

Bryn Mawr College

## Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College

---

East Asian Languages and Cultures Faculty  
Research and Scholarship

East Asian Languages and Cultures

---

2003

### Symmetry and the Quest for Justice in Leonardo Sciascia's *Il Consiglio d'Egitto*

Shiamin Kwa

*Bryn Mawr College*, [skwa@brynmawr.edu](mailto:skwa@brynmawr.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://repository.brynmawr.edu/eastasian\\_pubs](https://repository.brynmawr.edu/eastasian_pubs)



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [East Asian Languages and Societies Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

---

#### Citation

Kwa, Shiamin. 2003. "Symmetry and the Quest for Justice in Leonardo Sciascia's *Il Consiglio d'Egitto* (Review)." *Italica* 80.3: 1-18.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College.

[https://repository.brynmawr.edu/eastasian\\_pubs/10](https://repository.brynmawr.edu/eastasian_pubs/10)

For more information, please contact [repository@brynmawr.edu](mailto:repository@brynmawr.edu).

## *Symmetry and the Quest for Justice in Leonardo Sciascia's Il Consiglio d'Egitto\**

---

"Ho trovato." (Leonardo Sciascia, *Una storia semplice*)

Such wilt thou be to me, who must  
Like th'other foot, obliquely run;  
Thy firmness makes my circle just,  
And makes me end where I begun. (John Donne)

Leonardo Sciascia's 1963 novel *Il Consiglio d'Egitto* begins with a lie. Because it is a novel written by Leonardo Sciascia, it is no ordinary lie, but one that marks the beginning of a series of inverted echoes on the same theme, inverted because the lies become increasingly louder and more defined as they travel further outward. The lie begins in this way: an ambassador from Morocco, Abdallah Mohamed ben Olman, is stranded in Sicily, and the viceroy Caracciolo takes advantage of his residence there to request an expert opinion on some Arabic texts. The only person on the island who understands both Italian and Arabic, and who can therefore serve as interpreter, is a down and out chaplain, Don Giuseppe Vella. However, as we learn from the very first page of this novel, one does not understand another just because both share a language. As Ben Olman reaches for a magnifying glass to examine the text, he makes a reference that Vella does not recognize:

"Ruscello congelato" disse mostrandola. Sorrideva: ch  aveva citato Ibn Hamdis, poeta siciliano, per omaggio agli ospiti. Ma, tranne don Giuseppe Vella, nessuno sapeva di arabo: e don Giuseppe non era in grado di cogliere il gentile significato che sua eccellenza aveva voluto dare alla citazione, n  di capire che si trattava di una citazione. Tradusse perci , invece che le parole, il gesto "La lente, ha bisogno della lente."<sup>1</sup>

Vella's lie could be understood as unintentional; that is, don Giuseppe, lacking the literary cultivation to appreciate ben Olman's allusion, translates to the best of his ability the meaning as he understands it. His next lie, however, is far from innocent; when ben Olman announces that the so-called precious text is just another ordinary biography of the prophet Mohammed, Vella triumphantly announces: "Si tratta di un prezioso codice: non ne esistono di simili nemmeno nei suoi paesi. Vi si racconta

## 2 SHIAMIN KWA

la conquista della Sicilia, i fatti della dominazione" (492). This can be no error of translation, nor a symptom of the divide between classes; the profundity of the lie deepens further still in the lines that follow. Ben Olman apologizes in Arabic, "Mi dispiace di aver dato una delusione a monsignore: ma le cose sono come sono" to which Vella thinks in response: "Eh no, le cose non sono come sono!" (492) And so begins a novel that takes up as its major themes the issues of fraud, creation, and interpretation, which will continue to echo throughout the novel and culminate in a final deadening silence.

*Il Consiglio d'Egitto* is composed of three parts, the first introduces all of the characters, but focuses primarily on Vella's forgery of two "histories" of Sicily and his motivations for that act, pointing out his desire to raise himself into the society that patronizes his project. Vella seems as much motivated by a desire for the comforts of this lifestyle as he is by the conviction that he has as much right to these luxuries, and the history that attaches to them, as the barons of Sicily whose fate is linked to his work. The question of class inequalities surfaces on the very first page of the novel, when Vella fails to recognize the allusion that would be known only by those of a certain status. In his efforts to make his "translation" most authentic, and therefore most persuasive, he befriends the young lawyer Francesco Paolo Di Blasi and Di Blasi's uncles in order to access their knowledge. As his knowledge accrues, his social circles widen, though it is in fact his supposed cultural ignorance that makes the aristocrats trust the veracity of his translation. The second part takes the form of a document, a letter written by Vella to the king, consigning the products of his "translation" to the crown for safekeeping once his work is complete. The final section of *Il Consiglio d'Egitto* marks Vella's decision to unmask himself and to reveal his crime. This section of the novel mainly details Di Blasi's own deception, which is one against the state. Inspired by the philosophers of the Enlightenment and the revolution in France, Di Blasi tries to redress the inequalities he perceives by fomenting a revolution. He is arrested, but refuses to name the other collaborators, even under extreme measures of torture. Ultimately, Di Blasi is sentenced to death by beheading, and his fellow collaborators hung; punishments made according to the social status of each of the accused men. Even in the method of his death, all of Di Blasi's hopes have been thwarted. This novel, with its historical emphasis and Enlightenment context, ostensibly has little in common with the modern-day *gialli* for which Sciascia is justly famous, and might seem like something of an anomaly among his works. In many ways, however, the novel is not an anomaly at all, sounding the same call heard in the majority of Sciascia's work: to examine facts closely, leaving no page, literally, unturned.

