

## Performance and Text in the Italian Carolingian Tradition

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One of the most fascinating aspects of the chivalric-epic tradition of Italy is the historical dialectic between its manifestations as oral performance and written text. Based primarily on Carolingian lore, the oral and written traditions influenced each other in a symbiotic dialogue across the centuries. John Miles Foley, one of the leading experts on world epic traditions, discusses the interaction of oral and written processes in his book, *The Singer of Tales in Performance*: “The old model of the Great Divide between orality and literacy has given way in most quarters, pointing toward the accompanying demise of the absolutist dichotomy of performance versus document. . . . Consequently, text can no longer be separated out as something different by species from the oral tradition it records or draws upon; the question becomes not whether but how performance and document speak to one another” (1995:79). The dialectic interaction of oral and written manifestations of Carolingian lore in Italy will be the primary focus of this study. Special attention will be given to 1) the *cantari*, medieval poems that hail back to the beginnings of the chivalric-epic in Italian literature; and 2) oral performances of epic lore in the Sicilian *cunto*, which up until the early part of the twentieth century were still part of a living tradition.

The epic tradition in Italy, both oral and written, is primarily based on the French *chansons de geste*, in particular the *Chanson de Roland*. Foley asserts that the *chansons de geste* were originally *oral-derived* texts: “Behind these manuscript-prisoned epics stands a tradition of oral composition and transmission by singers of tales, called *jongleurs*, although clerical and scribal activity intervened in various ways between oral performance and written record” (2002:177). With specific reference to the

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<sup>1</sup> To listen to an audio example of the Sicilian *cunto*, performed by Peppino Celano, visit the eCompanion to this article at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org).

Oxford manuscript of the *Chanson de Roland*, he explains that it “derives in some fashion from oral tradition and retains structures and textures typical of oral poetry . . . . We know it only as a manuscript dating from about 1100, but it’s without doubt an oral poem” (2002:177-78). Foley, with his extensive scholarship and astute methodology on the subject, lends an authoritative and contemporary voice to the issue. But the belief that the *chansons* were derived from oral performance is certainly not new.<sup>2</sup>

### The *Cantari*

It is believed that stories and songs from France came into Italy in the twelfth century with merchants traveling to northern and central Italy for commerce and pilgrims on their way to Rome, but especially via minstrels and *jongleurs*, some of whom may have accompanied the other travelers.<sup>3</sup> These stories and songs would include *chansons de geste*, which were war songs such as the *Chanson de Roland*; Arthurian romances; and lyric poetry. Important evidence of the popularity of the French chivalric tradition in Italy during this time is provided by one of the most important historical figures, Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), the son of an Italian merchant. Francis was enamored of the chivalric tradition and sang troubadour songs of chivalric deeds in Provençal. His sermons to popular audiences were often in a chivalric register, using the knight’s code of honor as a metaphor for leading the Christian life (Cardini 1989; Frugoni 1995).

The French tales began to be written down in Italy, and the form that is of particular interest to this study, the *cantare* (pl. *-i*, from the Italian “to sing”), consists of verses in octaves. *Cantare* refers both to the poem as well as to its internal divisions. The earliest extant manuscripts date from the 1340s. Most likely it was literate *cantarini* (*cantari* performers) who wrote down the first *cantari*, thus most of the standard structural features, discussed below, are performance-derived. French tales, mostly Carolingian

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<sup>2</sup> The bibliography on the subject is extensive. To mention a few examples, see Rychner 1955 and Goldin 1978:28-46. All translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>3</sup> The informational background on the *cantari* is from Brand and Pertile (1996:167-68), Grendler (1988:59-71), and Kleinhenz (2004:180-81, 183-84). There is iconographic evidence (bas-reliefs in Modena) as well as records of people with Arthurian names that suggest the presence of chivalric romances in Italy as early as the twelfth century (Grendler 1988:61). For iconographic evidence, see Lejeune and Stiennon 1971.

and to some extent Arthurian, were the primary sources of the early *cantari*. Later, in the fifteenth century, we find *cantari* with other subjects, such as classical stories (the Trojan war, for example) and the Bible.

The *cantari* are an important part of the process of the Italianization of French literature and the beginning of an Italian chivalric continuum that would reach literary heights with the great Renaissance epics. For example, the *Entrée d'Espagne* (Entry into Spain), from the first half of the fourteenth century, written in a Franco-Italian koiné,<sup>4</sup> turns Roland (“Orlando” in Italian) into a knight errant in an Arthurian vein (Brand and Pertile 1996:167-68, Cromeley 1978:295). This and other innovations to Orlando “add new dimensions to the character on his journey to the Italian peninsula, preparing him for the pen of Boiardo and Ariosto” (Cromeley 1978:295). The great Renaissance epic poems of Pulci, Boiardo, Ariosto, and Tasso specifically continue the *cantare* tradition, adopting the octave meter and other narrative devices discussed below.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Sicilian *Cunto***

Nowhere else in Italy (or in Europe for that matter) have the Carolingian stories been so diffused and so integrated into the culture and popular psyche than in Sicily.<sup>6</sup> Fortunately we have extensive and intelligent accounts that were made while the traditions were very much a part of Sicilian life. In 1884 Giuseppe Pitrè, one of the greatest folklorists of the nineteenth century, published a lengthy article entitled “*Le tradizioni cavalleresche popolari in Sicilia*” (Popular Chivalric Traditions in Sicily) in six parts: (1) The Marionette Theater; (2) The Epic Storyteller; (3) Popular Poetry; (4) Various Traditions; (5) Ballad Singers in Italy; and (6) The

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<sup>4</sup> A discussion of Franco-Italian (referred to by Italian scholars as *franco-veneto*) will be published in Morgan forthcoming.

