

TRINÀCRIA

A Tale Of Bourbon Sicily



TRINÀCRIA

A Tale Of Bourbon Sicily



ANTHONY DI RENZO



GUERNICA

TORONTO • BUFFALO • BERKELEY • LANCASTER (U.K.)

2013

© 2013, Anthony Di Renzo and Guernica Editions, Inc.
All rights reserved. The use of any part of this publication,
reproduced, transmitted in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise
stored in a retrieval system, without the prior consent of the
publisher is an infringement of the copyright law.

Photo: 19th century fresco from the Palazzo dei Normanni,
page 175, used by permission by Mark Sherouse.

Michael Mirolla, general editor
David Moratto, book designer
Guernica Editions Inc.

P.O. Box 76080, Abbey Market, Oakville, (ON), Canada L6M 3H5
2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, N.Y. 14150-6000 U.S.A.

Distributors:

University of Toronto Press Distribution,
5201 Dufferin Street, Toronto (ON), Canada M3H 5T8
Gazelle Book Services, White Cross Mills, High Town,
Lancaster LA1 4XS U.K.

First edition.

Printed in Canada.

Legal Deposit – Third Quarter

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2013933968

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Di Renzo, Anthony, 1960-
Trinacria : a tale of Bourbon Sicily / Anthony Di Renzo.

(Essential prose series ; 102)

Also issued in electronic format.

ISBN 978-1-55071-726-6

I. Title. II. Series: Essential prose series ; 102

PS3604.I27T74 2013

813'.6

C2013-901443-8

For
SHARON ELIZABETH

Beneath the shadiest cypress,
Within the coziest urn,
Is death any less cruel?

— Ugo Foscolo,
The Sepulchers (1807)



Contents

PROLOGUE:	The Latest Invasion	13
CHAPTER I:	Eternal Death	25
CHAPTER II:	Family Pride	47
CHAPTER III:	Heroes and Tenors	71
CHAPTER IV:	God the Grocer	101
CHAPTER V:	A Century of Progress.	125
CHAPTER VI:	The Scent of Broom	157
EPILOGUE:	The Conquering Fly	177
Afterword		185
About the Author		195
Praise for Trinàcria		197



CATACOMBS OF THE CAPUCHINS, PALERMO.



PROLOGUE

The Latest Invasion



PALERMO PREPARED FOR THE latest invasion. The city was confident. After twenty-five centuries of Romans and Carthaginians, Normans and Arabs, Spaniards and Britons, surely it could handle a Hollywood film crew, even one led by a Milanese duke. But at Punta Raisi, the welcoming committee faced a more formidable (if less colorful) force than Garibaldi's Red Shirts. Armed with a five-million-dollar budget, Twentieth-Century Fox had assembled a battalion of two hundred carpenters, ten dozen make-up artists, hairdressers, and seamstresses, sixty cameramen, twenty electricians, fifteen florists, and ten cooks. "If the Allies had been this organized," joked the pug-faced mayor, "Operation Husky would have been less a fiasco."

The studio publicist, a propaganda officer during the war, laughed and pointed at the lanky figure on the tarmac: "The Maestro's a better general."

A dying breed, the mayor conceded. According to the studio press kits, which the publicist had distributed to the delegation, the director descended from cardinals and warlords, "whose massive red sarcophagi continue to awe visitors to the Duomo di Milano." The Maestro,

by a hundred thousand. When a frantic Department of Public Works called for major construction, crooked contractors went into a feeding frenzy. The most prominent — a former cart driver who had hauled stone and sand in the slums — was connected to the Mafia. Thugs bribed or coerced officials to rubber-stamp over four thousand building licenses. Half the signatures were gullible pensioners, duped into applying for phantom benefits. To deflect scandal, the administration touted this house of cards, but critics called the boom the Sack of Palermo. Construction crews had destroyed the city's green belt and Art Nouveau villas and replaced them with shoddy apartment complexes. Meanwhile, the historical center, bombed during the war, still lay in ruins.

