

Carlo STASI, *Leucàsia, the Legend, Lecce, Capone 2022, 2023*, pp. 109.

Thirty years have passed since the Salento literary “legend” of *Leucasia*, the fairytale, the fabulous “story” set on the Cape of Leuca at the bottom of Apulia (the “Heel” of the Italian “Boot”) was conceived, invented and written by Carlo Stasi in summer 1992.

In these 30 years the story of Leucasia, Aristula and Melisso created by Stasi’s imagination and mistakenly considered a “popular” legend, has been around the world and has had several attempts at imitation and plagiarism and nowadays has reached its seventh edition and second re-printing with English translation parallel text, by Sabina Parisi (Ottawa University).

On 22nd August 2013, on the square in front of the Monumental Waterfall of the Apulian Aqueduct, the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the first edition (in 1993) in the volume *Leucàsia. Tales, legends and poems of land, sea and love ...* (with preface by the well-known critic Vincenzo Guarracino), printed by Arti Grafiche Levante in Presicce (which later became, not a case, Editrice Leucasia).

The book was reprinted twice in 1996 and once more in 2001, until, in 2008, the expanded version of the legend was included, with 6 other fictional stories and legends, in the volume *Leucasia and the Two Sisters. Stories and Legends of Salento* (Mancarella, Cavallino) reprinted in 2012.

It was in 1992 that Carlo Stasi, fascinated by reading Maria Corti’s *Il Canto delle Sirene (The Sirens’ Song)*, came up with the idea of inventing the story of Leucàsia, an imaginative Ulysses-like siren, whose whiteness of the skin would have given the name to Leuca (from the Greek *leukòs*, white).

In that legend he, for the first time, tells the story of the two points of the Cape that embrace the bay of Leuca which, originally, in the creative fiction, were two lovers (Aristula and Melisso) whose bodies are finally petrified by the envious siren Leucàsia (punished in turn with the loss of her voice), thus becoming the current Punta Ristola and Punta Mèliso.

When Maria Corti read the story she “fell in love with it” (as Giuliana Coppola writes).

In an interview with Maria Rosaria De Lumé, Stasi explains the difference between the first version (the short one) and the second:

Over the years the legend has grown in my hands, adding details and much more, like entering the mermaid’s mind, probing her feelings, emotions, passions and thoughts, and so I tried to make a mermaid “human”.

And he adds:

The difference lies above all in the second part, in the psychological deepening of the character, whose dissatisfaction will lead her not only to consider her own situation,

but the siren (a semi-divinity) even comes to envy ordinary women who can love and procreate, in a word give life, while she does not have the possibility of loving or of being loved, much less of procreating: with the enchantment of her song, she only can give death! When she completely loses her voice she has no more reason to live...”.

Today, to those twenty years, we must add another ten, because it has been thirty years that this extraordinary story “walks” triumphantly, not only in print, but also on social networks and on the internet (even if often trivially summarized and forgetting to cite the author).

As evidence of its success, the story inspired the sculptor Mario Calcagnile who, in 2002, sculpted a statue of the siren now placed at the base of the Monumental Waterfall of Leuca; it gave rise to ballets, but also to clumsy attempts at imitation bordering on plagiarism; it was also read and studied in the “reading projects” of schools; finally it induced tourists and schoolchildren to visit the “places of Leucàsia”.

Yes, because Leucasia, introducing herself to Melisso, proudly states:

“My name is Leucasia and this is my sea!”.

And Melisso, with equal pride, in turn replies:

“My name is Melisso and this is my land!”

And this Sea and this Land “between two seas” are another example of the dualisms that make Stasi’s work “symmetrical”: the Two Points of Leuca (Punta Meliso and Punta Ristola); the Two Seas (Adriatic and Ionian); the Two Tails (Leucàsia’s, whose tail doubles in order to double the anger of revenge, a metamorphosis that makes her a double-tailed siren); the Two Lovers (Medea and Jason; Aristula and Melisso), the Two Rivals (Aristula and Leucasia).

It is no coincidence that the publisher Capone of Cavallino publishes in this volume, with a wonderful cover by Massimo Pasca, Stasi’s story with an English translation parallel text, and a body of notes by the author who, as Giovanni Invitto (University of Salento) wrote, in its Preface to the 2008 edition, *About new alchemy (A land transformed into myths)*:

...it is also a repertoire of Salento history and its notes in the appendix deserve a separate space, because they are full of history, philology and etymology, folklore, religious and artistic traditions. In short, beyond but next to the narration, it is a real, small historical-anthropological encyclopedia of Salento.