Sciascia's literary output during the more than 30 years of his career as a writer includes the genres of the *giallo* (detective thriller), the exploratory essay, and the historical novel. While literary historians have speculated

about Sciascia's turn away from his early preferred genre of the *giallo* to the exploratory essay until the end of his career, when he once again returned to the *giallo*, it would be inadequate to understand Sciascia's work exclusively as a simple trajectory of departures and returns. Some scholars emphasize Sciascia's commitment to the thought of Enlightenment writers and philosophers as the political theme that unites his writing and explains the relationship of *Consiglio d'Egitto* to his other works.<sup>2</sup> The thinkers of the Enlightenment, Sciascia's beloved Voltaire, Diderot, Courier, certainly do recur throughout his works criticizing society, whether they are societies of the eighteenth century or of twentieth century Sicily. *Il giorno della civetta* (1961) is a *giallo* demonstrating the frailty of reason in a world fraught with chaos, deceit and corruption as much as the historical novel set in the Settecento. *A ciascuno il suo*, which follows *Il Consiglio d'Egitto* by four years, is a *giallo* that chronicles the futility of its "hero"'s quest to implement reason in the solution of a crime, the solution of which is already known to everyone but him. This thematic similarity of reason thwarted in an unreasoning world, connected to Sciascia's belief in literature's uses for social and political action, makes *Il Consiglio d'Egitto* and its non-fictional counterpart, *Morte dell'inquisitore* (1964), the natural product of a writer concerned with the absence of reason in his world and convinced of the necessity of a commitment to social action on the part of a writer.

Most analyses of *Il Consiglio d'Egitto*, however, focus on its particularities as a historical novel rather than on its thematic similarities to his other works. Some scholars read it as an exposition of Sciascia's views about the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Others have read it as Sciascia's response to two other nearly contemporaneous novels also set in the eighteenth century, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's *Il Gattopardo* (1957) and Italo Calvino's *Il barone rampante* (1957); the general spirit of such discussions emphasize the difference between Sciascia's purposeful and active relationship to history and the purposeless and passive views of the other two novels.<sup>4</sup> While it is true that Sciascia's work, unlike Tomasi di Lampedusa's and Calvino's, certainly demonstrates the ways in which history intervenes into action, the three novels are strikingly similar in their final conclusion that actions fail to intervene with history. History and its relationship to truth was a topic that Sciascia himself spoke of in interviews with Marcelle Padovani collected in *Sicily as Metaphor*.<sup>5</sup> No wonder, then, that history is taken up by scholars as the predominant subject of the novel, often in relation to Sciascia's role as historian. Many have suggested that *Il Consiglio d'Egitto* is itself a metahistory, a history that comments upon itself.<sup>6</sup> As compelling as these varied observations on the relationship of the novel to history are, and as strikingly unavoidable the gestures to the *mise-en-abîme* made by a novel that shares the title of the forged book that is its subject, the comparison is imperfect. Vella is writing a history; he does not claim to be writing a historical fiction. Sciascia is not, Borges-style, claiming to write a history, but instead presents a novel set in a historical

period.<sup>7</sup> The difference is a significant one, stressing not the narrative aspects of history, but rather the historical truths of fiction. As Sciascia stated himself: "Yes, history lies, and its falsehoods envelop all the theories born of history in the same dust. And so it is that we discover a historical truth, not in a history textbook, but in the pages of a novel; not in a learned analysis, but between the lines of a novelistic description."<sup>8</sup> Here Sciascia's emphasis is less on an indictment of the work of history than it is on a redemption of the work of art as historically meaningful.

In speaking about the work of the writer, Sciascia noted that:

The writer . . . discloses the truth by deciphering reality and shedding light upon the incomprehensions that denature it; but in unveiling certain aspects of the real he may at the same time make things more obscure, for among the properties of writing is that of conveying certain obscurities. . . . There is, however, a difference between this obscurity and that of ignorance: it is no longer the obscurity of the unexpressed, of the shapeless, but the obscurity of the expressed and formulated. This is why I often employ the "discourse" of the detective story, a form of narrative aimed toward the truth of the facts and the indictment of the culprit, even if the culprit can't always be found.<sup>9</sup>

Rather than attempting to add to the scholarship on the elements of rationalist Enlightenment arguments in the novel, or on the novel's statements about history, this essay suggests a way of reading Sciascia's fiction along stylistic lines, which can be applied equally to his detective fiction as to this historical novel. *Il Consiglio d'Egitto* is a presentation of the same themes that preoccupied Sciascia in his *gialli*, employing the narrative techniques of his "discourse of obscurity" to elucidate these themes, representing not an anomaly but rather a continuation of an already established strategy of writing. Sciascia's narratives, as he states above, are always aimed towards an uncovering of the truth; yet, though the truth is revealed between the covers of the text, the indictment that is sourced within those covers has to be made beyond them. The investigator of reason usually does in fact uncover the truth, but only rarely is the indictment successfully carried out (in *Una storia semplice*, for example, when the carabinieri successfully defends himself against the true culprit), and reason *never* triumphs (even in *Una storia semplice*, the "truth" is completely covered over at story's end). While Sciascia has been described as decidedly pessimistic in his attitudes, based on his depictions of justice unachieved and reason thwarted, it is not because he believes that justice is impossible. Rather, it is because of his very belief that justice is possible that it is purposely withheld from his novels' resolutions.

