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# Co-Producing Love and Paradise: The Sicilian School of Poets




**Peter of Eboli, *Liber ad honorem Augusti* (Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Cod. 120.II, lat., f. 101)**

The idea of a sensual paradise might seem foreign to medieval Christian devotion. But it was an important motif in the love poetry of the Sicilian School, and likely emerged from interactions between Christian and Muslim poetic traditions in the island's Norman and Swabian courts. This article explores these hybrid origins – and how nationalist accounts have historically silenced them in favour of exclusively domestic narratives.

## *Plurimi notarii*: Christians and Muslims at the Sicilian Court

The so-called Sicilian School refers to a group of poets who lived between the 11th and 13th centuries in Sicily, at the court of the Norman and later the Swabian rulers. Its origins, in fact, can be traced back to the Norman conquest of the island under Roger I and the subsequent establishment of the Kingdom of Sicily, and the School continued to flourish under the Swabian dynasty, particularly during the reign of Frederick II. Under this ruler, a champion of cultural reform, numerous poets found their voice and produced their works (see Pirovano 2020).

The most renowned among these poets is undoubtedly Giacomo da Lentini, known as *il Notaro* ("the Notary") due to his role as *notarius* at the sovereign's court. In Norman and Swabian Sicily, however, a notary was far more than a bureaucrat; he was also a writer deeply engaged in the intellectual and poetic life of the court. In the history of Italian literature, Giacomo holds particular significance: if Dante is regarded as the father of the

Italian language, Giacomo might well be considered its “grandfather.” Even the *Sommo poeta* himself, in the *Divine Comedy* (*Purgatorio* XXVI, 55-57), acknowledges Giacomo’s influence on the poetry of the subsequent Tuscan tradition. The Notary introduces innovative elements on multiple levels. Stylistically, he strengthens the rhythmic and rhyming structures of poetry and is credited with “inventing” the sonnet – a form that would achieve immense success in Italian literature. In terms of imagery, Giacomo develops a vision of love that is earthly and carnal yet often intertwined with a celestial dimension. This duality allows love to become a force that can either destroy the poet or give him a state of beatitude. Furthermore, Giacomo enhances certain motifs, particularly those connected to nature, art, and the concept of *meraviglia* (“wonder”). These aspects are beautifully encapsulated in one of his most famous canzone, *Meravigliosamente*: *Meravigliosamente / un amor mi distringe / e mi tene ad ogn’ora – Wondrously / a love now grips me fast / and always rules my thoughts*… (tr. Lansing 2018, slightly modified).

The Notary was one of the most celebrated representatives of the Sicilian School, which established what was later considered as a new “poetic canon” within the Kingdom of Sicily. However, the Norman-Swabian court was not solely frequented by Italian writers or poets of Catholic faith. A 12th-century manuscript illustration of *Liber ad honorem Augusti* by Peter of Eboli offers a glimpse into the administrative and intellectual life of the Norman court. Beneath the arches of the royal palace, several figures are depicted engrossed in the act of writing. All these figures are identified as *notarii* (“notaries”, as said, the same title held by Giacomo): two are described as *notarii graeci*, Greek-speaking and of the Orthodox faith; two are *notarii latini*, akin to Giacomo da Lentini, likely speakers of romance vernaculars versed in Latin and Catholic; and, in the centre, two are labelled *saraceni*, indicating Arab-speaking Muslim notaries. Despite certain distinguishing features – such as the long black beards of the Greeks and the turbans of the Arabs – all the notaries wear similar yellow and green garments. And, though positioned beneath three distinct arches, they are not separated but clearly share the same space, symbolizing a unified intellectual and administrative environment.

The beautiful illustration from Peter’s *Liber* thus highlights the multifaceted nature of the Sicilian court under the Normans and the Swabians. This richly diverse cultural environment was not solely the domain of the so-called early Italian Christian poets. Indeed, even before the Norman conquest, Sicily had been renowned for its Arabic poetic tradition, which continued to flourish during the Norman period. Poets such as Ibn Hamdis, Al-Ballanibi, and Al-Tamimi were also active at the Norman court, engaging with the other *notarii* of the time and contributing to its vibrant intellectual life. The history of Sicilian Arabic poetry of this period aligns with the broader tradition of Arabic poetry between the 11th and 13th centuries, particularly in the western Mediterranean regions of North Africa and al-Andalus. Key developments during this era include the refinement of rhythmic and rhyming structures and the emergence of new genres, such as the *ghazal*. This poetic form, composed of couplets bound by a common rhyme, is characterized by themes of loss, of spiritual beauty, and A conception of love that blends earthly and carnal desires with a transcendent, almost mystical dimension.