And always Invitto not only praises the “*tales written with a liquid and very pleasant style ...*” and the “*peculiar originality of writing that produces beautiful tales*” but highlights the work of “*mythopoiesis*” (creation of the myth) performed by Stasi.

As suggested by Oscar Wilde’s exergue (“*To give an accurate description of what has never occurred is not merely the proper occupation of the historian, but the inalienable privilege of any man of parts and culture.*”), in his “legends” and

“stories”, Stasi accurately describes “stories” invented by himself (such as Leucasia) or reinvented and fictionalized.

Many have mistakenly believed that the story was a popular or even a Messapian legend, but, as the author and those, like me and others, who followed his creative work have been repeating for years, in the aforementioned interview, about the legend of ancient and modern marine sirens, Stasi states:

Exactly, modern sirens! I was fascinated by the beauty of the girls in the magical setting of this bay, with Punta Ristola on the right and Punta Meliso on the left that seemed to embrace this stretch of sea, an embrace of two headlands, almost an act of love, as if to protect Leuca. At this point I got the idea: I imagined that Leucasia, after her death, had “reincarnated” on the Salento coast right in front of the Greek islands (including Ulysses’ Ithaca), and that one day she met a Messapian shepherd boy. She tries to seduce him with her song, but the young man resists because he loves Aristula, a noble girl (and therefore a forbidden love) from the nearby town of Vereto (today Patù).

In the legendary story, Carlo imagines them as two petrified bodies separated precisely by Leucàsia, the double-tailed siren (a reference to Pantaleone’s siren, a mosaic on the floor of the Cathedral of Otranto), jealous of that love that blossomed between the two lovers.

Stasi is not a writer and poet who writes or who feels the need to write for fashion. He is an expert in the history of words and linguistic grammars, languages and human events. He is a full writer in the literal sense of the word, as can be seen from the long Stasian bibliography.

This is demonstrated, for example, by his mastery in calligrammatic or verb-visual poetry (his famous poems in which the typographical arrangement of the lines contributes to the aesthetic representation) as can be seen in his forty-year travelling exhibition of visual poetry entitled *Verso ... il Futuro (a poem to “see”, to “feel” and “reflect”)* recently collected in the volume *Verso... il Futuro (Visual Poetry: 1980-2020)* (Sannicola, iQdB, 2021) with a preface by Lamberto Pignotti. [“Verso” in Italian means both “Verse, line” or “towards”, so the title hints to “lines directed towards the Future”. Translator’s note].

Indeed, in the poems and stories of the Salentine visual poet there is a whole panorama that bounces to the conscience of those who love his and our land, a Salento with millenary history, collected in the 1226 pages of the monumental *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Salentini* (Lecce, Edizioni Grifo, 2018), a biobibliographic collection of more than 10,000 Salento personalities from antiquity to contemporaries.

Carlo Stasi, who defines himself as a citizen of the world, but is proud of his salentinity as he comes from Acquarica del Capo (on his father’s side) and Salve (on his mother’s side), blends Mediterranean, European and Anglo-Saxon culture (he has been a teacher of English language and literature for years), as evidenced by his studies on the English writer Horace Walpole (author of the first Gothic novel: *The*

Castle of Otranto, 1764), collected in the large volume *Otranto in the World (from Walpole's "Castle" to Voltaire's "Baron")* (Galatina, Editrice Salentina, 2018), with preface by Augusto Ponzio (Bari University) and presentation by Mario Spedicato, who included it in the *MeditEuropa* series of the Lecce National History Society.

The last draft of the legend I have in front of me is from 2022, and already in the *opening*, I can find the wonderful atmosphere of the Salento “legend” in which he immortalizes the places dear to him.

Stasi writes:

There, where the sand is kissed by the salty caresses of the sea, Leucàsia, lying naked, abandoned herself to the warm embrace of Helios, god of the sun, who rambled unhurriedly up in the sky while scanning the earth from his chariot of light.

This “poetic prose” is pure and elegiac poetry and yet, embedded in the prose, we discover more poetry, this time in verse.

