

A Nostra Lingua

Danti e a lingua siciliana

Di Joe Frederick Privitera

Traduzioni di Gaetano Cipolla

L'annu scorsu a casa editrici Legas publicau u me studiu *Sicilian: the Oldest Romance Language* unni cugghiu provi ca u sicilianu apparsi cinqu seculi prima di l'autri linguì rumanzi cioè u francisi, portughisi, spagnolu e talianu. Ma non sulu fu u sicilianu a prima lingua romanza, iddu fu puru a prima lingua digna di essiri usata in puisia. Chistu lu dici u Patri dâ lingua taliana Danti Alighieri. E' intrissanti nutari chiddu ca Danti dissi supra u sicilianu ntô so trattatu *De vulgari eloquentia* (ca 1302-1305). Citu stu branu picchí indica chiaramente ca a puisia taliana fu prima scritta dî Siciliani:

“Tra ddi vulgari passati ô sitacciu (pi modù di diri) facennu paragoni tra chiddi ca ristarunu ntô sitacciu vulemu scegliri brevementi u chiù onrevuli tra d'iddi. E primeramenti esaminamu lu geniù supra u sicilianu datu ca pari ca u vulgari sicilianu divintau cchiù famusu di l'autri tantu ca tutti i puisii ca sunnu scritti di l'italiani s'hannu a cunsidderari scritti in sicilianu, comu nta ddi canzuni ca cumincianu cu “Anchor che l'aigua per lo focu lassì” e “Amor che lungiamenti m'hai menatu.” (di Guido delle Colonne, unu dî pueti chiù canusciuti dû gruppu canusciutu come “a Scola Siciliana”).

Ma sta fama dâ terra di Sicilia si l'esaminamu curretamente ristau sulu pi la vrigogna dî principi taliani picchí iddi non vivunu in maniera eroica ma in maniera barbarica assicutannu la superbia. Ma ddi illustri eroi Federicu Cesari e u so ben nasciutu figghiu Manfredi, dimustrannu a nobiltati e a drittizza dâ so forma, mentri ca a furtuna li accumpagnava, vissiru siguennu i cosi umani e sdignannu i cosi bestiali. E u pirchí di chissu era ca si sfurzarunu di aderiri a la maistati di principi accusi granni e fu accusi ca a ddu tempu tuttu chiddu ca li eccellenti Taliani cumpunevanu nisceva nta la curti di stu granni re. E datu ca u seggiu riali so era ntâ Sicilia, addivenni ca tuttu chiddu ca i nostri pridicissuri scrissiru in vulgari si chiama sicilianu. E chistu è chiddu ca pinsamu puru niautri e i posterì ca venunu doppu di niuatri non ponnu cangiarlu... Ora dicemu ca si vulemu pigghiarì u vulgari sicilianu cioè si duvemu giudicari di

Our language

Dante on the Sicilian Language

By Joe Frederick Privitera

Nearly a year ago, Legas published my study, *Sicilian, The Oldest Romance Language*, in which I garnered proof that the Sicilian language appeared (out of Vulgar Latin) five centuries before the appearance of French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian. In the light of my *argumentum*, it is interesting to note what Dante had to say about Sicilian in his treatise on language, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. (ca 1302-1305). I cite this passage because in it he indicates clearly that Italian poetry was first written by the Sicilians.

“First let us turn our attention to the language of Sicily, since the Sicilian vernacular seems to hold itself in higher regard than any other, first because all poetry written by — Italians is called ‘Sicilian,’ and then because we do indeed find that many learned natives — of that island have written serious poetry, as for example, in the canzoni, *Ancor che l’aigua per lo loco lassi* - [Although water flees from fire] and *Amor che lungiamente m’hai menato* – Love which has so long led me. Guido delle Colonne (ca 1210-1287), a leading figure in the group of early 13th century lyric poets known as the Sicilian School]

“But this fame enjoyed by the Trinacrian isle, if we carefully consider the end to which it leads, seems rather to survive only as a reproof to the princes of Italy, who are so puffed up with pride that they live in a plebeian, not a heroic, fashion. Indeed, those illustrious heroes, the Emperor Frederick and his worthy son Manfred, knew how to reveal the nobility and integrity that were in their hearts; as long as fortune allowed, they lived in a manner befitting men, despising the bestial life. On this account, all who were noble of heart and rich in graces strove to attach themselves to the majesty of such worthy princes, so that, in their day, all that the most gifted individuals in Italy brought forth first came to light in the court of these two great monarchs. And since Sicily was the seat of the imperial throne it came about that whatever our predecessors wrote in the vernacular was called ‘Sicilian.’ This

chiddu ca nesci dâ bucca di midiocri paisani, allura avemu a conchiudiri ca iddu non è dignu di essiri misu avanti a l'autri, picchí havi assai ca non si pronunzianu versu comu a chistu "tragemi d'este focora se t'este a boluntate". Ma si non vulemu pigghiari chistu ma chiddu chi nesci dâ bucca di Siciliani principali, comu chiddu nta li canzuni minziunati prima, si pò vidiri comu non è in nenti differenti di chiddu ca niautri cunsiddiramu laudibilissimu, comu emu ora a dimustrari cassutta."