## Love, Suffering, and Beatitude

Expanding the scope of Sicilian poetry to include these Arabic authors allows for a deeper appreciation of the intricate web of interactions and mutual influences, as highlighted recently by the Italian scholar Francesca Maria Corrao (see Corrao 2002). Numerous themes and motifs found in the poetry of these Arab authors also appear in the works of the romance poets. For instance, the theme of love as suffering and the portrayal of the beloved woman as both an angelic figure and a cruel tormentor are striking parallels. Al-Ballanibi, a 12th-century Sicilian Arab poet, describes the wound

inflicted by his beloved in the following lament: *The sword of her gaze cut out my heart / and I was stained with its blood and its paradise* (tr. Corrao 2021, modified). Paradise and violent death alternate in these verses, where the focal point is the dreadful sword symbolizing the beloved's indifferent gaze, making the poet's heart bleed. Noticeably similar are two stanzas from another Sicilian Arab poet, Al-Tamimi: *An arrow shot into my heart: / there was my beloved and I greatly suffered* (tr. Corrao 2021). This intense focus on a "violent" and desperate vision of love is precisely one of the elements found in the ropoetic tradition of Sicily. For instance, Cielo d'Alcamo, a poet and a jester at the court of Frederick II, authored a *Contrasto* in which he engages in a dialogue with his beloved. Frustrated by her repeated refusals, he exclaims: *You have killed the man at home, traitress! / You take my life without striking a blow* (tr. Corrao 2021). Here, we find the theme of the woman as cruel betrayer, with her actions likened to the cut of a weapon (though, in this case, the woman manages to kill the poet without delivering a single blow). Giacomo da Lentini also draws extensively on this imagery. Tormented by the pains of love, he cannot help but declare: *Then I both die and live? / Not so, but my heart dies / more oft and painfully / than it would if its death were natural* (tr. Lansing 2018). Once again, we encounter the centrality of the heart, which, struck by the beloved's cruelty, perishes in a manner far more harrowing than natural death.

The imagery in these compositions is not new. The idea of love as a source of anguish, leading to disorientation and even near-death, traces back to the Greek and Latin literary traditions of the archaic and classical periods. It suffices to recall Sappho's verses, where she faints before her beloved, later echoed and adapted by the Latin poet Catullus, and the references to the *militia amoris* ("love's army") found in the elegiac poets of the late Republican and Augustan age, such as Ovid, where love is portrayed as a real war (see Drinkwater 2013). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that certain combinations of themes and motifs (for exemple, the idea of the the beloved's gaze as the blow of a weapon) are particularly characteristic of the Sicilian poetic landscape, appearing prominently in both Arabic and Italian authors.

## An Earthly, Celestial Paradise: Ibn Hamis and Giacomo da Lentini

One aspect that clearly illustrates the reciprocal contact among the various Sicilian poets lies in their treatment of the concept of paradise, which frequently emerges in their compositions. From the earliest polemical exchanges between Christians and Muslims, the former frequently mocked Islamic notion of paradise, the *janna* ("garden"), portraying it as a highly physical realm where bliss is experienced in a tangible and carnal way. For instance, in his treatise *On heresies* (ch. 100), John of Damascus, a former administrator in the service of the Umayyad caliphs (7th–8th century), imagines Muslims in their paradise, drunk on wine and waking up with severe headaches after their indulgence. Some time later, Theophanes the Confessor takes an even more pointed stance, condemning Muhammad's teachings: *He taught his followers that whoever kills an enemy or is killed by an enemy goes to paradise, and said that this paradise is a place where one eats, drinks, and engages in carnal relations with women* (*Chronicle* 629/630; my translation). Faced with this highly carnal and physical vision of the garden, filled with feasting, drinking, and female companionship, Christian authors contrast it with their own conception of paradise, imagined to be more contemplative and ethereal.

But moving beyond the polemical aims of Christian writers, who often exaggerate their opponents' views (a hallmark of heresiology), the Islamic vision of paradise does indeed differ, even in the earliest Qur'anic writings, from the conception that Christians developed. This vision of paradise, however, provided Arab poets with the means to develop a sophisticated language around earthly love, which could be transformed into celestial and paradisiacal love.