This essay argues that Sciascia's "pessimism" is in fact a strategy used precisely to achieve the aims of uncovering truth and indicting corruption in the world *beyond* the text. The reader, not the characters, is ultimately

responsible in the quest for justice begun inside the novel. Sciascia's strategy is one of correspondence, indeed, of symmetry: from concrete aspects like characters, to abstract ones like themes and ideas, everything has its other side. More importantly, Sciascia takes pains to show these other sides and sets up parallels to instruct the reader. His is a fiction that puts the weight on the reader to comprehend allusions, to know to recognize an irony, to look for similarities with earlier scenes in the novel.<sup>10</sup> Such a reader relies on this correspondence, finds meaning in its symmetry, feels dissatisfied when confronted with any asymmetries, and will seek to make meaning (if only in thought) when the counterpart is missing. Such symmetries continue on every level in the novel: Di Blasi is mirrored by Vella; each character's point of view physically occupies a hemisphere of the text; and language, without which the novel could not exist, is taken up as a central theme of the novel, suggesting the necessary correspondence of words to meaning in creating understanding. *Il Consiglio d'Egitto*, as are so many of Sciascia's novels, is a model of symmetry; in which each aspect has its other side.<sup>11</sup>

There is only one exception in this formula: justice. As much as the quest for justice drives this novel, it is ultimately unrealized, and even defeated, by novel's end.<sup>12</sup> The imperfection might go unnoticed, save that it appears in a novel that has been training its reader to examine texts carefully; it begins, after all, with the act of looking closely at the *Consiglio d'Egitto* itself, an act which is ever present in the rest of the events in the novel. Di Blasi's utter defeat at the end of the novel has no other side, remaining unresolved; justice in his world, and indeed, in our own, is an entity not yet entirely present. In this way, the novel points outwards into our world, inciting in the *reader* the wish for justice; it is a wish that, because it is never fulfilled in the world of the text, pushes her to find its fulfillment in the world outside. Sciascia creates a reader who, in reading his novels, comes to depend on symmetry so much that she is urged to fulfill it herself when she finds a missing element or notices, to use Sciascia's words, the "other side."<sup>13</sup>

*Mind and Body:* "E del resto a che serve una testa che non ragiona?"

To begin talking about meaning and symmetry, then, we should begin with the most important pairing in Sciascia's fiction, and in this novel in particular: the distinction between mind and body. As noted earlier, Sciascia felt most comfortable in the company of the ideals of Enlightenment rationalist thought, and the novel's setting allows it to take up the intellectual debates of the time. One of the hallmarks of Enlightenment debate was the distinction made between the thinking subject and his physical body, what Gilbert Ryle would later call the "ghost in the machine." In the novel, man himself is referred to as a prison, "il carcere è dell'uomo; direi anzi che è nell'uomo" (624). It is an apt metaphor for the anxieties of Enlightenment thought, with the development of the Cartesian subject

## 6 SHIAMIN KWA

and the notion of a thinking mind that exists separately from the physical body. Sciascia offers a more complicated version of this duality, though a duality nonetheless; in his system, it is because everything has its counterpart that everything is compromised: each side shapes how the other side is understood. The sensual is as much a creation of the mental as the mind is afflicted by the body, and thus the emphasis on the relationship and conflicts between the two.

Consider two corresponding scenes that address the relationship between the physical and the psychological: Chapter Nine of Part One, and Chapter Eight of Part Three. Chapter Nine of Part One is composed of three pages that detail Di Blasi's relationship with his mistress, the Contessa, but which carries in its pages the issues of allusion, translation and association that we will explore later in this essay. The scene between Di Blasi and his mistress exquisitely details how much of the sensual relies on its correspondence to the "model" provided by the scene already represented by Boucher. The countess displays herself according to the miniature scene on the lid of a snuff-box thought to represent a Miss O'Murphy. The countess' pose is a conscious imitation:

Erano di moda i quadri viventi . . . la contessa ne componeva uno straordinario, a perfetta imitazione del quadro di Boucher, la tenue luce aiutando a pareggiare a quelli di mademoiselle O'Murphy i suoi anni. Due soli elementi: una *dormeuse* e la propria nudità. Non si poteva desiderare quadro vivente più splendido, imitazione più precisa. (535)

The scene plays on the relationship between representation and subject, in which new subjects try to recreate representations of the original subjects, experiencing their pleasures through their knowledge of the original. Thus even the most primal of acts is bound in a web of connections, allusions to art and other desired women, and the most compromising of all, private profit: the Countess prevails on Di Blasi to intervene in Vella's translation project to protect her husband's property holdings. The body, again, is tied to the machinations of the mind, animated not by instinct but by calculation.

Parallel to this chapter, which allowed a glimpse of Di Blasi in the section of the novel primarily devoted to Vella and his scholarly creations, Chapter Eight of Part Three allows a glimpse of Vella in the section of the novel primarily focused on Di Blasi and his physical decline. The beginning of Chapter Eight, like its matched pair, focuses on what could quickly be dismissed as a tangential contemplation of the sensual. Yet this scene functions in multiple ways, once more reinforcing the comparison between Vella and Di Blasi, but also the correlation between the body and mind, in terms of cleansing. As Vella enjoys a bath, he recalls the Church's warnings against such an indulgence while imagining the eyes of a woman on his

Sciascia's *Il Consiglio d'Egitto* 7

body, and "le mani di lei, le mani, mossero intorno al suo corpo l'acqua" (589). The bath, in fact, is described as "una piccola morte: il suo essere vi si scioglieva, il corpo diventava una spuma di sensazioni" (589) that simultaneously evokes the French term for orgasm, suggests the pleasure felt in experiencing the disappearance of the body, and invokes, but distances itself from, the very real "pena di morte" that will conclude the novel. Again, physical pleasure is enhanced by the workings of the mind: the pleasure of the water is supplemented by the consciousness of committing a forbidden act and the thought of unknown eyes and hands. Significantly, it is following this bath, and a cup of coffee (another indulgence) that Vella goes to Monsignore's home to reveal his deception. Physical pleasure is described in both scenes as being enhanced by what occurs in the mind; the mind controls the body's experiences, but the body, too, can affect the mind.

