

# MALAGUERRA: THE ANTI-STATE SUPER-HERO OF SICILIAN PUPPET THEATER

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RIASSUNTO: Anche se il personaggio è poco conosciuto oggi, Morbello/Malaguerra era famoso in Sicilia e altrove in Italia dalla metà del XIX alla metà del XX secolo. Questo saggio si concentra sulle sue vicissitudini in stampa (*Storia dei paladini di Francia*) e nell'opera dei pupi, ma anche sulla diffusione del suo nome e sulle sue avventure fuori Sicilia, sia nel maggio epico del Nord Italia che nei copioni di un puparo catanese attivo a New York City. Poiché Malaguerra contesta ripetutamente le ingiustizie perpetrate dai potenti, la sua storia ci ricorda che l'opera dei pupi non era semplicemente una *soap opera* cavalleresca per le masse prima della televisione, ma poteva essere un veicolo per esprimere un atteggiamento critico verso lo Stato sotto la copertura di drammatizzazioni epiche medievali e rinascimentali. Può darsi, infatti, che il suo sottofondo politico sia stato un motivo della sua popolarità sia nell'Italia meridionale che tra gli immigrati italiani nei centri urbani del Nuovo Mondo. Più in generale, il saggio intende contribuire alla discussione delle ideologie politiche nel genere epico cavalleresco, soprattutto nel contesto della cultura popolare italiana.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Malaguerra, Morbello, opera dei pupi, Sicilia, Giusto Lodico, *Storia dei paladini di Francia*, maggio epico, epica cavalleresca, Manteo

ABSTRACT: Although this literary figure is little known today, Morbello/Malaguerra was famous in Sicily and elsewhere in Italy from the mid-19th to mid-20th century. This essay focuses on his vicissitudes in print (*Storia dei paladini di Francia*) and on the puppet theater stage, with some attention to the spread of his name and adaptation of his adventures outside Sicily, both in the epic *Maggio* tradition of northern Italy and in the scripts of a Catanese puppeteer active in New York City. Because Malaguerra repeatedly contests the injustices



perpetrated by those in power, his story reminds us that *l'opera dei pupi* was not simply a chivalric soap opera for the masses before television, but could be a vehicle to express a critical attitude toward the State under the cover of dramatizing medieval and Renaissance epics. Indeed, it may be that puppet theater's political undercurrent was a factor in its massive popularity both in southern Italy and among Italian immigrants in urban centers of the New World. More generally, the essay aims to contribute to the discussion of political ideologies in the chivalric epic genre, especially in the context of Italian popular culture.

KEY-WORDS: Malaguerra, anti-state, Sicilian puppet theater, chivalric literature, libertarian, Italian romance epic

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Sicilian puppet theater is known today for its fierce battles in which wooden knights with metal armor, swords, and shields clash furiously, sometimes even slicing their opponents' faces or bodies in two. The traditional *opera dei pupi* spectators who avidly followed the chivalric dramas on a daily basis, however, could have distinguished three very distinct (albeit sometimes interwoven) types of conflict derived from their medieval and Renaissance chivalric epic sources: first, collective battles spearheaded by rulers, such as Charlemagne's invasion of Spain to win a kingdom for his nephew Orlando; second, personal rivalries, such as the enmity between the cousins Orlando and Rinaldo over the wily princess Angelica of Cathay; and third, hostilities between a sovereign and individual knights, such as Charlemagne's recurring mistreatment of Rinaldo under the influence of his evil counselor Gano di Magonza.<sup>1</sup> From the perspective of libertarian literary criticism, the third category is of particular interest for its use of epic narrative to provide model figures who struggle against the abusive power

<sup>1</sup> The classic study of Sicilian puppet theater is PASQUALINO 1977. For book-length studies in English, see MCCORMICK - CIPOLLA - NAPOLI 2011 and CROCE 2014.

of the political state. Especially noteworthy in this regard is the anti-state super-hero Morbello, who calls himself Malaguerra. As the Sicilian anthropologist Antonio Pasqualino has aptly put it, this character «vorrebbe portare il suo rifiuto del potere statale fino alla totale delegittimazione del sovrano».<sup>2</sup> Although this exemplary figure has been virtually forgotten today, he was famous in Sicily and well-known in other parts of Italy from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. This essay focuses on Morbello's vicissitudes in print and on stage, with some attention to the spread of his name and adaptation of his adventures outside the context of Sicilian puppet theater, in order to contribute to the discussion of political undercurrents in the chivalric epic genre, especially in the context of Italian popular culture.

GIUSTO LODICO'S *STORIA DEI PALADINI DI FRANCIA*

Morbello/Malaguerra first appears in Giusto Lodico's *Storia dei paladini di Francia* (1858-1860), an almost 3.000 page prose compilation based on several medieval and Renaissance chivalric poems.<sup>3</sup> By seamlessly interweaving his invented character's vicissitudes with those of the most famous paladins of France, *in primis* Rinaldo and Orlando, Lodico gives the impression that this most subversive figure had a venerable literary pedigree. Nor does the new story clash with the canonical narratives surrounding it. On the contrary, as I discuss below, it serves as the undistilled expression of an anti-authoritarian sentiment already running through some of the Lodico's principal sources.

<sup>2</sup> PASQUALINO 1992: 100.

<sup>3</sup> Worldwide there are only a few known copies of this original edition, which I was able to consult thanks to the kindness of the puppeteer Onofrio Sanicola.

The *Storia dei paladini* replays over and over the animosity between Charlemagne and his paladins, primarily Rinaldo. The twelfth and thirteenth books elaborating Pulci's *Morgante* underscore this theme right through to the battle of Roncisvalle in which Rinaldo emerges as the avenging hero, after which Lodico brings his work to a close depicting the paladin's death and sanctification. Accordingly, there was no pressing need to invent yet another character to embody the ruler-paladin opposition. Nonetheless, Lodico takes great care not only in developing his character but also in situating his story within the arc of the compilation. Morbello is the protagonist of the entire Book Six: the Book opens as Rinaldo encounters him as an infant on the coast of Spain and it closes with the youth's incorporation as the emperor of Trabisonda (Trebizond, in today's Turkey). Despite the technique of *entrelacement* which required the insertion of additional narrative threads, Morbello is active in thirteen of the Book's twenty chapters and dominates most of these even though Lodico is not following any single source in this section as he does in most of the rest of the work. Morbello is given prominence through his story's placement as well: his extended adventures throughout Book Six immediately precede the retelling of Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* in Books Seven, Eight, and part of Nine, thus forming together the central and substantial core of Lodico's thirteen-book structure.

The first chapter of Book Six narrates Rinaldo's encounter with a fisherman who beseeches him to take over the care of an abandoned infant.<sup>4</sup> The fisherman knows nothing of the baby's origin other than the fact that the father had condemned his child to die at sea, but the captain charged with the heinous task did not have the heart to carry it out and entrusted the infant to his care instead. Rinaldo adopts the boy, giving him the name of Morbello to remember the site where he was discovered, and brings him home to his wife Clarice to raise him. While the boy grows with «ardire

<sup>4</sup> LODICO, *Storia dei paladini di Francia*, vol. II: 408-409.

insuperabile» until he equals the strength of Rinaldo, Lodico makes a point to inform us that nothing of note happens at the Parisian court for the next fifteen years («per il periodo di quindici anni nulla avvenne che fosse degno di esser narrato in questa nostra storia»)<sup>5</sup>. It is as though the heart of Charlemagne's empire will only be worthy of his attention again when the fifteen-year-old Morbello arrives on the scene.