This is one of the defining features of poetic forms such as the *ghazal*, which characterize Arabic poetry of this period and is also a common motif in certain Sicilian poets. Ibn Hamdis, a poet from Syracuse who lived at the Norman court during the late 11th and 12th centuries, is perhaps one of the most renowned figures of Sicilian Arabic poetic tradition. In one of his *ghazals* he vividly describes a sexual relationship with his beloved in the following manner: *What a fragrant breath! You believe the intercourse with her, / and her joining you, are a paradise of beatitude* (tr. Licitra 2023). In the words of Ibn Hamdis, the radiance of the beloved, the sensory experiences (visual, tactile, and olfactory) and the intimate sexual connection lead the poet to believe he is, in fact, in *janna* itself. The poet's expression is strikingly bold: he seems to invert the traditional perspective, suggesting that paradise can indeed be found on earth, embodied in the embrace of the beloved.

This earthly vision of paradise, along with the interplay between the earthly and the celestial, is not exclusive to Arabic poetic production. In the opening quatrains of a sonnet by Giacomo da Lentini, we find the following lines (tr. Lansing 2018, modified):

*Io m'aggio posto in core a Dio servire,*
*com'io potesse gire in paradiso,*
*al santo loco ch'aggio audito dire,*
*u' si manten sollazzo, gioco e riso.*

*Sanza mia donna non vi voria gire,*
*quella c'ha blonda testa e claro viso,*
*ché sanza lei non poteria gaudere,*
*estando da la mia donna diviso.*

*I've set my heart on serving God*
*So I might go to paradise,*
*That holy place, as I have heard,*
*Where all is delight, game, and fun.*

*I would not go without my love,*
*Whose face is bright and hair is blond,*
*For without her I'd have no joy,*
*Deprived of her companionship.*

The poet declares his desire to serve God with the aim of reaching paradise. So far, nothing seems unusual; however, shortly thereafter, he mentions having heard (without specifying from whom) that this place is characterized by eternal "delight, game, and

laughter." The terms *sollazzo*, *gioco*, and *riso* in Sicilian love poetry belong precisely to the lexicon of courtship, sensual and earthly love, and, in a more playful tradition, to the joy of drinking, singing, and revelry. In this sonnet, then, a distinctly earthly vision of paradise emerges, where the qualities celebrated in love poetry and in Giacomo's other poems become positive attributes. This perspective contrasts sharply with the more ethereal conception of paradise suggested by earlier and contemporary Christian theologians, as well as with the celestial vision presented in Dante's *Paradiso*, despite that poet's having drawn inspiration from the Notary's work. Moreover, in the second quatrain, after emphasizing his commitment to attaining such a "paradise of delights," Giacomo declares that he would not enter this place if his beloved were not present. Without her, this realm of bliss would lose all meaning, and he could not truly be among the blessed. Delight, play, and laughter are attainable only in the presence of his beloved; and the heavenly paradise becomes merely a reflection of this earthly perfection. Earthly and celestial visions blur, and for the poet, the relationship with the beloved already fulfils a state of beatitude, that the paradise above could never provide, if bereft of her. This is a rather original theme in love poetry, with no equivalents found among Christian poets of earlier periods.

In the sonnet, Giacomo states that he has "heard" that paradise is characterized by *sollazzo*, *gioco*, and *riso*. This raises the question: from whom did he hear such an idea of paradise, so far from the "canonical" Christian theological vision? It seems plausible that Giacomo developed this concept of paradise through his interactions with the Muslim writers and *notarii* at the court of Frederick II. After all, even though we do not know if the Notary had any knowledge of Arabic, this language was widely spoken at the court of Palermo, not only during the Norman period but also under the Swabians: Frederick II himself is said to have been fluent in Arabic. The vision of paradise presented in Giacomo's sonnet is, therefore, a co-produced idea, born from the interaction between Muslims and Christians, not merely on a theological level but also, we could say, within the "poetical realm".

## The "Co-produced" Sicilian Poetical School

These similarities and points of contact between the poetry of Arab and Italian poets are undoubtedly striking. And they did not escape the attention of later authors, who, since the 14th century, have reflected on the relationship between these two groups during the Norman and Swabian periods in Sicily and the potential contact between them. This debate is part of the broader discussion of the relationship of Arabic poetry to the European philosophical, literary, and cultural landscape (Nirenberg 2008).