Sciascia's novel just as deftly turns the argument around to demonstrate the body's influence on the mind; Di Blasi, who had previously believed in the separation of body from mind, ruefully finds that the theologians who believed this have never been subject to torture. Despite the fact that he ultimately "survives" the torture by relying on poetry to distract his mind, the experience alters his previously held beliefs:

Pensava a quei vermi che stanno interrati nell'umido: tagliati in due, ciascuna delle due parti continua a vivere; e così si sentiva, una parte del suo corpo viva soltanto del dolore, l'altra della mente. Solo che l'uomo non è un verme, anche i piedi appartengono alla mente: e quando i giudici l'avrebbero di nuovo chiamato, avrebbe dovuto riconquistare questa parte del suo corpo ormai così lontana, quasi recisa; comandare ai piedi di posarsi a terra, di muoversi. (619)

What sustains him through the crimes against his body may be the power of his mind, but the experiences of torture provide direct denial of rationalist beliefs in the autonomy of the mind. Though it is evident from Di Blasi's example that the mind can indeed control the body's actions, its authority is incomplete and often resisted; in fact, its pain is the ultimate proof of torture's crimes against reason. Di Blasi thinks ruefully about his previous arguments against torture: "hai risposto in nome della ragione, della dignità: ora devi rispondere col tuo corpo, soffrirla nella carne, nella ossa, nei nervi" (609). The arguments made by the mind are ultimately tested and proven on the body.

These correspondences between mind and body take on literal meaning in the discussions held concerning Di Blasi's impending execution by beheading. In his death, his head will literally be separated from his body, making distinctions between mind and matter, but also distinctions of class. The denouement of gossip in Sciascia's novel centers on a debate between varying opinions about the punishment and its significance:



## 8 SHIAMIN KWA

"Bella distinzione. . . . Per conto mio, preferirei sapere che il mio corpo resta intero: il pensiero di stare dentro al tabuto tagliato in due mi farebbe stare male."

"E come lo faresti questo pensiero?"

"Con l'anima, lo farei."

"L'anima non ha pensieri: sta ad arrostirsi e guarda."

"Guarda che?"

"Le *vastasate* dei vivi. . . . O il niente che è niente."

"Però con la manna si muore di colpo: loro anche in questo si pigliano il boccone migliore."

"Ma si resta senza testa." (629)<sup>14</sup>

The discussion raises issues of perception and of consciousness, debates that haunted the rationalist philosophers of the eighteenth century, who questioned the source of thought as well as of the soul. Did the mind continue after death, knowing that its head had been separated from the body, or would it even matter, since it was now separated from the body? Issues of philosophical debate may make for casual banter among Di Blasi's peers, but they of course become the real stakes in Di Blasi's planned revolution. As the same commentators remark on the "justness" of the sentence:

"Che *lui* la pena più forte l'avrà da questa distinzione che il Tribunale ha voluto fare. . . . Credeva nell'uguaglianza, si batteva per essa: ed ecco che gli danno la mannaia, e ai suoi compagni la forca."

"E allora la sentenza è, anche da questo punto di vista, giustissima: la pena deve contenere, in casi come questo, il rovescio delle idee di cui il soggetto si è reso colpevole." (630)

And so the uglier side of correspondences is calculated and meted out; the punishment is considered fair from the point of view of equality. The "equality" that Di Blasi sought is replaced by a death sentence that equates levels of punishment with levels of class; matching exactly the punishment to the motives of the crime.

*Words and How They Mean:* "E si può continuare a vivere senza questi titoli?"

It could be argued that all of the events in the novel occur as a result of struggles between factions over the control of the meanings of words. Inasmuch as language has the power to sustain, as the poetry of Dante and Ariosto keeps Di Blasi from succumbing to torture, it can be manipulated to control others. The act that gives its title to the novel is of course the act of translation that demonstrates the complications of language. Vella's translation is undoubtedly a forgery; on multiple levels, he compromises both language and content: "non faceva in effetti che trasformare un testo

arabo in un testo maltese trascritto in caratteri arabi, una vita di Maometto in arabo in una storia di Sicilia in maltese" (507). The novel suggests, however, that all correspondences are in some ways compromised, as in the titles of the barons and their desire to place themselves in the "history" of Vella's Councils. This section of the essay will consider various forms of "languages" or "codes" by which communication is effected, and their reliance on correspondence for meaning.

The novel emphasizes perspective in the apprehension of meaning, suggesting that there is no objective "meaning" or "truth" within the scope of the novel; everything is compromised by one's status in determining meaning, with the privilege of interpretation only allowed to those with "authority." Indeed, in Chapter Three of Part One, when the pompous poet Meli suggests his suspicion that Vella may be making up his translation, Monsignor Airoidi refutes him with an argument based on culture and status:

"E lascio considerare a voi: ci troviamo di fronte ad un uomo senza cultura, sprovveduto . . ." si voltò al Meli "Voi, che lo conoscete bene, potete dirlo: ritenete che Giuseppe Vella abbia conoscenza di lettere, di storia?"

"Una bestia" abbondò il Meli.

"E dunque come può, un uomo simile, costruire dal niente tutto un periodo di storia che, bene o male, io sono in grado di verificare? Come può, un uomo simile, tramare un imbroglio che sarebbe difficoltosissimo allo stesso Gregorio? . . . Credete a me: Vella l'arabo lo conosce. E vi dico di più: conosce soltanto l'arabo, nel nostro volgare non è nemmeno capace di metter su una lettera." (505)

Debates about knowing and authority are matched in Chapter 6 of Part 3 when Vella "triumphs" over Hager, a scholar who tries to challenge the veracity of his text and only to be defeated in humiliation. The very characteristics that exclude Vella from suspicion allow him to flaunt his authority in a display of "truth" that only Di Blasi is able to see through.

Indeed, parity can only be understood when one first is able to notice distinctions, places where one has more or less than another. Perhaps Di Blasi is able to see the distinctions — despite his uncle's conviction that lawyers can no longer tell the difference between true and false (585) — because of his attentiveness to language and his belief in the need for equality in language. In a telling moment in the novel, Di Blasi comments on the distinctions attached to common words, which may seem interchangeable, but which take on quite different meanings according to who speaks and who is spoken to:

"Io vedo l'uguaglianza. Solo che noi stiamo qui, in ozio, a goderci il fresco, ben vestiti, ben pettinati; e loro lavorano."

"E vi par niente?"