These conditions did not deter the director, whose scouts secured the best locations for his three-month shoot. He commandeered the Palazzo Gangi, with its gilded mirrors, Venetian chandeliers, and ceiling frescoes of rococo gods, for a ballroom scene. He converted a private chapel in the Cathedral of Palermo into a set. He uprooted telephone poles, repaved asphalt roads with cobblestone, and demolished an entire postwar neighborhood. At Ciminna, a mountaintop village thirty kilometers southeast of the city, he pillaged a three-thousand-year-old temple to Demeter to construct a marble mantelpiece for a fake palazzo.

A refuge was needed from the dust, din, and heat, so a decayed country manor in the suburb of Villabate, now the property of the University of Palermo's Department

of Agriculture, was restored to its former glory and became the Maestro's private retreat. Here he tinkered with the script, browbeat designers, and auditioned extras.

A stream of local aristocrats flowed through his door. Their fine manners, better suited for a social at Circolo Bellini than a hastily improvised cattle call, could not disguise their discomfort. Some were scandalized because an American actor had been cast as a Sicilian prince. Others, who traced their ancestry back to Justinian, resented kissing the hand of this Northern upstart. But all competed fiercely for the chance to play their ancestors, however briefly: supernumeraries begging to become supernumeraries. The director pitied them. One *cavaliere*, a member of the Palermo Chamber of Commerce, wore a Rotary pin beside the Royal Order of the Two Sicilies. To meet real aristocrats, he must visit the Capuchin monastery.

∞ The director traced the chiseled inscription:

FUMMO COME VOI,
SARETE COME NOI

We were like you, you will be like us.

Located on the western edge of the city, the Convento dei Cappuccini was famous for its extensive catacombs. Four centuries ago, the guide explained, the good monks discovered these vaults contained a mysterious preservative that could mummify the dead. Over time, eight

The director consulted his guidebook:

Zita Valanguerra Spinelli

(1794–1882)

Marchesa of Scalea, known as Trinàcria, was a 19th-century literary figure and caricaturist. A child prodigy, she captivated the Queen of Naples during her brief exile in Palermo. Widowed early, she ran a salon, wrote epigrams, and entertained the court at Caserta. When an indiscretion made her unwelcome, she allied herself to the growing Romantic movement. She promoted Bellini's operas and supported the poet Leopardi, until their rupture.

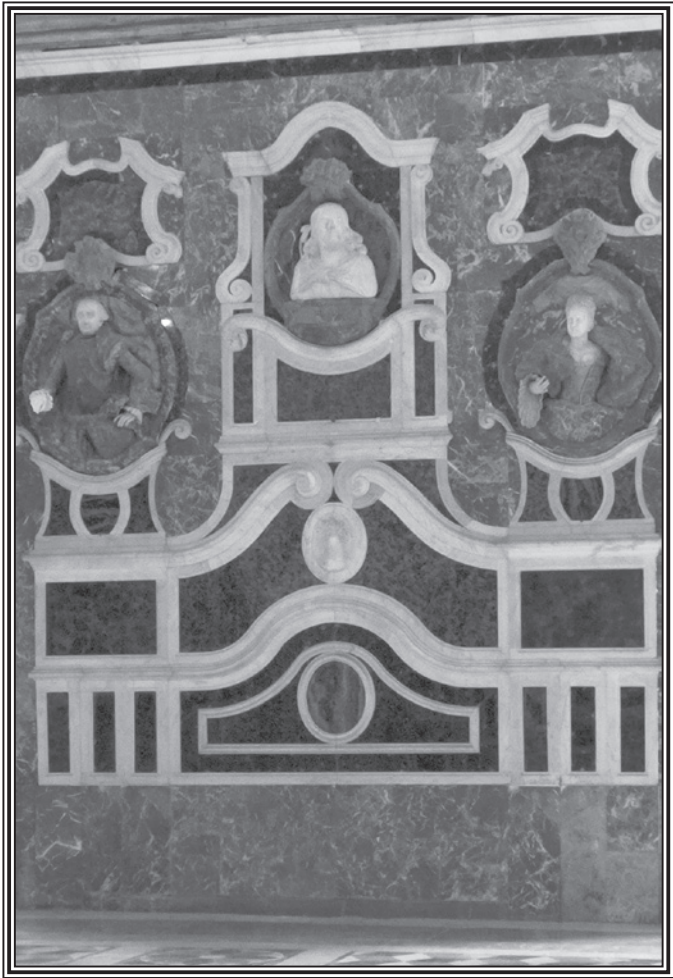
Practical and progressive, she cultivated the friendship of the wine merchants Benjamin Ingham and Joseph Whitaker, but a failed lawsuit against her business partners ruined her reputation and compelled her to withdraw to her country estate at Villabate. Embittered and reclusive, she became an eccentric and wrote tracts against liberalism, but her viciously funny political cartoons still appeared in the popular journal *Don Pirlone*.

