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Dame Poverty among Saints, Poets, and Humanists: Italian Intellectuals Confronted with the Question of Poverty

Introduction

The theme of poverty is prominent in Italian literature, and recurs frequently in both lyrical poetry and didactic prose from the thirteenth century to the dawn of the Renaissance. Poverty is, however, a multifaceted concept, which underwent important transformations over the course of the centuries, at the same time as medieval society evolved from the essentially rural setting of the higher Middle Ages to the urban landscape of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. My presentation will concentrate on some texts of the fourteenth century, which I believe will provide a fair picture of the diverse positions vis-à-vis the question of poverty in a century especially representative of Italian history and culture. This essay is divided into three parts: in the first one I examine two Italian re-elaborations of some famous passages on poverty found in Pope Innocent III's *De contemptu mundi*; in the second part I shall focus on the literary expressions of the Franciscan exaltation of poverty and the reactions to it in lay society; in the third one I point to a different way of considering the same question, greatly influenced by the humanist movement.

1. Re-elaborations of De contemptu mundi

In his work *De miseria condicionis humane*, also known as *De contemptu mundi*, Lotario de' Segni (later to become Pope Innocent III) has a passage on "the miseries of the poor" which was repeated in several Italian writings. We are concerned here with the re-elaborations by Bono Giamboni (c. 1240-1292) and Antonio Pucci (c. 1310-1388). Bono Giamboni, a writer known for his vernacular translations of Latin historical works and his moral treatises, was a judge in Florence from 1261 to 1291. He re-elaborated

Lotario's work in his *Della miseria dell'uomo*, a book which was in turn the source of Antonio Pucci's passage.¹ Antonio Pucci, who also lived in Florence, was an employee of the Commune and a prolific author of gnomic, historical and romantic poems.² His *Libro di varie storie* is a personal book of notes, a "Zibaldone", where he recorded information and ideas from the books he was reading. It is most interesting to compare how the three texts deal with the same subject, poverty, and note how different the spirit of the three passages is, in spite of the fact that the authors drew upon each others' ideas.

Ch. 14: Pauperes enim premuntur inedia, cruciantur erumpna, fame, siti, frigore, nuditate; vilescent et contabescunt, spernuntur et confunduntur. O miserabilis condicio mendicantis!

Et si petit, pudore confunditur, et si non petit, egestate consumitur, set ut mendicet necessitate compellitur. Deum causatur iniquum quod non recte dividat; proximum criminatur malignum quod non plene subveniat; in-

Some say that [...] those who are poor in terms of material possessions, in terms of food, drink, dress, and footwear, are shabby, that they are scorned and sneered at, and others whisper behind their backs so that they become timid, and faint-hearted, and are afraid to request that other people assist in meeting their needs. Therefore, poverty has a significant hold on them. Many services are requested of them and they are weighed

Poverty, some say, is far worse than wealth, because the poor are not only poor in terms of money, but also in terms of food, drink, dress, and footwear. They are shabby; they are scorned, sneered at, and mocked. Others whisper behind their backs, so that they become timid, faint-hearted, and afraid to request anything from other people. Meanwhile, they become servants to the rich, who shout out commands such as "Go

¹ Cf. Santorre Debenedetti, 'Bono Giamboni,' *Studi medievali* 4 (1913), 271-277; Cesare Segre, Introductions to his editions of *Volgarizzamenti del Due e Trecento* (Torino, 1964), 317-18 and Bono Giamboni, *Libro de' vizi e delle virtù e il Trattato di virtù e di vizi*, ed. Cesare Segre (Torino, 1968), XIII-XXIX. Among Giamboni's translations are *Le Storie contra i Pagani di Paolo Orosio*, ed. Francesco Tassi (Firenze, 1849); *Dell'arte della guerra di Vegezio Flavio*, ed. Francesco Fontani (Firenze, 1815); *Fiore di Rettorica*, ed. Gianbattista Speroni (Pavia, 1994); and *Libro de' vizi e delle virtù*.

² Cf. Natalino Sapegno, "Antonio Pucci" in *Pagine di storia letteraria* (Firenze, 1986), 87-114 (1st ed. Palermo, 1960, 135-81); *Firenze alla vigilia del Rinascimento. Antonio Pucci e i suoi contemporanei*, ed. Maria Bendinelli Predelli (Fiesole, 2006). A selection of texts may be found in *Rimatori del Trecento*, ed. Giuseppe Corsi (Torino, 1969), 778-900.

dignatur, murmurat (*sic*), down with duties.
 imprecatur.

here, go there! Do this, do that!”, and they, for whom even the smallest burden is already too onerous, become weighed down with duties.

[Ch. 15 ... Quod si non habet, habere compellitur, et si habet, cogitur non habere.

And yet if they have some money, they are compelled not to have it, and if they do not have it, they are able to think only of getting it; and they are abused and beaten, and no one has any sympathy for them. If a rich man is injured by others, he gains from it;

If they do not have money, they are compelled to have it, and if they have it, they are constrained not to have it. If a man cannot have money, he is humiliated, abused, and beaten; and if he abuses others, a double punishment is inflicted upon him, and the rich are the only ones to gain anything from it. It often happens that a crime is committed against a poor man, and he is condemned as if he were the perpetrator and not the victim. Furthermore, if a rich man commits a sin, the poor man bears the punishment. The poor become thieves out of necessity,³ and even if they do not become thieves, they are believed to be so by oth-

Culpa domini, servi pena; culpa servi, domini preda.

and if a rich man commits a crime, the poor man will bear the punishment.

³ G. Chaucer translated the same passage in his Prologue of the *Man of Law's Tale*. Vv. 104-105 read: “thou most for indigence / or stele, or begge, or borwe thy despence.”

“Quicquid delirant reges, plectuntur Achi- vi.”]

Adverte super hoc sententiam sapienties: “Melius est mori quam indigere.” “Eciam proximo suo pauper odiosus eris.” “Omnes dies pauperis mali.” « Fratres hominis pauperis oderunt eum, insuper et amici procul recessereunt ab eo. » “Cum fueris felix, multos numerabis amicos. Tempora si fuerint nubila, solus eris.”

Horace says that when the aristocrats fight, the poor folk and the servants are the ones who suffer. Because of this, and many other things that could be added, one can agree with Solomon’s view of the poor man: “It is better to die than to be poor, because a poor man’s days are all unhappy, and his brothers hate him.”

(Translation:
Amanda Glover)

ers and are trusted by no one. They are considered bad and wicked; rude comments are directed at them and they do not dare respond. Their wisdom is worthless and is reputed to be madness. Their strength is said to be laziness, their bravery is thought to be cowardice, and if one turns to religion others say “he was not brave enough to endure the hardships of secular life.” Hence why Solomon’s remark is so a propos, “’Tis better to die than to live a life of poverty, a life in which all of one’s days are unhappy.”

(Translation:
Amanda Glover)

Lotario de’Segni, *De miseria condicionis humane* (1195)⁴

Bono Giamboni (1240- c. 1292), *Della miseria dell’uomo*⁵

Antonio Pucci (c. 1310 -1388), *Libro di varie storie*⁶

⁴ Lotario dei Segni (Pope Innocent III), *De miseria condicionis humane*, ed. Robert E. Lewis (Athens, 1978), 114-119.

⁵ “Furono certi, che dissono ... coloro, che sono poveri d’avere, di manicare, e di bere, e di vestire, e di calzare, sono male in arnese, e sono spregiati e scherniti, e mormorato è loro dietro, e però diventano tipidi e vili e temono di richiedere altrui in su i bisogni, laonde la povertà maggiormente li distrigne. E sono molti di servigi richiesti e di fazioni gravati, e però se hanno alcuna cosa, sono costretti di non ne avere, e se non ne hanno, fa loro bi-

Lotario (1160-1215) was a nobleman (the son of a count), a monk who studied theology in Paris, and the nephew of pope Clement III, who made him cardinal. His book *De miseria condicionis humane*, written in 1195, enjoyed immense popularity and was translated into all the major European languages. Among others, Chaucer also provided a partial translation of it. The chapter on poverty is part of the first book, where Lotario deals with *de miserabili humane conditionis ingressu*, all the sufferings which affect human life from the moment of conception until old age, without any distinction of condition, social status or age.⁷

Chapter 14 of the first book, appropriately titled *De miseria pauperis et divitis*, offers within the same chapter reasons to pity the poor and reasons to

sogno di pensare pur d'averne; e sì ne sono straziati e sono ingiuriati e battuti, e niuno se ne duole. Se gli è ingiuriato il ricco da altrui, ne guadagna; e se il ricco commette il peccato, il povero ne porta la pena; onde dice Orazio: Di ciò che tencionano i grandi, i minori e soggetti lo comperano. Per queste e altre molte miserie, che dell'uomo povero si potrebbero dire, disse Salamone: Meglio è a morire, che esser povero, però che i di suoi sono tutti rei, e i fratelli lo hanno in odio." Bono Giamboni, *Della miseria dell'uomo*, ed. Francesco Tassi (Firenze, 1836), ch. 11. Italics show Giamboni's additions.

