

The Fall from Grace: Religious Skepticism and Sexuality in the Early Modern Mediterranean World

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between skepticism and sexual nonconformity in Italy from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. In the inquisitorial cases under examination, the praise of sexual freedom was supported by a heretical re-reading of the myth of the Fall from Grace. The criticism of religious deception is the link between sexual freedom and skepticism: these dissenters accused the elites of enforcing a morality based on a reward in the afterlife to keep people under control. Although these ideas have been mostly associated with seventeenth-century erudite libertines, this research shows them emerging almost a century before, in cross-class environments where forbidden books circulated widely. The article will explore how the written word was creatively re-appropriated in these composite social contexts, analyzing the influence of a Mediterranean tradition of radical doubt that cut across the boundaries dividing the three Abrahamic faiths. In particular, it will focus on the cultural exchanges between Christianity and Islam.

Keywords

sexuality – religious dissent – sodomy – libertinism – imposture of religions – Mediterranean – Islam

Introduction

This article will focus on a series of inquisitorial cases that were prosecuted in the Italian peninsula between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The

defendants celebrated sexual freedom through a heretical re-reading of the myth of the Fall from Grace. Stating that Adam and Eve practiced anal sex in the terrestrial paradise, some of them praised the pleasures of un-reproductive intercourse, both homo- and heterosexual. This idea was sometimes associated with a cluster of heretical beliefs that included a general mistrust towards the rites and ceremonies of the Church, the denial of the immortality of the soul, of Christ's resurrection, and the opinion that "all can be saved in their own faith" (that is, that eternal salvation could occur outside the sacramental boundaries of the Catholic Church, including among Jews and Muslims).

This heretical rereading of the Biblical account of Genesis also recurs in the writings of some of the most radical libertine thinkers of the seventeenth century. In terms that mirror, almost word for word, the heretical statements of our condemned sixteenth-century Italian dissenters, French writer François de La Mothe Le Vayer (1588–1672) and Dutch humanist scholar Adrian Beverland (1650–1716) discussed, in some of their works, the idea that sodomy was the original sin. The circulation in middle-rank and popular environments of a set of ideas that later became part of the repertoire of learned radical thinkers invites us to reconsider established genealogies and periodization. Given the available evidence, it seems that this scurrilous reinterpretation of the myth of the Fall from Grace also circulated independently from the cluster of heretical beliefs held by the dissenters whose trials this research is examining, and it appears to have continued to do so afterwards. Therefore, I am not hypothesizing a direct link of transmission that unites these cases and the subsequent emergence of this heterodox opinion in European learned culture. However, it is remarkable to point out how these dissenters integrated this curious interpretation of original sin within a heterogeneous ensemble of heterodox ideas, while following a rationale that was similar to the one adopted by those seventeenth-century intellectuals.

Radical atheism and irreligion were, thus, not the product of learned elites, but they reflected rebellious feelings of dissatisfaction with the status quo that cut across the social spectrum. Moreover, as we will see, many clues seem to suggest that their origin in the Christian West can be traced back to the contentious dialogue between the three main Mediterranean monotheistic religions. Finally, these cases confirm the extent to which sexual tropes long played a crucial role in uncovering the deceptive nature of religious revelations.

Social Background

This study is based on evidence from twenty-six cases in which the defendants were charged with – either as the main accusation or among other

offenses – holding the belief that the forbidden apple symbolically represented Eve's buttocks and that, therefore, the original sin was anal sex.¹ Most of the cases regarded individuals who were involved in larger networks of sociability where this outrageous opinion informally circulated. While in the seventeenth and eighteenth century this belief almost exclusively appears as an isolated heretical statement, in the first instances that I identified it went hand in hand with an articulated set of unorthodox beliefs that abruptly questioned some of the core tenets of the Catholic faith. By connecting the scattered information available, I argue that this idea originated in ecclesiastical circles and was subsequently appropriated by networks of lay nonconformists that cultivated a common interest in questioning the established religious beliefs and moral codes of their times.

Reference to the ecclesiastical origin of the idea that Adam and Eve committed sodomy in the terrestrial paradise is particularly evident in the first cases that were investigated by the Spanish Inquisition in Sicily. Both a priest and a theologian were implicated in eight cases reported between 1573 and 1605.² Furthermore, one of the defendants, whose profession was not reported, stated that “there were theologians who held that opinion.”³ Someone else specified that learned people and ecclesiastics were responsible for the spread of this indecent belief.⁴

The defendants of the most extensively documented late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century cases, however, were a wide variety of laymen. Zozamo Canatta, a surgeon born in southern Sicily, faced the judges a number of times during his adult life, between 1560 and 1605, when his effigy was burnt at the stake after his death (due to natural causes when he was about seventy-one years old). Marcello Impicciato was an illiterate grocer, prosecuted by the Neapolitan Inquisition in a long trial that lasted from 1598 to 1601. Ser Matteo Corti was a degraded priest tried by the Inquisition of Pisa in 1601.⁵ Ludovico Garrano, a jurisconsult, was a prominent figure in an extensive network centered in Palermo, which embraced a common interest in esotericism and magical arts. Involved in a tangled judicial case, he was forced to abjure *de vehementi*

1 Whether the forbidden fruit was a fruit and if so, which one, was a highly debated question at the time: Philip C. Almond, *Adam and Eve in the Seventeenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge, 1999), 192–193.

2 Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid (AHN), Inquisición, Sicilia, Libro 898, Palermo, *Relacion de las denuncias que han resultado de la publicacion de los autos de fé*, 1573, case 178 and Inquisición, Sicilia, Libro 899, *Causas despachadas despues del auto da fé del 25 febr. 1600*, 31r.

3 AHN, Inquisición, Sicilia, Libro 899, *Auto da fé*, May 5, 1601, case 16.

4 AHN, Inquisición, Sicilia, Libro 899, *De las relaciones de los revelos y testificacion que hizo en la visita que hizo el licenciado Llanes de la Inquisicion de Sicilia*, Val di Noto, case 25.