<sup>5</sup> Part of what makes the written tradition a continuum is the fact that later texts continue the stories of earlier ones: “Thus *L’Entrée d’Espagne* finds its sequel in *La Prise de Pampelune* [another Franco-Italian *chanson de geste*], Luca and Luigi Pulci’s *Il Ciriffo Calvaneo* in Bernardo Giambullari’s continuation, and the *Orlando Innamorato* in the *Orlando Furioso*” (Allaire 1997:6).

<sup>6</sup> See Di Palma (1991:59-62), where the author discusses, among other examples, popular sayings and children’s games.

Nature of the Chivalric Tradition in Sicily and Conclusion.<sup>7</sup> From written accounts, such as Pitre's, and from personal accounts of those who had witnessed performances when the tradition was still very much alive,<sup>8</sup> we may briefly sketch certain key aspects of epic performance in Sicily.

Although this study will primarily focus on the Sicilian epic storytelling tradition, an occasional reference to the puppet theater *l'opera dei pupi* (also *l'opira* or *l'opra 'i pupi*) must be made as well. The Sicilian *pupi* are a form of marionette, manipulated from above with two metal rods and one string. The Catanese versions, much larger than their Palermitan counterparts, stand over four feet high and can weigh close to 100 pounds. Traditionally built by the puppeteers themselves, they are carved of wood and dressed in satin and velvet. In particular, their ornamented armor represents a high form of folk art. They are greatly admired by puppeteers and folklorists the world over. Along with the storytelling performances, the puppet theater reenacted the tales of the Carolingian cycle, and the two traditions were closely linked. In fact, we know of performers who were both puppeteers and storytellers (Di Palma 1991:72-73). Together the two traditions were for many years the primary forms of popular entertainment.<sup>9</sup>

In Sicilian the art of epic storytelling is known as *cuntu* (with the same Latin origin as the Italian *racconto*). The *cuntu*, Italianized by folklorists to *cunto*, was performed by a *cuntista* or *cuntastorie*.<sup>10</sup> Pitre discusses other modes of one-man epic performances, such as singing and recitation in verse or in alternating sung verse and spoken prose. But throughout the nineteenth century the *cunto* was the most popular form.

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<sup>7</sup> Di Palma discusses the reasons why Pitre is so important as an early folklorist, including his ability as an acute observer who reports intelligently, unhindered by dogmatic adherence to any of the theoretical schools of the time (1991:12-28).

<sup>8</sup> My father, Luciano Scuderi, who was born in 1922, remembers the epic storytellers of the Marina section of Catania from his youth. Occasionally, traveling companies of puppeteers would come to his village of Belpasso. As an example of how diffused the stories were: when I was a child he could improvise adventures of the Paladins as bedtime stories.

<sup>9</sup> For the Sicilian *pupi* tradition see Buonanno 1990 and Cavallo 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Among folklorists and performers of this tradition, there is a distinction between the Sicilianate word *cuntastorie*, a performer who recounts his tales in narrative prose, and the Italian *cantastorie*, a ballad-singer who actually sings his stories, usually in octaves. In modern Italian, *cantastorie* is the generic term for "ballad-singer" or "epic storyteller." Pitre uses the Italianized *contastorie* for *cuntastorie*.

Surrounded by an audience of men and boys, elevated on a small wooden platform, and with only a cane or wooden sword as a prop,<sup>11</sup> the storyteller would recount the epic tales. These were based primarily on medieval prose compilations, such as *I Reali di Francia* and *Guerrino il Meschino* by Andrea da Barberino (c. 1372-1432), and the seventeenth-century novel *Il Calloandro fedele* by Giovanni Ambrogio Marini (c. 1594-1662) (Pitrè 1884:348), though elements of other literary epics were present as well. Like the performances of the puppet theater, some *cuntastorie* could perform each day, until the cycle of tales would end with the ambush at Rencesvals.<sup>12</sup> There the heroes of Charlemagne's court, *i paladini*, meet their doom at the hands of the Moslem infidels, aided by the treacherous Gano di Magonza. (In the Sicilian tradition, Gano often becomes Cani, "dog.") In one of the brief autobiographical sketches of a *cuntastorie*, Pitrè mentions one fellow named Salvatore Ferreri who, although illiterate, was able to perform each day for 18 months (1884:361).

