"A debatable land". Representations of Naples on the British Stage[1]

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Abstract

The general purpose of this paper is to show how the description of the South of Italy as a border land identifies it as the "debatable land" contended by two communities with an imbalance of power, whose disputes over time create a 'border culture'. From that concept, the specific purpose of this study emerges: to show how the dramatic representations of the Rebellion of Naples of 1647 under scrutiny portray the Southern territory as a land which acknowledges no law and seldom generates its own customary law. The beginning of what may be called 'Masaniello's literary history' will be dealt with and include its development in the Romantic age.

Keywords: southern territory, debatable land, culture, Naples, London, theatre, Masaniello.

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Recent scholarship (Lamont and Rossington, 2007) has highlighted a pivotal category – both geographical and rhetorical - which particularly fits the issue of this conference on "territories, views and perspectives", that of the 'debatable land'. The phrase is first recorded in the specific context of the Anglo-Scottish border in the sixteenth century and first appears in the Oxford English Dictionary in relation to it. Later it came to be used to indicate not only the Anglo-Scottish border but other disputed territories and, by metaphorical extension, "disputes of other sorts, social, intellectual and artistic" (p. 1) It is in the early

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nineteenth century that in the Introduction to his Ministrelsy of the Scottish Border (1802-03), Walter Scott deals specifically with the history of the border and writes:

"/in the mid-sixteenth century/ the Debatable Land, a tract of country, situated betwixt the Esk and Sarke, claimed by both kingdoms, was divided by royal commissioners, appointed by the two crowns. – By their award, this land of contention was separated by a line, drawn from east to west, betwixt the rivers /…/ Yet the Debatable Land continued long after to be the residence of the thieves and banditti, to whom his dubious state had afforded a desirable refuge" (Scott 1803, I: xxiii)

The rhetorical use of such a category will, however, never lose its geographical origin nor will it neglect its perception of the border as being "indistinct" and "porous" (Anderson, 1991), and as implying the type of culture that a debatable land encompasses – that is, passages, temporary stays, contrasts, unbalanced powers and indeed revolutions. In Britain's political and literary culture, Naples served as a debatable land since the publication of Alessandro Giraffi's Rivolutioni di Napoli (1647), translated into English by James Howell in 1650, which created a co-relation in England between the plebeian insurrection in Naples and the coterminous English Revolution. Two plays, 'T.B.'s Rebellion of Naples (1649) and Thomas d'Urphy's Masaniello (1699) – a closet drama, the former, and a hybrid farce drama, the latter – constitute the beginning of what may be called Masaniello's literary history and, even though from different 'generic' and ideological standpoints, both plays may be considered essentially 'antimasanellian'.

The Romantic scene, instead, includes here both the contemporary political debate (Thomas Spence and Leigh Hunt) – which took sides with the plebeian revolution, masking the contemporary anxiety of the rebellion-restoration paradigm – and the theatrical production of the period 1825-1830.

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In the seventeenth century, Naples was not only Europe's most populous city (after Paris), it was also one of Europe's urban marvels, a status it enjoyed in large part due to its extraordinary accumulation of grandiose private palazzi concentrated in a relatively small area of less than ten square miles/…/ The cumulative effect of countless such imposing structures, many of them with four, five or more stores and facades that at times seemed almost without end, was already at that time and throughout the remainder of the century, unequalled elsewhere, even in Rome. The piling up of immense new dwellings, crowding the slopes of the natural antitheater that gave rise to the city and walling in the streets on both sides, effectively reduced the sky above the rooftops to a distant narrow band of blue.
The effects produced upon the congested populace, caught in the streets and constricted by the vast walls put up by the wealthier members was one of an almost overwhelming swirl of human activity that was unique to the city / …/ Just as now, the streets of Naples were traditionally filled with a deafening and frenetic /…/ life that churned against the restricting alignment of the city's churches and palazzi. Although the inconvenience and violence of the city could be found in other European cities, including Paris, whose traffic and annoyances Nicolas Boileau so cheerfully described around 1660, it was most pronounced in Naples (Labrot, 1992).