⁶ "Povertà, disse alcuno, è molto peggio che ricchezza, però che i poveri son poveri non solamente di danari, ma di mangiare, di bere, di vestire e di calzare, vanno male in arnesi, sono spregiati, ischerniti e ucellati ed è mormorato lor dietro, onde diventano timidi e vili e temorosi de richiedere altrui e sono richiesti da' più ricchi di servigi *con atto comandativo*: 'Vammi qua e vammi là, fammi questo e fammi quello', e sono gravati di fazioni, *che non hanno sì picciola soma che non sia loro troppo grande*. E se hanno alcuna cosa sono costretti di non avere e se non hanno conviene loro procacciare d'averne *e se non ne possono avere* sono straziati e ingiuriati e battuti; e se ingiuriano altrui portano la pena doppia e 'l ricco ne guadagna, e molte volte sono *ingiuriati e condannati come s'egli avesser dato, e hanno ricevuto*. Ancora, se il ricco commette il peccato, il povero porta la pena; *diventano per bisogno ladri, e se non diventano, sì sono tenuti e niuno si fida di loro, sono tenuti cattivi e tristi, odono villania e non osano rispondere, il loro senno niente vale ed è riputato mattezza, loro fortezza è detta poltroneria, loro prodezza è tenuta viltà, se diventa religioso si dice: 'No gli dava il cuore di vivere'*. E però disse bene Salamone: 'Meglio è morire che viver sempre povero, però che i di suoi son tutti rei.'" Antonio Pucci, *Libro di varie storie*, ed. Alberto Varvaro, *Atti della Accademia di Scienze Lettere e Arti di Palermo*, s. IV, vol. 16, Parte seconda, fasc. 2 (Palermo, 1957), 100-101. Italics show Pucci's additions.

⁷ The second book deals with the desires of man and shows how seeking for riches, pleasures and honours leads to sin and guilt (*de culpabili humane conditionis progressu*); the third book insists on the moments of death and decay, the punishments of hell and the terrible awe of the Last Judgment (*de dampnabili humane conditionis egressu*).

pity the rich.⁸ If we analyze the passage we realize that the style is very detached. *Pauperes* are indicated as a collective entity, with a plural noun, which is the subject of verbs conjugated in the passive form. The distance between the narrator's voice and the object of discussion is even more apparent in the sentences that follow, where the impersonal form is used: *Deum causatur iniquum, proximum criminatur malignum*: 'the situation is such that God is being accused of being unjust, the neighbor is being accused of being evil...' The poor are never a "subject": they don't *do* anything. They only function as grammatical subjects of a passive or an intransitive verb or they are vaguely referred to by an impersonal form. The few introductory statements on the conditions of the poor are immediately followed by quotations from the Bible. The critique of how judgments are formulated according to the fortunes of a person (always in the passive form) serves as a transition to statements on the misery of the rich. Although fewer reasons are found to pity the "misery" of the rich, it is clear that the author intends to keep an equally distant and superior point of view vis-a-vis both conditions. The rhetorical figures he uses, especially the many parallelisms, reveal not only the "characteristics of the medieval classroom"⁹ but also the attitude of an author for whom the poor existed in an entirely alien and distant universe.

Turning our attention to Bono Giamboni's text, I shall first point out that, in spite of it being a fairly faithful translation of the passage from the *Contemptu mundi*, its inspiration stems from very different concerns. In fact, Bono Giamboni borrows the description of poverty from Lotario only to refute the thesis that the connotations of poverty are exclusively negative. The approach of the Florentine judge is that of an educator whose primary intent is to give good moral advice to his readers. The negative statements on poverty are presented as the opinions of someone else,¹⁰ and the judge refutes them in the following chapter, maintaining that poverty may be an asset, especially from a moral point of view, provided that certain conditions

⁸ It is one of a group of chapters where the author exposes the miseries of the different conditions: 14. *De miseria pauperis et divitis*, 15. *De miseria servorum et dominorum*, 16. *De miseria continentis et coniugati*, 17. *De miseria bonorum et malorum*.

⁹ Robert E. Lewis, Introduction to Lotario dei Segni (Pope Innocent III), *De miseria conditionis humane* (op. cit. supra, n. 3), 3.

¹⁰ "Furono certi, che dissono: Pogniamo che le ricchezze siano ree; io ti vo' mostrare che la povertà è vie peggiore, però voglio fuggire povertade e abbracciare ricchezze, perché coloro, che sono poveri d'avere, di manicare, e di bere, ecc." (ch. 11). (Some authorities state the following: Let's admit that riches are morally reprehensible; yet, I want to show you that poverty is far worse, and therefore I want to avoid poverty and embrace riches because those who are poor in terms of material possessions, in terms of food, drink, etc.)

are respected. To paraphrase the author: responding to what has been said, the sages state that poverty may be good or evil. I will show you the qualities a poor person must have in order to make his poverty a good thing ... and I will show you that a life of poverty is better than a life of wealth because it leads to salvation with lesser risks and obstacles.¹¹ The rhetorical device whereby the writer directly addresses the reader and the use of the first person plural already indicates a more cordial and participatory approach as well as a didactic attitude. The general intent of the passage (and in fact of the whole book) also demonstrates a more optimistic outlook on life. The writer addresses himself to ordinary lay people; he does not advocate the flight from this world in order to attain holiness, but maintains that people may attain ‘buono fine’ (eternal salvation), regardless of the socio-economic condition in which they find themselves in this world.

The statements on poverty lend themselves to further observations. Interestingly, Bono merges two consecutive chapters of Lotario’s work into one chapter, those on the misery of poor and rich and the misery of servants and masters (*De miseria servorum et dominorum*). What Lotario had in mind in the second of these two chapters was probably the relationship between feudal lords and their serfs, within the context of a (rural) castle or borough. In Bono’s culture, however, *servi* are immediately identified with the poor, and the masters are identified with the rich. Therefore Lotario’s concise expression “Culpa domini, servi pena”, translated as “se il ricco commette il peccato, il povero ne porta la pena” appears somewhat imprecise and of uncertain interpretation. Note that Bono translates the classical quotation “Quicquid delirant reges, plectuntur Achivi” with words that correspond exactly to those used by his contemporaries to describe the social classes of an Italian Commune: ‘grandi’, versus ‘minori’ e ‘soggetti’. Bono also adds certain details that portray the unjust treatment of the poor in more concrete terms than does Lotario’s text: “E sono molti di servigi richiesti e di fazioni gravati... e sì ne sono straziati e sono ingiuriati e battuti, e niuno se ne duole.” (Many services are requested of them and they are weighed down with du-

¹¹ Chapter 12 begins: “A rispondere alle cose, che sono dette di sopra , e acciò che possiamo vedere certi ammonimenti, che pongono i Savi sopra la povertade, ... perché la povertade e la ricchezza può essere buona e rea, sì ti voglio in prima mostrare, che cose debbono essere nel povero, acciò che sia buona la sua povertade; appresso che cose debbono essere nel ricco, acciò che sia buona la sua ricchezza. Appresso ti mostrerrò come la vita povera è migliore che la ricca, perché ne mena al buono fine con minore rischio, e per più piana via.”

ties ... and they are abused and beaten, and no one has any sympathy for them.)

When reading Pucci's notes, which obviously derive from Bono's text, one finds several additions that result in a remarkable transformation of the source. Some of the additions simply clarify the meaning of the original sentences, but others vividly emphasize the subordinate role of the poor with a more intense sentiment of human participation. Notice the abrupt transition to direct discourse "Vammi qua, e vammi là! Fammi questo, e fammi quello!" ("Go here, go there! Do this, do that!") that illustrates the arrogant attitude of the rich toward the poor; the unjust treatment in the courts of law ("It often happens that a crime is committed against a poor man, and he is condemned as if he were the perpetrator and not the victim."); the remarks about the tricks played on the poor for pure amusement and especially the observations on the bad opinion one forms of the poor against evidence to the contrary. A sentence found a few lines after the end of the quotation clarifies the matter even further:

e se sarai malvestito ti diranno dietro che tu sia un tristo e che non vuoi lavorare a otta che tu non cercherai d'altro e se tu sarai ben vestito diranno: "Di che fa egli tali spese?" e questo sarà un farti ladro con sue parole.¹²

(If you are poorly dressed, people will say that you are a bad character and that you don't want to work, meanwhile you do nothing but search for work, and if you are well dressed people will say "Where did he get the money for those clothes?", and you will be made a thief by the words of those people. [Translation: Amanda Glover])

It almost seems as if Antonio Pucci has had some direct experience of the arrogant treatment reserved for the poor. One might bear in mind that while Bono Giamboni belonged to the upper class, Pucci was a relatively modest employee of the municipal administration. The phrase "Their wisdom is worthless and is reputed to be madness," is reminiscent of a sonnet that begins *Signor priori, i' sono una cicala*, (*Lord governors, I am a cicada*)¹³ in which the same author, Antonio Pucci, laments that he is not allowed to appear before the governors of the city to express his opinion – presumably on the way certain affairs of the city were conducted. Most of all, one hears in

¹² A. Pucci, *Libro di varie storie* (op. cit. supra, n. 5), 102.