The *cuntastorie*'s presentation was a captivating and, at times, hypnotic theatrical performance. Like many traditions around the world, the performer would alternately narrate the tale and enact the parts of the various characters,<sup>13</sup> and from Pitrè's description we note that gestures and mimes were essential to the performance as well (1884:346-47):<sup>14</sup>

Head, arms, legs, everything must take part in the telling: mime is an essential part of the narrator's work. Standing on a sort of platform . . . he marshals his characters, presents them, has them speak. He repeats their discourses word for word, declaims their harangues, draws the soldiers up

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<sup>11</sup> An account of a nineteenth-century *cuntastorie* describes how the cane could be a versatile prop, representing at times wizard's wand or a giant's club (Di Palma 1991:44). In another account we note a twentieth-century performer who would use a cane for most of the performance and switch to a sword for the combat scenes (Di Palma 1991:74).

<sup>12</sup> Pitrè explains that in the puppet theaters the price for a normal performance, "a few cents," could be raised to "30 cents or 40 for a seat" on the night of the performance of the "death of the Paladins" (1884:317-18).

<sup>13</sup> Cf., for example, Ruth Finnegan's description of African narrative traditions (1970:501-02). Nobel laureate Dario Fo uses these techniques in his *giullarata*, his one-man show, named for the medieval *giullari* (It. *jongleurs*). For more on Fo's *giullarata* see Scuderi 2000a, 2000b, and 2004.

<sup>14</sup> In an account of *cuntastorie* Totò Palermo, who was active in the early twentieth century, we note the importance of facial expressions (Di Palma 1991:74).

for battle, he has them fight, agitating his hands violently and stomping his feet as if it were a real fight. The excitement grows: the orator's eyes widen, his nostrils dilate with his increased breathing, which, evermore agitated, forms the words. He stomps his feet on the platform, which, due to its empty bottom, resonates. . . . And the narration, always in monotone, returns to calm, as if no one died, as if two hundred or four hundred listeners had not been held in suspense, hearts palpitating, cruelly uncertain of the outcome. . . . This is true art, which the adult population wants and embraces.

All the important sources on the *cunto* describe the *cuntastorie*'s style of recitation as "declaiming." Fortunately, since the tradition managed to survive, even after it had lost its position as the primary mode of entertainment to variety theater and cinema, we have recordings of *cunto* performances. Two *cuntastorie* from the Palermo region, Roberto Genevose and Peppino Celano, were both recorded, Genevose in 1954 (by Alan Lomax) and Celano in 1962 (see bibliography).<sup>15</sup> The bold and heroic tone of both performers' recitations is indeed best described by "declaiming." The climax of a *cunto* performance would be the battles or duels. Although each *cuntastorie* reveals a very distinct style, they both deliver these episodes in a syncopated, rhythmic manner, accentuated by cutting the air with the sword or stomping on the platform.<sup>16</sup>

Below we will take a closer look at how and when the *cunto* tradition may have come to the island from the peninsula. Although we cannot trace the origin of the *cunto* with absolute certainty—and it may very well represent a confluence of various traditions—it ties into the greater epic storytelling tradition, sharing many qualities and techniques (some of which will be noted below): the small platform-stage (peculiar to the Italian tradition);<sup>17</sup> the use of *formulas* (as defined by Parry and Lord), which allows for the elasticity of the narrative (the ability to expand or contract scenes at the moment of performance); epithets and standard themes and motifs, such as the preparation for battle and description of armor and weapons; and narrative techniques such as the invocation and the abrupt interruption.

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<sup>15</sup> Both Genevose and Celano learned the art when the tradition was in decline, and neither had a formal apprenticeship. Nevertheless, Di Palma concludes that their performances retain many genuine elements of the *cunto* (1991:85-96, 99-116). Celano was recorded and filmed on other occasions besides the one cited in this study.

<sup>16</sup> The syncopated rhythm of each performer is markedly different. Unfortunately, space does not permit detailed descriptions with transcriptions.

<sup>17</sup> The use of a "modest bench" by epic performers of the peninsula seems to have begun during the 1500s (Balduino 1984:81-82, cited in Cabani 1989:50).

*Cunto-Cantari*

“If as audience or readers we are prepared to decode the signals that survive intersemiotic translation to the medium of texts, and whose recognition will require some knowledge of the enabling referent of tradition, then performance can still be keyed by these features” (Foley 1995:64). In *Le Forme del cantare epico-cavalleresco*, Maria Cabani traces techniques of the medieval epic ballad-singers and storytellers that were originally adapted in the *cantari*: “The narrative structure of the *cantare* is based on a fundamental pretense: an oral narrator recounting an ancient story to an audience of listeners” (1989:151). She discusses the process by which the performance of the medieval ballad-singer (*cantarino*) is transferred by the author to the written page. With reference to the process of performance transferred to text, Foley explains that “this scenario assumes ... an audience or readership sufficiently acquainted with the signals embedded in the register to be able to summon the special, institutionalized meanings that are those signals’ reason for being. . . . The scenario assumes an audience who can rhetorically simulate the performance arena—in the absence of the actual enabling event of performance itself—on the basis of textualized cues that engage the enabling referent of tradition” (1995:65). Considering the popularity of chivalric-epic lore as street performance at the time, we can assume the *cantari* could very well convey performance to the medieval reader.<sup>18</sup>