5 Archivio Storico Diocesano di Pisa (AsdPi), Inquisizione, Atti dal 1596, 608r–620v.

in 1633, and was sentenced to five years of imprisonment in solitary confinement, a sentence that was eventually commuted to house arrest.⁶ Finally, the last defendant who was prosecuted for the heretical statement that Adam and Eve committed sodomy in the terrestrial paradise, not as a single charge but along with other radical sceptical and irreligious ideas, was Antonio Partenio, a thirty-seven-year-old Venetian accused by the Inquisition of the *Serenissima* in 1705.⁷

Despite the difference in status of the defendants, all these cases share some relevant common features. The networks these dissenters belonged to usually cut across the social spectrum. According to the trial records, the witnesses engaged in lively discussions staged in a vast array of informal settings. The main square of a neighborhood where people gathered after work, the shops of apothecaries, the docks of a port city like Leghorn, the outskirts of a monastery, private houses, random streets and alleys and, later on, (in the eighteenth century) tobacconists and coffee-roasting warehouses were some of the backdrops against which these animated exchanges of ideas took place. Once uttered, the idea that the original sin was sodomy provoked outraged responses in some, curiosity in others; still others, however, rightfully feared the ubiquitous specter of the Inquisition. The desire to trigger reactions and shock the audience is a frequently attested personality trait of these dissenters. Although skepticism towards the sacraments, anti-clericalism, and radical doubt about the most counter-intuitive aspects of the Catholic catechesis (the virginity of Mary, the resurrection, the afterlife) were widespread popular attitudes in the early modern era; in the cases under examination the defendants sought to explain these widely shared feelings within a more consistent intellectual context. According to the witnesses, some of them declared to be eager readers of forbidden books, and bragged about their learning with their neighbors and acquaintances. While I have already discussed other aspects of these cases in previous works,⁸ in this article I will attempt to reconstruct the

6 A short summary of this case in AHN, Inquisición, leg. 1747, exp. 3, *Relacion de los penitencados en el auto da fé de Octubre 1633*, case 21. A detailed report in AHN, Inquisición, Libro 899, 120r–135v. See also Maria Sofia Messina, *Inquisitori, negromanti e streghe nella Sicilia moderna (1580–1782)* (Palermo, 2007), 456–458 and Melita Leonardi, “Inquisizione, sette necromantiche e cabalistiche in Sicilia tra XVI e XVII secolo,” *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* 1 (2003): 65–99.

7 Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASV), Sant’Uffizio (SU), B 132 (1705).

8 U. Grassi, “Sex and Toleration: New Perspectives of Research on Religious Radical Dissent in Early Modern Italy,” *Intellectual History Review* 29, no. 1 (2019): 129–144; “Ambiguous Boundaries: Sex Crimes and Cross-Cultural Encounters in the Early Modern Mediterranean World,” *Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni* 84, no. 2 (2018): 513–528; “Il frutto proibito. Eresia, emozioni e peccato originale nell’Italia moderna,” in *“Infami macchie”. Sessualità*

learned sources that were discussed in these informal networks. Most times, what they read was not reported in the trial reports and therefore the reconstruction can only be speculative. In one case, however, the depositions of several witnesses named the authors and titles of what appears to be a select collection of radically subversive books.

An Esoteric Private Library

As noted earlier, Ludovico Garrano was tried for heresy and sorcery in Palermo. He was also charged with denying the immortality of the soul, believing in God's impassibility, and negating the divinity of Jesus Christ.⁹ He did not believe in the authority of the pope, and denied his power to free souls from Purgatory.¹⁰ He and his friends were accused of often arguing about *belles-lettres* (as they liked to call forbidden books in their jargon).¹¹ The Inquisitorial reports retraced the texts allegedly read by Ludovico and his group of friends, which included the *Clavicula Salomonis*,¹² works by Virgil,¹³ Cardano (*De subtilitate rerum*),¹⁴ Scaligero,¹⁵ Trithemius (*Polygraphia*),¹⁶ Pietro d'Abano,¹⁷ Artemidorus (*Book of Dreams*),¹⁸ and the *Liber de Syndicatu*.¹⁹

Garrano was accused of practicing magic: among other charges, he was believed to have cast a spell on the archbishop of Montereale and the Inquisitor

maschili e indisciplina fra XVII e XVIII secolo, eds. Fernanda Alfieri and Vincenzo Lagioia (Roma, 2017), 51–86.

- 9 AHN, Inquisición, libro 899, Auto da fé, March 13, 1605, 128r, 130v (on the immortality of the soul); 127v (on God's impassibility); 130v (on Jesus Christ).
- 10 Ibid., 133r.
- 11 Ibid., 123r.
- 12 Ibid., 120r–v; 130v; 133r. The *Clavicula Salomonis* was the most popular manual of magic circulating in Italy at the time. It is not a single text, but a family of texts. It was copied, re-adapted, and often forged for many reasons, often for moneymaking purposes. Federico Barbierato, *Nella stanza dei circoli. Clavicula Salomonis e libri di magia a Venezia nei secoli XVII e XVIII* (Milano, 2002).
- 13 Ibid., 122r. It could refer to a work by Italian humanist Polidor Vergil (1470–1555). I thank Lucio Biasiori for the suggestion.
- 14 Ibid., 123r. See below.
- 15 Ibid., Julius Caesar Scaliger, *Exotericarum exercitationum libri XV de subtilitate ad Hieronymum Cardanum* (Paris, 1557).
- 16 Ibid., 127r; 133v. Johannes Trithemius, *Polygraphiae libri sex* (1518).
- 17 Ibid., 127r. See below.
- 18 Ibid., 134r.
- 19 Ibid., 125v. It could refer to Paride del Pozzo, *De syndicatu* (Leiden, 1548). I thank Lucio Biasiori for the suggestion.

Juan de la Cueva to provoke their deaths due to the enmity of some within his sodality.²⁰ However, the scope of his intellectual interests, as they are reported by the witnesses, goes beyond practical magic. We do not know what works of Pietro d'Abano (d. 1316) circulated among Garrano's network. In absence of a clear textual reference, we cannot even be sure that what was referred to as Pietro d'Abano's was actually one of his writings. As noted by Federico Barbierato a "text may have been sold, lent, or presented under the title of *Clavicula Salomonis* or as a work by Pietro d'Abano" despite the fact that "it was something completely different, often an imperfect fragment whose image was enhanced by a high-sounding and eloquent title."²¹ However, some of the charges against the defendants are reminiscent of core principles of the medieval philosopher and astrologer's thought as they were absorbed in radical intellectual circles in the Italian peninsula (and beyond) in the late medieval and early modern period. Pietro d'Abano overtly advocated the astrological theory of the cyclical nature of religious eras, which was first formulated by Muslim authors and then circulated in European Christianity. According to this astrological theory, historical faiths were believed to be subject to a cyclical rhythm that included their origin, development, and decadence. As with other natural phenomena, these cycles were regulated by astral influences. In his *Conciliator differentiarum philosopharum* (written around the beginning of the fourteenth century), d'Abano argued that the birth of each religion, as well as other relevant events like Noah's flood and the birth of Muhammad, were related to a favourable astral conjunction. He also suggested a relatively rational approach to miracles, trying to reduce them to natural explanations. In his opinion, the prophets' supernatural powers could also be explained by the influences of the stars and notions of "complexions."²²

Girolamo Cardano (1501–1576), still another author whose work was allegedly discussed among Garrano's circle, was probably one of the major contributors to the transmission of this astrological construct in the sixteenth century. A renowned mathematician, his eclectic interests embraced a wide range of

20 Leonardi. "Inquisizione, sette necromantiche," 86–87.

21 Federico Barbierato, "Writing, Reading, Writing: Scribal Culture and Magical Texts in Early Modern Venice," *Italian Studies* 66, no. 2 (2011): 263–276 (265).