The early, initiatic adventures of Morbello – in which he acquires enchanted arms, wins his first joust, conquers the heart of the lovely damsel Rosana, and frees his fellow paladins from an enchantment – establish his preeminence as a knight (chapters 3-5). Yet despite having been honored by the emperor and promised Rosana as his bride, Malaguerra is subsequently pit against Charlemagne in an extended episode that spans three chapters (13-15). Following a pattern common throughout the work, the conflict is set into motion through the evildoing of Gano di Magonza. After originally planning to abduct Rosana on behalf of his nephew, the treacherous Gano decides to possess the damsel himself. Although Morbello chases the culprit to Paris (after accompanying an unharmed Rosana safely to her homeland) and gains the support of Orlando who promises him «degnà riparazione»,<sup>6</sup> Gano avoids punishment by inventing a fraudulent story that wins the emperor to his side. Morbello is subsequently persuaded by Orlando to forgive his fiancée's abductor, thus demonstrating the youth's earnest effort to make peace.<sup>7</sup>

Malaguerra's troubles are far from over, however, and the continuation of the episode will directly implicate the emperor in Gano's subsequent evildoing. It is with the complicity of Charlemagne, «che non sapea dispiacersi il cognato»,<sup>8</sup> that Gano attempts to arrest Malaguerra in his sleep during the night. The wary knight, however,

<sup>5</sup> Ivi: 409-410.

<sup>6</sup> Ivi: 520.

<sup>7</sup> Ivi: 522.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

who had remained awake to defend himself against just such an eventuality, kills the guards who attempt to carry out the treacherous plan and wounds Gano in the process. With the ensuing commotion and rumor of Gano's death, Malaguerra «dovette sostenere gran battaglia» to defend himself against an onslaught of knights.<sup>9</sup> Orlando manages to stop the battle and gives Malaguerra the occasion to explain «l'orrendo tradimento che Carlo e Gano suo cognato aveano ordito contro di me».<sup>10</sup> Warning Malaguerra that «ogni tua difesa sarà vana se Carlo ti troverà in questa reggia», Orlando urges the youth to escape just as Tancredi had told the *Gerusalemme Liberata's* Rinaldo to do when Goffredo was about to act unjustly against him (*Gerusalemme liberata*, V 40-50). Once Morbello steps foot outside of France, however, he will never return to the site of the conflict. Thus, unlike Tasso's crusading epic, the *Storia dei paladini* never stages a reconciliation between the imprudent authority figure and the mistreated knight, thus underscoring the incompatibility between individual rights and overreaching political power.

Although Malaguerra has left Paris, readers are encouraged to continue feeling righteous indignation against Charlemagne though an ensuing scene pitting the emperor against Orlando and the rest of the paladins. Upon learning that Orlando helped Malaguerra escape, Charlemagne orders him to prison and threatens a fitting punishment («pena condegna»). Orlando not only resists the emperor's command but wants «colui che si lascia guidare da uno scellerato ministro» to know that «Orlando non è stato mai tanto dappoco da farsi menare ad ingiusto castigo».<sup>11</sup> When Charlemagne subsequently calls for Orlando's arrest in a desire to demonstrate his power («poiché bramava mostrare se più valeva la sua potenza, o quella di un miserabile»), the paladins refuse to obey the command and simply depart. This is one

<sup>9</sup> Ivi: 523.

<sup>10</sup> Ivi: 524.

<sup>11</sup> Ivi: 525.

of the many occasions in the *Storia dei paladini* in which Charlemagne's unjust orders lead to a withdrawal of consent of the kind evoked by Étienne de La Boétie in his *Discours de la servitude volontaire*, the quintessential Renaissance treatise on a people's right to disobey a tyrant.<sup>12</sup> Faced with the mutiny of his knights, Charlemagne then turns to his armed city guards. Instead of arresting Orlando, however, the guards deliver the emperor to his nephew at swordpoint (technically, at lancepoint). Brought to «quell'estremo», Charlemagne repents and asks Orlando's pardon. After freeing the emperor, Orlando leaves Paris and thus effectively (albeit temporarily) removes himself from his service.

After a subsequent adventure in Macedonia (discussed briefly below) and a hurricane at sea, Malaguerra eventually arrives in Trebizond where the rest of Book Six plays out (chapters 17-20). After being hosted by an innkeeper who is «pieno di bontà» and «di generoso cuore»,<sup>13</sup> the knight defends the realm's princess against a giant who had treacherously sought her death by accusing her of sexual indiscretion. When Malaguerra kills the giant after five hours of single combat, the latter's brothers, rulers of Armenia, head to Trebizond with a large army. Despite the gratitude the emperor Arismondo should have felt for the heroic newcomer, out of fear and convenience he has the knight apprehended in his bedroom (Gano's earlier strategy) and placed in the «più orrendo carcere di Trabisonda»<sup>14</sup> in order to turn him over to be killed by the brothers. Help comes in the form of non-political actors. First, at the news of the hero's imprisonment and impending death, the «popolo» spontaneously heads to the palace and «minacciò di morte l'imperatore, se non rimettesse in libertà Malaguerra». Second, the innkeeper who had hosted Malaguerra secretly leaves the city and «si pose a correre valli e monti» to seek Rinaldo. Faced with the population's rebellion, the king offers to

<sup>12</sup> LA BOETIE, *Discours de la servitude volontaire* [Bayard].

<sup>13</sup> LODICO, *Storia dei paladini di Francia*, vol. II: 542-543.

<sup>14</sup> Ivi: 550.

free Malaguerra in exchange for his defense against the brothers. Thus the narrative shows once again that a ruler is powerless when those subject to him resist. If earlier the emperor of France could not detain Orlando when his knights disobeyed his orders, now the emperor of Trebizond must free Malaguerra because his subjects rise up against him.

The episode culminates in a climactic scene in which the king, in order to rid himself of the giant's angry brothers, treacherously poisons them at a supposedly reconciliatory banquet. Believing himself to be poisoned as well, Malaguerra «pieno di giusto sdegno» strikes a fatal blow against Arismondo [Figure 1]. The soldiers, assuming that Malaguerra had killed the five royal guests as well as their own ruler, immediately attack him en masse. After single-handedly staving everyone off for over six hours, the youth is gravely wounded from behind. When the queen intervenes to save his life, she spots a necklace she had left with her infant several years before, thus realizing that the newly arrived knight is none other than her long lost son Orello that Arismondo had sent to die at sea after a prophet foretold that at the age of eighteen the boy would kill his father. The queen further explains that, at her urging, the official charged with the task spared the infant's life and took him to a distant shore. In the meantime, the concerned innkeeper has succeeded in finding not only Rinaldo, but also Orlando, Bradamante, Oliviero, Agolaccio, and Gandellino who, after learning of «il nero tradimento dell'imperatore»,<sup>15</sup> head to Trebizond in all haste. Upon his arrival, Rinaldo is thus able to corroborate the queen's story by recounting how he came upon Morbello as an infant. Having thus regained his original identity and family, Orello, surrounded by the principal paladins of France, is happily proclaimed heir and emperor of Trebizond: «ciascuno si tenne contento del nuovo erede e fu acclamato imperatore».<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Ivi: 551.

<sup>16</sup> Ivi: 557.





Figure 1. G. Mattaliano, *Malaguerra uccide suo padre*, in LODICO, *Storia dei paladini di Francia*, vol. II: 547

In addition to the general romance plot of the hero abandoned to his fate as an infant and raised anonymously until his identity is discovered at a crucial moment, one can no doubt recognize the specific story of Oedipus Rex behind King Arismondo's failed attempt to invalidate a dire prophecy through infanticide. Unlike Oedipus, however, Malaguerra does not commit any unwitting act that brings shame upon himself or others. On the contrary, he has no regrets in causing his father's death since the latter had sought to have him killed on two occasions. In addition to narrating the ruler's evil actions, Lodico had also expressed his reprobation as narrator by referring to Arismondo as «il tiranno imperatore» who «reggea quel regno con obbrobrio del proprio nome»<sup>17</sup> and as «quel vecchio tiranno» who «avea dato prove della sua crudeltà».<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Lodico had prepared this moment right from the very opening of Book Six where he condemned those who commit evil deeds as the result of prophecy.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ivi: 535.