Cabani demonstrates how the earlier *cantari* adhered more closely to this device, while later the presence of a reader begins to be acknowledged. This process is marked by a shift from an exclusive address of *voi* (plural “you”) directed to an audience, to a more frequent use of *tu* (singular “you”), that is, the reader (1989:50-56). By the time of the Renaissance epics of Boiardo, Ariosto, and Tasso, suggesting that the author is in some way a performer had become a standard rhetorical trope of the genre. The audience is imagined to be courtiers, and the reader and the act of writing are frequently acknowledged.<sup>19</sup> In the medieval *cantari*, on the other hand, the writer is first and foremost assuming the role of oral performer. The focal

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<sup>18</sup> Andrea da Barberino (mentioned above) wrote chivalric epics in prose and was also an established performer, reciting chivalric lore, including his own works, in the *piazzetta* of San Martino al Vescovo in Florence (Allaire 1997:6).

<sup>19</sup> Pulci in his *Morgante*, which he wrote in a more grotesque register (in the Bakhtinian sense) than the others mentioned, presents a rustic performer.

point is the public piazza, and the idea that the author is a popular *cantarino* is essential to the text. As would be expected in a piazza, the audience is not comprised exclusively of nobles (Cabani 1989:63):

*Or ascoltate, villani e cortesi,  
mezani e vecchi, grandi e piccolini* (Sp XIII 2)<sup>20</sup>

Listen now, peasants and nobles,  
middle-aged and old, large and small.

The writers of the *cantari* employ a series of “formulas and topoi that allude directly to a function of the text that we can define as ‘theatrical’ (invitation to gather around the singer, call for silence and for attention, allusion to a precise situation [context] in which the narration unfolds)” (Cabani 1989:14). Let us begin our comparison with a basic example of how the *cunto* represents a continuation of the epic tradition that originally inspired the *cantari*. The invocation is an aspect of oral performance that was adapted to the literary tradition as well. From Homer invoking the muses onward, it becomes standard for epic poetry of all genres, including Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, to cite two celebrated examples. As Cabani (1989:23) observes, “every *cantare* [chapter within the greater *cantare*] opens with one or more octaves of invocation to God or to the Virgin in which the narrator asks for grace for the work he is about to undertake,” and in fact Pitre reports that the *cuntastorie* began his performance “with the sign of the cross, during which the religious auditors remove their hats” (1884:347). We may note that although the *cunto* was greatly influenced by the written tradition (discussed below), what Pitre observed was not the recitation of a literary invocation but an actual prayer.

One of the most striking techniques borrowed by the literary tradition is the abrupt interruption by which the storyteller keeps his audience in suspense and assures their return. Pitre relates a passage by Vincenzo Linares, “diligent observer of Sicilian life” (1884:352), in which he describes the narrative style of a particular *cuntastorie*, Maestro Pasquale. Here, Linares notes the abrupt stoppage of action: “And when the listeners are anxious to hear the end, it’s over. Thus he moves the listeners emotionally and holds them in suspense in order to assure that they will

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<sup>20</sup> Each excerpt of the *Cantari* from Cabani will be followed by her own abbreviation system: As = *Cantari d’Aspramonte*; Ri = *I Cantari di Rinaldo da Monte Albano*; Sp = *La Spagna*. For original sources, refer to the text (Cabani 1989:5-8). I will limit myself to one or two examples, whereas, due to the nature of her study, Cabani’s examples are extensive. I have taken the liberty of removing her emphases.



return the next day with the small fee of 2 cents (*un grano*) to be admitted to the show” (1884:353). Cabani offers parallel examples of sudden cessations in the *cantari* (Cabani 1989:153):

*Montò a cavallo e dice a' compagni:  
 “A quella casa voglio cavalcare  
 e recheronne qualche bandigioni  
 con che voi vi possiate confortare.”  
 Signori, andate che Idio vi perdoni (Sp XX 47)*

He mounted his horse and said to his companions  
 “To that house I want to ride  
 and ask for some sustenance  
 with which you may reinvigorate yourselves.”  
 Go now, sirs, and may God forgive you.

*Intanto fîr della rocca veduti  
 que' tre cavagli e il buon destrier Baiardo.  
 Cristo benigno sî a di noi riguardo (Ri X 40)*

Meanwhile from the tower were seen  
 those three horses and the good war steed Baiardo.  
 May Christ be gracious unto us.