22 Giorgio Spini, *Ricerca dei libertini; la teoria dell'impostura delle religioni nel Seicento italiano* (Roma, 1950), 18–19. On the "horoscope of religions" see: Paola Zambelli, *Astrology and Magic from the Medieval Latin and Islamic World to Renaissance Europe: Theories and Approaches* (Farnham, 2012); Eugenio Garin, *Astrology in the Renaissance: The Zodiac of Life*, trans. Carolyn Jackson, June Allen and Clare Robertson (London, 1983). See also: Joan DeGuire North, "Astrology and the Fortunes of Churches," *Centaurus* 24, no. 1 (1980): 181–211.

disciplines. As an authoritative early modern champion of astrology, his life-long commitment was to restore the tradition of Ptolemaic classical astrology, which he wanted to purify from the subsequent influences of Arabic authors that “encrusted” its pristine body during the translation process that occurred in the Middle Ages. Paradoxically though, the aspect of his thought that left the most lasting legacy was precisely the only part he decided to save of this tradition, that is, the theory of the great astrological conjunctions.²³ Cardano was prosecuted by the Inquisition under the accusation, amid other charges, of having analyzed the figure of Jesus Christ through his horoscope.²⁴ Cardano’s transmission of the theory of the cyclical nature of religions was undoubtedly a source of inspiration, among others, to Giulio Cesare Vanini (probably the most radical representative of Italian libertinism, burned at the stake in Toulouse in 1618),²⁵ and to French scholar Gabriel Naudé.²⁶ Since the Middle Ages, these ideas undermined the faith in revealed religions and were frequently associated with the development of the theory of the imposture of religion; that is, the belief that the founders of the three main monotheistic Mediterranean faiths were just tricksters who used their arts to deceive ignorant people and keep them under control. Religions were reduced to mere political devices in the hands of the powerful.²⁷

The theme of the imposture of religions had circulated in European Christianity since the late Middle Ages. On July 1, 1239, Pope Gregory IX wrote an encyclical letter accusing the Holy Roman emperor Frederick II of having

23 On Cardano, see: Nancy G. Siraisi, *The Clock and the Mirror: Girolamo Cardano and Renaissance Medicine* (Princeton, 1997); Anthony Grafton, *Cardano’s Cosmos: The Worlds and Works of a Renaissance Astrologer* (Cambridge, MA, 1999); Maria Luisa Baldi and Guido Canziani, eds. *Girolamo Cardano. Le opere, le fonti, la vita* (Milano, 1999); Germana Ernst, “Veritatis amor dulcissimus’: Aspects of Cardano’s Astrology,” in *Secrets of Nature: Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe*, eds. William R. Newman and Anthony Grafton (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 39–68.

24 On genitures, astrology, and the figure of Christ, see: Aaron Adair, “The Star of Christ in the Light of Astronomy,” *Zygon* 47, no. 1 (2012): 7–29.

25 Spini, *Ricerca dei libertini*, 28. On Vanini, see: Francesco Paolo Raimondi, *Giulio Cesare Vanini nell’Europa del Seicento* (Pisa, 2005); Didier Foucault, *Un philosophe libertin dans l’Europe baroque: Giulio Cesare Vanini (1585–1619)* (Paris, 2003); Cesare Vasoli, “Vanini e il suo processo per ateismo,” in *Atheismus in Mittelalter und in der Renaissance*, eds. Friedrich Niewoner and Olaf Pluta (Wiesbaden, 1999), 129–144.

26 On Gabriel Naudé, see Cavaillé, *Les Déniaisés*, 195–217. On the Naudé’s relationship with Cardano’s work, see: Lorenzo Bianchi, *Naturalismo, scetticismo, politica. Studi sul pensiero rinascimentale e libertino* (Firenze, 2019), 107–134.

27 See: Lucio Biasiori, “«Empietà e bestemmie anche alle orecchie dei saraceni infedeli». La condanna di Zanino da Solza tra rafforzamento ecclesiastico e progetti di crociata (1459),” *Rivista storica italiana* 129, no. 3 (2017): 863–886.

“openly stated” that “the whole world has been fooled by three impostors, Jesus Christ, Moses, and Muhammad.”²⁸ Frederick responded by denying the accusations and denouncing the pope himself as a heretic.²⁹ The encyclical letter was written at the peak of the conflict between the two main secular and religious authorities of the Christian West (Empire and papacy). Pierre des Vignes, Frederick’s chancellor, was in charge of replying to the pope’s accusations against his master. His response, however, fueled further suspicions, and rumors spread that Pierre des Vignes wrote, in collaboration with the emperor, a treatise titled *De tribus impostoribus*.³⁰ From then on, this pernicious text became a powerful instrument of control. Although no one saw it, for centuries the guardians of orthodoxy attributed its authorship to almost anyone who criticized the tenets of the Church or the foundation of its political authority. To mention but a few, among those who – sooner or later – were accused of authoring this wicked book, we find the likes of Boccaccio, Pietro Pomponazzi, Niccolò Machiavelli, Desiderius Erasmus, Pietro Aretino, Bernardino Ochino, Francesco Pucci, Miguel Servet, Rabelais, Guillaume Postel, Giordano Bruno, Tommaso Campanella, Spinoza, and John Milton. Cardano was also among them.³¹

The legend of the three impostors is an ever-present theme in the history of European radical dissent, doubt, and atheism in the medieval and early modern period. As we will see, the circulation of an actual manuscript version of

28 “Iste rex pestilentie a tribus barattatoribus, ut eius verbis utamur, scilicet Christo lesu, Moyse et Machometo, totum mundum fuisse deceptum [...]”: *Epistolae saeculi XIII e regestis pontificum romanorum selectae per G.H. Pertz*, ed. Carolus Rodenberg (Berlin, 1883–94), vol. 1, 653. Quoted by Mario Esposito, “Una manifestazione d’incredulità religiosa nel medioevo: Il detto dei ‘Tre Impostori’ e la sua trasmissione da Federico II a Pomponazzi,” *Archivio Storico Italiano* 89, no. 3 (1931): 3–48 (6).

29 Esposito, “Una manifestazione d’incredulità,” 6.

30 Georges Minois, *The Atheist’s Bible: The Most Dangerous Book that Never Existed*, trans. Lys Ann Weiss (Chicago, 2009), 2–9.