<sup>18</sup> Ivi: 542.

<sup>19</sup> «Indarno l'uomo fugge il destino segnato dal fato, e dee reputarsi stolto colui, che prestando fede agl'indovini, commette tal fiata enormi crudeltà, onde guadagnarsi miglior fortuna; giacché quando crede aver cambiato sorte, e sia lungi da lui il predetto male, inavvedutamente accelera i passi per incontrarlo con maggiore sciagura, ciò che sarà provato in questo libro sesto» (ivi: 407-408).

Thus the entirety of this Book is cast as a morality tale with Arismondo as the villain and Malaguerra and the hero destined to prevail.

Because Malaguerra was raised a Christian, he persuades his mother, the queen, and subsequently the entire population, to convert as well, an example of spreading Christianity through discourse rather than through armed conflict. Peacefully bringing about the conversion to Christianity of a vast territory east of Europe would have further established the character's heroic stature for Lodico's intended readership in nineteenth-century Sicily. Although he uncompromisingly and consistently rebels against the ruler of the Frankish state and even kills the emperor of Trebizond, Malaguerra is, like Rinaldo during his later vicissitudes in the *Storia dei paladini*, depicted as a faithful believer in the Christian God. Yet just when the reader could have imagined a happily-ever-after ending with Orello as an exemplary ruler, Lodico warns us that the character is destined to be killed by neighboring kings because of his religion. This leaves the reader with a focus on negative examples of rulers – both within and outside Christendom – and no concrete prospect for a more positive model projected into the future.

The episodes in which Malaguerra is not involved in a contentious relationship with either of the two emperors complete his portrayal as an exemplary knight in a manner that could almost be described as hagiographic. One of these moments highlights not only his unsurpassed military valor, but also his moral philosophy regarding the principles and conditions of military engagement (chapter 9). When he comes upon the Spanish Saracen king Marsilio on the verge of losing a battle and is entreated to join him, «il valoroso Morbello» puts his sense of justice according to natural law above any religious or national distinctions, asking whether the king is defending right or wrong («volle conoscere se combattendo difendea la ragione, o pure

il torto», II, 478).<sup>20</sup> Even though Morbello is a Christian knight, he joins forces with the Saracens after Marsilio assures him that he is acting against «gente ladra e traditrice». After bringing about the victory with his prodigious valor, Morbello takes more than a thousand prisoners and explicitly forbids any further bloodshed. When the Spaniards disregard his order, the youth unhesitatingly takes up arms in defense of the defeated population. Lodico underscores the youth's ethical stance at every stage: if initially he took up arms solely on behalf of justice and subsequently «vietò di più macchiare quel suolo del sangue delle innocente vittime», he now admonishes the king «che era disdicevole ad un monarca l'inveire contro il debole sesso».<sup>21</sup> Rather than heed the lesson, however, Marsilio and his troops proceed to assail the knight who had just saved them from defeat. Despite the collective onslaught («tutti i cavalieri l'assalirono»), Malaguerra succeeds in singlehandedly defeating Marsilio and several of his best knights. When the king learns of the knight's connection to Rinaldo, with great fear («gran paura») he throws himself as a supplicant at Malaguerra's feet. After freeing everyone from prison («fe' trarre di prigione i mille che avea egli stesso posto in ceppi, e colle donne e fanciulli li fe' uscire da quella terra»),<sup>22</sup> Malaguerra also departs because he has learned not to trust Marsilio's word («temendo che quel re crudelissimo gli avesse fatto qualche tradimento»).

During his later travel from France to Trebizond, Malaguerra is the protagonist of an episode that reinforces both his dedication to helping others («aiutar l'infelice è mio costume», as he explains)<sup>23</sup> and his disinterest in attaining political power (chapter 16). Passing through Macedonia, he comes to the aid of King Pigmaliione whose eyesight, hearing, and health could only be restored by drinking water from a certain

<sup>20</sup> Ivi: 478.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> Ivi: 479.

<sup>23</sup> Ivi: 526.

fountain. Malaguerra accomplishes his task in quintessential chivalric fashion – by slaying a «crudo serpe» who was guarding the source. Yet when the grateful sovereign offers his entire realm and beautiful daughter to the hero in gratitude, Morbello refuses the offer. His explanation draws attention to his desire to emulate Rinaldo who had already turned down a thousand crowns: «mio padre mille e mille imprese ha superato e mille corone gli sono state offerte, ma egli non ha mai abusato della gentilezza di coloro che gliele hanno offerto; io vo' seguire le orme del genitore».<sup>24</sup> When the king hears the name of Rinaldo, he confirms the rightness of Malaguerra's attitude by calling the famous Frankish paladin the «primo uomo del mondo». This is consistent with Malaguerra's later statements in Trebizond. After defeating the giant Ippalco and being offered the hand of the princess and the future reign of the kingdom, he clarifies that «non erasi battuto per acquistare quella monarchia, ma per far giustizia».<sup>25</sup> When subsequently proclaimed emperor, the youth initially wants to cede power to his father who, consistent with his character, refuses. Tellingly, as noted above, we never see Morbello carry out the role of ruler but are only warned of his subsequent murder. He thus remains immortalized through his opposition to political power rather than his exercise of it.

In designing Morbello's trajectory, Lodico refashions and combines different sources as well as relying on his own inventiveness. According to Anna Carocci, the knight is based on three sixteenth-century characters: Mirabello in the anonymous *Ajolpho del Barbicone* (1516), Ivonetto in Ciego da Ferrara's *Mambriano* (1509), and Palmerino in Lodovico Dolce's *Palmerino d'Oliva* (1561).<sup>26</sup> Noting that the three

<sup>24</sup> Ivi: 531.

<sup>25</sup> Ivi: 546.

<sup>26</sup> CAROCCI 2019: 45. Although the *Mambriano* was an acknowledged source for Morbello's early Arthurian-like adventures, Carocci's study is the first to identify the *Palmerino d'Oliva* and to posit the *Ajolpho del Barbicone* as sources for the character (46). For a comparison of the Morbello story to its sources, see PASQUALINO 2018: 122-123; 125, n.; 126, n.; 138, n.; 145, n.; and CAROCCI 2019: 45-48.

characters used as precedents do not share any particular traits beyond their youth, Carocci emphasizes how «mescolando e riscrivendo le loro storie e saldandole con particolari di sua invenzione, Lodico ha saputo dar vita a una storia nuova».<sup>27</sup> As a result of this complex combinatory process, Carocci furthermore cites Morbello as the best example of Lodico's «meccanismi di montaggio» that go well beyond textual variants or reelaborations within the confines of a single poem.<sup>28</sup> Alessandro Napoli has recently noted that Lodico, along with creatively combining certain plot lines, also alludes to a whole range of additional texts in the construction of his hero. Remarking on Lodico's process of creative elaboration, Napoli maintains that Lodico autonomously constructed the final parts of Malaguerra's story «lavorando di integrazioni e varianti a partire da tutti questi suggerimenti».<sup>29</sup>

The wealth of literary precedents that Lodico evokes for his character serves to augment his heroic stature. In the Macedonian adventure, he is shown to be on par with — indeed, superior to — famous classical heroes: the «mostro» he defeats is so large that even Alexander of Macedonia and Artaxerxes with their infinite army («infinito loro esercito») would have been destroyed in less than half an hour.<sup>30</sup> Moving from history to myth, Lodico later adds that the serpent is larger than the one Cadmus killed at the fountain and no less fearsome than the ferocious Hydra defeated by Hercules.<sup>31</sup> Nor does Lodico miss an occasion to show Morbello outdoing a Renaissance hero in the same episode. If in the *Orlando Furioso* Astolfo restored Senapo's eyesight and allowed him to eat without the interruption of the Harpies, Morbello's procuring of the curative liquid cures Pigmaliione's blindness, deafness, and physical infirmity all in one

<sup>27</sup> Ivi: 48.