Ariosto employs this technique extensively in *Orlando Furioso*. In what must be considered a parody of the trope, he brings it to heights of literary artistry, pretending to be concerned lest he should bore his reader/imaginary audience of courtiers and ladies. Here, as an example of his extraordinary wit and comic irony, he leaves Ruggiero fumbling to remove his armor in an attempt to rape Angelica (1974:245; translation 1983:106).<sup>21</sup>

*Frettoloso, or da questo or da quel canto  
 confusamente l'arme si levava.  
 Non gli parve altra volta mai star tanto;  
 che s'un laccio sciogliea, dui n'annodava.  
 Ma troppo è lungo ormai, Signor, il canto,  
 e forse ch'anco l'ascoltar vi grava:  
 sî ch'io differirò l'istoria mia  
 in altro tempo che più grata sia. (X:115)*

With hasty fingers he fumbled confusedly at his armor, now this side, now the other. Never before had it seemed such a long business—for every thong unlaced, two seemed to become entangled. But this canto has gone on too

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<sup>21</sup> For humor in the Franco-Italian epic, see Morgan 2002.

long, my Lord, and perhaps you are growing a-weary with listening to it: I shall defer my story to another time when it may prove more welcome.

In *I Cantari di Fiorabracca e Ulivieri* (estimated to have been written sometime in the second half of the fifteenth century; Melli 1984:19), we note how the author anticipates the next *cantare* division as if it were the next day's performance (Melli 1984:112):

*Nell'altro canto ve dirrò la bactaglia;  
Cristo ce guarda da pena et da travaglia* (II:40)

In the next canto I will tell you of the battle  
Christ protect us from pain and travails

We also note how he picks up the story after the invocation (*ibid.*:121, 159):

*Or ritorniamo all nostra novella,* (IV:1)

Now let us return to our tale,

*Al nome di Colui che tutto move,  
ritorno a ddire l'istoria dilictosa* (VII:1)

In the name of He who moves all,  
I return to tell the delightful story

In the following example from a *cantare*, the performer interrupts his recitation specifically to take refreshment and rest, and he invites his listeners to do the same (Cabani 1989:154):

*Signori, i' vo' finir questo cantare  
e gire e bere e rinfrescarmi alquanto;  
e voi, se sète stanchi d'ascoltare,  
potete riposare un poco intanto* (Sp VI 46)

Sirs, I wish to finish this *cantare*  
and mingle and drink and refresh myself some  
and you who are tired of listening  
may rest for a little while

Pitrè describes what would occur during these breaks in the *cunto*. We note that the need for refreshments brought on a symbiotic relationship between performer and vendors (this goes for the puppet theater as well [1884:318]): “The *cunto* . . . lasts a few hours, in which there is an

occasional break for the *cuntastorie* to rest and catch his breath. . . . While this is happening, the snack vendor [*siminzaru*] and water vendor [*acquaiolu*] circulate with sacks of toasted seeds and glasses” (347). Thus the *cunto* actualizes what the authors of the *cantari* suggest by their recreating of public performance. Where would the listeners procure refreshment while the *cantarino* rested? Perhaps some enterprising vendors circulated there as well.

We mentioned above that the Carolingian lore had become an important part of Sicilian culture. Pitrè explains that during the breaks the *cuntastorie* would step out of his role as performer and discuss the details of the narration with members of the audience (347):

In these brief interludes, without leaving his platform, he ceases to be what he is [a performer], accepts a bit of snuff from a bystander, and lets a listener engage him in conversation on a passage of the story in progress. . . . He resolves doubts, settles issues, reconciles apparently contradictory facts. This is a difficult moment for someone who is not profoundly versed in the lore, and he could compromise himself with an answer that is not anchored in the lore, well known to the listeners. But the Sicilian *cuntastorie*, although he works from memory, is not easily confused.

Foley discusses how the interpretation of an oral performance that is part of a living tradition remains, to some degree, open to the individual receiver, while at the same time maintaining a certain degree of homogeneity that is shared by all receivers. It is the tradition itself that provides the homogeneous quality and encodes the frame with indexical meaning that goes beyond the literal level. Words or units of utterance, within the frame, are informed with special significance that is understood within the tradition (1995:5-47). This requires an audience that is steeped in the tradition (as were the audiences of the *cunto*). Key to this process is the concept of *immanence* in verbal art. “For the record, immanence may be defined as *the set of metonymic, associative meanings institutionally delivered and received through a dedicated idiom or register either during or on the authority of the traditional oral performance*” (Foley 1995:7, emphasis in the original).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> A book that has been germinal to the study of oral performance is Richard Bauman’s *Verbal Art as Performance* (1984). A special edition of the *Journal of American Folklore* (115:455 [2002]) was dedicated to reassessing the influence of *Verbal Art*.