## 10 SHIAMIN KWA

“Niente del tutto. A meno che non vogliate guardare la cosa in rapporto alla giustizia: e allora convengo che tra noi e loro ci sono gravissime, vergognose differenze. . . . Dico vergognose per noi. . . . Ma nel loro essere uomini, nel nostro, nessuna differenza: sono uomini come voi, come me. . . . Lasciate che cadano quegli orribili nomi di mio e di tuo. . . .”

“E che sarò io, senza il mio?”

“Un uomo. . . . E che non vi basta?”

“Ma lo sono di più con le mie terre; con le mie case. . . . E voi lo siete di più con la rendita che vi viene da vostro padre, da vostra madre. . . .”

“Lo siamo di più nel senso che in grazia di una rendita stiamo qui a discutere del nostro essere uomini, a parlare dei libri che abbiamo letto, a godere della bellezza. . . . Ma basta considerare che questo nostro *più* è pagato da altri uomini: ed ecco che siamo nel *meno*. . . .” (527)

Di Blasi’s argument emphasizes the way that a word’s meaning changes situationally depending on the context in which it is used; “più” quickly changes to “meno” in the way that it is understood, and even the word “uomo” is contested depending on one’s place in society. For Di Blasi, then, justice must be addressed in the very foundations of language. Language is the point of departure in reducing the differences between the men who work the land and the men who own the land.

The problems of language and the distance between what is said and what is meant haunt Di Blasi not only in public situations, but in intimate ones. Recalling the chapter on Di Blasi and the Contessa, we might note another play of language:

François Boucher: *boucher, boucherie, vucciria. Vucciria*. Il mistero che è in ogni lingua: per un francese i quadri di questo pittore, così luminosi, così sensuali, così pieni di gioia, forse avranno una sfumatura, appena una sfumatura, di macelleria, di *vucciria*. Io, pur conoscendo il francese, sto pensandoci ora: il nome Boucher fino a questo momento è stato per me incanto, desiderio. . . . (536)

Boucher and butchery are linked through coincidences of language in a love affair that alludes to the *Arabian Nights*, among other foreign texts, demonstrating the suggestiveness of correspondence; the more that a mind knows, the more capable it will be of making meaning.<sup>15</sup> Di Blasi’s mind immediately forms links that may seem haphazard, but this passage suggests that even these coincidences of language may ultimately contain a core of meaning, depending on the mind of the observer. His objection is not to the fact that the mind makes associations; indeed, as we see in this variation on Boucher, his mind delights rather in finding correspondences. What he objects to, what drives him to his quest for justice, is the fact that the minds of his peers make correspondences that are unequal.

They are incapable of perceiving men as men because of biases of class, and have used these biases to make their own definitions the only legal ones.

Vella seems the character most suited to the art of association, both literal and figurative; outside of the privileges of class, he has learned to profit from creating his own correspondences, knowing how two seemingly disparate entities can be manipulated to relate to each other. Before becoming drawn into this project of "translation" he has made a living as a numerologist. In this case he reads and interprets dreams, a "smorfatore di sogni, dai sogni che gli raccontavano trascoglieva gli elementi che potevano assumere una certa coerenza di racconto, e le immagini che nel racconto prendevano risalto egli traduceva in numeri" (494). Images are translated into the language of lottery numbers here, and bring to the fore the pervasiveness of correspondence in every transaction. Profit is again implicated with the manipulation of correspondence: the theme of gambling recurs throughout the novel. After all, what is Vella's translation if not a gamble for power and luxury?

The vocabulary of the card game is frequently evoked in the novel, as when Vella eyes the inspector who has come to investigate the supposed theft of his translation "come stessero a tavolino, le carte della primiera in mano" (562). The gambling on the lottery, patronized by the lower classes, is mirrored by the endless card games of *biribissi* played by the aristocrats. As Vella enters these circles he is able to observe the men at their games, and indeed witnesses how arrangements of winning or losing cards translate into gains or losses of property:

Su una sola carta, un solo numero, a volte si dissolveva un feudo: don Giuseppe che non mancava d'immaginazione, vedeva su quella carta, su quel numero, vivida affiorare la piccola mappa del feudo: la campagna vera, dura, concreta di redditi, senza idillio, senz'arcadia. (504)

Whereas Vella once transformed dreams of concrete objects into numbers for gaming, these numbered cards in game are transformed into concrete pieces of property. In a neat move, Sciascia again emphasizes the gamble by following this scene of cards with that of Vella's construction of his false codex, using the same language associated with cards:

Per cominciare, aveva dislegato il codice foglio per foglio. Il mazzo dei fogli lo aveva accuratamente frammischiato, proprio come un mazzo di carte da giuoco: ch  era per l'appunto un giuoco, il suo, di grande abilit , di grande azzardo; e perci  non aveva trascurato il tocco, alla fine, di tagliare, a propiziazione, il mazzo. (506)

This geometric style, in which the scenes are set up against each other and contain within them musings on the art of correspondence, reiterates the

## 12 SHIAMIN KWA

presence of symmetry of all sorts. It is reinforced again near the end when Vella reflects on life itself, using the language of the lottery, the *cinquina* referring to the five winning lottery numbers:

La vita è davvero un sogno: l'uomo vuole averne coscienza e non fa che inventare cabale; ogni tempo la sua cabala, ogni uomo la sua. . . . E facciamo costellazioni di numeri, del sogno che è la vita: per la ruota di Dio o per la ruota della ragione. . . . E, tutto sommato, più facile finisca col venir fuori una cinquina sulla ruota della ragione che su quella di Dio: il sogno di una cinquina dentro il sogno della vita. (626)

For men like Vella, who choose to remain aloof from, and perhaps contemptuous of, the injustices in the world, life may be a dream; but the vision at the end of the novel of Di Blasi going to his execution, which touches even Vella, demands more than complacency.

*Truth by the Book*: La vita ha tante imposture che la vostra ha almeno il merito di essere allegra e anche . . . utile.

