

The Duke of Athens: A Study of Niccolo Tommaseo's Medievalism

From his earliest studies, Niccolò Tommaseo (1802–1874) had always professed a great admiration for the Middle Ages. A linguist, an author, a pedagogue and a politician, he considered that his own nineteenth century had much to learn from the dark and powerful Middle Ages. In this paper the development of Tommaseo's interest in the period shall be outlined. The main focus will be on his novella *The Duke of Athens* in which, through various literary experiments, the author attempted to achieve a binary goal. First, he aspired to write the "ideal" historical novel and secondly, he wished to recreate a convincing medieval atmosphere. Finally, mention will be made of the critical reaction to Tommaseo's attempts.

In 1827 Tommaseo was invited by publisher Giampietro Vieusseux to write articles for the journal *Antologia* in Florence. He spent seven years in that city initiating there the most active, and certainly the most innovative period of his life as writer. In 1834, after the political suppression of the *Antologia*, Tommaseo went into exile in France. This period, which lasted until 1839, was also a time of intense literary activity. Among his publications was the short historical novel *The Duke of Athens* (Baudry, 1837).

As a student, Tommaseo linked his studies to the Classical authors. At seventeen years of age, however, as he confesses in the *Memorie poetiche*, he discovered that there was a certain correspondence between the sensual and the spiritual worlds. At that point he began to read the works of Dante,¹ and to memorize them.² For Tommaseo, Dante was, in fact, a symbol of patriotism and an indication of Italy's future greatness.³ Furthermore, for Tommaseo the centuries in which Dante lived constituted the true Middle Ages and, in fact, in referring to the "Medioevo" Tommaseo generally limited himself to the period from the 12th to the 14th centuries. He did not concern himself with the fact that the term may have described a far more extended period of time, or that the scholarly tradition

may have understood it differently. In his dictionary he does define the Middle Ages as "the centuries that spanned the time from the fall of the Roman Empire to the fifteenth century."⁴ However, that Tommaseo has a more limited period in mind is clear from the fact that his two major historical novellas deal with events of the 14th century. His interest in the Middle Ages, and more specifically in the time of Dante, is well in keeping with the Romantic fascination with the period. It manifested itself not only in the historical novellas but also in his numerous reviews of historical novels, including a critically provocative review of Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed* published in the *Antologia* in 1827. In addition, Tommaseo also studied the works of Sir Walter Scott in translation. Most important among the works that are evidence of his interest in and fascination with the Middle Ages is his commentary on Dante's *Divina Commedia*, a work that is still considered valid today. Significantly, it was first published in 1838, just after the publication of *The Sacking of Lucca (Il Sacco di Lucca)* in 1834 and *The Duke of Athens (Il Duca d'Atene)* in 1837. In the introduction to the *Commentary on the Divina Commedia*, Tommaseo explains his interest in the Middle Ages, or more specifically in the 'secolo di Dante,' in this way:

It was an era of "passion which was not weak, of virtue which was not insincere, of misdeeds which were not timid. The body was robust, the imagination ardent; the customs were varied and the language young and masculine. Woman was either despised as a less than human creature or venerated as an angel, or she was part of that masculine pride, communicating to man those qualities which render her divine. It was an era of misfortune alternating with joy, as do short days with long nights; government by few and government by too many were confused. . . . Religion was often abused, but not to the point of making its harmful aspects greater than its beneficial ones: vices were bared but without shame; cruelties were truly brutal, but not without remorse; misfortunes were grave but they carried the reward of resignation or hope or glory. The [common] people occupied themselves with new arts, with commerce, with the pursuit of civil liberties; nobles often worked for the good of all, but more often to the detriment of all, but at least they occupied themselves in undertakings and thus inertia, that plague of the State, and boredom, that hell for souls, were expelled from restless spirits and tired bodies. Religion was not divided from morality, nor knowledge from life, nor the word from the deed . . ." ⁵