This encompasses many aspects of a given storytelling tradition, but let us focus on a basic example: the epithet, whereby “‘grey-eyed Athena’ would serve as an approved traditional channel or pathway for summoning the Athena not just of this or that particular moment, but rather of all moments in the experience of audience and poet” (Foley 1995:5). In both written and oral traditions, epithets may also function aesthetically for completing lines and/or for metrical purposes. An example from *I Cantari d’Aspramonte* (estimated to have been written sometime between the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth centuries, Fassò 1981:xii) demonstrates the use of an epithet to finish the rhyme of the couplet, which closes each octave stanza (*ibid.*:12):

*Il maggiore avea nome Ricardo  
e ‘l minore nome avea Ricciari gagliardo* (IV:32)

The elder was named Ricardo  
and the younger was called Ricciari (the) valiant

Throughout the *cantari* we find many epithets, typical of an epic tradition. As examples we may cite:

*Re Carlo Mano; Carlo imperator romano* (cf. first stanza of Ariosto’s *OF*)  
King Charles the Great; Charles (the) Roman emperor

*il conte Orlando; il forte Oralando,*  
the Count Orlando; the strong Orlando

*Rinaldo paladino; Rinaldo, quel da Monte Albano*  
Rinaldo paladin; Rinaldo, (the one) from Monte Albano

*marchese Uliveti; Uliuieri della gran gesta*  
Marchese Uliveti; Uliuieri of the great geste

*el pregiato arcivescovo Turpino*  
the esteemed Archbishop Turpino

Looking again at a line in a passage cited above (Cabani 1989:153), we also cite:

*que’ tre cavagli e il buon destrier Baiardo.* Ri X 40  
those three horses and the good war steed Baiardo

We note how Rinaldo’s horse, Baiardo, is distinguished from “those three [ordinary] horses,” while at the same time invoking for the knowledgeable

audience the exceptional qualities and almost human acumen of the wonder horse.

In the recording by the *cuntastorie* Peppino Celano (1962), the heroic cousins, Orlando and Rinaldo, are fighting (as usual) over Angelica. Rinaldo, the master swordsman, is getting the better of his cousin and we note this rather hefty epithet, in this case replacing his name altogether. The performer explains that when it came to sword play,

. . . *vinceva sempre 'ddu ladruni di Montalbanu che cummannava a settecentu ladruni*<sup>23</sup>  
(Celano)

. . . that thief of Montalbano who commanded 700 thieves would always win.

It is well documented that in the Sicilian tradition most people favored Rinaldo, even over Orlando, who in the overall Carolingian tradition is supposed to be the primary hero. Much has been written on this phenomenon. The character of Orlando is steeped in extreme heroic righteousness, epitomized by his refusal to blow his oliphant and call for help at Rencesvals until it is too late. This quality appealed to the Sicilian folk to a certain extent, but also conveyed a sense of naiveté, not a recommended quality for the difficult life of a poor peasant, often forced to survive by his wits. Rinaldo is wily and cunning, never the dupe or sucker. Falsely accused, cast out of Charlemagne's court and forced to steal, he is the quintessential underdog. These qualities also tie into a sense of social justice for the Sicilian peasantry. Antonio Pasqualino discusses this issue and how, in the Sicilian cultural context, it differs from its medieval French roots (1978:194):

In the *chansons de geste*, rebellion is seen as a social evil which must be remedied by a sacrifice of pride on both sides, even if the rebel is more appealing than the sovereign. Judging from the *Story of the French Paladins* [mentioned below] in the Sicily of yesterday and today, the feeling for social order is less than it was in medieval France. In fact, the deterioration of the figure of Charlemagne<sup>24</sup> is extreme in the Sicilian versions. The contrast between the rebel baron and the sovereign may even come to be identified with that between the hero and the traitor. . . . Part of what makes

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<sup>23</sup> My transcription of Celano's performance language, which is a Sicilian-Italian hybrid. To listen to this performance, visit the eCompanion to this article at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org).

<sup>24</sup> The deterioration of the Charlemagne figure began early in the Italian tradition; see Vitullo 2000:1-29.

Rinaldo better liked than Orlando is that he is cunning, sagacious, and capable of deceit for the sake of winning.

The Sicilian public was engaged both intellectually (knowing the lore) and emotionally as well. At both the *cunto* and the *opra*, the audience would discuss the story after the performance, cry at the death of the Paladins at Rencesvals, and, specifically at the *opra*, vent their anger, even throwing objects at villain puppets.<sup>25</sup> The stories and the characters became real. In Pitrè's article we read the following excerpt from an account by the *cuntastorie* Maestro Salvatore (Turiddu) Ferreri (mentioned above) (1884:358):

One day I told the story of how Rinaldo was put in prison, and Charlemagne had condemned him to death. A fellow approached me with tears in his eyes: "Turiddu, there's a *carlino* [21 cents] for you if you quickly liberate Rinaldo." Admiring his affection for Rinaldo, I rushed, accelerating the tale, and had Rinaldo released by Malagigi, by means of his diabolic art. As soon as he saw [sic] Rinaldo released, he jumped up and yelled, "Bravo, Turiddu, for liberating Rinaldo! Go fry yourself, Charlemagne, you asshole"! And he left his place to give me a *carlino*.

