PREACHING AS PLAYWRITING: A SEMI-DRAMATIC SERMON OF THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

Katherine L. Jansen

Donna del Paradiso,
lo tuo figliolo è preso,
Iesù Cristo beato.
Accurre, donna e vide
che la gente l’allide;
credo che lo s’occide,
tanto l’ò flagellato
Lady, Queen of Heaven,
they have taken your son;
Hurry, come and see—
they’re beating Him,
Whipping Him brutally;
they will kill Him.¹

Written at the end of the thirteenth century, Jacopone da Todi’s lauda, “Donna del Paradiso” was one of the most beloved vernacular poems of the later medieval period. In the passage cited above, Jacopone imagines the disconsolate words of the messenger who, on Good Friday, delivers the news to the swooning Virgin Mary that Christ has been arrested. It is well-known that laude were sung or recited rhythmically by laudesi companies whose central devotional practice was to sing the praises of the Lord and his saints. What perhaps is less well-known is that the text of the “Donna del Paradiso,” along with other vernacular laude, often became the centerpiece for sacred oratory of the friars of the fifteenth century, the subject of this paper.

The study of medieval sermons has a long and distinguished history, one which only recently has turned to consider preaching as performance, with due attention to the exchange between preacher and

Then, as now, the sermon was a ritualized event in which the preacher tried to soften hardened hearts or move people to action. On occasion, it could provide an afternoon’s entertainment. In either case, the preacher used his pulpit and what we would call a repertoire of performance techniques to transmit his message to as wide an audience as possible. In 1977, John Fleming memorably termed this “pulpit drama.”

“Semi-dramatic” sermons with *laude* embedded at their dramatic core most certainly contributed to transforming preaching events into dramatic performances in the late medieval and early modern periods. The great practitioners of this genre were preachers of the Franciscan Observant Reform movement. Focusing on a semi-dramatic sermon of Roberto Caracciolo (d. 1495), a leading light of this movement, this paper analyzes the text in its performative context.

The Observant Franciscans, no less than their early brethren, preached conversion to penance, the subject matter of most medieval sermons. The penitential life was a broad complex of ideas including conversion from sin, accompanied by acts of repentance, expiation, self-mortification and charity, not infrequently held together by the bonds of voluntary poverty. Preachers envisioned the penitential path as a permanent process, a life’s work, which called for constant vigilance and attentiveness to the pitfalls and temptations offered up...

---


4 On this genre, see Vincenzo de Bartholomaeis, *Origini della poesia drammatica italiana*, 2nd ed. (Turin: S.E.I., 1952), 326–30, who seems to have been the originator of the term.

5 For a thorough introduction to the works of Caracciolo, also known as Roberto da Lecce, see *Roberto Caracciolo: Opere in volgare*, ed. Enzo Esposito; intro. R. Mordenti (Galatina: Congedo, 1993). There is a summary of his life at 47–50 and a comprehensive bibliography at 66–73.

6 One of the best works on the subject is Giovanna Casagrande, *Religiosità penitenziale e città al tempo dei comuni* (Rome: Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, 1995).