<sup>28</sup> Ivi: 45.

<sup>29</sup> PASQUALINO 2018: 143, n.; 144, n.

<sup>30</sup> LODICO, *Storia dei paladini di Francia*, vol. II: 527.

<sup>31</sup> Ivi: 529.

fell swoop.<sup>32</sup> Upon arriving at the shores of Trebizond, three fairies force him to choose among them (putting him in the role of Paris *vis-à-vis* the three Greek goddesses). His choice of Sordanella will lead to the birth of Ferabax (thus giving him an heir). Morbello's relation with this fairy also allows him to experience a quintessential episode undergone by heroes from antiquity to the Renaissance: a romantic interlude with an enticing female until he is called back to his destiny by a higher force.<sup>33</sup> Such a concentration of romance and epic motifs all designed to bolster Morbello's preeminence make this character stand out even above the beloved heroes Rinaldo and Orlando. Indeed, he even at one point appropriates Baiardo and Durlindana, the famous horse and sword that in Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* King Gradasso of Sericana had set out from East Asia to obtain. One might think at this point that nothing else could be added to Lodico's character, and yet another Sicilian author is soon thereafter inspired to develop the anti-authoritarian elements of his story even further.

#### GIUSEPPE LEGGIO'S EXTENDED VERSION OF THE *STORIA DEI PALADINI DI FRANCIA*

Lodico's *Storia dei paladini* was so popular that Giuseppe Leggio (1870-1911) published an edition with additional episodes in 1895-1896. This expanded edition is the one that

<sup>32</sup> Ivi: 530-531.

<sup>33</sup> In Morbello's case, it is a voice that comes to him three times while he sleeps to admonish him not to place love above glory and to pursue «quell'avventure che il cielo ti ha destinato» (Ivi: 537). For a comparison of various iterations of this classical episode from Cieco da Ferrara to Torquato Tasso, see CAVALLO 2004: 74-98, 158-228.

was reprinted in successive decades and right up to the twenty-first century.<sup>34</sup> Alessandro Napoli has pointed out that Leggio's expanded version also contained additions to Morbello's story.<sup>35</sup> I would like to argue that these additions are designed to bring further attention to both the reprehensible behavior of Charlemagne and the parallels between Rinaldo and his even more rebellious adopted son.

Leggio's first substantial addition occurs in the very opening episode. Lodico had prefaced Rinaldo's discovery of the infant with a summary of how the knight instructed his children on the need to be loved by both the people and Charlemagne and on the prudence that every lord should show his subjects.<sup>36</sup> This passage serves at least three functions: first, it emphasizes that Rinaldo's essential character is not that of a rebel but of someone who respects both those below and above him in the hierarchy of power; second, it portrays Rinaldo as a father who teaches conventional ethical values to his children; and third, it provides a subtle but ironic reminder that the ultimate figure of authority, Charlemagne, fails to abide by these principles *vis-à-vis* his subjects. Leggio, dispensing with the subtleties, invents a completely new episode that reminds the reader just how far the emperor is from such an ideal.

Before recounting the discovery of Morbello, Leggio describes how festivities in Paris escalate into an actual physical brawl between Rinaldo and Charlemagne. First Gano blames Rinaldo for a vengeful joke that Astolfo played against the Magonza clan which consisted in the Saracen Ferraù beating them up upon their entrance. When Ferraù subsequently departs for Spain without taking official leave of the emperor, Gano

<sup>34</sup> For the *Storia dei paladini*'s publication history, see PASQUALINO 2018: 19, n. All references to Leggio's version in this essay are from the recent and readily available reprinting, LODICO, *Storia dei paladini di Francia* [Cammarata].

<sup>35</sup> Alessandro Napoli's notes on the character can be found in PASQUALINO 2018: 125, n.; 126, n.; 138, n.; 145, n.

<sup>36</sup> «Rinaldo [...] ebbe istruiti i figliuoli di quanto faceva uopo per essere amati dai popoli e da Carlo, ed inculcando loro quella prudenza che ogni signore dee sempre mostrare ai sudditi» (LODICO, *Storia dei paladini di Francia*, vol. II: 408).

instigates Charlemagne against Rinaldo by claiming that he condoned this gesture of disrespect. After a heated exchange in which Rinaldo repays Gano's insults with a blow that knocks him down, Charlemagne responds by throwing a chair at Rinaldo, who likewise falls to the floor. Rinaldo's retaliation against the emperor bears citation: «divenne un fulmine e cieco di rabbia percosse l'imperatore con tanto furore che se non fosse stato pronto a saltare dal trono sarebbe rimasto ucciso».<sup>37</sup> After this near regicide, Charlemagne exiles Rinaldo from all of Christendom, including from the knight's own property in Montalbano (in southern France). Although Orlando tells Rinaldo that «è dovere di un suddito obbedire ai comandi del suo signore», he then compels Charlemagne to mitigate the penalty to banishment from Paris and threatens to take up arms against the emperor should he disturb Rinaldo on his home turf («se volete irritarlo anche nel suo castello, la mia spada sarà in sua difesa»)<sup>38</sup>

In Leggio's version, moreover, Rinaldo subsequently encounters Ferraù in Morbello. When he informs the Spanish knight of the incident, the latter proposes to head to Paris to kill Charlemagne. It is immediately after Rinaldo turns down Ferraù's offer that the fisherman approaches them with a baby who, he explains, is alive because a seacaptain refused to carry out «un atto così atroce» as the murder ordered by the baby's father.<sup>39</sup> It will only become clear subsequently that Rinaldo's fight with the emperor was a foreshadowing of Morbello's own hostilities involving figures who abuse their political power – beginning with Charlemagne himself. Leggio also takes advantage of Rinaldo's exile to inform readers that the knight «godeva a Montalbano il riposo dalle armi» and took pleasure in hunting with the wizard Malagigi, who also had fun with Morbello.<sup>40</sup> Thus, rather than mentioning the lack of newsworthy activities in Paris, Leggio suggests

<sup>37</sup> LODICO, *Storia dei paladini di Francia* [Cammarata], vol. VI: 9.

<sup>38</sup> Ivi: 10.

<sup>39</sup> Ivi: 11.

<sup>40</sup> Ivi: 13.



an idyllic formative period during the boy's childhood, at least until Rinaldo's next conflict with Charlemagne (which, incidentally, does not take long to occur in this compilation).

Leggio's second addition brings us to the heart of Morbello's sequence at the Frankish court and takes his conflict with Charlemagne to a new and unprecedented height. Whereas in Lodico's original version Morbello leaves Paris at Orlando's urging and is next encountered in Macedonia, Leggio's character returns instead to Montalbano «con il cuore gonfio di vendetta».<sup>41</sup> Morbello originally seeks his father's help, but upon hearing that Rinaldo is away, he proceeds to assault Paris with Rinaldo's seven hundred retainers. With Orlando also away, Morbello defeats the defending paladins one by one until the emperor himself is forced to take up arms. Before engaging in combat, Charlemagne threatens to have Morbello killed «per essere stato ribelle alla sua corona».<sup>42</sup> In response, Morbello proclaims himself a sovereign individual not subject to anyone: «Io non sono soggetto a nessuno». Morbello's statement of complete self-sovereignty in one sentence negates the entire political structure that makes the ruler the arbiter of justice and controller of individual lives.<sup>43</sup> Although both have faith that God will ensure their victory, the knight unhorses the emperor at the first impact of his lance. Refusing to hand over Gano, Charlemagne becomes Morbello's prisoner.