Thus, in the specific context of the fight between the heroic cousins of Celano's performance, Rinaldo's status as a thief and commander of seven hundred thieves is not immediately relevant. However, in the greater context of the Sicilian *cunto*, through indexical meaning, we may get a glimpse of the import such an epithet signalling Rinaldo might have had. For the *cunto*'s audience Rinaldo was "a victorious instrument of fantasized revolt, free from a sense of guilt and from the contradictions associated both with the bandits of nineteenth-century popular narrative and with the rebel barons in the *chansons de geste*" (Pasqualino 1978:196). As would be expected from the basic dynamics of a new figure in a host culture, the figure, in this case Rinaldo, takes on new meaning that is informed by the needs and in the idiom of the host culture.

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<sup>25</sup> Mike Manteo, head puppeteer of the Manteo Family, recalls such an incident from his youth, in New York's Italian community, when during a performance a spectator fired two shots at the marionette which Mike was manipulating (Gold 1983:72).

### Literary Text in Performance

We will probably never trace with certainty the origins of the oral epic tradition in Sicily. The *chansons de geste* may have originally come with the Normans, whose invasion of the island began in 1060, though we have no firm evidence of this advent. We know that during the Middle Ages, *jongleurs* and mimes were as active in Sicily as they were in the peninsula (Di Palma 1991:34). As far as actual performances of the *chanson* tradition, however, Pitrè reports one tantalizing allusion from a poem, *Battaglia celeste di Michele e Lucifero* (Celestial Battle of Michael and Lucifer) by the Sicilian poet Antonino Alfano, which dates back to 1568: “per le piazza alle volte ragionar s’ode dell’arme d’Orlando e di Rinaldo, sogni e favole di poeti” (in the piazzas one could sometimes hear about the swords of Orlando and Rinaldo, dreams and tales of poets) (1884:346).

Di Palma, who studied the *cunto* in depth, concludes that the tradition in the manifestation we know came to Sicily via Naples, sometime during the nineteenth century. Like the Sicilians, the Neapolitans were partial to the renegade Rinaldo, and the Neapolitan performers were known as *cantarinaldi* (“Rinaldo singers”), often shortened to *rinaldi*. The *rinaldi* based their performances primarily on verse in octaves.<sup>26</sup> They typically held a cane in one hand and a book in the other, and this is where they most differed from the *cuntastorie*; “a book to hold, upon which one must look every half second, is a powerful obstacle, even for those who are inclined to gesticulate by nature” (Rajna 1878:568). By contrast, even if a literate or semi-literate *cuntastorie* would refresh his memory by reading before a performance, he would lose prestige if he were to come before his audience book in hand (Pitrè 1884:348).<sup>27</sup> Unencumbered by reading and with both hands free, the *cuntastorie* performed in a more animated fashion with mime and gesticulations.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> For the specific books the *rinaldi* used, see Rajna 1878:571-74. Prose works, such as those by Andrea da Barberino, were rewritten in octave verse.

<sup>27</sup> Pitrè was writing at the height of the *cuntu*’s popularity. Later, in 1907, Nino Martoglio (1870-1921), dialect author and champion of Sicilian culture, lamented that as the old *cuntastorie* were dying, the remaining ones “have taken to reading (!), to a much more cultured (!! ) audience, old detective novels” (1983:64). His exclamations are obviously intended to express outrage and sarcasm.

<sup>28</sup> In Rajna’s account, the one *rinaldo* who performed from memory is presented as an anomaly (1878:577-78).

The germinal work by Milman Parry and Albert Lord on the South Slavic oral epic defined the *formulae* upon which the *guslari* based their extemporaneous compositions in performance. The original concept of the formula, specifically and narrowly defined for its use in the Homeric Greek and South Slavic contexts, defined a “unit of utterance in performance” (Foley 1995:2). Since then the term has been elaborated, and the formula has been adapted to other contexts and other traditions. It has become an analytical tool for understanding oral performances that entail extemporaneous composition. The formula, in the least specific and most general sense, is a mnemonic element that is contextualized at the moment of performance and must perforce be defined for the specific tradition being studied. The actual mechanics underlying a performance based on formulas is best explicated by Albert Lord in his discussion of memory and fixity in the south Slavic epic (note here that Lord uses *improvise* in its usual connotation of inventing offhand, without preparation): “Not memorized, not improvised either, not even exactly repeated, but presented in ‘more or less the same words,’ while expressing the same essential ideas. The text is not really fixed, yet because the essential ideas have remained constant, it is ‘more or less fixed’” (1987:453).

If we accept Di Palma’s conclusion that the *cuntu* came to Sicily via Naples in the nineteenth century, then it was in fact a relatively recent and relatively short-lived phenomenon.<sup>29</sup> Di Palma discusses how the *cuntu* lacked homogeneity, and only began to define itself in mid-century (1991:43).<sup>30</sup> The mechanics behind its performance are indeed multifaceted, since *cuntastorie* ranged from illiterate, to semi-literate, to literate performers. Though, as Pitrè explained, a *cuntastorie* worth his salt would never appear before an audience book in hand, some did use a written text in their preparation. Focusing on the use of written texts, we note an account by Paolo Emiliani Giudici of a private performance by a *cuntastorie* given in a nobleman’s home in 1822. He explains that the performer prepared himself by reviewing Andrea da Barberino’s *I Reali di Francia* which served as a “repertory outline” (Di Palma 1991:36-37). The books, when used, provided the various narrative elements of the tales that were then contextualized in performance. The *cuntastorie* retold the tale in the oral medium, “expressing the same essential ideas.” Moving from written text to performance, the

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<sup>29</sup> Trying to determine how it was shaped by indigenous performance traditions presents another avenue of investigation.