31 On the “Three impostors” see: Silvia Berti, Françoise Charles-Daubert, and Richard H. Popkin, eds., *Heterodoxy, Spinozism, and Free Thought in Early-Eighteenth-Century Europe: Studies on the Traité des trois imposteurs* (Dordrecht, 1996); Silvia Berti, *Anticristianesimo e libertà. Studi sull’illuminismo radicale europeo* (Bologna, 2012); Abraham Anderson, ed. and trans., *Treatise of the three impostors and the problem of Enlightenment: a new translation of the Traité des trois imposteurs (1777 edition) with three essays in commentary* (Lanham, Md., 1997). Still informative, despite an old-fashioned interpretation, Spini, *Ricerca dei libertini*. A broader view on the theme of deception in early modern Europe in Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, *Les déniés. Irréligion et libertinage au début de l’époque moderne* (Paris, 2013); by the same author, see also: “Imposture politique des religions et sagesse libertine,” *Littératures classiques* 55 (2004): 27–42. On the supposed circulation of the manuscript in sixteenth-century Italy, see Germana Ernst, “Campanella e il *De tribus impostoribus*,” *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* 2 (1986): 143–170.

this much-feared text was attested to in the late seventeenth century, and a printed version eventually appeared in the early eighteenth. The history of the circulation, since the late Middle Ages, of the idea of the imposture of religion has been of the utmost importance to the progressive revision of Lucien Febvre's influential thesis, first advanced in *Le probleme de l'incroyance au XVI^e siecle. La religion de Rabelais* (1942). Here, Febvre argued that, despite the ubiquitous condemnation of atheism in normative sources, the radical denial of God was something that, before the enlightenment, people just lacked the intellectual instruments to conceive of. However, it has since been proven that some of the core themes allegedly attributed to the book (and then contained in its known manuscript and printed versions) circulated widely in popular environments since at least the thirteenth century.³² A large part of this historiographical debate has revolved around the issue of the relationship between learned and popular culture. While the criticism of the top-down paradigm of intellectual history has been successfully revised, the notion of a separate "popular religiosity" that existed independently from – though clashing and mingling with – the culture of the elites seems also to be no longer convincing.³³ As Federico Barbierato has pointed out in his seminal work on the spread of atheistic ideas in early modern Venice, the repertoire of erudite irreligiousness encountered needs that were already existent across the social spectrum. In a context where books were discussed in a wide range of public and semi-public settings, learned sources also provided common people with "easily recognizable elements to use and adapt to one's own ideas, which," with the support of literary authorities, "took on a greater degree of credibility." By using rhetorical conventions, literature "supplied a vocabulary and theoretical structure for existing states of mind."³⁴ Paradoxically, however, the freedom of

32 It is not possible to give justice to the complexity of this historiographical debate in a single footnote. I will limit myself to mention the influential work of John Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* (London, 2005), 191–231.

33 In early modern religious studies this thesis was most famously brought forward by Carlo Ginzburg in his innovating book, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (London, 1980; originally published in Italian in 1976). Despite the impact of Ginzburg's book, his methodological approach has not been exempted from criticism. Among others, see: Dominick LaCapra, "The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Twentieth-Century Historian," in *History and Criticism*, ed. Dominick LaCapra (Ithaca, 1985), 45–70; Paola Zambelli, "From Menocchio to Piero Della Francesca: The Work of Carlo Ginzburg," *The Historical Journal*, 28, no. 4 (1985): 983–999; David Levine, Zubedeh Vahed, "Ginzburg's Menocchio: Refutations and Conjectures," *Social History* 68 (2001): 437–464.

34 Federico Barbierato, *The Inquisitor in the Hat Shop: Inquisition, Forbidden Books, and Unbelief in Early Modern Venice* (Farnham, 2012), 290–291.

discussion enjoyed in informal settings allowed people to talk about religious matters more bluntly and directly than could ever have been done in a manuscript or, even more so, in a printed work.

Christ the Loaf, the Beggar, the Thief

The virulent attack against the Christian religion that was carried on by some of the defendants in the cases under examination is reminiscent of the core themes that have been historically associated with the theory of the imposture of religions. In the case of Marcello Impicciato, tried in Naples at the turn of the sixteenth century, we see some of the most outrageous and aggressive moves against the founder of the Christian religion. Impicciato's, however, was not the first denunciation to have occurred in Naples. Before him, another defendant was charged with believing that the forbidden fruit symbolized Eve's buttocks. The forty-year-old Biagio di Corso was brought to trial by the Neapolitan Inquisition in December 1577. Leonardo Costa, ex-jailer of the Archiepiscopal Curia, said that three prisoners testified to him that Biagio was living under a false name, and that he had been previously burned in effigy by the Inquisition of Palermo. This element seems to suggest that this idea circulated from Sicily to the Southern Italian peninsula through informal contact networks.

Although the sources do not say if there were contacts between the Sicilian and the Neapolitan defendants, the description of the localized sociability they were immersed in allows us to formulate some reasonable hypotheses. Men and goods circulated extensively in economies largely based on trade, as was the case in Sicily and the viceroyalty of Naples. Traveling was not an exception for middle-rank professionals like most of the defendants of our cases. From the reports of Garrano's trial we know that some of his acolytes lived between Naples and Palermo, and that the Sicilian necromancers smuggled books from Venice, which they received unbound and which they then bound once arrived.³⁵ It is quite likely that people characterized by curiosity and the will to challenge established systems of beliefs sought the company of like-minded companions or engaged in provocative discussions as much when they travelled as when they were at home. This picture, however, as tentative as it may be, must not be compared to the spread of a formal heresy. An established set of beliefs that required to be agreed upon, as well as the intent to proselytize, seem as alien to the mind-set of these individuals as the compliance to any form of religious orthodoxy. Curiosity, unsystematic thought, provocation, and

35 Messina, *Inquisitori, negromanti e streghe*, 456 n. 141.

irreverence were the key features that shaped their approach to the world that surrounded them.