The urban community appears here as a constructed form of closure into a territorial unit, which responds to a politics of location and which functions because of its capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render abjected (Hall, 1996). The narrative of this public space, indeed the locus of antonyms as it is the epitome of the relation between people and multitude, can only begin when the contesting discourses of the two contrasting entities render change "(im)possible in terms of the (im)permeability of the borders between them" (Rajan, 1998). These two categories have often appeared in relation and in contrast since the seventeenth century, when the term multitude came out to designate a

radical, republican alternative to the theoretical paradigm which was being shaped around the nexus between 'people' and 'sovereignty'. When Hobbes (Leviathan, 1655) theorised about mass protest and social upheaval he gave madness a specifically political dimension, as madness concerns the excess not just of individuals, but even more importantly, of the multitude. Spinoza, instead, viewed multitude as a new political subject, indeed a relation more than an entity, whose agency relies on a texture of plural temporality, a sort of dynamic poly-chronism which allows plurality to resist any reductio ad unum. It is not by chance that Spinoza appears, in an anecdote described by his biographer Johannes Colerus, in a selfportrait in the guise of a fisherman, identified by the biographer himself as Masaniello, the hero of the Neapolitan Revolution of 1647.

The years we are about to consider are those of Cromwell, of the purging of Parliament and the death of Charles I (January 1649) and of the ruthless campaigns in Ireland and Scotland in revolt. After a failed attempt to maintain the balance between Conservatives and Radicals, Cromwell broke with the left wing and in 1653 conferred himself the title of Lord Protector. Christopher Hill maintains that it is by no means exaggerated to affirm that Cromwell combined the roles of Robespierre and Napoleon in the French Revolution (Hill, 1958: 21-22). They were also the years in which Hobbes wrote Leviathan, whose political consequence has already been mentioned. They were also the years in which between 1647 and 1648 the Neapolitan uprisings took place, generally identified with the name of Masaniello. Few other periods and historical figures in the South of Italy had such European resonance and left behind a no less consistent wake of memories and myths, which have not been given adequate treatment in historiography. It was only in the 20th century with the work of Michelangelo Schipa that historical research on Masaniello was pondered adequately to the point of providing an exhaustive and critically satisfying reconstruction. The revolt of coarse and violent plebeians, or a generous popular and national uprising against foreign dominion, against oppression and exploitation on the part of a

backward country such as Spain of the Siglo de Oro: these were the visions of the Neapolitan events in 1647-1648, alternative yet often juxtaposed, prevailing until then and not even weakened in substance by the work of Schipa himself. In the plebeian uprising, deprived of any cultural background, an uprising of a very different nature has been adumbrated, i.e. an uprising in which bourgeois involvement would have been much larger than believed and would also have involved the Neapolitan governing class of the time. In this respect, the Neapolitan revolt of 1647-1648 came to be compared to the great European revolutions of the 17th century and homologized to them by a historiographical perspective which made of these movements cardinal points for the interpretation of modern European history, connecting them to the controversial, but not entirely unfounded thesis, that Europe was undergoing a general crisis in that period.
It seemed important for me to go back over the events in order to validate one of the dominant modern features of the ideological and symbolical representation of the anti-Spanish revolt of 1647-48 in the city and realm of Naples and of its absolutely tragic hero, in the political, historiographical and literary writing of the 17th century. In the words of Mario Melchionda, the coherently legitimist use – in support of the absolutism of the Stuarts - /…/ of that parable of subversion and apology of the Restoration, finalized in the immediate transposition of the emblems of the subversive radicalism of the masses and of the individualism, in the self destructive vein of their leaders, in those 'monstrous successes (Howell, 1650) /…/ all blatantly present /…/ to the emergence of national life and to its representations at the institutional or antagonistic level (1988: 1).
The correlation between the plebeian insurrection in Naples and the great English Rebellion seemed plausible barely two years after the event, when an anonymous playwright (known only by the initials T.B.) staged "for the reader alone" The Tragedy of Massenello in 1651, proclaiming himself an eye-witness to the events portrayed, and inaugurating in England and in European dramatic literature as a whole the future fame of the ephemeral hero of a Mediterranean story.

This good fortune lasted down to the Romantic Era, another age of revolution and restoration. In 1650 James Howell's English translation appeared, from the best known reconstruction of the ten days of Masaniello, Le rivoluzioni di Napoli, by Alessandro Giraffi, which modern historiography, in agreement, termed 'bourgeois'.
To return to the anonymous drama, it might be said that it is a dramatic action which can only be staged in an imaginary scenic space, the theatres having been closed for seven years. Hence, it may be defined as a closet drama, even if the fact that it could not be staged was due to extratextual, political and institutional constrictions, not to considerations of genre or authorial choice.