Astolfo, who had previously declared his support for Morbello's actions, now advises the youth to take the emperor and the captured paladins to Montalbano and imprison them in Rinaldo's castle. When Rinaldo returns home and hears the news, his first reaction is to laugh.<sup>44</sup> Yet he reprimands his son for his reckless action that could bring Charlemagne's ire down upon him. When Morbello states «io ho agito

<sup>41</sup> Ivi, vol. VII: 15.

<sup>42</sup> Ivi: 18.

<sup>43</sup> For a theoretical elaboration of a natural law based concept of self-sovereignty and self-ownership, see ROTHBARD 1998.

<sup>44</sup> LODICO, *Storia dei paladini di Francia* [Cammarata], vol. VII: 19.

giustamente» and recounts the events, Rinaldo «comprese che Morbello avea ragione». Nonetheless, Rinaldo drags Morbello back to the prison, releases Charlemagne, and bids his son to kneel before the emperor and ask his forgiveness. Morbello, however, bites Charlemagne's hand instead. At this point an angry Rinaldo imprisons his son and hands over the keys to Charlemagne, who returns to Paris. Even though Rinaldo elsewhere in the poem openly rebels against Charlemagne, here his acquiescence to authority puts into relief Morbello's unconditional pursuit of justice.

Preferring death to captivity, Morbello takes action by refusing to eat. Rinaldo obtains the keys from the emperor with the condition that Morbello not return to Paris. Although the youth promises Rinaldo to abide by this restriction, upon his release he wastes no time in devising a new plan. This time he no longer seeks to rely on his father's men, but rather places posters throughout the forest announcing the recruitment of troops to dethrone Charlemagne. Rinaldo is initially enraged by Morbello's rebellious actions since he expects to bear the brunt of Charlemagne's rage, and he races through the woods poised to kill his son for such disobedience. As Morbello waits for recruits, Malagigi takes on the voice of destiny and commands him to flee to avoid being killed by his father. When Bradamante catches up with Rinaldo, she convinces him to compel Morbello to reconcile with Charlemagne instead. As we know, this will not happen, as the youth is on his way east.

Leggio's further development of the episode underscores Morbello's uniqueness in remaining true to his principles. Unlike the other paladins who repeatedly forgive the emperor and his evil counselor throughout the work, Morbello distinguishes himself as a character who adamantly refuses to reconcile with Charlemagne until Gano has been punished for his treachery. He is unwilling to compromise his principle of self-sovereignty or his desire for justice even if it means disobeying his beloved father or starving himself to death in prison. Moreover, in Leggio's version, Orlando does not simply leave the court due to anger at Charlemagne, as he does in Lodico, but he leaves Europe precisely in order

to reconcile Rinaldo with his son: «ebbe pietà del giovanetto e deliberò andare in cerca di lui e fare il possibile per conciliarlo con Rinaldo».<sup>45</sup> The presence of Rinaldo, and indeed the tension between the two, allows for the pattern of conflict and reconciliation to take place – if not between the young knight and the emperor in Paris, as noted above, at least between father and son on the northern shore of Turkey.

#### SCRIPTS OF THE CATANESE-AMERICAN PUPPETEER AGRIPPINO MANTEO

While some puppeteers continued to use Lodico, many others adopted Leggio's extended version.<sup>46</sup> Either way, the *Storia dei paladini* became the authoritative source for puppet theater throughout Sicily as well as in southern Italy and wherever puppeteers immigrated. Since this third-person narration could not be staged directly, puppeteers created their own scripts (*canovacci* or *copioni*), writing out the location, setting, characters, division of the action into acts and scenes, stage directions, and some direct dialogue. These documents can provide a window into the presentation of Morbello in traditional *opera dei pupi*. The set of scripts I examine below belonged to the puppeteer Agrippino Manteo (1884-1947).<sup>47</sup> These scripts not only maintain the anti-authoritarian thrust of Morbello's story, but employ narrative and theatrical means to further develop the parallel between Malaguerra and Rinaldo and to intensify the sense of collective resistance to the emperors Charlemagne and Arismondo.

<sup>45</sup> Ivi: 24.

<sup>46</sup> For an in-depth comparison of several puppet theater scripts to their sources, see CAROCCI 2019: 135-254.

<sup>47</sup> Agrippino Manteo's scripts were donated to the Italian American Museum in New York by his descendants and should soon be made available on both the museum's website and "eBOIARDO" (see the following link for more information and updates: <<https://edblogs.columbia.edu/eboiardo/manteo-puppet-theater>>). I am grateful to the Italian American Museum for access to these scripts. Without access to other puppet theater

Born in the province of Catania and apprenticed to the *puparo* Giuseppe Crimi in his youth, Agrippino Manteo performed the history of the Paladins of France and other chivalric works in nightly segments between 1923 and 1939 in New York City's Little Italy with the assistance of his wife and children. His extant scripts follow Giuseppe Leggio's extended retelling, most likely the edition published by Bideri in Naples in 1909 that his descendants have inherited. The three notebooks that contain plays featuring Malaguerra display the character's name prominently on the cover: «Rinaldo acquista Malaguerra», «Pipino figlio di Carlo uccide Baldovino. Sino Le avventure di Malaguerra» and «Cominciando con avventure di Malaguerra. Sino Orlando in Albracca» (see Figures 2-3 for the latter two).

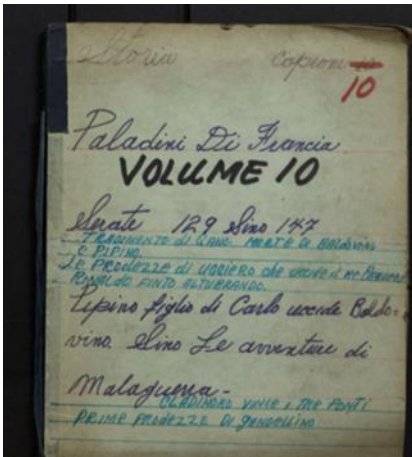


Figure 2. Agrippino Manteo, script #10, *Paladini di Francia*, serata 129 to 147. «Pipino figlio di Carlo uccide Baldovino. Sino le avventure di Malaguerra»

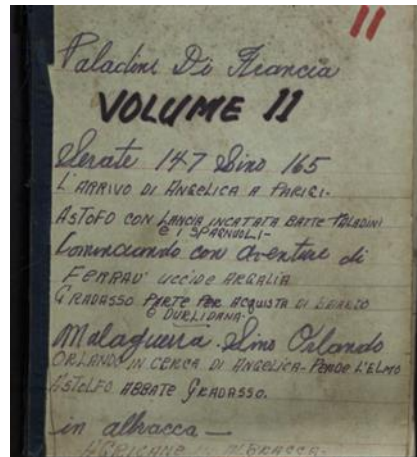


Figure 3. Agrippino Manteo, script #11, *Paladini di Francia*, serata 147 to 165. «Cominciando con avventure di Malaguerra. Sino Orlando in Albracca»

scripts, I am not able to ascertain the degree of originality in Manteo's rendition. The discussion in this section therefore simply treats his plays as one concrete example of the *opera dei pupi* tradition.

