

Confraternities and the History of Mystical Traditions. An Invitation

Among the aspects of confraternal institutions and experiences that our Society studies, surely one of the most significant is their placement within the history of spirituality. And, more specifically, we at times entertain the question: "What role did confraternities play in the development and fostering of mystical, or contemplative, traditions from the first records we possess of such groups until the Early Modern Period?" In this regard, I would like to suggest that our members and readers contribute short articles, notes, bibliographic references and the like to this bulletin and that we consider devoting special sessions at the various conferences in which we participate to the topic "Confraternities and the History of Mystical Traditions".

We are experiencing, at present, a pronounced interest in these traditions. For example, the last issue of this bulletin featured a resume of a three-year research project entitled "Les confréries dans le monde méditerranéen".¹ This resume, contributed by André Godin, brings to our attention the mystical orientation of certain Islamic confraternities and cites in its bibliography the title *Les ordres mystiques dans l'Islam. Cheminements et situation actuelle*.²

For the Christian tradition, the project undertaken by Bernard McGinn at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago must be singled out. This will be a four volume study under the general title *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*. The first volume, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, was published in 1991. In its General Introduction the author outlined his plan:

The four volumes that will comprise *The Presence of God* are both a history and a historical theology of Western Christian Mysticism. The first two volumes, *The Foundations of Mysticism* and *The Development of Mysticism*, present and account for the first major period—or, perhaps better, layer—of Christian mysticism, which was created in the third and fourth centuries and flourished down through the twelfth. This layer may well be called the monastic layer, since it was closely tied to the values and practices of monasticism. The third volume, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, will treat the period from the thirteenth century through the sixteenth, a time when new forms of religious life and practice produced a second rich layer which interacted with the monastic component in the later Middle Ages and the Reformation era. These centuries saw the creation of classic "schools" of mysticism, which sought to spread mystical practices to all groups in Christian society through the medium of the vernacular languages, not the learned Latin of the clergy. The fourth volume of *The Presence of God* will be entitled *The Crisis of Mysticism* and will deal with the challenges to Christian mystical ideals from within and without that became evident in the seventeenth century and that have continued to the present. The final part of this last volume will also endeavour to summarize in constructive fashion what this account of Western mysticism means for contemporary reflection on the nature of Christian mysticism.³

From this overview we can see that the projected third volume, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, will be most pertinent to our confraternity studies. We eagerly await its publication.

I would like now to offer a brief contribution from my own work with the dramatic traditions of Italian confraternities of the late thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries. I will discuss a play that focusses on a figure that represents the ideals of eremitical and contemplative retreat, Anthony Abbot. He may have provided a model for the laymen who experienced their confraternity as a context preparing them for that "particular kind of encounter between God and the human" which is the goal of mysticism.⁴

The *lauda drammatica*, or vernacular music-drama, in question is from Perugia, in Umbria, a city and region renowned from earliest times for eremitical and contemplative traditions.⁵ It is a *lauda* that enacts several incidents in the life of Anthony and may provide an indication of a particularly contemplative orientation of the group that composed it, the confraternity of San Fiorenzo (Florentius).⁶ Another indication of this orientation is the connection of this group with the Cistercian Order.

The earliest documentation for the existence of the confraternity of San Fiorenzo dates from the mid-fourteenth century, about the same period in which the Anthony *lauda* would have been composed and performed. It took its name from the church and monastery of San Fiorenzo with which it was connected, both of which were at that time under the control of the Cistercian Order. The confraternity's archives have been dispersed, so it is not possible to learn how close this relationship was, or how strongly the contemplative traditions of the Order influenced the lay group that was, in some way, affiliated with it. The Anthony *lauda* becomes, therefore, a significant piece of evidence that needs to be examined.

Dramatic action takes place at two monasteries and during a journey between them. Anthony complains to his companions that their monastery is not a quiet place and that they must leave it to seek a more suitable one. Once they are established in a new monastery in the desert, Anthony tells them that he must leave to visit Paul the Hermit. He comforts them in their distress and appoints a new abbot. Anthony asks a blessing

on the monastery and the monks sing a prayer to him as the *lauda* ends.

This work is remarkable for what it does *not* dramatize, for neither Anthony's momentous meeting with Paul nor any of his four temptations is included. Instead, the action consists of a series of departures deeper and deeper into solitude, until Anthony declares that he no longer wants to see a human face.