In the case of Sicily, the discussion is initiated by the very poets who adopted forms, themes, and imagery from Sicilian lyric poetry: the Stilnovists. The Aretine Francesco Petrarca, in one of his later letters (*Seniles* 16, 2), claimed that the poetic language, style, imagery, and other elements of Sicilian and, consequently, Tuscan poetry were entirely derived from Greek and Latin literary traditions. He explicitly denied any mutual influence between Sicilian and Arab poets, emphasizing instead what he perceived as the excessive and blind formalism of Arabic poetry (Mouloud 2021).

The question continued to engage intellectuals in the following centuries. A starkly different perspective was offered by Giovanni Maria Barbieri, a Modenese courtier and intellectual, in his treatise *Dell'Origine della poesia in rima* ("On the Origin of Poetry in Rhyme"). While lamenting the excessive simplicity of the Qur'an, Barbieri argues that the distinct poetic language of Sicilian and Provençal poets had developed so precociously precisely because they had learned it "from the Arab nations."

Barbieri's work highlights how the debate on the origins of Sicilian poetry is often framed within the broader discussion of the relationship between Arabic literature and "European literatures." Within this tradition, we can consider the views of the Jesuit Juan Andrés (1740–1817). In his treatise *Dell'origine, progressi e stato attuale d'ogni letteratura* ("On the Origin, Development, and Current State of All Literature"), Andrés, challenging earlier French intellectuals such as Joachim du Bellay, argues that French literature borrowed not only the art of rhyme but also other elements from Arabic literature. Sismonde de Sismondi, in his *De la littérature du midi de l'Europe* ("On the Southern-European Literature"), expanded on the Jesuit's observations, emphasizing that the cultures of southern Europe, including Sicily, adopted various elements from Arab-Islamic culture. These borrowings extended beyond numbers, arithmetic, and even Greek philosophy to include poetry itself.

Considering the enduring vivacity of the centuries-old debate on the origins of Sicilian poetry, the absence of any mention of it in the *Storia della letteratura italiana* ("History of Italian Literature"), edited in 1870 by Francesco De Sanctis, scholar and Minister of Education of the newly formed Kingdom of Italy, might seem surprising. The *Storia* is the first systematic work which aimed at narrating the birth and development of Italian literature (and thus its language) up to the author's own time. In this account, the Sicilian school assumes a prominent role, as it represents the proto-history of Italian literature.

Yet, in the early chapters dedicated to Sicilian poets, De Sanctis deliberately silences any discussion of their connection with Arabic poetry, a relationship widely debated in earlier works and still a topic of debate – his contemporary Michele Amari was writing his *Storia dei musulmani di Sicilia* ("History of Sicilian Muslims") during the same period. This omission, however, is tied to the ideological purpose of De Sanctis's work. His *Storia* must be understood within the broader effort by politicians, scholars, and intellectuals to construct an "Italian identity" in the wake of the Risorgimento and national unification ("We have made Italy; now we must make the Italians," as statesman Massimo D'Azeglio famously remarked). In this unified narrative of the Italian language, there could be no space for external influences – except, perhaps, for some connections with troubadour poetry.

De Sanctis's model was long considered canonical in the study of Sicilian poetic production. In recent decades, however, scholars have revisited and highlighted the complex relationship between Arab-Muslim and Christian-Italian poets in Sicily under the Normans and Swabians. These studies have shed light on the adoption and influence of Arabic literature. Ibn Hamdis, for instance, lived only a century before Giacomo da Lentini making it plausible to assume that the former had some influence on the latter. Indeed, the Arab poets of previous generations were still highly regarded in the time of Frederick II. This perspective allows us to move beyond the schematic view that frames the Sicilian School as the independent and impermeable "prehistory" of Italian literature. Instead, the Sicilian School can be understood as having emerged, at least in part, under the influence of Sicilian Arabic poetry.

The recent studies conducted on Sicilian poetry during the Norman and Swabian periods have thus made it possible to challenge a somewhat "monolithic" model and to offer a broader and more nuanced perspective on this poetic school. This discussion can be enriched and further developed by considering the Sicilian poetic production as it arose from processes of co-production involving the diverse communities residing in the island. Far from being the product of a singular cultural lineage, the Sicilian School embodies an intricate web of interactions that characterized the Western Mediterranean during this period. We could even say that the Sicilian poetical school

epitomizes Italian poets coexisting, engaging in dialogue, and intermingling with their counterparts from different languages and religions. Arab Muslims, alongside Latin and Greek Christians, each played an integral role in shaping these poetic transformations. The lens of co-production not only offer a more dynamic and engaging framework but also resonate more closely with the historical reality of Sicily under Norman and Swabian rulers, a profoundly entangled and interconnected island.

## Further Reading


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