Morbello's story begins in *serata* 116 with his infancy. Although Leggio added an episode in Paris reinforcing Charlemagne's unjust treatment of Rinaldo, as noted above, he followed Lodico in delaying the specific details of Malaguerra's origins until the denouement. In introducing Morbello into his cycle, Manteo completely overhauls this narrative structure by revealing the hero's backstory right from the very beginning. Although this does away with the suspense, it allows the puppeteer to dramatically juxtapose and alternate events in France and Trebizond. This synchronicity not only affects the temporal understanding of events, but underscores their shared thematic concerns as well. The succession of scenes connects Rinaldo and Morbello as victims of imperial authority even before their fates are joined in southern Spain.

The parallels between the two stories are carefully underscored throughout this play through the technique of interlacing. Arimondo orders his infant son's death while Charlemagne orders the banishment of Rinaldo from all of Christendom. In both cases, the harm is mitigated through the intervention of a third party, the former's wife and the latter's nephew, respectively. Near the conclusion of the play, Manteo juxtaposes two scenes taking place in Paris and Trebizond: in the first, Gano plots to kill Rinaldo («Gano cerca il mezzo come far morire Rinaldo», Act 3, scene 3), and in the second, Arimondo gets the news that his baby has been killed («Arimondo riceve il capitano dice che il bambino è morto», Act 3, scene 4). These close parallels between the Frankish knight under attack and his soon-to-be adopted son narrowly escaping death, all concentrated in the space of one evening, prefigure their shared roles and highlight the dark side of state power across borders right from Morbello's first appearance in the cycle.

The sequence beginning with Morbello's conflict with Gano and Charlemagne and culminating with his coronation as emperor of Trebizond provides the narrative material for nine consecutive plays (from *serata* 143 to *serata* 151). In the four plays that stage the events in France, Manteo closely follows Leggio but adds some of his own

touches. For example, whereas in the *Storia dei paladini* nobody will attempt to follow Charlemagne's order to arrest Orlando, Manteo imagines instead that the emperor calls upon the Mangonzei clan. This would have given him the opportunity to stage a battle between Orlando and Gano's relatives (*serata* 145, Act 1, scene 3) before Charlemagne is arrested by his own soldiers in the following scene.

Before bringing the events in France to a conclusion, Manteo develops a scene that further reduces the tensions between Rinaldo and his adopted son. Even though *serata* 147 finds Malaguerra already in Macedonia, the play opens with Bradamante catching up with Rinaldo in France. Whereas Leggio had written that «tanto disse Bradamante che alla fine calmò il fratello»,<sup>48</sup> Manteo actually reports Bradamante's speech in which she states that Morbello is, after all, in the right: «infine ha ragione» (Act 1, scene 1). Although these words are not in the printed version, they echo the wording from various other moments in the text in which characters comment on whether Morbello is in the right to act as he does.<sup>49</sup>

After the intervening episode in Macedonia which serves as both a divider and a mid-point, the sequence of plays recounting Malaguerra's eventful return to Trebizond is elaborated over the course of four evenings (*serata* 148 to *serata* 151), thus creating a structural balance by mirroring the initial four in France. Here, too, Manteo finds a way to intensify the underlying themes. When in the *Storia dei paladini* Arimondo plans to hand Morbello over to the five kings, the news travels from his wife and daughter to the rest of the population. The puppeteer, rather than simply relating the passing of the news, devises a new scene in which first his wife reproaches him («lo rimprovera») and subsequently his daughter curses at him («imprega»). Arimondo's intransigence

<sup>48</sup> LODICO, *Storia dei paladini di Francia* [Cammarata], vol. VII: 24.

<sup>49</sup> Orlando, for example, tells Morbello «hai ragione» for defending himself against Gano and his men who tried to arrest him in his bedroom (*serata* 144, Act 3, scene 4), and the knight Ugiero explains to Charlemagne that Orlando stopped them from arresting Morbello because the youth «ha ragione» (*serata* 145, Act 1, scene 2).

appears all the more reprehensible when he is shown dismissing and denying the pleas of his closest family members. The emperor does not attempt to justify his predicament or show signs of conflicted emotions, but rather asserts his power with an attitude of intransigence. Act One concludes indicating that Arimondo, «irremovibile, dice che aspetta i re per farlo morire» (*serata* 149, Act 1, scene 7).

When it seems that nothing can stop Arimondo from committing such an injustice, Act 2 opens depicting the initiative of the local population to help the innocent foreigner. In the first scene, the innkeeper sets out to find Rinaldo upon hearing the news of Malaguerra's arrest. In the second, an angry crowd heads to the palace to demand Malaguerra's release. Manteo gives Lodico's generic «popolo» the more specific contours of «popolani e popolane», enumerating the various domestic items and farming tools with which they are armed: «armati chi di scopa chi di pala chi di scure chi di frecce ed altro» (*serata* 151, Act I, scene 2). Since this is not a narrative to be read by the public but rather a *pro memoria* for the puppeteer, the listing of brooms, shovels, axes, arrows, and other objects gives a sense of the scale of the uprising to be staged.<sup>50</sup> In a form of theater in which most characters are perennially dressed in armor, the visual impact of civilian characters of a lower social status wielding everyday objects as weapons against an emperor must have made the scene all the more impactful.

In *serata* 150, Manteo once again uses interlacing to create a thematic parallel between the events in France and Trebizond. Between the first two scenes of Act 1 in which Arimondo sets into motion his plan to poison the five kings and the fourth scene in which the poisoned kings fall to their death and Malaguerra slays the emperor, Manteo takes us back to Paris. In this intermediate scene, Gano engages in a monologue in which he reveals his murderous intentions *vis-à-vis* Rinaldo: «Ho mandato delle spie

<sup>50</sup> In the list of characters preceding the play, Manteo had already indicated the props: «popolani e popolane armati di frecce, scope, bastoni, pale e scure». Although the order is different, the replication of the same objects suggests that they were all used for the scene in question.

per scoprire Rinaldo e farlo morire in qualche agguato, ma non mi è mai riuscito di vedere la fine del ladrone».

In the final evening of the sequence, Manteo enacts two changes to complete the story's happy ending. Whereas the *Storia dei paladini* waits until the paladins have returned to France before recounting the arrival of Rosana in Trebizond, Manteo brings Morbello's fiancée onto the stage earlier so as to celebrate the wedding and the coronation in the same scene (*serata* 151, Act 2, scene 1). And whereas Lodico and Leggio provided a flashforward anticipating Morbello's tragic demise, Manteo leaves the characters to enjoy this moment of reunion and recognition unmarred by future evils.

#### RECOLLECTIONS OF PUPPETEERS AND CONTEMPORARY SICILIAN PUPPET THEATER

Thanks to the *Storia dei paladini* and traditional puppet theater, both Morbello and Malaguerra were household names in Sicily and beyond for over a century. The character was not only well-known, but also well-liked.<sup>51</sup> Alessandro Napoli (Catania) remembers that Malaguerra, «in quanto replica “amplificata” di Rinaldo, riscuoteva fortissime simpatie presso il pubblico tradizionale dell’Opira».<sup>52</sup> He further notes how Rosario Napoli's poster from 1928-1929 [Figure 4] announcing the deadly banquet scene in Trebizond focuses on the decapitation of Arismondo, «dando rilievo al valore guerriero di Malaguerra, che continua a combattere benché ferito alle spalle».<sup>53</sup> The late puppeteer Enzo Rossi (Monreale) names Malaguerra – along with Rinaldo and the

<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Carocci calls him «un personaggio amatissimo dell’opera dei pupi» citing Felice Cammarata's characterization of him as the «idolo dei ragazzini» (CAROCCI 2019: 46).

<sup>52</sup> Alessandro Napoli, email communication, April 8, 2018.