Spinelli's reactionary politics became more rabid after Garibaldi's troops destroyed her prized carriage. This outrage probably contributed to a paralytic stroke. Confined to a

wheelchair and nursed by her granddaughter, she spent her last twenty years writing, translating Lichtenberg's aphorisms and producing a monograph on Hume. Her history of 18th-century Palermo, *Feste, Forche e Farina* (*Festivals, Gallows, and Flour*) became a source for Lord Harold Acton's two-volume *The Bourbons of Naples*; but her erotic memoirs remained unpublished until forty years after her death. Her manor at Villabate, donated to the University of Palermo, is still used for special occasions.

My hostess, thought the director. He was about to bow, but the small, imperious figure checked him. Rage had frozen her expression into a silent shriek, which squelched all flippancy. Even so, the director wondered if he should incorporate her into his film, a bit of local color to set off a scene. He gazed at the woman's clouded face, but his attempt to pierce her veil failed. The beads were as numerous as flies on a windowpane. Only the empty sockets were distinct. Their depth unnerved him. Lost in those caves, he felt faint.

A draft blew through the catacombs, and somewhere a door slammed. A chill prickled the director's skin, and his ears buzzed. He could almost hear the mummies whisper: "*You alone on earth are eternal, death ...*"



PART OF THE VILLA PALAGONIA'S
GALLERY OF ANCESTRAL BUSTS.



CHAPTER I

Eternal Death



YOU ALONE ON EARTH ARE eternal, Death. All things return to you. You cradle our naked being. In you, we rest secure — not happy, no, but safe from ancient sorrow. But why should that concern you happy children of this modern age? That warning at the gate does not apply to you. So you think. Much has changed since those words were carved, but one thing never changes: We all die, but still the mind clings to illusion until it rots. That is why we tell stories. To pretend otherwise, to rock ourselves to sleep and turn oblivion into a lullaby. Is it any wonder God never listens? Is it any wonder time unweaves every word?

We dead mock the living. And the more you chatter, the more we laugh. Our one consolation. Every joke is an epitaph for a feeling. It numbs regret and kills tedium. *La noia*, we call it. The cosmic boredom that is our common fate. And so we pass time listening to gossip. The Three-Twenty-Seven bus has become so bumpy. The pastries at Guli's are so over-priced. The public works commissioner should be jailed. *Divertimenti* for an eternal salon.

These catacombs are cool and damp. Like the underground chambers in Bagheria, where we escaped the sirocco. Now we find refuge from life's heat. Muffled by

stone, the traffic above us purls like a stream in a grotto. I would love to see these new machines, for father's sake. Made in Turin, I understand. More Piedmontese presumption. What do these Northerners know about carriages? They never parked at the Marina, in a car of ebony and gold, making love and eating jasmine-petal ices till two in the morning. They never defied Lord Bentinck's edict and drove through the Quattro Canti in a coach and six, the coins for the fine sown in the horses' plumed headbands and picked by the *carabinieri*. Ciccio, Regina's husband, did better work. But I cannot afford to be a snob. My great-grandson sells horseless carriages in America, and his money pays the rent and keeps me in style. The least he can do, considering he killed me.