¹³ 'Cicada' means here 'a voice to which nobody pays attention'.

Pucci's words a firm denunciation of the infringement of the dignity of the poor.

Antonio Pucci appears to be the fittest representative of people of median status and culture living in an Italian medieval Commune. His office as town-crier put him in contact with the offices of the governors on one hand, and the common people to whom he announced the decisions of the government on the other. He was open to the responses of the crowd and the comments of city folk about the various political and social events that marked the history of the Commune. He also left a picturesque description of the crowd of "little people" that congregated every day in the market square in Florence, in a poem titled *Le proprietà di Mercato Vecchio*, which is one of the rare medieval texts that describe the poor with realism yet without disdain.

2. Religious and Lay Responses to the Question of Poverty

Although they describe poverty from an external point of view, Giamboni and Pucci's texts reflect well, in my view, the social conditions of an Italian Commune with regard to the distribution of wealth. We know that money more than nobility had become the driving force behind the power-relations in the cities.¹⁴ The old polarity between *potens* and *pauper* had transformed itself into the polarity between rich and poor; the activities of certain merchants had created immense private wealths. The newly rich emulated the old nobility in behavior and possessions, and although the laws of 1292, which appeared revolutionary at the time, had excluded the families of old nobility from public offices,¹⁵ the distance between noblemen and those who came to be called the "fat people" quickly faded away, with the help of intermarriage. The distance, however, between the well to do on one hand and the small artisans, the subordinate trade workers, the servants, the peasants, and those who owned no property, on the other, grew exponentially. With it grew the arrogance in human relations as represented by Pucci's passage in his *Zibaldone*. In the city rich and poor lived side by side and the disparity became obvious; the sumptuary laws attempted without success to restrain

¹⁴ Several poems since the end of the 13th century denounce how riches are supplanting old values. Examples may be found in sonnets by Niccolò del Rosso, *Denari fanno l'uomo comparere* and Pieraccio Tedaldi, *Il mondo vile è oggi a tal condotto*, in *Poeti giocosi del tempo di Dante*, ed. Mario Marti (Milano, 1956), 491, 732.

¹⁵ Ordinamenti di Giano della Bella, whereby only members of a trade corporation could be appointed to public offices.

the vainglorious display of jewels and precious garments paraded by the ladies.

It is precisely against the background of such arrogance (Dante would say “pride, envy, avarice”)¹⁶ that the example of poverty given by St. Francis (1182-1226) and his companions appeared. Like the monastic movement of earlier centuries, St. Francis’ message challenged the established order of the world and called for a return to the purity and poverty of early Christianity. But, instead of fleeing the world like the anchorites had done, or creating a separate society like the Benedictine monks were still doing, St. Francis realized a radical form of poverty in the world; he mingled with the destitute, and preached in the squares and the churches.

It is well known that the Franciscan movement was not only extremely successful but also inspired a great number of literary writings. Of these, the highest example is probably Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, *Paradise XI*, appropriately known as the canto of St. Francis. Here, Dante concentrates the saint’s life and its significance in a few powerful images, the principal of them being the love story between Francis and Lady Poverty which culminates in their wedding. The creation of this image is not entirely new. An allegorical description of poverty as a woman living on top of a mountain, isolated and abandoned by everyone, had already appeared in the well known Latin pamphlet *Sacrum Commercium sancti Francisci cum domina Paupertate*, and occasional allusions to the saint’s love of poverty as similar to a relationship between two lovers are already in some of the biographies of St. Francis.¹⁷

¹⁶ When Dante meets Ciacco in *Inferno VI*, the compatriot identifies the sources of Florence’s decline in three vices: “superbia, invidia, avarizia, sono / le tre faville c’hanno i cuori accesi” (vv. 74-75). These vices seem to correspond to the attitudes of the three main components of the city population: the Pride of the nobility, the Envy of the lower classes, and the Avarice of the mercantile middle class.

¹⁷ See, for example, *Sacrum Commercium* (c. 1227), 3: “Mirabilis est, fratres, desponsatio paupertatis, sed facile poterimus ipsius frui amplexibus, quia facta est quasi vidua domina gentium, vilis et contemptibilis omnibus regina virtutum”; Thomas a Celano, *Vita prima sancti Francisci* (1228), *Opusculum primum*, 5-7: “Putabant homines quod uxorem ducere vellet, ipsumque interrogantes dicebant: - Uxoremne ducere vis, Francisce? - Qui respondens eis aiebat: - Nobiliorem et pulchriorem sponsam quam unquam videritis ducam, quae ceteris forma praemineat et sapientia cunctas excellat. - Et equidem immaculata Dei sponsa est vera religio...”; Thomas of Celano, *Vita secunda sancti Francisci* (1246-47), *Opus secundum*, XXV 3-5: “Amator igitur factus formae illius, ut uxori fortius inhaereret, ac duo essent in uno spiritu, non solum patrem matremque reliquit, verum etiam universa submovit. Proinde castis eam stringit amplexibus, nec ad horam patitur non esse maritum.” Source: <http://www.paxetbonum.net/biographies>. The allegory of poverty as a wo-

Dante brings novelty to this theme by emphasizing the image of a wedding between lovers. He fuses into one event the successful wooing of an extraordinary woman and the biographical information on the strained relations between Francis and his father, thus the wedding coincides with the episode of the restitution to the father of all his belongings (“*et coram patre* le si fece unito,” v. 62 – *et coram patre* he wed her). The communion between Francis and his ladylove appears then to be the cause for other people to become followers of St. Francis:

La lor concordia e i lor lieti sembianti,
 amore e meraviglia e dolce sguardo
 facieno esser cagion di pensier santi;
 tanto che 'l venerabile Bernardo
 si scalzò prima, e dietro a tanta pace
 corse e, correndo, li parve esser tardo.
 Oh ignota ricchezza! Oh ben ferace!
 Scalzasi Egidio, scalzasi Silvestro
 dietro allo sposo, sì la sposa piace. (*Par. XI*, vv. 76-84)¹⁸

(Their harmony and their glad looks, their love / And wonder and their gentle contemplation, / Served others as a source of holy thoughts; / So much so, that the venerable Bernard / Went barefoot first; he hurried toward such peace; / And though he ran, he thought his pace too slow. / O wealth unknown! O good that is so fruitful! / Egidius goes barefoot, and Sylvester, / Behind the groom – the bride delights them so. [Translation: *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri. Paradiso. A Verse Translation by Allen Mandelbaum. New York, 1986*])

The accent is on the mystical fervor of such love, which is rendered by the accelerated rhythm of the style: note, in the Italian version, the accumulation of nouns, (*concordia*, *lieti sembianti*, *amore*, *meraviglia*, *dolce sguardo*), the parallelisms, the exclamation marks, the use of the term ‘scalzarsi’ as a metaphor for ‘embracing a life of poverty’, the conclusion of the clause on the repetition of ‘sposo’, ‘sposa’.

Other writers focus on Franciscan poverty in a direct way, without the intermediary of the allegory. The theme is recurrent in Franciscan literature. An example can be found in the anonymous *canzone O povertà gioiosa*, a

man appeared of course also in Jean de Meung’s *Roman de la Rose*: “Povreté siet a l’autre chief / Plaine de honte et de meschief...” Jean de Meung, *Roman de la Rose*, ed. Silvio F. Baridon (Milano, 1954), vv. 8091-8323.

¹⁸ Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia. Paradiso*, ed. Natalino Sapegno (Firenze, 1968).

joyous exaltation of poverty which aptly represents the point of view of the Spiritual Franciscans:

Povertà sant'è di cotal natura,
 che nulla cosa tien né vuole avere;
 di ricchezze, d'onor niente cura;
 per ogni cosa in tutto possedere
 ogni mondan piacere
 tien più che loto e più che paglia vile.
 Tant'è di cuor gentile
 Che sol d'amar Iesù se pasce e posa.

...