These were indeed the main characteristics of Marcello Impicciato's words and actions. He allegedly repeated dozens of times to his acquaintances, neighbors, customers, and friends that "Christ was born a tramp, and he wandered around begging."³⁶ Others reported him saying that Christ "was lashed because he deserved it,"³⁷ because "he went robbing around"³⁸ and that he "loved Saint Peter because they wander around together stealing fishes and dividing them up among them."³⁹ Impicciato, like Ludovico Garrano and Zozamo Canatta before him, was accused of denying Christ's death on the cross, thus undermining the core tenet of the Christian religion. He allegedly repudiated his resurrection, claiming that "It is in not true that Christ died on the cross: he just pretended to be dead. If he had died, he wouldn't have come back to life ... When have you ever seen someone be resurrected from the dead?"⁴⁰ He was also reported to have added: "Who has ever seen this Christ? These images are made by carpenters; they're just men's inventions."⁴¹

Zozamo Canatta believed only in the first part of the Christian Credo and not in what was written after "in Jesum Christum filium eius."⁴² In 1581 he was reported as having said that the Jews had not killed Christ our Lord.⁴³ Ludovico Garrano, for his part, sometimes denied the divinity of Jesus, while others allegedly argued that someone else had been sacrificed in his place, referring to Simon of Cyrene.⁴⁴

This precise reference literally echoes one of the statements for which the Friulian miller Menocchio – made famous by Carlo Ginzburg's groundbreaking book *The Cheese and the Worms* – was charged. He was, indeed,

36 ASdN, SU,1067(1598–1601), 14r. January 12, 1598. Aloisio Antonio Alfano.

37 Ibid., 21v. February 20, 1598. Mattia Simeone di Napoli.

38 Ibid., 22v.

39 Ibid., 143v. January 15, 1599. Ferdinando de Luca alias "Scoglio." These statements are reminiscent of a long textual tradition that dates back to anti-Christian pagan writers like Celsus and continues in Jewish polemical writings like the *Toledot Yeshu*. These themes were subsequently incorporated into the theory of the imposture of religions in early modern Europe. I will delve into these aspects of this tradition in the monograph I am currently devoting to these cases.

40 ASdN, SU, 1067, 2r; 6r; 24r; 27r; 29v; 110r; 122v; 126r; 132v; 140v; 163v; 176v; see also: 43v; 101r (Impicciato's formal accusation).

41 Ibid., 43v; 48r; 124r; 169r; and 101r (formal accusation).

42 AHN, Inquisición, libro 899, 232v.

43 AHN, Inquisición, 899. "Auto da fé," March 13, 1605.

44 AHN, Inquisición, Libro 902, 130v (on Jesus Christ); 126v; 130v; 133r (on Symon of Cyrene). I already discussed the topic of the crucifixion of a Christ look-alike in "Sex and Toleration."

accused of having said that “It is not true that Christ was crucified, but rather it was Simon of Cyrene.”⁴⁵ In the critical edition of Menocchio’s trial records, Andrea del Col highlighted that this belief could depend on a Gnostic root. Early anti-Gnostic heresiographies widely reported the belief that Jesus only apparently suffered his passion and crucifixion.⁴⁶ The specific reference to Simon of Cyrene is attributed by Irenaeus of Lyon to Basilides.⁴⁷ We cannot, however, exclude *a priori* that, in both Menocchio’s and Garrano’s case, the Inquisitors were trying to conflate something that they were incapable of classifying with a well-known historical heresy.

Islamic Watermarks

Indeed, in light of recent research on Menocchio, another hypothesis can be formulated. Besides being associated with the Gnosis, the denial of the crucifixion and the “substitution legend” have been central to Islamic exegesis. Only one passage in the Qu’ran directly refers to Jesus’ crucifixion, but it does so by explicitly mentioning that the Jews did not kill him.⁴⁸ An Italian translation of the Qu’ran by Giovanni Battista di Castrodardo was published by Andrea Arrivabene in Venice in 1547. Although the title page claimed that the *Alcorano* was based on the Arabic original, it was in fact a patchwork of a diverse set of previous European sources that included rearrangements of medieval Arabic-Latin texts and an abridged version of Theodor Bibliander’s edition (1543) of Robert of Ketton’s Latin translation of the Qu’ran (1143).⁴⁹ Even though there is no allusion to Simon of Cyrene, the reference to the substitution legend recurs several times there.⁵⁰ As Pier Mattia Tommasino has proven, the Italian translation of the Qu’ran was almost certainly among the readings of the Friulian miller studied by Ginzburg.⁵¹ Given the similarities between the cases under examination and Menocchio’s heresies, we cannot exclude that there may have been some common sources. After all, we have

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- 45 Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, 43.
 46 Andrea Del Col, *Domenico Scandella known as Menocchio: His Trial Before the Inquisition (1583–1599)*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi (Tempe, 1997), lxvi.
 47 Irenaeus of Lyon, *Contro le eresie/i. Smascheramento e confutazione della falsa gnosi*, ed. and trans. Augusto Cosentino (Roma, 2009), vol. 1, 24, no. 4, 155.
 48 Qu’ran, 4:157, M. H. Shakir’s translation.
 49 Pier Mattia Tommasino, *Venetian Qur’an: A Renaissance companion to Islam*, trans. Sylvia Notini (Philadelphia, 2018).
 50 *L’Alcorano di Macometto. Nel qual si contiene la dottrina, la vita, i costumi, et le leggi sue. tradotto nuovamente dall’arabo in lingua italiana* (1547), 41v; xi (v); xviii (v).
 51 Tommasino, *Venetian Qur’an*; Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, 107–108.

already seen that Venice was a supply source for the illegal market of forbidden books that nourished the curiosities of Garrano's esoteric circle. Moreover, Zozamo Canatta, the first of the defendants to be accused of believing that sodomy was the original sin, was kept as a slave by Muslim corsairs when he was an adolescent and spent a significant amount of his juvenile life as a converted Muslim in North Africa. Among his charges, there was the belief that "all can be saved in their own law," that is, that salvation was accessible also outside the boundaries of Christianity. This idea was widely spread in those times, as a result of the ongoing tensions between the three main monotheistic faiths, of the phenomena of mass conversions in the Spanish empire, and of the excruciating pain caused by religious wars and tensions – all elements that were further exacerbated by the outbreak of the Protestant Reformation in Europe. Skepticism, doubt, and the desire for a cease-fire to end the violent turmoil provoked by confessional and interreligious conflicts became a more or less conscious attitude of many women and men yearning for peace.⁵²

The Muslim religion contained some elements that resonated with this widespread need for concord. As already pointed out by Mercedes García Arenál, anti-Muslim polemicists attributed the idea that "all can be saved in their own faith" to Islam.⁵³ In his *Antialcoran* (1535), the preacher Bernardo Pérez de Chinchón (1488/1493–1556?) stated that "some of the learned men among the Muslims say that each can be saved in his own law." Gaspar de Escolano (1560–1619) placed this belief in the list of errors that he attributed to the Muslims in his history of Valencia. This opinion was not groundless. At least two passages of the Qu'ran clearly make reference to the universal salvation of the good: Qu'ran 2:62 and 5:69.⁵⁴ Centuries before the consolidation of Iberian anti-Muslim discourses, French theologian William of Auvergne (1190–1249) in his *De legibus* quoted the Latin translation of the Qu'ran as one of the channels through which the idea that "all can be saved" circulated in

52 Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 2007); Stuart B. Schwartz, *All Can be Saved: Religious Tolerance and Salvation in the Iberian Atlantic World* (New Haven, 2008). The theme was also crucial to the multifaceted manifestations of radical dissent in Italy during the spread of the Reformation. The bibliography is too vast to be summarized here. For an introduction in English, see Mario Biagioni, *Radical Reformation and the Making of Modern Europe: A Lasting Heritage* (Leiden, 2017).