At the end of the seventeenth century, the figure of Masaniello returned, with the work The Rise and Fall of Massaniello by Thomas D'Urphy, markedly experimental in its excessive dramatic vest: it is made up of two parts, five acts each. The complexity of the piece, both as to the plot and the dramatic form it assumes, ensures that the multitude emerge from their anonymity and is made recognizable by the proliferation of characters. One can perceive, in fact, the identification of these characters in the corporations of masters and arts, placed at the same level as banditti and Jesuits: "A Butcher, a Taylor, a Miller, a Smith, a Cobbler, Banditti, Jesuits, a Baker, a Fishmonger, a Lawyer" along with "women, wives, sisters", together with "guards, servants, musicians". Here again Giraffi's historiographical and also moral material is manipulated and translated by Howell as follows:
Masaniello rendered himself by degrees the most beloved, the most respected and worthy of esteem by all that possibly could be, notwithstanding that in such confused multitude of so many thousands of people there were so many Doctors, Merchants, Notaries, Scriveners, Proctors, Physicians, Soldiers, and very worthy Artizans and an infinite number of others… (1650: 57-58).

From a strictly theatrical point of view, mass scenes are avoided and everything comes down to the inflexible opposition between

the two palaces, the physical loci of legitimate power and subversive violence. Hence, the catastrophe consists in the storming of the illegitimate Palazzo and in the suppression of the alternative power by which it is occupied.
The narrative of the Neapolitan Revolution continued to be present to the historical consciousness whenever there were political conditions favourable to a symbolic representation of popular revolutions. The Romantic scene encompasses both the contemporary political and cultural debate, and the theatrical production of the period. I focus on two key moments, the ideal extremes of a temporal segment when the Neapolitan Revolution was the controversial material of direct or indirect political investment – namely, the 1790s, and 1829-1830. The 1790s were the crucial years of the political debate on the French Revolution which shifted from the high rhetoric of Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France, conceived and elaborated within the closed palace of the establishment, to the struggle for the rights to free public assembly and political expression.
With the publication of a weekly series entitled One Pennyworth of Pig's meat; or, Lessons for the Swinish Multitude (1792), Thomas Spence entered the debate opened by the notorious reference to the 'swinish multitude' Burke made in his Reflections. In the second volume, collecting the various issues of the periodical, about seventy pages are occupied by Francis Midon's already quoted History of the Rise and Fall of Masaniello, which constituted the narrative underlying most plays on the Neapolitan revolution as a theatrical subject in the Romantic era. In the context of the extremely unstable political situation of the years between 1792 and 1794, in fact, the publication of the 'history' aimed at reminding William Pitt of the rights of people to arise against tyranny.
After about thirty years, under the pressure of the French revolution of 1830, Leigh Hunt's condemnation of Walter Scott's way of writing history unveiled Scott's prejudices about the superiority of "high-born and high-bred warriors" over the "brutal populace of a great town", as is highlighted in his review entitled "Revolutions of Naples in 1647 and 1648; Masaniello

and the Duke of Guise", which had been published in 1829 in The Foreign Quarterly Review, n. 4. Hunt attacked Scott in The Tatler, n.17, stating that

No man can be bitterer than he is in behalf of the narrowest prejudices, or more courteous towards the iniquities of the powerful… There is a review of his, discussing the different characters of Guise and Masaniello, in which this instinct of the courtier is painfully discernible.

Leigh Hunt later published – n. 30 of The Tatler – a poem "High and Low. Or How to write History, Suggested by an article in a Review from the pen of Sir Walter Scott, in which accounts are given, of Masaniello and the Duke of Guise", a parody of Scott's ideological stance, who was always willing to pardon crimes in the name of "high born aristocracy". In this case, as said before, the historical resonance is to be found in the French Revolution of 1830 and in the role of the rabble in Paris which greatly contributed to the fall of Charles X. Evidence of this can be found in The Times theatre review of October 29, relating about "Their Majesty's First Visit to the Drury-Lane Theatre", and their 'mixing familiarly with their subject". The performance then proceeded:

The pieces originally announced for representation were The Brigand, The Illustrious Stranger, and Masaniello; but at a very short notice the command for Masaniello was withdrawn and the opera of The Marriage of Figaro, with which the performances commenced, was substituted.

It was indeed in the theatre that the danger and the subversive potential of the story of Masaniello came across most clearly.

A tragedy by George Soane on the topic had been performed Drury Lane on February 17, 1825, ending, as the reviewer of The Times wrote on February, 18, "in very considerable opposition and certainly a tragedy which would not – as assuredly it will not – have a run". The reviewer notes that

such a story, placed in the hands of a man of fine genius would form the foundation of a noble tragedy. Mr. Soane is a clever man, but he is not a man of genius. And his tragedy lacks all those great qualities by which tragedy ought to be distinguished.

He had neither adhered to history nor to nature. And though Kean played the hero very carefully, the character was such that the finest actor that ever lived could not make strikingly efficient.