The sections above demonstrate how symmetry has been used structurally, when Sciascia sets scenes against each other, or juxtaposes different moments in the novel around similar themes. This section will closely examine the method of symmetry as it is used thematically: specifically, it will examine the overlapping of the two main characters' experiences in the novel with regard to the interlaced notions of truth, falseness, construction and destruction, which all tie together in the very image of a book. The mutual sympathy and admiration felt between the two men is clearly sourced from their resonating experiences; they understand each other's motivations and each senses a shared kinship.<sup>16</sup> The dualities that surface here of truth/falsehood and construction/destruction are both tied to Vella's creation of Sicily's false history, set against the backdrop of many destructions of what are considered more "legitimate" books.

Di Blasi and Vella both make statements about the status of history and its susceptibility to compromise and biases; each man's discussion evokes the same metaphor of a tree.<sup>17</sup> When Vella convinces his assistant to continue his work, he argues most eloquently both that history is imposture and that it excludes, neglecting the "leaves" of those of their and their fathers' class:

Forse che esistono le generazioni di foglie che sono andate via da quell'albero, un autunno appresso all'altro? Esiste l'albero, esistono le sue foglie nuove: poi anche queste foglie se ne andranno; e a un certo punto se ne andrà anche l'albero: in fumo, in cenere. La storia delle foglie, la storia dell'albero. Fesserie! Se ogni foglia scrivesse la sua storia, se quest'albero scrivesse la sua, allora diremmo: eh sì, la storia. . . . Vostro

Sciascia's *Il Consiglio d'Egitto* 13

nonno ha scritto la sua storia? E vostro padre? E il mio? E i nostri avoli e trisavoli? (533–34)

This “tree” of history resurfaces again, drawing once more on the values of truth and falseness in Di Blasi’s mind, when Di Blasi tells his uncles that he believes Vella’s translation is a forgery, though he does not think it a crime but rather the parody of a crime, as history is indeed imposture (594). He, too, uses the image of the tree to explain:

La menzogna è più forte della verità. Più forte della vita. Sta alle radici dell’essere, frondeggia al di là della vita. L’oscuro stormire degli alberi lungo la strada di San Martino si propagò alle più oscure fronde della menzogna. ‘Le radici, le fronde!': con disgusto spesso si sorprende a pensare per immagini. (586)

This time the emphasis is on the roots of the tree, the society based on barons and a rigid class structure that paralyzes the possibility of equality and justice, making it impossible for the “leaves” to do anything but perpetuate falseness. This symmetrical juxtaposition suggests that the two men are not ethical opposites, but differ only in levels of self-interest; though Vella has no ideals and Di Blasi holds himself to the highest ideals, these scenes suggest that the two subscribe to the same basic philosophy. Perceiving the inequality of class, from opposite levels of status, they both question the veracity of a history that justifies this inequality.

As the creation of the book challenges the distinction between true and false, the government sanctioned seizure and destruction of books is similarly an act submerged in ambiguities. Following the “discovery” of these Arabic texts, the reader learns that Caracciolo has ordered the burning of the books of the Inquisition, which Di Blasi interprets as a good sign: “Non è stata una *vastasata*: il marchese Caracciolo ha voluto dare a tutti il senso preciso, il preciso avvertimento che i tempi stanno per mutare; e che di un certo passato bisogna fare come della roba appestata: un rogo” (501). Soon, however, the novel will seem to overflow with one *rogo* after another, in the burning of not only books but papers, all to different ends and different significance. Indeed, it is quite literally the smell of these burning books that inspires Vella to use his translation to the same effect, to overturn the barons’ “rights” to their land:

Il Caracciolo stava tentando di incenerire tutta la dottrina giuridica feudale, tutto quel complesso di dottrine che la cultura siciliana aveva in più secoli, ingegnosamente, con artificio, elaborato per i baroni, a difesa dei loro privilegi: una giustapposizione di elementi storici sapientemente isolati, definiti, interpretati, e ne era venuto fuori un corpo giuridico fino a quel momento inattaccabile. (519)

It is striking indeed that destruction and construction are juxtaposed so many times here, pointing to the close connection between the two, and both men's awareness of the allusive powers of books; we have already seen how the recognition of texts demonstrates cultural status, how allusion is used in flirtations, how poetry distracts the mind from bodily agony. All these moments must be recalled when confronted with the conflagrations of books. In a final complication of the image of book burning, Sciascia depicts the new viceroy monsignor Lopez making similar plans for another *rogo*, as he confides to Airoidi his paranoid view of the proliferation of books that escape regulation (579).

The smell of burning paper evokes both ideas and memories, in the characters of the novel as well as in the mind of the attentive reader. This section closes with a final pairing, which again involves Vella and Di Blasi in matching scenes. Vella, in the second chapter of Part Three, has a presentiment that he will be found out, and engineers the supposed theft of the original documents. He secrets the texts in his niece's house before calling for help, and burns in his kitchen any other evidence of his activities (561). When his house is in fact searched, the inspectors find nothing that incriminates him. Shortly afterwards in the novel, Di Blasi is betrayed by a conspirator with a guilty conscience, and the police come to his house, too, to seize him. His mother, feeling a presentiment as well, tries to destroy what she supposes is incriminating evidence. As she is completely unaware of her son's activities and does not know that there is nothing compromising in the home, it is the smell of burnt paper in the room that serves as the most damning evidence against his guilt (601). At the moment of his arrest Di Blasi kicks at his books of Diderot, thinking to himself "E anche per te, ora; non ti servono più, ammesso che ti siano mai serviti; che ti siano mai serviti se non per ridurti a questa condizione" (602). Perhaps even more than the moving scene of Di Blasi's execution, this futile aggression against the books he loved captures the poignancy of his defeat; whereas the absence of evidence in his home incriminates him, the many ideals and arguments he has embraced as truths worth fighting for do nothing to protect him.