<sup>53</sup> Alessandro Napoli, description of Rosario Napoli's painting *Morbello Malaguerra / uccide suo padre* (1928-1929 ca.). Catania, Collezione Marionettistica dei fratelli Napoli.



Saracen Ferraù – as a favorite hero, singling him out as «un personaggio che faceva simpatia» and recalling his rebellious nature («durante la sua giovinezza era un ribelle»), exemplified by his splitting Charlemagne’s throne in two and wounding the treacherous Gano in the face.<sup>54</sup> The puppeteer Onofrio Sanicola (Marineo/Milan), in affirming that «Malaguerra fu molto famoso all’inizio del secolo in quanto classificato come ribelle in positivo», recalls that one of his uncles used the nickname *Malaguerra*, a label that he extended to his group of close friends.<sup>55</sup> Sanicola, in fact, possesses a photograph of the group with a sign reading «La banda Malaguerra dopo la battuta» [Figure 5]. Mimmo Cuticchio (Palermo) recalls that his mother used to call him Malaguerra as a nickname while he was growing up.<sup>56</sup>



Figure 4. Rosario Napoli, *Morbello Malaguerra / uccide suo padre*, Catania, Collezione Marionettistica dei fratelli Napoli, (1928-1929 ca.)



Figure 5. «La banda Malaguerra dopo la battuta». Photograph of Onofrio Sanicola’s uncle with his group of friends called “la banda Malaguerra”

<sup>54</sup> ROSSI, *Interview 2*: 41:43-42:40. Rossi’s recollection of two moments not in the *Storia dei paladini* – i.e., Rinaldo’s splitting of Charlemagne’s throne and slashing of Gano’s face – serves to indicate that Agrippino Manteo was not the only puppeteer who elaborated on Morbello’s story.

<sup>55</sup> Onofrio Sanicola, email communication, April 6, 2018.

<sup>56</sup> Mimmo Cuticchio, in-person communication, Urbana, Illinois, October 29, 2018.

Malaguerra can still be found in the puppet collections of contemporary Sicilian puppeteers. Franco Cuticchio (Palermo) notes that his Malaguerra puppet [Figure 6] is currently used in the role of Rinaldo. Perhaps the puppets are considered interchangeable because their characters are so alike. Cuticchio, in fact, describes Malaguerra as «un personaggio valoroso e astuto come il padre Rinaldo» and points out that the entire tragedy of Roncesvaux could have been avoided if Charlemagne had just listened to Malaguerra: «Se Carlomagno avesse ascoltato Malaguerra che voleva Gano di Magonza perché aveva capito che era un traditore, i paladini non venivano uccisi». <sup>57</sup> In 2019 the puppeteer Salvatore Oliveri (Alcamo) constructed a handsome new Malaguerra puppet [Figure 7] to replace one he had recently sold. In accounting for the traditional public's affection for the character, Oliveri explains:

La cosa che più colpisce in questo personaggio è che crescendo molto somiglia a Rinaldo. Lui è dotato di una forza straordinaria, è un avventuriero, dove mette piede non cresce l'erba, sembra suo padre giovane. Ecco perché il personaggio è molto amato dal pubblico di allora. <sup>58</sup>

Morbello has also recently returned as a protagonist to the Sicilian puppet theater stage, albeit without overt political undertones. The puppeteer Enzo Mancuso (Palermo), in developing his offerings beyond the customary plays based on Boiardo, Ariosto, and Pulci regularly staged in recent decades, has added *Morbello distrugge l'incanto della maga Uriella* to his repertory. For the occasion, in 2005, together with Antonino Guarino, he constructed an attractive Morbello puppet with blue trimmings [Figure 8]. Mancuso states in the program notes that he freely adapted the play from «antichi canovacci», presumably the traditional scripts used by the puppeteers in his own

<sup>57</sup> Franco Cuticchio, Facebook message, November 19, 2019.

<sup>58</sup> Salvatore Olivieri, Email communication, October 3, 2019.

family. The episode corresponds to Morbello's early exploits in the *Storia dei paladini* and the traditional puppet theater cycle: falling in love with Rosana, taking on the name of Malaguerra, attaining his armor in a magic adventure, participating incognito in (and winning) his first joust, stealing Orlando's sword, and, finally, liberating his fellow knights from the enchantment of Uriella and revealing his identity to Rinaldo.



Figure 6. Morbello/Malaguerra puppet constructed by Franco Cuticchio (Palermo)



Figure 7. Morbello/Malaguerra puppet constructed by Salvatore Olivieri (Alcamo) in 2019



Figure 8. Morbello/Malaguerra puppet constructed by Enzo Mancuso and Antonino Guarino (Palermo) in 2005 for the play *Morbello distrugge l'incanto della maga Uriella*

## NORTHERN ITALY

The *Storia dei paladini* and its eventual sequels circulated in print not only within the island, but also in northern Italy and even in the New World. In at least one instance, moreover, chivalric works published in Sicily reached northern Italy after having first

crossed the Atlantic Ocean from New York City.<sup>59</sup> Thanks to printed editions, the work entered the repertory of an independent folk performance tradition in northern Italy based largely on chivalric epics, the epic *maggio* sung in the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines.<sup>60</sup> The character thus became the protagonist of a number of dramatic plays in the epic *maggio* tradition. Giacomo Alberghi (1875-1944), a prominent *maggio* author from the Reggio Emilia province, composed a *maggio* entitled *Morbello* that was sung in Cervarolo (RE). Two separate *maggi* with the name of Morbello are attributed to Michele Costi (1868-1942), another Reggio Emilian *maggio* author whose plays include a *Rinaldo appassionato* and *Orlando Furioso*.<sup>61</sup> Given that the epic *maggio* typically pits good against evil, with evildoers almost invariably punished or expelled, it is not surprising that Morbello's story should have found its way into the tradition's repertory. Unfortunately, however, at present further study of Morbello in the *maggio* tradition is thwarted by the fact that none of these plays are known to be extant.

There is also evidence that Morbello found favor in other regions of northern Italy outside the context of the epic *maggio*. Giovanni Kezich notes that the Tuscan peasant poet Morbello Vergari, son of an impoverished farmer turned miner, was given his first name by his parents (i.e., as a birth name, not a nickname) in the early twentieth century. Removing any doubt regarding the reference to Lodico's character is the fact that one of Morbello's brothers was named Orlando. Kezich reflects on the logic beyond this unusual occurrence:

A chi, oggi, potrebbe mai saltare in testa di marcare a vita un figliolo con un nome del genere? Ma per un contadino del tutto diseredato fattosi poi minatore per dura necessità come il padre di Morbello, in una maremma di butteri e briganti che nel 1920 è ancora

<sup>59</sup> CAVALLO 2005: 53-55.

<sup>60</sup> For more on the epic *maggio* tradition and its relation to puppet theater, see CAVALLO 2002-2004.

<sup>61</sup> VEZZANI 1992: 366, 369 and 405.

praticamente un *far west*, la saga già un po' incartapecorita dei paladini evidentemente esercita ancora un suo fascino elementare.<sup>62</sup>

What indeed could have inspired a farmer-turned-miner to name his biological son after a character who killed his father with his sword? It may not have been only the Far West features of the Maremma region. After all, there are many worthy names of paladins from which to choose. Could it have been that Mr. Vergari felt a particular affinity to the more political aspects of Morbello's character? Although we will never know the story behind his particular choice, there is evidence that at least the puppet theater culture that celebrated Morbello was characterized as spreading a climate of resistance to political authority.