Povertà è contenta d'un vil tetto,
 e panno tanto aver che cuopra 'l dosso:
 massarizie non vuol, botte né letto,
 sarco né zucca, per andare scosso;
 vuol pane e cibo grosso...

...

Povertà vuol co' suoi, per istar gaia,
 fervor con pianto e sospir per sollazzo:
 stride muggiando, come can ch'abbaia,
 sì che tenuto sia da ciascun pazzo.
 Non trova albergo o stazzo
 Ove mangiar abbia, tovagli' o desco;
 ché tanto dorme al fresco,
 seguendo [lui] la povertà amorosa.

(*O povertà gioiosa*, vv. 5-12; 85-89; 181-188)¹⁹

(Holy poverty is of such a nature / that it allows you to value and desire nothing; / to riches, to honour, it pays no mind; / in order to possess everything / it holds every worldly pleasure no dearer than mud or straw. / It is of such a gentle heart / that it is nourished by the love of Christ / and finds peace in his love alone. / ... / Poverty is content with a shabby roof, / and enough clothes to cover the back: / it does not want possessions, nor barrels nor a bed, / nor a bag nor a canteen, / because in this way it can walk about free of a heavy load; / it wants brown bread and simple food / ... / Poverty wants as company, in order to be gay, / fervour with tears and sighs as solace: / the poor man screeches and howls like a barking dog, / so that others assume he is mad. / He does not find an inn or a pen, / where

¹⁹ *Miscellanea di prose e rime spirituali*, ed. Francesco Zambrini (Imola, 1879), 162-167. Also published in *Florilegio francescano*, ed. Guido Battelli (Torino, 1923), 222-226.

he can eat on a dinner table with a cloth, / for he often sleeps outside, / accompanied by lovely poverty. [Translation: Amanda Glover])

The reasons that justify such exaltation of poverty are that it intimately unites the faithful with an absolutely poor Christ, teaches humility, is a source of love, peace, and tranquility, and guarantees entry into heaven. The rhetorical use of the language renders the tone of mystical rapture that is typical of this kind of literature.²⁰ Jacopone da Todi, a major Franciscan poet, insists and expands on similar notions. Poverty removes any fear of loss or anxiety for litigations; poverty provides full control of oneself; better yet, on account of its union with God the poor faithful do possess everything.²¹ Most of all, poverty is a sign of the full control that man's will has over his desires. We may read a passage from one of Jacopone's *laude*:

Chi descidra è posseduto,
 a cquel c'ama s'è venduto;
 se ll'om pensa que n'à auto,
 ànne aute rei derrate.
 Troppo so' de vil coraio
 ad entrar en vassallaio,
 simiglianza de Deo c'ao

²⁰ See for example a passage from *I fioretti di San Francesco* (composed perhaps between 1370 and 1390), ch. 13: "[la povertà] è tesoro sì degnissimo e sì divino, che noi non siamo degni di possederlo nelli nostri vasi vilissimi, con ciò sia cosa che questa virtù sia quella virtù celestiale, per la quale tutte le cose terrene e transitorie si calcano, e per la quale ogni impaccio si toglie dinanzi all'anima, acciò ch'ella si possa liberamente congiungere con Dio eterno. Questa è quella virtù la quale fa l'anima, ancor posta in terra, conversare in cielo con gli Agnoli. Questa è quella ch'accompagnò Cristo in sulla croce; con Cristo fu soppellita, con Cristo resuscitò, con Cristo sali in cielo; la quale eziandio in questa vita concede all'anime, che di lei innamorano, agevolezza di volare in cielo; con ciò sia cosa ch'ella guardi l'armi della vera umiltà e carità." ("For it is a treasure so great and so divine, that we are not worthy to possess it in these vile bodies of ours. It is this celestial virtue which teaches us to despise all earthly and transitory things, and through it every hindrance is removed from the soul, so that it can freely commune with God. Through this virtue it is that the soul, while still on earth, is able to converse with the angels in heaven. This virtue it is which remained with Christ upon the Cross, was buried with Christ, rose again with Christ, and with Christ went up into the heaven. This virtue it is which even in this world enables the souls who are inflamed with love of him to fly up to heaven; it is also the guardian of true charity and humility." (Text and Translation: <http://www.paxetbonum.net>)

²¹ Jacopone da Todi, *Laude*, ed. Franco Mancini (Bari, 1974), *laude* 36, 47.

detorpiria en vanitate! (*O amor de povertate*, vv. 23-30)²²

(He who desires, belongs, because he sold himself, to what he desires; if he thinks of it, he will realize that he got a bad deal. Too cowardly is my heart if I make myself a servant, if for the sake of vanities I degrade the part of me that resembles God)²³

But poverty is nothing but the first step on the way to perfection. In the Franciscan ethos poverty is part of a larger project of self-denial, penance, and humiliation.²⁴ This is why it is not enough to get rid of one's possessions - one must also renounce any kind of honours, including knowledge and fame. It is interesting to note how aware the Franciscans are that their choice may be construed as "pazzia", madness. They even strive to be judged as fools by ordinary folks. The point is that their madness imitates the folly of Christ who, for love of man, did not cling to his prerogatives as God's equal, but "emptied himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of man."²⁵ God's attitude towards his creatures shows such an incredible love that it elicits a reciprocal love from man's soul in response. And as God's "irrational" gesture towards the soul is dictated by love, so it is for the sake of and on account of his burning love for God that the poet engages in a systematic "lowering" of oneself. It is the habit of what he calls "self-hatred" that allows Jacopone to use humor and irony when he describes the horrors of his life in prison: his underground cell, his latrine full of flies, the chains that hamper him even in his sleep, his food kept in a hanging basket to protect it from rats, the bitter cold:

O amirabile odio meo
 D'onne pena à' signorio,
 non recipi nullo eniurio,
 vergogna t'è essaltazione.
 [...]

²² Jacopone da Todi, *lauda* 36.

²³ Translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

²⁴ Cf. *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*, ch. 7: "Above all graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit that Christ gives to His friends is the grace to conquer self, and willingly to bear any pain, injury, insult, and hardship for love of Christ. For we cannot glory in any other gifts of God except these, because they are not ours, but God's [...] But in the cross of suffering and affliction we may glory, because this is our own. So the Apostle says: «I will not glory except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ»." *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*, transl. Leo Sherley-Price (Harmondsworth, 1959).

²⁵ St. Paul, *Letter to the Philippians*, 2: 2-7.

Questa pena che-mm'è data,
 trent'agn'à ch'e' l'aio amata;
 or è ionta la iornata'
 d'esta consolazione. (*Que farai, fra' Iacovone?*, vv. 115-126)²⁶

(O admirable self-hatred / That masters all suffering, / Nothing can injure you, / For to shame you is to exalt you. [...] The suffering they've inflicted on me, / For thirty years I have loved it, / For thirty years longed for it / And now the day of my consolation is here. [Translation: Serge and Elizabeth Hughes, *Jacopone da Todi. The Lauds*, New York, 1982])

Most of these arguments in favor of poverty appear understandable only in the context of a state of psychological exaltation that only religious fervor could sustain. It is true that laymen close to the Franciscan movement also wrote in praise of poverty (one of whom was Antonio Pucci); but their voices sound much less passionate and far less convincing.²⁷ In fact, lay writers did not fail to express their responses to the Franciscan positions, opposing and rebuking the praises of poverty. Their responses essentially take two forms: they are either statements that oppose the Franciscan positions on moral grounds or parodies of the celebrated *topos* of the wedding with Dame Poverty.

Interestingly, most of the poems that tackle the theme on moral grounds, although attributed to certain prestigious figures, in fact remain anonymous. Their date is also uncertain, though it is safe to assume that they were written within the first half of the fourteenth century. The most important poem is perhaps the *canzone Molti son quei che lodan povertate*, attributed by the two manuscripts that preserved it, probably erroneously, to the painter Giotto. The approach in this poem is rational and didactic, not dogmatic. It may have been composed at the beginning of the fourteenth century, at a time when the discussions between the Franciscan Spirituals and the Conventuals were being brought before the tribunals of the Popes, and Pope John XXII definitely disavowed the thesis of the absolute poverty of Christ (1323). The author seems aware of the different positions put forward by the various representatives of the Franciscan Order but he opposes the very

²⁶ Jacopone da Todi, *lauda* 53.