53 Mercedes García-Arenal, "Religious Dissent and Minorities: The Morisco Age," *The Journal of Modern History* 81 (2009): 888–920 (907). I already dealt with this problem in "Sex and Toleration: New Perspectives of Research on Religious Radical Dissent in Early Modern Italy," *Intellectual History Review* 29, no. 1 (2019): 129–144.

54 M. H. Shakir's translation.

the West.⁵⁵ There is evidence that these Qur'anic passages were discussed not only in anti-Islamic writings, but also by Christian theologians and philosophers open to reconsidering the official position of the Church regarding the relations between historical religions. In this fashion, they were quoted also by Marsilio Ficino in his *De Christiana religione*.⁵⁶

As we have seen, the analyses of some of the works contained in Garrano's private library also call into question the relationship between Muslim and Christian intellectual traditions. When we consider attempts to explain the world, its origins, and the destiny of humanity on grounds other than religious revelations, the boundaries dividing the three main Mediterranean cultures tend, indeed, to blur. Natural philosophy and natural sciences, including astrology, medicine, oneiromancy, and magic were rooted in the classical tradition, and their circulation was made possible by the translation movements that took place in the Arabic-speaking world first and, subsequently, in the central centuries of the European Middle Ages. The tradition of the heterodox interpretations of Aristotle in Europe, which since the twelfth century had provided the intellectual foundation for radical ideas like the denial of creation and the immortality of the soul, were rooted in the reception of Ibn Rushd's (Averroes) commentaries on the works of the Greek philosopher.⁵⁷

The theory of the imposture of religions itself originated in the midst of the conflicts between the three main Mediterranean monotheistic faiths. Back in the seventh century CE, the foundation of Islam was a breakthrough in the consolidation of a critical approach towards revealed religions. Muhammad claimed to be a prophet, and this claim was rejected by Jews and Christians alike. As a response to that, the traits that distinguish a true prophet from an impostor became a key issue in Islamic theological writings. The development of the disparate Jewish and Christian criteria of true prophecy was fueled by the polemics against Muslims.⁵⁸ In this intricate interreligious dispute, each

55 Guilelmi Alverni, *Opera Omnia*, 2 vol. (Paris, 1674), 1:57a and ff., quoted by Daniele Conti, "Religione naturale e salvezza universale. Appunti sulla fortuna di Ficino e una nota su Agrippa e Camillo Renato," *Rinascimento* 11 57 (2017): 231–285 (247).

56 Marsilio Ficino, *Della Christiana religione* (Pisa, 1484), c. [pīiii]v, quoted by Conti, "Religione naturale," 243.

57 Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic translation movement in Baghdad and early Abbāsīd society (2nd–4th/8th–10th centuries)* (London, 1998); Mohammed Abattouy, Jürgen Renn, and Paul Weinig, "Transmission as Transformation: The Translation Movements in the Medieval East and West in a Comparative Perspective," in *Intercultural Transmission of Scientific Knowledge in the Middle Ages*, special issue of *Science in context* 14, no. 1–2 (2001): 1–12.

58 Sarah Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam: Ibn al-Rāwandī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, and Their Impact on Islamic Thought* (Leiden, 1999), 30.

side helped to shape and remodel the theological edifice of the other, but ultimately the seeds of doubt were also planted within each religious tradition. The status of prophecy and revelation per se started to be questioned, and the theme of the imposture of religion came to undermine the foundation of every possible religious faith.⁵⁹ These ideas emerged in Western Christianity during the Middle Ages in contexts of religious blending, such as at the court of Frederick II, or in contexts where the three faiths coexisted, like in Iberian Al-Andalus.⁶⁰

However, it was not only ideas and books that circulated in the Mediterranean world. People coming from different religious backgrounds traveled, clashed, and often coexisted side-by-side for long periods of time. Practices of day-by-day coexistence favored processes of hybridization. The Iberian context played a crucial role in the long-standing history of the interactions between Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the basin of the Mediterranean Sea. Notwithstanding its intrinsically conflictive nature, the coexistence of the three faiths in Iberia gave birth to fruitful processes of cross-pollination, but also encouraged the development of doubt and skepticism. As already noted by John Edwards in a study on the heretical statements prosecuted by the inquisition in the Castilian dioceses of Soria and Osma between 1482 and 1502, “blasphemy, materialistic attitudes, skepticism, anti-clericalism” were widespread attitudes among common people in contexts where religious minorities coexisted with the Christian majority.⁶¹

After the decision to force Jewish and Muslim individuals to convert, “conversos” and “moriscos” often maintained loyalty to their religious and cultural roots, transmitting their legacy through a wide range of dissimulation practices. In a context where concealment became a habit, doubt easily sowed its seeds. Forced transits between the faiths could reinforce the sense of belonging to a threatened tradition, but they could also foster processes of identity crisis. As Stefania Pastore has pointed out, this climate characterized by conflicts and coexistence, translations and adaptive strategies, led to the development of an intellectual undercurrent of doubt in Spain that in some cases resulted in the development of overtly heretical positions.⁶² While some developed

59 Ibid., 35.

60 See: Patricia Crone, “Oral Transmission of Subversive Ideas from the Islamic World to Europe: The Case of the Three Impostors,” in *Islam, the Ancient Near East and Varieties of Godlessness. Collected Studies in Three Volumes* (Leiden, 2016), 3: 200–238.

61 “Religious Faith and Doubt in Late Medieval Spain: Soria circa. 1450–1500,” *Past and Present*, no. 120 (Aug. 1988), 3–25, 18.

62 Stefania Pastore, “Doubt in Fifteenth-Century Iberia,” in *After Conversion: Iberia and the Emergence of Modernity*, ed. Mercedes García-Arenal (Leiden, 2016), 283–303 (286).

beliefs that were close to “certain deistic standpoints” that emerged in France and Holland between the late sixteenth and the seventeenth century, other dissenters adopted forms of “radical skepticism, which resulted in the denial of the immortality of the soul and of the validity of all religious precepts,” which echoed – just as the Sicilian Zozamo Canatta did – “the centuries-old theories on the three rings, or the three impostors.”⁶³

Doubt, therefore, was not just a matter-of-fact approach to religious matters in a world divided by faith, but also an intrinsic part of a common cultural heritage. The readings of our dissenters seem to provide a case in point for this statement. While it is difficult from the sources to assess exactly how they themselves were aware of such connections, the reality is that these individuals bore the fruits of vines whose roots, underneath the surface, resulted from the interweaving of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian legacies alike. Traditions of radical doubt cut across the boundaries of the faiths. On the one hand, doubt was a collateral result of interfaith polemics that ultimately ended up undermining the belief in religious revelations per se. On the other, it nourished itself on the attempts made by scholars belonging to the three main Mediterranean religious traditions to accommodate, or refuse to, their own religious beliefs with the legacy of Classical philosophy and science, which constituted a common background for Jewish, Christian, and Muslim philosophers and theologians alike.