#### POLITICAL RAMIFICATIONS

As Pasqualino has pointed out, «a Napoli e in Sicilia fin dal secolo scorso molti osservatori hanno notato l'importanza dell'aspetto sovversivo della *Storia dei paladini*».<sup>63</sup> In the late nineteenth century a polemic arose in the newspapers in which puppeteers were accused of planting the seeds of sedition. Rinaldo was singled out as especially dangerous, but the accusatory remarks could be partially applied to his adopted son as well: «Di Rinaldi malandrini e ladri, di Rinaldi ribelli ed assassini e di quelle madornali assurdità che fanno perdere perfino la divina particola, avea bisogno solo il medio evo».<sup>64</sup> In response to this allied attempt by the local press and government to close down puppet theaters, the eminent Sicilian ethnographer Giuseppe Pitré defended

<sup>62</sup> KEZICH 2006: 14.

<sup>63</sup> PASQUALINO 1977: 116.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in PITRÉ 1884: 271.

the tradition, asserting that the chivalric masterpieces staged in the plays inspired, on the contrary, ethical behaviour and valorous action.<sup>65</sup> Although Pitré was no doubt correct about the genre's didactic intention, the political powers of the time were also not mistaken in sensing the insurrectionary potential of the narratives performed.

One might thus be tempted to equate the creation of *Morbello* and the overall political undercurrent of the *Storia dei paladini* with the revolutionary stirrings of the period given that the compilation was published just prior to the Unification of Italy in 1861 and retained its popularity in the following decades. Yet historical circumstance alone cannot provide a complete answer since the anti-state vicissitudes of *Morbello* only bring into greater relief a skeptical attitude toward political power already present in various of the medieval and Renaissance chivalric poems that Lodico adapted. In Luigi Pulci's *Morgante*, for example, Charlemagne is in continuous contention with his paladins. Early on he offends Orlando, precipitating the latter's departure from Paris. Subsequently, he orders the successive executions of Astolfo and Ricciardetto, both of whom are rescued from the scaffold at the last minute by Rinaldo, the knight most consistently set in opposition to the emperor.<sup>66</sup> In Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*, Charlemagne unjustly leaves Astolfo to rot in prison after the latter's altercation with the Magonza clan. Upon his unexpected release following Gradasso's invasion of Paris, the paladin repudiates the Frankish court and heads east in search of Orlando.<sup>67</sup> More broadly, Boiardo warns readers at the outset of his poem that it is a tendency of those in power to recklessly put their entire realms in danger in a vain attempt to satisfy their unlimited craving: «E sì como egli advien a' gran signori / Che pur quel voglion che

<sup>65</sup> While dismissing accusations of the genre's potential seditiousness, Pitré also discredited the journalists by branding them as an overly sensitive fourth branch of the state («i delicati nervi di qualche rappresentante del quarto potere dello Stato»). Ivi: 270.

<sup>66</sup> For the critique of political power from Pulci's *Morgante* to Sicilian puppet theater, see CAVALLO 2017.

<sup>67</sup> For the political implications of this episode, see CAVALLO 2013: 38-41.

non pòno avere, / E quanto son difficoltà maggiori / La disiata cosa ad otenere, / Pongono il regno spesso in grandi erori, / Né posson quel che voglion possedere». <sup>68</sup>

Another reason that the anti-state sentiment detected in late-nineteenth century puppet theater cannot be confined to the period of Unification is the fact that it was still prevalent among puppeteers and their public in the second half of the twentieth century. Interviews that Pasqualino carried out in the post-World War II period demonstrate the extent to which the genre's potential to critique political power was consciously understood by puppeteers themselves: «Il discredito del potere [...] si è accentuato in questo dopoguerra». <sup>69</sup> As one puppeteer declared in an interview, Charlemagne was the character most hated by the public next to the universally despised traitor Gano. Puppeteers and their public could surmise that the emperor invariably allied himself with his evil counselor not only because the two were related by marriage, «ma anche perché Gano è molto ricco e fornisce l'oro necessario a governare». <sup>70</sup>

Behind the memorable deeds of Morbello and the objectionable actions of Charlemagne, Gano, and Arismondo, their narratives embody universal political issues. At stake in the conflict are central questions of individual rights, justice, and political accountability. The repeated mistakes made by the two emperors underscore how political power may exacerbate weakness of judgment, corruption, intransigence, and bias. The hero's fundamental belief in his self-sovereignty as an individual challenges the pretensions of the ruler to be obeyed even when acting unethically. The staging of Morbello's conflictual situations in both Christian France and Saracen Trebizond demonstrates, moreover, that the political issues raised by the narrative transcend

<sup>68</sup> BOIARDO, *Orlando Innamorato* [Canova], I 15.

<sup>69</sup> PASQUALINO 1977: 117. Pasqualino's chapter entitled *Ideologia dell'opra* provides a more extensive treatment of ideology in Sicilian puppet theater, including his division of conflict into Christian-Saracen, convert-traitor, and sovereign-rebel (108-131).

<sup>70</sup> Ivi: 118.

cultural, religious, and geographical differences. The various reactions – from remonstrances to the withdrawal of consent to outright rebellion – on the part of vassals and the general population offer scenarios in which abusive power is contested by third parties. Indeed, Morbello receives even more help from the general population (the innkeeper and both male and female commoners) in a land where he is a stranger than on his own home turf. The underlying assumption is an irreconcilability between a natural law with a shared understanding of right and wrong behavior, on the one hand, and the autarchic decrees pronounced by an absolute political authority, on the other.

Although Morbello's story presents the dark side of political power, his foretold murder by neighboring kings does not offer a positive model. Looking ahead in the *Storia dei paladini*, however, Rinaldo will provide that model when he temporarily becomes the emperor of Trebizond after Morbello's death. After having refused to rule a thousand times, according to Morbello, Rinaldo demonstrates a different model of governance in Trebizond by acting on behalf of the inhabitants rather than subjugating them. Upon learning of his wife Clarice's death in a Frankish prison, the grieving widower decides to return to the life of a pilgrim and is concerned that Trebizond remain in that liberty («in quella libertà») in which he leaves it, even promising the inhabitants that – should he ever reconcile with Charlemagne – he would return «più per custodire i vostri diritti anziché imperare».<sup>71</sup> Tellingly, in stark contrast with Charlemagne's abuse of power and Gano's scheming, not one of the nobles wants to assume the crown of Trebizond: «di tutta la signoria niuno volle prendere la corona».<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> LODICO, *Storia dei paladini di Francia* [Cammarata], vol. VII: 258. Here I cite from the readily available recent edition of the *Storia dei paladini*.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*. Napoli compares this scene in the *Storia dei paladini* to the original poem *Trabisonda* (PASQUALINO 2018 [Napoli], 316n). This chapter of Rinaldo's chivalric career merits further attention.



Malaguerra's trajectory provides a compelling fictional example of a heroic character fighting against the injustices perpetrated by those wielding political power. His presence thus reminds us that Sicilian puppet theater was not simply a chivalric soap opera for the masses before the advent of television, but could also be a vehicle to express a critical attitude toward the state under the cover of dramatizing medieval and Renaissance canonical epics. Indeed, it may be that puppet theater's political undercurrent contributed to its massive popularity for over a century in southern Italy and among Italian immigrants in urban centers of the New World. It certainly does not seem a coincidence that the character most beloved by the traditional puppet theater public, Morbello's adoptive father Rinaldo, was also the one who most consistently and prominently plays out the opposition between individual rights and unwarrantable state power. Both the *Storia dei paladini* and Sicilian puppet theater, moreover, are part of the larger genre of epic and thus these episodes are a reminder that epic narratives do not necessarily glorify the military victory of one's people over a fearsome and often demonized foreign other, but may express a wide range of positions, including a critical eye toward political power across cultures.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>73</sup> A shorter version of this essay, with the same title, was presented at the Libertarian Scholars Conference held in 2018 in New York City and sponsored by the Ludwig von Mises Institute.

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