Legally, I should not be here. Mummification was banned the year before I died, but the Villabatesi conspired on my behalf and confected ghost stories for the abbot. I prowled the fields at night in the shape of a she-wolf, they claimed. Dissolving into mist, I mingled with the oranges and lemons, turned into a poisonous cloud, and choked the field hands at dawn. I beat my former groom in his sleep. The old man could show his reverence the bruise from my crop. Somehow, they said, I must be appeased. My spirit would not rest, until I joined my ancestors. The abbot refused. The next morning, he awoke and found the saints knocked off their pedestals in the main chapel. He hastily obtained a dispensation and personally embalmed me.

Such stories shock the American tourists, but Sicily pampers and exalts her dead. On the Feast of All Souls, relatives come to offer us gifts and to change our clothes. Sometimes they reinforce our rotting limbs with wire hangers. A necessity, I'm afraid. Although we try to remain presentable, time and gravity can be cruel. Most of us miss a jaw, a hand, or a foot. Every time I see my reflection, I sigh. Did this scarecrow seduce at one ball the Princes of Salina, Assoro, Trabia, and Camastra? Penance for my sins. When I was young and glib, I angered Archbishop Pignatelli by calling the mummies *baccalá*, dried cod. Now look at me ...

∞ "You're still well preserved, Zita," Don Benjamin said. He took my blue-veined hand in his paw and kissed it. Charles II was right. Merchants are England's truest gentry.

I nearly forgot to be cross. "Does this flattery mean my order isn't ready?"

His nostrils flared slightly; otherwise, his face remained calm. In the security of his *baglio*, his dockside warehouse, Don Benjamin was imperturbable. Even after buying his title, Baron of Santa Rosalia, and mingling with the best of Palermitan society, the old Englishman still supervised his interests, here and in Marsala, and remained formidable behind a counter.

"On the contrary, Marchesa. We filled it immediately." He called: "*Picciotti!*"

Two aproned lads scurried to the back, and Don Benjamin patted his belly. The *baglio* hummed like a beehive. Hammers rang in the cooperage. Rolling barrels rumbled. Clerks chirped over the accounts. So different from my manor at Villabate, where only the cicadas rattled. But Don Benjamin remained silent, the unmoved mover, as serene as Aristotle's God. His bulk had increased with his wealth. Fifty years ago, he was fit and trim. He wore high collars and elegant cravats, and his auburn hair was feathered in a Titus cut. Now he barely fit into his swivel chair, and a button was missing from his serge suit. His complexion had reddened, his nose broadened, but he remained strangely virile. His musky cologne penetrated the miasma of ripening *grillo*. Even so, I had never forgiven him for siding with Don Joseph, who was touring their vineyards in the Mazara Valley. My failed lawsuit hung between us like a bad odor.

"Congratulations again," he offered, "on Regina's confirmation."

"We were going to buy fireworks," I said, "but it seems Garibaldi will provide them."

"Nonsense!" Don Benjamin grunted. "Young bloods stirring up trouble, that's all."

Together, we had survived many upheavals, most recently the April riots, so we were indifferent towards the rumor of another invasion. Nothing fundamentally would change, except perhaps we would be forced to speak Turinese instead of Neapolitan. Back then, Turin manufactured revolutions rather than carriages.

“We’ve played this lottery before,” I said: “‘20, ‘37, ‘48. All losing numbers. It’s not entirely our fault. The game is rigged, God help us; but you’ve always known that, haven’t you? That’s why you prospered. You were never a gambling man, Don Benjamin.”

“Not in politics, certainly; but trade is full of risks. Luck and pluck make profits.”

“Then hide your cash box,” I warned, “or the Red Shirts will confiscate it.”

Jefferson Gardner entered, breathing fire. He was still youthful-looking, despite the mop of graying hair. His foster father, like other American sea captains, had come from Boston after the war with England and had settled in Marsala before prospering and moving to Palermo. Now Signor Gardner owned the captain’s dry good stores along the Marina. He acted like an old salt himself. His manners were blunt, and he spoke Sicilian with a Boston accent.