<sup>30</sup> In fact, it is his opinion that the *cuntu* does not constitute a “true tradition” (*idem*).



stories were “not repeated but *re-created*” (Foley 1995:47, emphasis in the original).

We have an earlier example of epic literature serving as a formulaic reservoir. In Spain the epic tradition is also primarily based on the medieval stories from the French tradition, both Arthurian as well as Carolingian. As a literary style, the culmination of its popularity came with the romances of chivalry in the sixteenth century (Eisenberg 1982:35). For evidence of the input from the oral tradition, L. P. Harvey (1974) examines the case of Román Ramírez, a Morisco storyteller who was arrested by the Inquisition in 1595 for a number of offences, including witchcraft and apostasy. What is of interest to us is his professed ability to “memorize” novels of chivalry, which brought an accusation of having diabolical assistance.<sup>31</sup> In an attempt to exculpate himself, Ramírez explained how he gave the illusion of having memorized texts for his performances. From the Inquisition trial, we read how he revealed his trade secrets (Harvey 1974:283):<sup>32</sup>

What happened is that the accused would commit to memory however many books and chapters were in *Don Cristalián* [chosen by the Inquisitor to test Ramírez] and the gist of the adventures and the names of the cities, realms, knights, and princes that the said books contained, and he would commit them very well to memory. And later, as he recited, he would expand and shorten the accounts as he wished, always being careful to conclude with the gist of the adventures, so that to all who heard him recite, it seemed that he was very precise and that he did not alter anything of the accounts and the language of the same books.

Harvey concludes that the essence of the technique for oral performance as employed by Ramírez was much the same as that described by Parry and Lord: “They were improvised narrations of known stories in a known style, but not in a fixed form. That is to say that they varied in the same way that the text of Yugoslav epics vary from one performance to another, or in the way that a performance of the *Poema de Mio Cid* would have varied” (283). Harvey concludes that Ramírez was “possibly one of the last in the long line of narrators in Spain” (284).

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<sup>31</sup> It is interesting to compare the story of Brother Cædmon (reported by Bede c. 680 C.E.). Although Cædmon had no formal education, “when any passage of Scripture was explained to him by interpreters, he could quickly turn it into delightful and moving poetry in his own English tongue.” It was determined by “many learned men” that his talent was a gift from God (Bede 1974:250-53).

<sup>32</sup> Harvey cites the original Spanish text.

One of the reasons why the *cantari* poets claimed they were writing in the first place was in order to *traslatare* (a word which denotes both “translate” and “transfer”) the original stories from Latin or French, thus popularizing them for their audience (Cabani 1989:137):

*secondo che ne' libri mi dimostra,  
vo ringraziando della gran vertute  
ch'i' ricevo di questo traslatare (As XXII 1)*

according to what the books revealed to me  
I want to give thanks for the great virtue  
that I receive from this translating

*la bella storia che io ho volgarizata (Ri XXVII 1)*

the beautiful story that I have vernacularized

Andrea da Barberino also wrote with the intent of presenting “old material that a new audience may enjoy” (Allaire 1997:15). The process of *traslatare* continued throughout the life of the epic as a living tradition. For the Sicilian *cunto*, the most important work in this vein was *Storia dei paladini di Francia* by Giusto Lo Dico (1826-1909), which came out in four volumes between 1858 and 1862. This voluminous work, approximately 3,000 pages, chronicles the adventures of the *paladini* in simple prose, as a note to the original title for the first publication explains, “from Milone count of Anglante until the death of Rinaldo.” Lo Dico felt a need to gather and to rewrite in a simpler form the stories of the major epic poems, not only to make them more accessible to a less educated audience, but also to facilitate the literary input into the oral tradition, which he felt lacked an accurate chronology (Pitrè 1884:350). *Storia dei paladini* achieved its desired effect and became *the* sourcebook for both *cuntastorie* and “the bible of puppeteers” (Cammarata 1971:jacket notes). It also enjoyed a widespread popularity with the literate, semi-literate, and illiterate populations. Since it was very common for people to read to each other at the time, sociologically speaking this is significant because it was the means by which women, who did not normally frequent the *opra* or follow the episodes of the *cunto*, could become familiar with the epic tales (Cammarata 1971:17).

The Carolingian epic tradition began as an interchange of oral and written narrative. In Italy the stories came via oral performance in the Middle Ages and continued in a oral/written dialectic until the twentieth century. The oral tales, committed to text, became a source for verbal art, both as verbatim readings and as a source for formulae to be contextualized

in performance, keeping the Carolingian epic as part of a living tradition. This living tradition, which lasted long enough to be observed empirically in the context of folklore studies, provides important clues to the historical dialogue of performance and text.

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