GIOVANNI KEZICH SOME PEASANT POETS — AN ODYSSEY IN THE— ORAL POETRY OF LATIUM PETER LANG

An Astonishing Literary Survival

Encountering a poet. A few scant notes in literature over the last 400 years bring us news of some peasant poets.

On Sunday 21st of May 1581, Michel de Montaigne, having stopped a few weeks on his Italian journey to "take the waters" at Bagni di Lucca, thanked his hosts by offering them a banquet at which, he reports:

I gave a seat at my table to Divizia, a poor peasant who lives two miles from the Baths and who as well as her husband lives by the labour of her hands. She is very ugly, is thirty seven years old, has a goitre in her neck and can neither read nor write. But there having resided in her father's house an uncle of hers who from her tenderest years used to read aloud in presence Ariosto and some other poets, her mind became alive to, so imbued with, the spirit of poetry, that not only does she compose verses off hand with the most surprising facility, but she moreover introduces into her compositions ancient fables, the names of gods, countries, sciences and illustrious men as readily as though she had gone through the regular course of studies. She composed a number of these verses before me. They are indeed nothing but verses and rhymes but they are at the same time conceived in an easy and elegant style¹.

In later years many other European *literati* engaged in the "Grand Tour", including distinguished figures such as Johann Wolfang von Goethe, Madame de Staël and Hans Christian Andersen, testified to similar encounters with the Italian improvisers. These could easily take place in the theatres and the great literary academies of the time – that of "Arcadia" first of all² - but also rather casually in the streets of Florence and Rome, on the canals of Venice, in the port of Leghorn, or even on the roadside and in the open countryside, where a whole array of rather unlikely characters such as market vendors, gondoliers, galley-slaves or

¹ Works of Michael de Montaigne: Comprising His Essays, Journey Into Italy, and Letters, Volume 4, ed. by William Hazlitt; Orlando Williams Wight; Cambridge, Riverside Press, 1859, pp. 390-1.

The academy of Arcadia was founded in Rome in 1690, at the court of Queen Christina of Sweden, Cfr. VITAGLIANO, A. *Storia della poesia estemporanea*. Roma, 1905.