*Conclusion: The altra parte and Looking on the Other Side*

In Sciascia's brilliant *giallo*, *A ciascuno il suo*, the nosy professor Laurana becomes embroiled in an investigation that is none of his business when his attention is drawn to the back of a mysterious note. His clue is the glimpse of a word from which the novel takes its title, "Unicuique," a clue that will significantly reduce the number of suspects in the entire village to two. Laurana says "Stavo leggendo il foglio dall'altra parte" and the *maresciallo* lowers his hand to prevent Laurana from continuing to do so, to which Laurana responds "forse sarebbe bene che a questo modo la leggesse anche lei."<sup>18</sup> This scene, which incorporates the call to look at the other side,

Sciascia's *Il Consiglio d'Egitto* 15

suggesting a new way to read, is an echo of an earlier moment of revelation in *Il Consiglio d'Egitto*. It is the moment when Vella reveals his deception to his patron:

"Vostra eccellenza deve solo avere la bontà di esaminarlo bene. . . . Con quell'attenzione, voglio dire, che finora non si è degnato di dedicargli."  
 "Ma . . ." monsignor Airoidi lo guardò in faccia: non capiva, aspettava una spiegazione.  
 "Basta semplicemente che vostra eccellenza metta contro luce una pagina qualsiasi. . . . Ecco, questa. . . . Un po' in contro luce. . . . Il filo della carta, la grana. . . . La dicitura, insomma."  
 Monsignore eseguì: e come era di vista debole e, al momento piuttosto confuso, lesse "a v o n e g."  
 "Vostra eccellenza" disse l'abate con calma, persino con indulgenza "ha letto all'incontrario: la filigrana dice Genova."  
 Monsignore boccheggìò, come un moribondo esalò "Genova" in un soffio.  
 "Questa carta" disse l'abate "presumo sia stata fabbricata a Genova intorno al 1780: io l'ho comprata qualche anno dopo qui a Palermo." (590–91)

The truth of Vella's deception was thus always present, just never noticed. The two scenes are identical: there is a piece of paper with writing on it, both times the information is literally located *in* the paper, but not contained in the text of the writing itself. The person holding the paper is urged to "read" it more carefully.

These two identical moments are crucial to understanding Sciascia's fiction. It is a fiction that replicates that motion; it too comes to the reader in the form of pages with writing on them, which call out for a closer reading, for looking at things from all sides, for imagining the possibilities of a message held not within those words but somewhere else. It is only then that the reader can make out the faint traces that, once noticed, become impossible to ignore: reason and justice are absent in this world. Sciascia, speaking about his state of mind after reading Pirandello explained:

Who am I, what am I, how do other people see me, what are other people like, how can I talk to others if they know nothing about me and I know nothing about them and nothing about myself as well? — these questions thrust me into isolation and solitude. To emerge from such a condition . . . I clutched at reason, at *the hidden other side of things*, using the rational methods I'd encountered in Diderot, Courier, Manzoni. (emphasis mine)<sup>19</sup>

The author looks on the hidden other side, and in doing so upholds the philosophies of those men whose writing emphasized the power of reason; rationalism can only be functional when one knows where to look. With reason clutched firmly and an awareness of this hidden side, the reader too is armed for emergence from the stupor of isolation. He, unlike these



characters, can engage with an active world, noticing the ugliness of imbalances and seeking to right them. Sciascia's final novel, *Una storia semplice*, published after his death in 1989, is ignited by a strange phone call followed by a supposed suicide, the suspicion of which is raised by some writing on a piece of paper. They are the words "Ho trovato." and they comprise an unfinished sentence, marked with a period at the end. It is not the words themselves but the addition of the punctuation that raises the investigator's suspicion, causing him to wonder what is missing from the sentence. It suggests, again, that we must be vigilant in our awareness of anomaly, of unexpected detail, of missing objects, of hidden meanings. Aware, too, of the unfinished sentence: especially since it is the one we must finish ourselves.

SHIAMIN KWA  
*Harvard University*

#### NOTES

\*I would like to thank the editor and the two anonymous readers for their insightful and helpful comments, and Lino Pertile for sharing his enthusiasm in Sciascia.

<sup>1</sup>Leonardo Sciascia, *Il Consiglio d'Egitto* (Milan: Einaudi, 1963). Quotations are used from the reprint edition, with foreword by Claude Ambroise, *Leonardo Sciascia Opere 1956-1971*, vol. 1, (Milano: Bompiani, 1990) 491. All future references to the novel will be numbered in the text.

<sup>2</sup>Robert S. C. Gordon, "A Neo-Rationalist Tendency in the Field of the Literary Intellectual in 1970s Italy: Vittorini, Sciascia, Ginzburg," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 6.2 (2001): 256.

<sup>3</sup>Sciascia himself likened his efforts to Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* in the portrayal of history and the relationship between literature and history. See JoAnn Cannon, *Postmodern Italian Fiction: The Crisis of Reason in Calvino, Eco, Sciascia, Malerba* (London: Associated UP, 1989) for more details.

<sup>4</sup>Tom O'Neill, "Rewriting the Risorgimento in Sicily: Vincenzo Consolo's *Il sorriso dell'ignoto marinaio*," *Literature and Film in the Historical Dimension. Selected Papers from the 15th Florida State University Conference on Literature and Film*, ed. John D. Simons (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1994) 13-31 contrasts Tomasi di Lampedusa's unchanging Sicily with the revolutionary potential of *Il Consiglio*, but mentions the complete neutralization of Di Blasi's attempts at revolution only in passing. Joseph Farrell, *Leonardo Sciascia* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1995) links the novel to Sciascia's belief in the importance of historical context, counter to the vision of an impassive hero *Il Gattopardo*. Claude Ambroise, in comparing the work to Calvino's *Il barone rampante*, makes elegant observations about similarities between both novels, but ultimately points to the difference in their attitudes towards history: whereas Calvino's hero, Cosimo, dies a natural death and experiences the Revolution as another event, Sciascia's hero crumbles under the weight of history. In Claude Ambroise, "Deux images du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: *Il barone*

Sciascia's *Il Consiglio d'Egitto* 17

*rampante et Il consiglio d'Egitto*," Italo Calvino. *Imaginaire et rationalité*, Paper presented at the Colloquium on Italo Calvino, 19–20 November, 1986, ed. Aurore Frasson-Marin (Genève: Slatkine, 1991) 21–33.