(Dante, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, edited and translated by Steve Botterill, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p.29)

Ntô paragrafu ca segui, Danti sâ pigghia cû vulgari tuscanu dicennu ca iddi sunu nsinsati e arruganti attribuennu ô toscanu u titulu di vulgari illustri. Iddu cunnanna tutti i vulgari parrati ntê città dâ Toscana cunsiddirannu pero' ca ci sunnu certi pueti ca usanu un linguaggiu cchiù dignu comu a Lapo Gianni e Cinu di Pistoia. Infini conchiudi ca a lingua ca iddu cerca comu u vulgari illustri dignu di essiri usatu pi scriviri puisia non esisti ntâ Toscana.

E' importanti sapiri sti cosi cunsiddirannu chiddu ca si dici dû nostru sicilianu. E' importanti ca Danti, e puru Petrarca dopu di iddu, appiru palori di lodi pû sicilianu. A raggiuni pi cui u sicilianu cissau di essiri usatu comu lingua nta tutta l'Italia fu na raggiuni politica. L'impurtanza dû sicilianu dicadiu dopu a morti di Federicu II ntô 1250 e dî so figghi Manfredi e Curradu, l'urtimu ntô 1266. Siguenno sta linea di raggiunamentu si putissi pinsari ca si a putenza dû partitu ghibellinu, cioè chiddi a favuri di l'impiraturi, non avissiru persu a guerra contru i forzi alliati dû papa e di Carru d'Angiò, cu sapi comu eva a finiri dû puntu di vista linguisticu. Unu putissi pinsari, siguenno stu raggiunamentu, ca si Federicu II e u so partitu non avissiru statu distrutti oggi in Italia forsi a genti parrassi talianu cu l'accentu sicilianu.

Nta nautra parti dû libru *De vulgari eloquentia*, Danti minziona di passaggiu u sunettu ca divintau a forma puetica principali (a parti a *Divina Commedia* unni usa a terza rima) di iddu e di l'autri pueti toscani inclusu Petrarca. Danti certamenti sapeva ca u sunettu fu usatu pâ prima vota dâ Scola Siciliana a Palermu e ca fu 'nvintatu a curti di Federicu. Cu sapi picchí non ci desi creditu ê Siciliani pi s'altu primatu. Forsi pi orgogliu riggiunali? Io mù dumannu!

term is still in use today and posterity will be able to do nothing to change it. . . . Now if we consider the Sicilian popular language, that is if we have to make a judgment by listening to what comes out of the mouths of mediocre folk, then we will have to conclude that it is not worthy to be placed above the others. It's been long since we heard lines such "tragemi d'este focora se t'este a boluntate". But if we consider what comes out of the mouths of the principal Sicilians, on the other hand, like the language of the canzoni we already mentioned, we can see how it is not different in any way from what we consider very praiseworthy, as we will demonstrate below."

(Dante, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, edited and translated by Steve Botterill, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p.29)

In the paragraph that follows Dante berates the Tuscans for being without sense and for being arrogant in their belief that Tuscan is an illustrious "vulgare". He condemns all the idioms spoken in every city of Tuscany but praises a few poets such as Lapo Gianni e Cino da Pistoia. He concludes that the illustrious language that he deems worthy of poetry does not exist in Tuscany.

It's important to know these things considering what people say about our Sicilian language. It's important that Dante, and Petrarch after him, had words of praise for Sicilian. The reason for which Sicilian fell from its prominent position as a language used in all of Italy was a political reason. Sicilian fell after the death of Frederick II in 1250 and of his sons Manfredi and Conradin, the latter in 1266. Following this line of reasoning one could conclude that if the Ghibelline party, that is, the party that sustained the Emperor, had not lost the war against the allied forces of the Pope and Charles d'Anjou, who knows what the outcome would have been linguistically. One could be entitled to think, following this logic, that if Frederick II and his party had not been destroyed, today in Italy people would be speaking Italian with a Sicilian accent!

Elsewhere, in the *De Vulgari*, he makes casual mention of the sonnet, which became his principal poetic form (apart from the Comedy's *terza rima*) and that of his fellow Tuscans and later, extensively, of Petrarch. He must have known that the sonnet was first used by the Sicilian School of Poetry and that it was invented at Frederick's court in Palermo. Was it regional pride that caused him to withhold credit from the Sicilians? I wonder.