These early *laude drammatiche* had some connection with the offices and devotional rituals of the confraternities, a connection that is not yet clearly understood. From another source we have evidence that the episodes portrayed in the Anthony *lauda* may have had their source in the paraliturgy of the confraternity. As has been said, the San Fiorenzo archives have been dispersed, so their early books of devotion are not known. However, such a book of devotion belonging to the confraternity of St Anthony the Abbot in Arezzo gives us an idea of what that paraliturgy might have been like. This codex, now MS D113 of the Kenneth Spencer Library of the University of Kansas, contains works composed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, mainly vernacular hymns and Latin offices.⁷ The usual Latin office of the patron saint contained four lessons regarding the life of Anthony, and the episodes included parallel those dramatized in the Perugian *lauda*. If the Perugian confraternity had at one time possessed a similar Latin office with such lessons, then the vernacular music-drama could be seen as a kind of "translation" not only of the language but also of the genre. Such a consideration allows us to appreciate more fully the devotional quality of early confraternity dramatizations.

The special quality of the Perugian *lauda drammatica* will be made clearer if we compare it with a late fifteenth-century *sacra rappresentazione* (religious play) about Anthony which is the eighth item in the Second Florentine Collection in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze.⁸ This play, like the Perugian *lauda*, affirms the values of eremitical retreat but, unlike the earlier work, included and emphasizes scenes of dramatic tension and theatrical spectacle. An angel announces the performance and states that he will take part in it. Action

begins with Anthony kneeling to pray and then going to seek advice from a hermit about leading a life of penance and perfection. He determines upon such a course but finds that his companions do not share his choice. He then tries to persuade his sister to abandon the world and enter a monastery of enclosed nuns, which she agrees to do only after putting up stiff resistance. When Anthony has sent for the poor and distributed his possessions among them, he returns to the hermit to begin his new life. As he prays, in a simultaneous Hell scene Satan exhorts his companions to tempt the hermit. Thereupon the Spirits for Fornication, Sloth, and Gluttony visit him. Anthony resists with the assistance of the Angel announcer. He then goes to the desert where the Spirit of Avarice waits on a mountain of gold. An episode ensues concerning three evil-doers, Scaramuccia, Tagliagambe, and Karapello, who set out on a journey. Meanwhile, Satan in Hell orders his companions to go to Anthony and beat him, whereupon Jesus appears and heals Anthony's wounds. Anthony journeys through the desert, meets the three evil-doers, and warns them to avoid the mountain of gold. They, instead, seek out the gold and kill each other over its possession. The Spirit of Avarice delivers a speech over their corpses and then returns to Satan in Hell as the play ends.

The Perugian *lauda*, focussing not on the more stage-worthy incidents of Anthony Abbot's life, but rather on his persistent retreat into contemplative solitude may offer us an indication of the particular orientation of the lay confraternity of San Fiorenzo and of the nature of its connection with the rich traditions of the Cistercian Order with which it was connected. Such considerations invite us to explore further aspects of confraternity drama within the broad history of Christina mysticism.

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Notes

¹*Confraternitas* 3:2 (Fall 1992) 15-20.

²Travaux publiés sous la direction de A. Popovic et G. Veinstein (Paris: EHESS, 1986).

³*The Foundations of Mysticism. Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), pp. xii-xiii.

⁴*Ibid*, p. xvi.

⁵See my "The Italian Saint Play: The Example of Perugia" in *The Saint Play in Medieval Europe*, ed. Clifford Davidson (Kalamazoo: The Medieval Institute Publications, 1986), pp. 183-187.

⁶For the confraternity of San Fiorenzo, see the unpublished dissertation of Anna Maria Jemma, "Le confraternite disciplinate di S. Fiorenzo e di S. Simone in Perugia", Perugia, Università degli Studi, 1969, pp. 35-58. For the *lauda* of Anthony Abbot, I have used the edition of Giuseppe Galli in "I disciplinati dell'Umbria del 1260 e le loro laudi", *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana*, Suppl. 9 (1906), 155-160. I have corrected this text from the original codes, MS A.26 of the Biblioteca Vallicelliana in Rome. I am grateful to the authorities of this library for the privilege of consulting this codex on several occasions.

⁷See Dennis J. Dutschke and Shona Kelly, "Un ritrovato laudario aretino" *Italianistica. Rivista di letteratura italiana* 14:2 (1985) 155-183.

⁸*La rappresentazione di sancto Antonio della barba romito* (Firenze: Antonio Mescomini, 1490 [1495]).