Tommaseo's fascination with the Middle Ages led him to contrast

that era with those that followed, always to the disadvantage of the latter. He wrote in (*Bellezza e civiltà*), for example, that he had observed "in the sculptures of the 14th and 15th centuries such a force of "affetto" (sentiment of affection) that hardly a century later could be found only with great difficulty in even the most powerful paintings. . . . And all the things of those centuries are depicted in masculine relief.⁶ The dichotomy between masculine and feminine is also found in Tommaseo's contrast of the Middle Ages and his own century, the former being dark and powerful while the latter was "soft, and with gas lamps."⁷

We have previously stated that Tommaseo's interest in this period manifested itself in various works, most of which were written in the period from 1834 to 1838. These dates are significant in the writing career of this author because they represent the time span during which his best and most innovative works were written. After 1838, in fact, Tommaseo turned his attention to literary experimentation in the controversial novel (*Fede e bellezza*), the work for which he is best known and which was published in 1840. By his own admission, both *Il Sacco di Lucca* and *Il Duca d'Atene* were also of a highly experimental nature, although different in literary aim from *Fede e bellezza*. In 1836, Tommaseo wrote to one of his closest friends, Gino Capponi in Florence, that he had written *The Duke of Athens*; it was not a novel, he stated, but a painting with dialogue.⁸ In a note appended to the novella in its second edition, published in 1858 in Milan, he outlined the specific aims that he had set for himself in writing the work. He commented that he had focussed much more on the use and abuse of victory in the story, rather than on the instruments of resistance and battle. He continued that his historical sources had been Villani and Machiavelli, and he appended the relevant passages to the novella inviting those readers who wished to do so to judge how, in his version, he had reproduced the colour of the times. He invited his readers to the historical events through the meditation of the imagination and through "affetto." He added that in writing the novella he had sought historical truth even in the language, making use of archaic terms and grammatical forms, which were better suited to the description of the century and the place. Nevertheless, he was careful to maintain the vividness of a living language. This, he wrote, was facilitated by the fact that the

Tuscan dialects used in the novella contained many ancient terms.⁹

Tommaseo had set himself another goal in writing *The Duke of Athens*, namely that of producing a historical novel that would serve as a good example of the genre. To corroborate this is the fact that in the note appended to the second edition, Tommaseo concerns himself with defending the genre to the reader. In other writings, especially in *Della bellezza educatrice* (1838), he laments the corruption that the genre had suffered at the hands of inept authors. He observes that they seem to have followed some terrible formula in order to produce what he facetiously calls a "good historical novel." This involves opening the story with a historical passage, followed by a dialogue in which the plot of the novel is revealed. It is better that the dialogue be trivial and long. The character must be presented in minutest detail, and if during the description of these details, the character should wrinkle his nose or forehead, that gesture should also be reported in a separate parenthesis. The number of hairs in a character's beard should be scrutinized to the same degree as his most intimate thoughts, for the more minute the detail, the more precious it becomes. If it should be necessary in the novel to refer back to a historical source, this also should be quoted in its entirety. Another necessary aspect of the "good historical novel," states Tommaseo sarcastically, is a comic character who attaches himself to the principal heroes and who makes them laugh in the midst of fear or danger, or remorse or misfortune. The "good historical novel" should have more than one comic character; these should either have some ridiculous fixations or appear from nowhere in order to lighten a scene. Depict the great and the lowly, monarchs and users, men of letters and murderers with equal detail, he advises. Then, an author should add a mysterious character who keeps the reader in suspense. In this way he will have composed a "good historical novel" according to all the rules.¹⁰

In a more serious vein, Tommaseo concludes that the purpose of the true historical novel was not to elaborate upon history, gathering minute particles of truth that had been cast aside by the Muse, and weaving from them a faded garland. Rather, it was to make better known great and important historical facts, illustrating them in an imaginative manner and commenting on them in such a way as to make plain their moral essence.¹¹ Authors of the historical novel have

rather an important function since they must imbue history with the vital breath of poetry. In a sense, they must make the dead speak, they must repaint those hues faded by the years and bring closer to the heart of the reader those faraway faces so that the reader can judge them, listen to them and feel them live.