²⁷ See, for example, Pucci's *canzone O gloriosa e santa povertate* in *Rimatori del Trecento*, ed. Giuseppe Corsi (*op. cit. supra*, n. 2), 893-897. The arguments to which lay writers seem to have been more responsive are 1. that poverty allows people to be free from anxiety (Pucci), and 2. that poverty diminishes temptations (Bono Giamboni, *Della miseria dell'umana condizione*, cap. XVIII).

statement that is at the heart of the Franciscan movement that poverty leads to a state of perfection. At the beginning he states that a literal observation of the rule of poverty would be, in his opinion, an “extreme” and for this reason it is not to be praised: in accordance with the widely known Aristotelian axiom, in fact, it rarely occurs that “something extreme is without a fault,” and the Gospel warns that it is not advisable to set the foundations of one’s life on something that is not solid enough. The author then distinguishes between voluntary and involuntary poverty. The latter is without a doubt ‘tutta ria’ (absolutely evil), because it leads to sin:

ché di peccare è via
 facendo spesso a’ giudici far fallo,
 e d’onor donne e damigelle spoglia,
 e fa far furto, forza e villania,
 e spesso usar bugia
 e ciascun priva d’onorato stallo... (vv. 18-23)²⁸

(it corrupts judges, deprives women and girls of their honour, causes theft, rape and injury. It often turns people into liars and robs them of honour and reputation).

As far as voluntary poverty is concerned, the author insists that apart from the discrepancies that exist even among those who claim to embrace poverty, poverty is not praiseworthy because “discrezion né provedenza / o alcuna valenza / di costumi o virtute le s’affronta. / Certo parmi grand’onta / chiamar virtute quel che spegne el bene...” vv. 36-40 - “it allows no discretion, foresight, noble habits or virtue. It surely seems a great shame to call virtue what smothers all good things”). The *canzone* then confronts one of the most important points of the Franciscan position, that of the evangelical counsel of poverty (“Il Signor nostro molto la commenda,” v. 47 - Our Lord praises it constantly). First of all, the author responds, Christ as God could have anything he wanted. Secondly, if he was content with little, it was to induce us to avoid greed, certainly not to encourage us to take a road that leads to sin. Finally, the author attacks the hypocrisy of those who, while proclaiming the praises of poverty, seize the first opportunity to occupy positions of honour and power.

In essence, the author rejects poverty because it contradicts other virtues: discretion, prudence, worthiness of habits, magnanimity; all virtues that the

²⁸ *Molti son quei che lodan povertate in Rimatori del Trecento*, ed. Giuseppe Corsi (*op. cit. supra*, n. 2), 918-922.

Italian urban society of the fourteenth century had learned to appreciate and that, in my opinion, were associated with the lay upper-class rather than with a religious walk of life.

Other poems, in particular two anonymous *canzoni*, elaborate similar themes, although at a lower level of conceptual sophistication. The most interesting remarks are once again those that contrast poverty with a sense of honour and worthiness:

Ai lasso! Quanti e qua' sarebon quelli
che spanderien la lor bontà sovrana
infra la gente humana,
se ttu no·lli spogliassi di baldança;
ma ttu occupi lor costumi belli
e fa' tener lor contenença vana...

[...]

Canzona, vanne per ciascun paese

[...]

dicendo che già mai

la sozza povertà non farà onore

ad uom ch'ami valore

E brami al [...] di virtù salire.

(*O povertà che tti distrugga Iddio*, vv. 31-36; 76-81)²⁹

(Alas! How many and how good are they / who would spread their sovereign kindness among the human race, / if you didn't deprive them of their self-confidence; but you infiltrate their customs, / enabling them to behave vainly. [...] My song, travel to every country [...] saying that never / will despicable poverty honour a man who loves value and wishes to attain virtue. [Translation: Amanda Glover])

In the second *canzone*, *O povertà come tu sei un manto* (probably later than, and indebted to *O povertà che tti distrugga Iddio*), the honour that poverty negates had acquired a clearly humanistic connotation, as witnessed by the importance attributed to fame after death:

La morte può ben l'uom privar di vita,
ma non di fama e di virtute altera:
anco felice e vera
riman perpetual nel mondo e viva.

²⁹ Santorre Debenedetti, 'Una canzone contro la povertà citata dal Barbieri,' *Bullettino della Società di Filologia Romana*, N.S. III (1912). I quote from the excerpt, pp. 1-5.

Ma chi a tua foce sconsolata arriva,
 sia quanto vuol magnanimo e gentile,
 ch'è pur tenuto è a vile;
 e perciò chi nel tuo abisso cala
 non sperì in alcun pregio spander l'ala. (vv.18-26)³⁰

(Death can well deprive man of life, / but not of fame and proud virtue: / still happy and true, / They remain forever living in the world. / But he who arrives, disconsolate, at your door, / as magnanimous and noble as he may be, / he is rendered small and powerless; / and for this reason he who falls into your abyss / cannot hope to ever be praised. [Translation: Amanda Glover])

In sum, in response to the notion of poverty as the source of all virtues, lay circles affirm a definition of virtue as something inseparable from social prestige, magnanimity, self-confidence, and *courtoisie*. In contrast, if not synonymous with vice, poverty is portrayed as akin to vice, or at least to unworthiness, cowardice, baseness. It is interesting to recognize that the morals alluded to in these *canzoni* coincide with those found, for example, in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. In one of his *novelle*, Boccaccio explicitly indicates the opinion that the Florentine upper class held of the religious:

Essi, il più stoltissimi ed uomini di nuove maniere e costumi, si credono più che gli altri in ogni cosa valere e sapere, dove essi di gran lunga sono da molto meno, sì come quegli che per viltà d'animo non avendo argomento, come gli altri uomini, di civanzarsi, si rifuggono dove aver possono da mangiar, come il porco. (*Decameron*, III 3)³¹

(These religious, being, for the most part, great blockheads and men of odd manners and habits, do nevertheless credit themselves with more ability and knowledge in all kinds that fall to the lot of the rest of the world; whereas, in truth, they are far inferior, and so, not being able, like others, to provide their own sustenance, are prompted by sheer baseness to fly thither for refuge where they may find provender, like pigs. [Translation: The Decameron Web])

It is therefore not surprising that the highly poetic image of St. Francis' choice of lifestyle as a mystical wedding with Dame Poverty soon became an object of mockery or, at least, of parody. The earliest of such parodies is the *Canzone del fi' Aldobrandino*. Likely composed in the middle of the

³⁰ *Liriche edite ed inedite di Fazio degli Uberti*, ed. Rodolfo Renier (Firenze, 1883), 177-180.

³¹ For more accusations against false claims of poverty and hypocrisy of the Franciscans, see *Il Fiore* (an Italian re-elaboration of *Roman de La Rose*), esp. sonnets 89-90, 120 and passim, in *Il Fiore e il Detto d'amore*, ed. Gianfranco Contini (Milano, 1984).

fourteenth century, the canzone is again the only one attributed to an otherwise unknown historical figure, indicated rather mysteriously as “the son of Aldobrandino”.³² In it, the narrator pretends to invite a friend to his wedding and describes the fiancée, her house, her relatives, her dowry, and her love. The fiancée is, of course, Dame Poverty. It may be worth noting that the physical appearance of the allegory of poverty is never described in Franciscan literature. The *Canzone del fi’ Aldobrandino* on the contrary describes the figure of the fiancée, drawing on details from earlier representations of poverty: thus the woman

non mostra altro che l’ossa, tanto è magra,
 e ’l mal della podagra
 par ch’aggia in sé; più negra è che la notte.
 Ahi, quanto orribil cosa pare e agra
 la fronte sua vestita de capello
 e collo enfiato ciglio!
 Piangoli li occhi e ’l capo sì li gotte,
 e poi, apresso le dolenti grotte
 de l’ampio naso, mostra pur le fossie
 coi denti radi e lunghi;
 i labri ha curti: par che se raggiunghi,
 sì l’una gota co l’altra se cossie. (vv. 17-28)³³

(She is so skinny that all her bones stick out: it looks as if she is suffering from gout. Her skin is darker than night. How bitter and awful her forehead looks, with hair growing all over and its thick eyebrows! Tears fall from her eyes, her whole head is wet. Next to the awful cavities of her large nose her mouth shows long and sparse teeth; her lips are thin, her cheeks seem to touch one another)

In Poverty’s house rain seeps through the roof, there is no furniture, not even a chair; ten hungry daughters ask for bread (notice that young girls were deemed less apt to earn money and therefore more of a burden than young boys); Dame Poverty wears a short, dilapidated and sleeveless tunic. The perfect love that Dame Poverty expressed to Christ and Francis in Dante’s

³² Claudio Giunta has identified the author of the *canzone* as a Buccio d’Aldobrandino from Orvieto. In his opinion, the *canzone* dates of the latter part of the 14th century. Cfr. Claudio Giunta, ‘Chi era il fi’ Aldobrandino,’ *Nuova rivista di letteratura italiana* 2, n° 1 (1999), 27-151.