“Look at this!” he sputtered, rattling a torn poster. “Some scamp pasted this outside!”

A cartoon showed a resplendent Garibaldi liberating a cemetery. He rode a white charger and wore a sash emblazoned with the words “*Fedele e Verace.*” Overjoyed, the dead danced and scattered coins. The caption read: “*Anche i mercanti della terra piangono e gemono, perché nessuno compera più le loro merci.*” And the merchants of the earth shall weep and mourn, for no man buyeth their goods any more.

“Socialist trash!” Signor Gardner said.

“I apologize for the iconography, gentlemen. Not in the best of taste.”

“I don’t understand,” muttered Don Benjamin, his voice thicker than Yorkshire pudding. “The man was lionized in London. And what is he?”

“A gaucho,” I said. “Poor Nelson wasn’t deified until after his death.”

“The admiral’s morals were not always the most admirable.” That was his great uncle, the famous Methodist, speaking. Don Benjamin attended the Anglican service at Palazzo Lampedusa every Sunday. Nevertheless, rumor accused him of wanting to be preserved in the Cappuccini. Perhaps he was following Jeremy Bentham’s example.

“Then he should have stayed in Sicily. We like our heroes wicked. They make better tenors. But hawkers are notoriously tone-deaf. No English tradesman will accept an adulterous admiral with poor credit. What did Napoleon call you? A nation of shopkeepers” — and I unfurled a Cheshire grin. As the Romans said: *maior risus, acrior ensis*. The bigger the smile, the sharper the blade.

For the first time, Don Benjamin frowned. “True, Marchesa. But we beat Boney, didn’t we, and everyone prospered; even our enemies. All we ask, in return, is a little gratitude.”

A rebuke. Without shares in Ingham & Whitaker, I could not manage our estate. I resented the reminder but swallowed my bile. “Does Yankee Doodle agree?” I asked. “Can this commercial age afford to honor heroes?”

Signor Gardner pursed his lips and thought. “That depends, Marchesa,” he said. “America certainly honors its heroes. But since their greatness depends on pleasing the people, they are always expendable. That is democracy.”

An honest answer, if nothing else. “But that doesn’t prevent you from boasting you’re Paul Revere’s grandson,” I said. “Perhaps modern heroes need a trade. Signor Revere, I believe, was a silversmith who made false teeth.” I tapped mine, for emphasis.

“Ha, ha, ha, ha!”

Olympian laughter. They were gods, after all, the English Croesus and his Yankee Mercury. The two controlled Sicily’s most lucrative exports—wine, lemon, cotton—but most of their millions came from American investments, most notably New York transportation. We pretended to be friends again and discussed the company’s holdings. I welcomed this chance to practice my English; but still, what a falling off! I, who had recited Pope for the King and Queen at the Palazzina Cinese, who had dined with the Hamiltons and entertained Coleridge, forced to parrot a prospectus. A huge map of New York State hung behind Don Benjamin’s desk, highlighting the railroads and the Erie Canal, with the cities fat and brown as the figs ripening at our *masseria*. One was called Syracuse.

“Siracusa,” I mused. “Does America plan to annex Sicily?”



About the Author

Anthony Di Renzo, a fugitive from advertising, teaches writing at Ithaca College and has published in such journals as *Alimentum*, *Il Caff *, *Essays & Fictions*, *Feile-Festa*, *The Normal School*, *River Styx*, and *Voices in Italian Americana*. His latest book, *Bitter Greens: Essays on Food, Politics, and Ethnicity from the Imperial Kitchen* (State University of New York Press, 2010) received strong reviews, most recently in *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*. Descended from Spanish nobility, who settled in Bagheria in the early 18th century, he lives near the West End, Ithaca, New York's former Italian neighborhood, "an Old World man in a New Age town." *Trin cria* is his first published novel.