These then, are the goals which Tommaseo had set for himself in writing the *The Duke of Athens*. The historical events which he had chosen to treat revolve around Walter of Brienne, the Duke of Athens, who came to the military service of Florence in 1342. In the same year, he became Lord of the city, a title which he obtained with enormous help both from Florentine nobles and the common people. However, much stronger allegiance to the latter soon became evident. His military strength came from French mercenaries. It was not long before there was great resentment and opposition to the violence of the Duke's soldiers, his high taxes and his oppression of those who opposed him. This dissatisfaction gave rise to three conspiracies which in the end brought about the expulsion of the Duke from Florence.

Tommaseo envisaged his novella as a series of vignettes dealing with the actions of the members of various conspiracies. His aim was, of course, to be as accurate as possible from the historical point of view. In fact, the character of the Archbishop Acciaiuoli in the first edition of the novella, was demoted, as it were, to Bishop in the second edition, when Tomaseo was reminded, in a letter from Gino Capponi, that Florence did not have an Archbishop until the end of the 14th century.¹² Of greater importance to the author, however, was that portray, as plausibly as he could, the psychological atmosphere in which his historical characters moved. An example of this is the description of Lucia Buondelmonte, desperately in love with Ippolito, son of the jailer, who was not only fourteen years her junior but also totally unworthy of her. Tommaseo describes her as a "loving and delicate woman, in whom the light of the once clear but now fleeting youth, was more alive and more ardent than ever. . . ." Beauty was renewed in her (because of her love) but this would render all the more bitter the moment in which she would sadly realize that time had passed and that earth blossomed with much younger love. She loved Ippolito as if she were devoted to a fatalistic necessity."¹³ Another example is that of the confession of Filippo Brunelleschi

who had inadvertently betrayed one of the conspiracies. Tommaseo writes that each word of the confession was as a wound inflicted by a sword piercing the hero's breast, but as his confession continued, he began to feel unburdened, and although he felt more despised by his co-conspirators, he also felt less unworthy in the eyes of God and in his own eyes.¹⁴

The action of the novella moves from conspiracy to conspiracy and then focuses on the crowds incited toward rebellion. It also moves behind the scenes to delicate descriptions of the fears and the prayers of those whose loved ones were participants in the fighting, and then to the surreptitious actions of the Duke's cowardly supporters in their attempts to evade retribution for their actions. These are at times violent descriptions and overly graphic. Nevertheless, they do capture the atmosphere of rage, frustration, confusion and loss of social order which Tommaseo tried to evoke. The Duke of Athens himself appears in the novella only towards the end. Until his appearance he is described as arrogant and strong. His brief entrance to grant honours and freedom to Antonio Adimari, one of his prisoners, in a last attempt to quell the rebellious Florentines, corroborates this. But when the author directly focusses upon him in the latter half of the novella, he presents him quite differently, as a broken man, asking mercy from the Bishop and begging him to advise the Florentines that he had mended his ways and his politics. The Bishop is so taken by this new attitude that he goes to implore the crowds to spare the Duke's life. Still later, Tommaseo shows the reader the human side of Duke Walter of Brienne, thus making him much less of a villain than he had appeared up to this point. For Walter, writes Tommaseo, every moment seemed to be an hour, so great was his anxiety (as he waited for news of the insurrection and its progress). Nor could the Florentines have imagined a greater torment than this agony of doubts, of delays and of new negotiations, even if they had wished. But then suddenly Tommaseo manipulates the readers' feelings again, as the Duke allows two of his supporters to be killed so that he himself may be spared.