On the response of the audience and on its interpretation the reviewer seems to avoid any political commitment. He refers that "from time to time, the audience proved, by their hisses, that they wanted character and action- two points in which this tragedy is miserably deficient", whereas the perception of danger of the very narrative of the revolt in terms of its purely political potentiality is witnessed by the image of an audience portrayed as causing "a riot and disturbance by hissing and hooting during the performances".

May 5th, 1829. The theatrical advertisement in The Times shows a clustering of performances of various Masaniellos, both on the legitimate and the illegitimate stages, as is also witnessed by George Daniel [D.G.], author of the "Remarks" on the Cumberland's British Theatre edition of Henry M. Milner's Masaniello:
In the present day, it has furnished the subject for a superb ballet at the King's theatre, for a grand opera at Drury Lane, and a gorgeous romance at the Coburg /…/ The modern authors, as usual, have had recourse to the French – M. Auber's La Muette de Portici is the original of both pieces. To Mr. Kenney, the public are indebted for the opera; to Mr. Milner, for the historical drama (1828: 5).

The great popularity of the plot, which was translated, as previously mentioned, into a number of genres, retained an underlying revolutionary potential which exploded during staging in minor theatres.
The play produced at Covent Garden entitled Masaniello, was drawn from La Muette de Portici, libretto by Scribe and Delavigne with music by Daniel Auber. For Jane Moody (2000) James Kenney, the author of the translation, was compelled to defend the 'Tory morale' of this play, in as much as, as he mentioned himself, the lesson to be learnt from the humiliation

of a revolutionary fisherman was the exact opposite of the revolutionary one. But, even a plot which stages the punishment of the rebels could have an entirely unforeseen impact. In October 1830, Kenney's staging of Masaniello at Covent Garden was suddenly interrupted when the radical newspaper, Poor Man's Guardian, espoused the revolutionary cause, "the cause of the rabble", transforming it to its own liking and inviting its readers to fill the balconies of the theatre to demonstrate to the king that, as the Neapolitan multitude, they would depose a king who frustrated the expectations of the people and, at the same time, would request a constitutional reform, the abolition of the House of Lords and the end of the monopolies.
But it is from Milner's 1829 musical drama, staged at the Royal Coburg Theatre, in blocks of action and intense dialogue, that injustice is most powerfully enacted, as it emerges that Gonzalo, commander of the viceroy guard, has abused Fenella, Masaniello's dumb sister. She is condemned to silence and introduces to the play an interesting thread of experimentation, which is not mime, nor dumb show, such theatrical expedients, but one with the plot, indeed with the last abuse undergone, that must be revenged. Here is an example of the directions in mute dialogue with the text:
Fenella throws herself at the feet of the princess
Fenella expresses by sign that she cannot speak, but implores protection from the pursuit of Gonzalo.
Fenella indicates Gonzalo—that he seized on her in spite of her prayers and tears; she imitates the action of turning locks, and explains that she has been confined in a dungeon, where she remained absorbed in grief, till the idea of affecting her escape suddenly flashed on her (Milner, 1828: 11-12).

The revolutionary action is set off by the Leader's call to action, emphasized by exasperated imagery and the language which phantasmagorically reproduces the violence undergone as contamination and shame, but at the same time justifies it. In the words of Masaniello:
You hear me comrades? Strike him down. Our wives, our sisters, are to be torn shrieking from our arms, to the fell pollution of

these foreign ravishers! Strike him down! Reptile!… Though shalt feel, poor hired myrmidon, that all thy power withers into impotence before the awful arm of struggling freedom. (Milner, 1828: 22)

As Fenella, also the multitude in this play is mute. The silence they have in common, dense as it is with signs, is the vehicle of an intense dramatic interaction contained within its development and contemporaneously finalized in its restraint. Fenella is thus connoted as the critical consciousness of the rebellion, the censor of its excesses, but she also incarnates the pity that understands folly and abjection and, at the moment of its defeat, dies also.

A territory such as that described and where the history of Masaniello took place is a locus of rhetorical antonyms as well as of geographical and trans-historical oppositions, a border we have chosen to call a "debatable land" because "the word 'debatable' so clearly enables the move from the geographical and political to wide-ranging intellectual disputes". (Lamont, Rossington, 2007: 6).

Notes

[1] This paper develops, according to the perspective of territory, some aspects which were dealt with in another forthcoming study, "Rivoluzione e controrivoluzione. Masaniello dal dramma secentesco alla scena romantica", in L. M. Crisafulli, A. Sportelli eds., *Teatro romantico europeo e identità nazionale*, Napoli: Liguori.

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