Libertinism

In 1705, about a century and a half after the first Sicilian trials, Antonio Partenio was prosecuted by the Venetian Inquisition. He was accused of being a swindler who tricked simple people out of their money by pretending to exercise the arts of magic. At the end of his depositions, however, he also provided a long list of unorthodox opinions in matters of faith. He disputed the tenet of predestination, favoring instead a belief in universal salvation. He, too, denied the immortality of the soul, denounced the greed of the Catholic hierarchies, the meaninglessness of their rituals, and the absurdity of the temporal power exercised by the pope. He also believed that Adam and Eve committed sodomy in the terrestrial paradise. In his final confession, he stated that “religion it is nothing but the cover of political power, so as to conceal its tyranny,” thus adding an additional layer to the denunciation of the deceitful nature of the

63 Ibid.

Christian religion already made manifest by these cases.⁶⁴ This pointed clarity (“cover,” “conceal”) reflects a changed context. The beginning of the eighteenth century was, indeed, a turning point in the history of the reception of the idea of the imposture of religions. The mysterious book that was said to have circulated since the late Middle Ages finally made its appearance in two major forms. Several manuscripts titled *De tribus impostoribus* and the *Traité des trois imposteurs* appeared between 1688 and 1719. They were the result of the collective work of heterodox circles mainly located between northern Germany and Holland, and their authors were driven not only by their antireligious beliefs, but also by profitmaking interests. Although manuscript copies were made from these two basic works, their core contents remained stable.⁶⁵ Eventually, a print copy of the *Traité*, the more influential of the two, appeared in 1719. The French treatise “offered a recapitulation of antireligious arguments that had been developed from Celsus and Julian all the way to modern atheists”; they were “linked more or less coherently to form a sort of handbook for the perfect villain, the Bible of the unbeliever, the ‘little red book’ of irreligion.”⁶⁶

When Partenio was tried, however, the idea that Adam and Eve committed sodomy in the terrestrial paradise had also emerged in the work of at least two major representatives of seventeenth-century radical libertine thought. The first one, Le Mothe le Vayer, is among the direct sources that were almost literally copied in the French version of the *Three impostors*, along with Vanini, Naudé, Charron, Hobbes, and, above all, Spinoza, who appears, himself, in the title of the first print edition of the book, *L'Esprit de Spinoza*. Le Mothe le Vayer in two of his works, the *Antre des nymphes* and the *Hexaméron Rustique* (1671), discussed the idea that, in the terrestrial paradise, the female buttocks were the forbidden fruit, attributing the genesis of this unorthodox belief to previous rabbinic literature.⁶⁷ A few years later, in 1678 (and then again in 1679) one of the most outrageous libertine works ever, Adrian Beverland's *De peccato originali*, came out. Beverland attacked the bigotry of religious sexual morality by presenting his solution to the problem: allowing greater sexual liberty. As Partenio also stated in his confession, “who is allowed to err, errs less.” While exaggerating the negative aspects of lust, Beverland “actually suggested to the

64 ASV, SU, B 132 (1705), 8r.

65 Minois, *Atheist's Bible*, 161.

66 *Ibid.*, 163.

67 François de La Mothe Le Vayer, *L'antre des nymphes*, ed. Jean-Pierre Cavallé (Toulouse, 2004). Jean-Pierre Cavallé, *Les déniaisés. Irreligion et libertinage au début de l'époque moderne* (Paris, 2013), 77–90.

reader to consider the opposite point of view: that sex was a delight, a natural gift to all people.”⁶⁸

In 1700 the idea that the original sin was sex was eventually defined as a heretical proposition – and not a heresy – by a resolution of the theological consultors of the Roman Holy Office on July 18, 1700.⁶⁹ The archives of the Roman Inquisition have been another important source of information for reconstructing the circulation, within central and northern Italy, of the heretical belief that the original sin was sodomy. Unlike the cases we have already discussed, in this archival material there is no mention of the larger cluster of unorthodox ideas shared by the Sicilian, Neapolitan, and Venetian defendants. The belief that the forbidden apple symbolized Eve’s buttocks appears to be a sexual joke that, despite its outrageousness, had no other serious heretical implications. While this statement was not extensively discussed in the cases we have already mentioned above, its origins and content emerge clearly from the analysis of the latter ones.

Gregorio Corsetti, Director of the Ghislieri College in Pavia, who was prosecuted by the Roman Inquisition in 1686, confessed that in order to justify the opinion that the primeval fault was sodomy he had relied upon a passage in which the jurist Egidio Bossi (1488–1546) quoted an Augustinian text on sodomy.⁷⁰ In a chapter of Bossi’s *Tractatus Varii* (a compendium of criminal law) entitled *De Stupro detestabili in masculos* (On the dreadful sexual abuse

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- 68 Karen Hollewand, “The Banished Scholar: Beverland, Sex, and Liberty in the Seventeenth-Century Low Countries,” *Early Modern Low Countries* 1, no. 2 (2017): 273–296, (288). On Beverland see: Karen Hollewand, *Banishment of Beverland: Sex, Sin, and Scholarship in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic* (Leiden, 2019). Beverland also authored an *Epistolum ad Batavum, in Britannia hospitem, De tribus impostoribus* (under the pseudonym of Perini del Vago) whose contents are, however, irrelevant to the history of the transmission of the legend of the three impostors, as the epistle focuses on conflicts between three bishops and not on the “dialogue” between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The attribution of this work to Beverland is found in the entry “IMPOSTORIBUS (LIBER DE TRIBUS) sive Tractatus de Vanitate Religionum” by Prosper Marchand, *Dictionnaire historique, ou Mimoires critiques et litteraires, concernant la vie et les ouvrages de divers personnages distingues, particulierement dans la republique des lettres* (The Hague, 1758), 1: 312–329. I refer to the critical edition of this entry by Jeffrey Dean, “Marchand’s article IMPOSTORIBUS,” in *Heterodoxy, Spinozism, and Free Thought in Early-Eighteenth-Century Europe: Studies on the Traité des trois imposteurs* eds. Silvia Berti, Françoise Charles-Daubert, and Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht, 1996), 477–524 (522).
- 69 Archivio della Congregazione della Dottrina della Fede (ACDF), Stanza Storica, O 1-h, archival sub-unit n. 9, 143r.
- 70 ACDF, Sant’Offizio (SO), Stanza storica, o 1-h, archival sub-unit n° 9, 561r–v.561r. The Ghislieri College was an important educational institute in Counter-Reformation Pavia: Gianpaolo Angelini, “I collegi della riforma cattolica. L’architettura e la committenza,” in *Almum Studium Papiense. Storia dell’Università di Pavia*, ed. Dario Mantovani (Milano,