³³ *Canzone del fi’ Aldobrandino* in *Poeti del Duecento*, ed. Gianfranco Contini (Milano-Napoli, 1960), 435-440.

poem has now become an object of derision. The fiancée is so attached to the narrator that

tutto giorno m'ha le braccia al collo
 sì che tutto mi mollo
 del pianto ch'ella fa per drudaria.
 [...]

 Leccami tutto il volto
 e non mi lassa star notte né dia;
 tanto ell'ha preso di me gelosia
 ch'ella s'uccide s'um ricco m'apressa.. (vv. 62-70)

(She keeps her arms around me all the time, / so that I am soaked / with her tears of love [...] She licks my face / and never lets me be night or day; / she is so consumed with jealousy that she would kill herself / if a rich man were to approach me.)

In the conclusion, the poet emphasizes another poignant motif associated with poverty, the fact that the poor are abandoned by all their friends:

Ché mille volte chiamo
 'nanti che l'uom mi voglia pur rispondere.
 Sí malamente a tutti sono in camo,
 che fugge ogni uom da me più pauroso
 che non dal can rabbioso
 e là onde io passo veggio onne uom nascondere:
 nessun m'aspetta, nessun mi vuol giongere;
 solo mi trovo là dovunque io vada... (vv. 93-100).

(Even if I call out a thousand times / not a single man will answer me. / I annoy others so much / that every man flees from me, more frightened / than if he had seen a rabid dog / and every man who sees me approaching tries to hide: / no one waits for me and no one walks with me; / I find myself alone wherever I go)

In subsequent decades, the mock wedding or betrothal to Dame Poverty became a *topos* of popular literature, and later still, one of folk literature. The process is exemplified in a *frottola* written towards the end of the fourteenth century by the jongleur Zaffarino Povaro.³⁴ By then, however, the impact of the Franciscan movement had considerably faded, and the *topos* was exploited merely for entertainment purposes.

³⁴ Tito Saffioti, *I giullari in Italia. Lo spettacolo, il pubblico, i testi* (Milano, 1990), 458-462.

3. *A humanist approach*

Perhaps the most interesting result of the passionate debate surrounding poverty is the newfound moral ideal which surfaced in the realm of literature, the ideal of relative poverty, or should we say austerity, whereby a man earns his living by his work and shares with the poor any surplus he attains. It presumably took form in Franciscan preaching, for example in the sermons by friar Servasanto from Faenza (who preached in Florence in the years 1244-60) which were incorporated by Bono Giamboni in his *Della misera dell'umana condizione*. As we have already noted, Giamboni redresses and corrects the common opinion that poverty is entirely negative. Followed by Pucci and others, he recommends that the poor work with their hands so as not to fall into beggary, even if this meant neglecting the pursuit of learning. Poverty has a positive value in that it allows people to be free from anxiety and diminishes temptations: it is therefore the way to a happier and temperate life in this world, and to salvation in the next. But by the end of the fourteenth century the influence of Petrarch and Boccaccio was providing new and powerful models. The once religious ideal of a modest life merged with the historical accounts of the spurn of riches attributed to ancient Romans, thus acquiring new prestige. The ancient anecdotes of Valerius Maximus and Vergil which had until then been confined to the roles of occasional *exempla*, took on a new life harking back to a previous age which, although not touched by the revelation of Christ, represented an alternative - and a positive one - to the decline of contemporary mores.

The best example of a humanist treatment of the theme of poverty is to be found in a passage of Boccaccio's late work *Genealogie deorum gentilium* (which is roughly contemporary to the passage we have read from Antonio Pucci's *Zibaldone*). In the last two chapters of his extensive research into the mythology of classical antiquity, Boccaccio defends his choice to devote his life to poetry and literature, responding to the argument that such studies do not bring him any riches. He promptly admits that poetry is not a lucrative business, but he adds that this is not a reason to spurn the poets because, in fact, they tend to much higher tasks.

Once the section on defense of poetry is concluded, Boccaccio adds a few eloquent considerations that directly address the question of poverty:

Nunc autem post hec libet paululum exire limen, si forte queam abloquentium in paupertatem frenare impetus. Est igitur paupertas, quam multi fugiunt tanquam importabile malum, ut vulgo placet, caducorum bonorum paucitas, esto ego existimem eam animi egritudinem fore, qua etiam abundantes persepe laborant. Prima quippe, si desiderio careat

augendi, placida atque optabilis est, et eius infinita sunt comoda; secunda vero pacis et quietis hostis est, misere crucians mentes, quibus inhabitat. Prima poetarum fuit, quos isti pauperes volunt; eis quippe, dum modo esset quod vite sufficeret, satis erat. Hac enim duce libertatem volentes consequimur, animi tranquillitatem et cum eis laudabile ocium, quibus mediis viventes in terris gustamus celestia. Hec in solido sita est, nec Fortune, mundana versantis, minas aut iacula timet: fulminet ether desuper, concutiat ventorum impetuosa rabies orbem, inundent campos ymbres assidui, diluant flumina, sonet classicum, tumultuosa oriantur bella, discurrant predones undique; hec, ruinas ridens et incendia, dulci securitati letatur. (*Genealogie deorum gentilium*, XIV.IV.20-21)³⁵

(At this point let me turn a little aside in hope of curbing the violence of those who inveigh against poverty. This poverty, then, which most people flee as an intolerable ill, is really a mere paucity of perishable goods. Yet I should call poverty also a mental disease that often afflicts even the rich. The first kind – mere paucity of perishable goods – where one cares naught for increase, is highly desirable as a bringer of tranquillity and infinite comforts. The second – a mental illness – is the enemy of peace and quiet, and cruelly tortures the mind it possesses. The first has been the lot of the poets whom my opponents call poor, but who were satisfied with enough to live on. For, with such poverty as our leader, we by choice attain to liberty and peace of mind, and thereby to honorable ease; whereby, while we dwell in the midst of earth, we taste the delights of heaven. Such poverty is founded upon a rock, fearing neither threat nor thrust of Fortune, who confounds this world. Let thunders fall and mad winds smite the earth; incessant rain submerge the fields, rivers wash them away; let trumpets sound the battle and tumultuous wars arise, and plunder rage on every hand. Amid all, Poverty smiles at fire and ruin, and rejoices in sweet security. [*Boccaccio on Poetry*, trans. Charles G. Osgood, New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1956])

A series of *exempla* from Antiquity follows and demonstrates how secure and happy, even in the midst of turmoil, was the condition of Aglaus Sofidius, Diogenis, Democritus, Anaxagoras, Amiclates and Aronta. The last sentence in the passage I just quoted may sound somewhat rhetorical and exaggerated, but then Boccaccio pushes his argument further with sarcastic questions:

Dicant, oro, si oportuisset Homerum de re agraria cum villico litigare, aut de domestica a curatore domus rationem exigere quando Yliacum ex-

³⁵ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogie deorum gentilium*, ed. Vittorio Zaccaria. *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, dir. Vittore Branca, VII-VIII (Milano, 1998).

cogitasse carmen et nomen suum claritate sydereâ floridum in hodiernum usque protendere potuisset? Quando Virgilius, quando reliqui poeticam cum paupertate sectantes?

(Genealogie deorum gentilium, XIV.IV.24)

(Pray, let them say whether it was incumbent upon Homer to go to law with his overseer about the management of his farm, or exact an account of household affairs from his housekeeper, as long as he could produce the *Iliad*, and hand down his name bright in starry splendor even unto this day. I might ask the same regarding Vergil or the others who have cultivated the art of poetry in poverty. [*Boccaccio on Poetry*, trans. Charles G. Osgood, New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1956])

In my view, the author's tone shows that his statements about a dignified poverty are not remote to his own experience and express a heartfelt conviction. Boccaccio thus lays the ground for an appreciation of poverty based on human values, without a necessarily religious motivation. This attitude will have long lasting repercussions. It will, for example, be emphasized in the late sixteenth century epic poem *Jerusalem Delivered* and the play *Aminta* by Tasso. Yet, it appears that even when grounded in a humanist attitude, poverty has enormous difficulties in becoming a dominant discourse, even more so in the Renaissance than in the Middle Ages.