<sup>5</sup>Leonardo Sciascia, *Sicily as Metaphor: Conversations Presented by Marcelle Padovani*, trans. James Marcus (Marlboro, VT: Marlboro, 1994), orig. publ. in French as *La Sicile comme métaphore* (Paris: Stock, 1979).

<sup>6</sup>Giuseppe Traina, *In un destino di verità. Ipotesi su Sciascia* (Milano: La Vita Felice, 1999), notes the departures that Sciascia makes from the historical source material that he used (primarily the historical accounts of Scinà for Vella's story, as well as Villabianca's diaries for Di Blasi's) as a commentary on the historian's relationship to history and, in kind, the writer's responsibilities as historian, identifying Vella as Sciascia's alter-ego. Cannon suggests that Sciascia draws the reader's attention to the "epistemological problem of the nature and limits of historical discourse" by making the contesting written histories the subject of his novel. See Cannon 57. A similar observation is also made by Massimo Onofri in *Storia di Sciascia* (Bari: Laterza, 1994). Carol Springer writes that Vella's "Council of Sicily" and "Council of Egypt" function as a *mise-en-abîme* of "the problem of authenticity in historical narrative" to draw the reader's attention to the duplicity of Sciascia's own work, Carol Springer, "History, Fantasy and Fraud: The Status of Historical Representation in Sciascia's *Il consiglio d'Egitto*," *Italica* 66.2 (1989): 177.

<sup>7</sup>*Morte dell'Inquisitore* (1964) would be a more appropriate candidate for talking about Sciascia's writing of history. See Cannon for a discussion of the texts in relation to each other, or Vittorio Sciuti Russi, ed., *Il "tenace concetto." Leonardo Sciascia, Diego La Matina e l'Inquisizione in Sicilia*, Papers from the Convegno di studi Racalmuto, 20–21 November 1994 (Caltanissetta-Roma: Salvatore Sciascia, 1996).

<sup>8</sup>Sciascia, *Metaphor* 91.

<sup>9</sup>Sciascia, *Metaphor* 97.

<sup>10</sup>Indeed, one is reminded here that the reader is expected to do better than Vella has at the beginning of the novel.

<sup>11</sup>I do not mean, however, that there is only one way to read the novel, but want only to emphasize its precision of style. For an exhaustive presentation of a semiotic reading of the novel, refer to a work like Anna Maria Toti, *Leonardo Sciascia: la scrittura investigatrice (Analisi semiotica de Il Consiglio d'Egitto)* (Genova: Basilisco, 1988).

<sup>12</sup>I am not convinced by Jones' claim that: "Di Blasi's vision of the world's linear progress towards a better future is patently wrong, and yet the message of this book is not one of despair. The rational, principled approach of Di Blasi, inadequate at this stage as a tool for sweeping changes, has sown a seed in the mind of Vella, and even affects, at a subliminal level, the brutalized personality of the executioner." Verina Jones, "Leonardo Sciascia," *Writers and Society in Contemporary Italy. A Collection of Essays*, ed. Michael Caesar and Peter Hainsworth (New York: St. Martin's, 1984) 252. Unlike Jones, I find that despite the fact that Vella indeed feels true sympathy for Di Blasi and horror at how he has changed, this is not evidence enough to me of a newfound determination to commit himself to social action. I do feel, however, that the seed is sown in the mind of the reader.

<sup>13</sup>Certainly he is not the only author writing technically balanced works; one might compare him to Graham Greene, whose work is similarly precise in structure and frequently takes up moral order as its theme. Greene's moral dilemmas, however, are played

## 18 SHIAMIN KWA

out within the realm of the text itself, often narrated by the first person narrator who looks back on the story in self-condemning guilt, as in *The Quiet American* and *The End of the Affair* or the agent of moral order appears within the text itself to carry out justice herself, as in *Brighton Rock*.

<sup>14</sup>This denouement of gossip or private conversation is an interesting technique employed in many of Sciascia's *gialli*, allowing insight into the inner workings of the characters at story's end. See *A ciascuno il suo*, for example, where the idle conversation reveals how much of the truth was known to all.

<sup>15</sup>This resonates with networks of allusion in other works; in particular, Sciascia refers to Dostoevsky's *The Idiot in Porte aperte*, which surfaces in an argument against capital punishment, a theme in *Il Consiglio* as well. This allusion resurfaces at the end of *Il Consiglio* with mention of another *Idiota*, but Dostoevsky's could not have been possible here, as it antedates the novel's setting by nearly a century. The allusion is to Nicholas di Cusa, whose concerns also involved debates on mind, body and soul, thus resonating with arguments in this and other novels. For more on the death penalty in Sciascia, consult the proceedings in Italo Mereu, ed., *La morte come pena in Leonardo Sciascia. Da Porte aperte all'abolizione della pena di morte*, Proceedings from Seminario internazionale di studi tenutosi a Firenze l'8 febbraio 1997 (Milano: La Vita Felice, 1997).

<sup>16</sup>See Traina for more on Sciascia's departure from Scinà's description of Vella in his creation of a more sympathetic and compassionate character.

<sup>17</sup>Refer to Ambroise, "Deux images" for a fascinating reading of the etymology of "codex" and its relationship to the image of a tree.

<sup>18</sup>Leonardo Sciascia, *A ciascuno il suo* (Torino: Einaudi, 1967), reprint, with foreword by Claude Ambroise, in *Leonardo Sciascia Opere 1956-1971*, vol. 1 (Milano: Bompiani, 1990), 785.

<sup>19</sup>Sciascia, *Metaphor* 18-19.