among males) there was a paragraph titled *Sodomiticum vitium habuit originem à mulieribus* (The sodomitic vice originated in women). Here, the author, indeed, quoted an Augustinian *Sermo ad fratres in eremo* (n. 47) on sodomy.⁷¹ The work was, in fact, an influential pseudo-Augustinian writing composed in the late Middle Ages that circulated widely despite its controversial contents.⁷² In the sermon, the author accuses women of being the cause of the spread of the sodomitic vice, following the famous Pauline passage of *Romans* 1.26–27. The pseudo-Augustinian author addresses to the female gender the rhetorical question: “Women, mothers of lust, wasn’t it enough for you to deceive the first man?” (O mulieres luxuriae matres, nonne sufficiebat primum hominem decepisse?).⁷³ Although in the passage there is no indication that Eve’s infraction was having solicited Adam for anal sex, this exegesis is not completely unimaginable given the context.

Beyond the quest for the origins, yet another case preserved in the archives of the Roman Holy Office helps clarify the basic logic of this heretical statement. Friar Giovan Battista d’Antrodoco confessed that he stated that “buggery is an act of beatitude, and that this was the reason why God forbade Adam from eating the apple in the terrestrial paradise because it symbolized buggery, which God wanted to keep to himself.”⁷⁴

This radically subversive opinion projects onto God a commonplace assumption of the burlesque and satiric poetry of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: that sodomy was a sophisticated privilege of the ruling classes.⁷⁵ Antonio Rocco, in his scandalizing apology of sodomy, *Alcibiade Fanciullo a scola* (Alcibiades the Schoolboy) articulated this idea in a fashion that is highly reminiscent of D’Antrodoco’s interpretation, who probably knew of the clandestine manuscript and read it. Rocco deemed sodomy a “celestial pleasure,” and accused the religious and political institution of forbidding it in order to preserve it for themselves by terrifying the ignorant and simple “populace.”⁷⁶

The theme of deception comes back here: sexual deception was the root itself of political and religious deception. Works like Rocco’s *Alcibiades* delves

2013), vol. 1, no. 2, 925–932 (929). I have already discussed this case and the following conclusion of this paragraph in “Il frutto proibito.”

71 Egidio Bossi, *Criminalem materiam* (Basilea, 1580), 298.

72 Erick L. Saak, *Creating Augustine: Interpreting Augustine and Augustinianism in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2012).

73 Augustine of Hippo, *Opera Omnia*, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Parigi, 1841), vol. 6, col. 1328.

74 ACDF, SO, M 5-P, 752r.

75 Jean Toscan, *Le carnaval du langage: le lexique érotique des poètes de l'équivoque de Burchiello à Marino (XV^e–XVII^e siècles)* (Lille, 1981), 194–216.

76 Antonio Rocco, *L’Alcibiade fanciullo a scola*, ed. by Laura Coci (Roma, 2003), 56.

deeply into the tradition of erotic and satirical prose and poetry that had flourished in Italy since the fifteenth century.⁷⁷ However, it takes these themes a step further and, in line with the currents of European erudite libertinism, it attributes a heuristic and philosophical role to the use of sexual innuendos.⁷⁸ By framing sex in the light of natural philosophy, works like Rocco's *Alcibiades* contrasted the current morality (that, based on a reward in the afterlife, aimed to subjugate the people) with an ethic that encouraged enjoying the pleasures generously offered by Nature to human beings. From this perspective, religion was an instrument of control, whose most powerful political tool was the demonization of sexual pleasure.⁷⁹

Conclusions

I found the initial evidence of the idea that the original sin was sodomy and that the apple symbolized Eve's buttocks in the documents of the Spanish inquisition in Sicily from the second half of the sixteenth century. Probably originating in ecclesiastical environments, these heterodox beliefs circulated among informal circles of lay dissenters, where it was discussed along with a set of radically heterodox beliefs like the denial of the immortality of the soul, of the virginity of Mary, and of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. These opinions were couched in a skeptical framework whose elements can be connected to an enduring Mediterranean tradition which, cutting across the boundaries dividing the three Abrahamic faiths, aimed at undermining the belief in revealed religions and prophecy.

The leading figures in these informal groups of dissenters mostly belonged to the middle-high ranks of the world of the urban professions, but the sources report their discussions taking place in public or semi-public spaces where people belonging to all levels of society gathered and participated. The relations

77 Paula Findlen, "Humanism, Politics and Pornography in Renaissance Italy," in *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origin of Modernity, 1500–1800*, ed. Lynn Hunt (New York, 1993), 49–108.

78 Robert Darnton, "Sex for Thought," in *Sexualities in History: A Reader*, eds. Kim M. Philipps and Barry Reay (New York, 2002), 203–221.

79 Jean-Pierre Cavaillé, "Alcibiade enfant à l'école. Clandestinité, irréligion et sodomie," *Tangence* 81 (2006): 15–38 (30–38). On Rocco's *Alcibiade*, see also: Paolo Fasoli, "Figurae: Sex and Rhetoric in Early Libertine Venice, 1642–51," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 12, no. 2 (2012): 97–116; and Armando Maggi, "The Discourse of Sodom in a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Text," *Journal of Homosexuality* 33, no. 3–4 (1997): 25–43.

between these sets of unorthodox ideas and the opinion that Adam and Eve committed sodomy in the terrestrial paradise is not made explicit in the initial cases. Its internal logic becomes clearer in later instances, where, nevertheless, this belief appears as an autonomous statement and not in relation to other serious crimes of opinion. However, the content that emerges in these later explanations is consistent with the core themes of the cluster of unorthodox ideas originally associated with it. Sodomy was depicted as a celestial pleasure, and its prohibition was interpreted as still another manifestation, probably the most radical, of religious deception.

This connection between sexual, religious, and political trickery is clear in the writings of seventeenth-century erudite libertines who reported this interpretation of the myth of the Fall from Grace. However, almost a century earlier, some dissenters in the Italian peninsula reached the same conclusions, using sex as a device to unveil the deceiving nature of institutionalized religions. The study of these cases can contribute to the rethinking of established periodization and genealogies, further proving how much the development of skeptical approaches to religion, as well as incredulity and atheism, were not just refined literary products. Instead, they were aspects of a wider culture in which common people, middle rank professionals, and members of the cultivated elites did not just passively read books, but also creatively elaborated upon such ideas and contributed to their proliferation. It also points out the extent to which sexual themes, rather than being mere “divertissements” or manifestations of folk attitudes, were important theoretical tools in a wider critique of religious and political authority and authoritarianism.

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