A good example of such ambiguity in the humanist view of poverty can be found in the short *Liber De Paupertate* composed by the little known humanist Antonio da Romagno towards the end of his life, around 1405 (he died in 1409). The *Liber de Paupertate* is essentially a dialogue between a pious person ("faithful") and his spiritual father St. Francis on poverty. The "faithful" gathers all his reasons for rebelling against poverty, St. Francis rebukes his arguments. Both sides of the discussion appear thoughtful and fresh and are interestingly representative of a humanistic point of view. However, in my opinion, the arguments against poverty are more cogent than the ones in praise of it. An attention to the importance of the well being of the body as a prerequisite for the well being of the mind, or soul (*animus*) is reminiscent of the famous classical motto *mens sana in corpore sano* which was reflected in the way in which the great school masters Vittorino da Feltre and Guarino Veronese organized the life of their pupils. A new thought about the nature of man and his place in this earthly world is reflected in the question "What's the difference between the human and the animal species, if not that men have more than the bare necessities of life, which birds and quadrupeds normally enjoy?" The contributions of man to his society are stressed in a typically humanistic attitude: without an abundance of goods, man can neither be generous with his friends, nor contribute

anything honorable to his homeland. Great artists need colours to realize their paintings, bronze to cast their statues. Some of the old arguments against poverty are repeated: it is the source of all sorts of crimes, it eradicates piety, loyalty and charity from the society of men; it elicits “insolentium contemptus, delicorum nausea, derisorum iocus” (spurn from the insolents, disdain from the sophisticated, mockery from the jokers). It represents a distortion of the original equal distribution of all the worldly wealth that nature had intended. What is worse is that, by reducing some free men into servitude, poverty forces people who were made for lordship to become servants. The emphasis is on characteristically humanist values: honorable reputation in one’s society, an ardent desire to learn, fame after death. Like dense smoke the shadow of poverty obscures any merit, be it personal or ancestral:

Nil maiorum tituli, nil propria gesta proficiunt, nec ulla nobilitatis aut generis tanta lux est que perrumpat paupertatis fumum: umbra hec omnibus immo noctem velut imo emissa Herebo furva Proserpina rebus obicit. An administrandas ad res occupandosque illum suscipi magistratus credas qui nec a lege dicendis admittitur testimoniis?³⁶

(Neither merits of ancestors nor personal worthy deeds are of any avail; no splendor of title or family ties will suffice to dispel the shadows of poverty. As if it were dark Proserpina herself emerging from the depths of Hell, the night of poverty hides everything in its shadows. Or do you think that he will be appointed to public office and key positions who is not even admitted as witness in a court of law?)

The author himself has often wept bitter tears because poverty prevented him from acquiring learning, “qua beatius homini nil contingit in terris” (the happiest experience that man can enjoy in this world):

Ego, mehercule, paupertatis onera, que fere nulla non videor expertus, cum omnia tolleratu gravia tum hoc unum sentio gravissimum, quod a studiis avocatur sapientie measque hinc ortas potuisti de celo videre sepius, pater, lacrimas lugentis hunc paupertatis culpa praeceptum michi pastum ... suavissimum animorum.³⁷

(I myself, by Jove, who have escaped almost none of poverty’s burdens, although I perceive all of them as heavy, this alone I perceive as the heaviest, that I

³⁶ Maria Chiara Ganguzzo Billanovich, *L’umanista feltrino Antonio da Romagno e il suo “Liber de Paupertate”* (Firenze, 1980), 72.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

am prevented from the pursuit of learning. In fact, from heaven you yourself, o father, could often see me crying because, on account of poverty, the pursuit of learning, that sweetest nourishment of the soul, was denied to me.)

Finally, poverty even deprives the dead of their memory:

Quid, quod non tantum crudelis in vivos, etiam mortuos infesta persequitur? Nonnullos partim accepi, partim, ut videor, memini hac urgente expertes, ut dicam, pompa funeris aut titulo inscripti lapidis caruisse, imo proiectos et inhumatos, inhumatos, inquam, o rem detestandam, feras volucres pavisse!³⁸

(What else besides poverty would not only torment the living but also persecute the dead? Some I have seen, of some I have heard who, under the curse, so to speak, of poverty, have lacked a proper funeral and an inscription engraved on a stone; so that having been thrown in a shallow grave and buried – buried, I say – still they were in danger of being devoured – o abomination! - by beasts or birds of prey.)

St. Francis' reply rebukes the arguments that poverty prevents noble and honorable contributions to one's family or society or the acquisition of learning by proposing the examples of famous Romans (Publicola, Agrippa, Quinzio, Curione, Fabrizio) and Greek philosophers (Anaxagoras, Anacharsis, Xenocrates, Diogenes):

Quem horum igitur [...] quem, inquam, horum quicquam cum et in alios et in se tum et in patriam et in suos non liberaliter, non amice, non iuste, non pie, non continenter, non pudice coegit facere paupertas? Cuius aut honores obscuravit aut gloriam calligavit aut fidem depuravit aut gravitatem movim aut magnitudinem minuit? Cuius denique fame nocuit, libertati obstitit, venerationi maiestatique detraxit?³⁹

(Which one of these was forced by poverty to act in a way that was not generous, or friendly, or just, or pious, or moderate, or chaste, either towards his neighbors or himself, or towards his country and his people? Of which one of the above poverty obscured the merits, or trampled the glory under foot or betrayed the loyalty, or removed the authority or diminished the magnanimity? And finally, whose fame did poverty damage, whose freedom did poverty obstruct, whom did poverty deprive of dignity and prestige?)

His arguments appear rather un-Franciscan in that the Saint appears to adhere to the "faithful"'s humanist scale of values, and simply denies that pov-

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

erty is an obstacle to attaining them, without bringing forward any specific positive connotation of poverty. In fact, the main thrust of Francis' reply is the lament about the degeneration and avarice of the Church, religious orders, and lay people. As I said, the booklet was left unfinished, which may be indicative of the difficulty the author had in elaborating a coherent plan to illustrate the positive aspects of poverty. The reader is thus left with a sense of unresolved contradictions. It is as if, in spite of the author's intentions, a credible defense of the state of poverty grounded in the new appreciation for classical models and stoic literature could not really be carried out.

Before leaving this text, however, I should like to return to the conclusion of the "faithful"'s speech against poverty. At this point, the "faithful" directly addresses his protector Saint Francis, casting doubts about the famous legend of his mystical marriage:

Cuius olim tue, pater, quod cum tua bona, queso, dicatur venia, insuavisime coniugis michi fit impossibile pene creditu mores te asperimos tristissimumque convictum, tranquillo tulisse animo.⁴⁰

(If you please pardon my saying so, it seems to me almost impossible to believe that you would peacefully bear the most unpleasant habits and the saddest company of this the least gentle of wives.)

This rhetorical figure of a direct challenge issued to the authority which recommends the appreciation of poverty is reminiscent of another text, a *canzone* recently published by Claudio Giunta, presumably composed in the first half of the fifteenth century.⁴¹

The lyrical voice directly addresses Jesus Christ, the authority who obviously had the most power in recommending poverty. The *canzone* does not have a mocking attitude, but objects to the recommendation of poverty with an unconstrained attitude that would have appeared blasphemous a few decades earlier. The lyrical voice does not refer to the views held by a group, be it a social or scholarly one, but it dares to confront and discuss the question with Jesus Christ person to person. The speaker's arguments are drawn from the appreciation of natural human instincts, just as the arguments found in a famous dialogue by Poggio Bracciolini, where Antonio Loschi is introduced to justify the pursuit of wealth.⁴² The results generate a smile, and are cer-

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴¹ Claudio Giunta, "Chi era il fi' Aldobrandino," (*op. cit. supra*, n. 32), 123.

⁴² Poggio Bracciolini, *De avaritia. Dialogus contra avaritiam*, ed. Giuseppe Germano (Livorno, 1994). The dialogue was, composed in 1428-29.

tainly indicative of a new vision of man and God. Take for example the following stanza:

Ma responde arragion, di, como posso
 voler la povertà? Non ò io bocca?
 La rabbia non me tocca
 s'io non ò da mangiare e bere spesso?
 Deh, prego, di, quando la neve fiocca,
 s'io non mi calzo e non mi copro el dosso,
 non rinfreddo e non tozzo?
 Sì faccio certo e ben lo sai tu stesso.
 Dell'arosto e del lessò
 m'ài fatto vago: ordunque, Gesù Cristo,
 puoi che tu sai che del cappone io godo,
 ben di' saper s'io rodo
 quando ò del pan secco, e s'io me ne ratristo.
 Però in ciò non sarò mentecatto,
 ché esser voglio tal qual tu m'ài fatto.
 (*Deh, dimmi, Cristo, quando fuste al mondo*, vv. 31-45)⁴³

(Tell me, and think about it, how can I / desire poverty? Do I not have a mouth? / Does rage not consume me / if I fail to eat and drink regularly? / Alas, I beg of you, *tell me*, when the snow falls in large flakes / and I have no socks and no clothes, / do I not shiver and cough? / Of course I do, and you know it. / You have made me such that I desire / roast beef and boiled meat: therefore, Jesus Christ, / because you know that I enjoy goose, /you must be well aware that when I gnaw / on dry bread, I become depressed. / For this reason I won't be deceived, / and I want to be as you have made me. [Translation: Amanda Glover])

When we see how natural human instincts are now considered and appreciated, rather than voluntarily and systematically repressed as was the case with the religious preaching of earlier centuries, we realize that the age of penance is definitely over. We also see that, in spite of Boccaccio's idealized statements, the examples of the Ancients did not foster a more favorable attitude towards poverty. On the contrary: the question of poverty was as controversial in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance as it is today.