We have stated previously that Tommaseo attempted to recreate the atmosphere of the banishment of the Duke of Athens from Florence through the use of "authentic" vocabulary and sentence structure. In fact almost every modern edition of the *Duke of Athens*

contains a glossary that explains some of the more archaic terms, which are far too numerous to be described in detail here. He also attempted to bring his historical characters back to life through the extensive use of dialogue and by keeping the omniscient authorial voice to minimal interruptions. Both of these techniques were praised by contemporary critics, such as Gino Capponi and Giovita Scalvini. On the other hand, almost all the critics found that the violence presented in the story was unnecessarily emphasized. In a letter to his friend, Cesare Cantù, who was also an author of historical novels, Tommaseo defended his work, saying:

there are too many atrocities in the Duke; this is true. I did this in order to mask the aspects which are not so good.¹⁵

He answered Capponi in this way:

In the Duke the tortures are too many, it's true, but the fact is that the people did eat the roasted flesh (of the two men condemned by the Duke in order to save himself). . . . Deliberated cruelty is not in the nature of the people, but in this case it was; and I toned it down by making only a few men guilty of it, rather than all of Florence . . .¹⁶

Nevertheless, many of the more horrifying scenes of the novella were attenuated in the second edition.

Despite the criticisms of Tommaseo's contemporaries, as valid as they may be, the modern reader of the *Duke of Athens* must admire not only the way in which this novella fulfills the author's criteria for a good historical novel but also his attempts to recreate linguistically the atmosphere of 14th-century Florence.

University of Toronto

NOTES

- 1 N. Tommaseo, *memorie Poetiche*. Edizione del 1838 con appendice di poesie e redazione del 1858 intitolata *Educazione dell'ingegno*. A cura di Marco Pecoraro (Bari: Laterza, 1964), p. 32.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 49
- 3 N. Tommaseo, *Diario intimo* a cura di R. Ciampini, 2a ed. (Torino: Einaudi, 1939), p. 27.

- 4 N. Tommaseo, *Dizionario della lingua italiana* nuovamente compilato dai signori Nicolo Tommaseo (sic) e Cav. Prof. Bernardo Bellini con oltre 100.00 giunte ai precedenti Dizionarii (Torino-Napoli: UTET, 1872), Vol. II, 610.
- 5 N. Tommaseo, *La Commedia di Dante Alighieri* colcommento di Niccolo Tommaseo (Milano: Pagnoni, 1869), Vol. I, XIX. The translation is mine.
- 6 N. Tommaseo, *Bellezza e civiltà o Delle Arti del Bello sensibile*. (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1857), p. 365.
- 7 N. Tommaseo, *Fede e bellezza*, a cura di Daniele Mattalia. (Milano: Rizzoli, 1963), p. 137.
- 8 N. Tommaseo and G. Capponi, *Carteggio inedito dal 1833 al 1874*. per cura di I. Del Lungo e P. Prunas (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1911-1932), Vol I, 496.
- 9 N. Tommaseo, *Il Duca d'Atene* (Milano: Francesco Sanvito, 1858), pp. 224-232.
- 10 N. Tommaseo, *Della bellezza educatrice*. Pensieri di Niccolò Tommaseo (Venezia: Gondoliere, 1838), pp. 190-91.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 197.
- 12 N. Tommaseo and G. Capponi, *Op. cit.*, Vol I, 586.
- 13 N. Tommaseo, *Due baci e altri racconti* a cura di Carlo Bo (Milano: Bompiani, 1943), pp. 86-87. The translation is mine.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- 15 *Il Primo esilio di Nicolò Tommaseo, 1834-1839*. Lettere di lui a Cesare Cantù edite ed illustrate da Ettore Verga (Milano: Cogliati, 1904), p. 153. Some of the linguistic changes that Tommaseo made in order to attenuate the violence of *The Duke of Athens* are discussed in Mario Puppo, *Tommaseo prosatore*, 2a, ed. (Roma: Studium, 1975), pp. 201-222.
- 16 N. Tommaseo and G. Capponi, *Op. cit.*, vol. I, 577-78.
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