⁴³ Claudio Giunta, "Chi era il fi' Aldobrandino" (*op. cit. supra*, n. 32), 123.

APPENDIX

From Antonio Pucci, *The Properties of the Old Market / Le proprietà di Mercato vecchio*, vv. 85-111.⁴⁴

<p>Gentili uomini e donne v'ha da lato, 85 che spesso veggion venire a le mani le trecche e' barattier c'hanno giucato.</p>	<p>Noble men and women stand aside, observing the hubbub as peddlers and swindlers get up from the game table.</p>
<p>E meretrici v'usano e ruffiani, battifancelli, zanaiuoli e gaglioiffi e i tignosi, scabbiosi e cattani. 90</p>	<p>Prostitutes are there, and pimps pederasts, errand boys, and ne'er-do- wells, people ridden with skin diseases like ringworm and scabies, and bullies.</p>
<p>E vedesi chi perde con gran soffi biastimar con la mano a la mascella e ricever e dar dimolti ingoffi.</p>	<p>You see a man losing at dicing, he is cursing in frustration, and receiving and giving many blows.</p>
<p>E talor vi si fa con le coltella e uccide l'un l'altro, e tutta quanta 95 allor si turba quella piazza bella.</p>	<p>And now and then these fights occur with knives, and the two men kill each other, and all of this disturbs that beautiful square.</p>
<p>E spesso ancor vi si trastulla e canta, però che d'ogni parte arriva quivi chi è vagabondo e di poco s'ammanta.</p>	<p>Often people trifle and sing here, because arriving from all parts of the world are vagabonds who carry little with them.</p>
<p>E per lo freddo v'ha di sì cattivi 100 che nudi stan con le calcagna al culo perché si son di vestimenti privi,</p>	<p>And because of the cold there are some poor devils that sit naked with their heels underneath their rumps because they have no clothes.</p>
<p>e mostran spesso quel che mostra il mulo; pescano spesso a riposata lenza perch'è ciascun di danar netto e pulo. 105</p>	<p>And they show parts of the body that it is only proper for mules to show; often quietly looking for an opportunity to steal from others (?), because none of them has a cent.</p>
<p>Quando fa oste il Comun di Firenze, quinci vi vanno guastatori assai per ardere e gustare ogni semenza;</p>	<p>When Florence goes to war, they recruit these men as spoilers who will burn and destroy every enemy crop.</p>
<p>esconne manigoldi e picconai, di cui la gente molto si rammarca 110</p>	<p>From their ranks come executioners and taskmasters: people look down on them,</p>

⁴⁴ *Rimatori del Trecento*, ed. Giuseppe Corsi (*op. cit. supra*, n. 2), 870-880.

perché guadagnan pur de gli altru' guai.

because they gain from someone else's
griefs.

(Translation: Amanda Glover and
George Predelli)

Anonymous, *Molti son quei che lodan povertate* (Many are those who praise poverty).⁴⁵

Molti son quei che lodan povertate
e ta' dicon che fa stato perfetto
s'egli è provato e eletto,
quello osservando nulla cosa avendo:
a ciò inducon certa autoritate, 5
che l'osservar sarebbe troppo stretto.
E pigliando quel detto,
duro estremo mi par, s'io ben comprendo:
e però nol commendo
ché rade volte estremo è senza vizio, 10
e a ben far difizio
si vuol sì proveder dal fondamento,
che per crollar di vento
e d'altra cosa così ben si regga,
che non convegna poi si ricorregga. 15
Di quella povertà ch'è contro a voglia,
non è da dubitar ch'è tutta ria,
ché di peccare è via
facendo spesso a' giudici far fallo,
e d'onor donne e damigelle spoglia, 20
e fa far furto, forza e villania,
e spesso usar bugia
e ciascun priva d'onorato stallo,
en piccolo intervallo,
mancando roba, par che manchi senno, 25
s'avesse retto renno,
o qual vuol sia che povertà tal giunga.
Però ciascun fa pungia
di non voler che incontro gli si faccia,
ché, pur pensando, già si turba in faccia. 30

De l'altra povertà, che eletta pare,
si può veder per chiara esperienza
che senza usar fallenza
s'osserva o no, non si come si conta.
E l'osservanza non è da lodare, 35

Many are those who praise poverty;
some even say that it leads to perfection,
if a person is chosen and perseveres
in observing the rule of not possessing
anything: but some authorities that they
invoke are too strict to be followed.
That pronouncement
appears to me to be extreme, if I am not
mistaken; that's why I do not approve of it
because too rarely extremes are faultless.
If we want to build well, in fact,
we must lay so solid a foundation
that in spite of winds
or other mishaps, our building will stand
and not be in need of repairs.
Unwanted poverty
is obviously an evil thing
because it induces to sin:
it corrupts judges,
deprives women and girls of their honour,
causes theft, violence and injury.
It often turns people into liars
and robs them of honour and reputation.
Lack of earthly goods, in no time
will look as lack of judgment,
even if you had governed a kingdom,
before becoming poor.
For this reason people strive
not to fall into poverty;
the very thought of poverty is enough to
upset them.
About voluntary poverty,
It is clear that both observing it and not
observing it may be without fault,
that is not how it is told.
To observe poverty is not praiseworthy

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 918-922.

perché discrezion né provedenza
 o alcuna valenza
 di costumi o virtute le s'affronta.
 Certo parmi grand'onta
 chiamar virtute quel che spegne el bene, 40
 e molto mal s'avene
 cosa bestial preporre a le virtute
 le qual donan salute
 a ogni savio intendimento accetta,
 e chi più vale in ciò più si diletta. 45
 Tu potresti qui fare un argomento:
 – Il Signor nostro molto la commenda. –
 Guarda che ben l'intenda,
 ché sue parole son molto profonde
 ed in loro hanno doppio intendimento 50
 e vuol che 'l salutifero si prenda.
 Però 'l tuo viso sbenda
 e guarda 'l ver che dentro vi s'asconde.
 Tu vedrai che risponde
 le sue parole a la sua santa vita, 55
 ché podestà compita
 ebbe di soddisfare a tempo e loco:
 e però 'l suo aver poco
 fu per noi iscampar da l'avarizia
 e non per darci via d'usar malizia. 60
 Noi veggian pur col senso molto spesso
 chi più tal vita loda manco in pace
 e sempre studia e face
 come da essa si possa partire;
 s'onore o grande stato gli è commesso, 65
 forte l'afferra qual lupo rapace
 e ben si contrafface
 pur ched e' possa suo voler compire
 e sassi si coprire,
 ch'el peggior lupo par migliore agnello 70
 sotto falso mantello:
 onde per tale ingegno è guasto il mondo
 se tosto non va in fondo
 questa ipocresia, ch'alcuna parte
 non lascia al mondo senza usar su'arte. 75
 Canzon, va e se truovi de' giurguffi,
 mostrati loro sì che gli converti;
 se pure stesson erti,
 sia sì tagliarda che sotto gli attuffi.

because it allows no discretion, foresight,
 noble habits or virtue.
 It surely seems a great shame
 to call virtue what smothers all good things,
 and it is bad judgment to prefer
 a beastly habit to the virtues
 that lead to proper behavior,
 which pleases all wise persons.
 The better someone is the more he will
 delight in those virtues.
 Here you might object:
 "Our Lord praises it constantly."
 I answer: "Make sure you get Him right,
 because His words are very deep
 and may be understood in more than one way.
 We have to grasp the true meaning of His
 words. Therefore, open your eyes
 and understand the hidden truth.
 You will then realize that His words
 correspond to His saintly life,
 during which he was able to provide fully for
 his needs according to circumstance:
 therefore his possessing little
 meant to dissuade us from greed,
 not to induce us to embrace vice."
 Furthermore, we often see that those who
 praise poverty are not at peace with
 themselves; but, on the contrary, strive
 to find ways to depart from it.
 Should an honorific office be proposed to
 them, they will jump at it, as if they were
 rabid wolves. They can disguise themselves
 in order to attain what they want.
 They are so good at hiding their true desires
 that the worse wolf among them looks like
 a lamb properly disguised.
 Because of this trickery the world is
 corrupted unless an end is put to this
 hypocrisy which extends to every corner of
 this world.
 Go now, my song, and if you find people who
 are still mistaken show them your wisdom,
 so that they may be converted; but if they
 remain obstinate, don't hesitate to give them
 a lesson they will never forget.

(Translation: Amanda Glover and George Predelli)