It is Leucasia who sings, and Carlo involves her with a poetic text in prose and verse:

She also liked to dive deep and enjoy the colours of algae and fish, sea urchins and seahorses, vertiginous precipices and arches, the bleak spectacle of wrecked ships and boats sunk during storms, eddies and currents that only she could resist. She knew her sea thoroughly, she felt that in fact there were two seas because the two currents met and collided off the Promontory, causing dangerous eddies. She took a subtle pleasure in seeing that all that beauty belonged to her. She would never allow anyone to steal it or destroy it. She sang poignant love songs to passing sailors, but the melody that most enchanted them was the *Song of Medea and Jason*, which told the legend of the Ausonia promontory where Leucasia lived”.

It is here that Stasi, citing a local legend in “his” own legend, creates a song to be sung by Leucasia (a series of quatrains of septenaries with the fourth trunk line) which tells the tragic love story of Medea and Jason, as if to foretell what Leucasia would do to Aristula and Melisso.

Each verse begins with a “why”, the story is told through questions that tell and incorporate the answers:

*Why did Medea slaughter
Jason's son **into pieces**
like lambs
she threw them in the sea*

And here is the divine intervention of Athena / Minerva who finds the solution through the “petrification” of the heroes:

*The goddess had mercy
on Jason's sons
those bodies torn to pieces
she turned into rocks.*

The refrain of this “Ballad of Leucasia” gives us the central themes of the story: unrequited love, jealousy and revenge:

*It is Fate that rules
love enslaves you
but it is jealousy
that kills me too*

Superb interpretation of Euripides’ text (*Medea* was staged for the first time in Athens in 431 BC), which only a poet like Stasi could grasp in the profound sense of the *pietas* [Latin for “virtue”] of the great Greek tragedian.

But as the story proceeds, Leucasia remains as if captured by Fate too, and here is that the *Song of Medea* becomes *Song of Aristula and Melisso*.

The refrain is the same, it is the story that has changed and the ballad is written accompanying the unfolding of the story:

*Why did Leucasia sweep
the lovers’ love away
into pieces like lambs
she threw them in the sea*

Not only does she throw them into the sea but she curses them by condemning them to remain separated, because the author, paraphrasing the Gospel marriage formula “*let no man split apart what God has joined together*” (Matthew 19.6), transforms it into “*man dare not unite what I have split*”.

Incremental repetitions dominate the stanzas, the subject changes, but the result is the same:

*The goddess had mercy
on Aristula and Melisso
those bodies torn to pieces
she turned into rocks.*

The involvement of the goddess Pallas Athena (Minerva for the Romans) is fitting, because the whole Salento promontory of *Finibusterrae* [Land’s Border] has to do with the great Greek divinity. In Otranto there is the Colle della Minerva (Hill of the 800 Christian Martyrs); in Castro, just a few decades ago, a large statue of the goddess was pulled out of the sewer of the city; in Galatina, the ancient historians refer to an Athenaion, whose elective divinity must have been Athena. And then, right in Leuca, in its countryside, there is an area called the Minerva area.

All this to say that Carlo Stasi, referring to that divinity, knew her power over these lands of ours. And it is romantic to think that the two lovers Aristula and Melisso, the fruit of his imagination, are still today those two promontories (Ristola and Meliso) full of millenary stories.

But *The Ballad of Leucasia* continues to haunt the same siren in the third and final part of the poetic intervention of the writer-poet, when Leucasia adds stanzas describing his desperation to the refrain which, in the end, echoes mockingly like Fate.

It is Fate that rules ... ules ... es...

As an evidence of his classical studies and the profound knowledge of the cultural heritage of which the history of Salento is full, there is no shortage of mythological references, for example to Aphrodita (Venus for the Romans) and Eros (Cupid), or to the owl, a powerful symbol of Athena, whose “terrible song” still today frightens the people of Salento.

It is no coincidence that Stasi invents another story-within-the-story, inserted in the final version (therefore not in that of ‘93), in which he imagines that the Devil’s Cave (close to Punta Ristola) was the refuge cave of the siren Leucasia and that some young Messapians, convinced that there was a treasure, tried to break into the cave to steal the treasure, but as the siren comes back and discovers the intrusion she begins to scream with her powerful voice deafening the young Messapian and making the vaults of the cave collapse. This is to explain why there are two openings on the vault of the Devil’s Cave.

The other insert is that of the Messapian shepherds who challenge the epimelid nymphs in the dance, but are defeated and transformed into olive trees. This is a true ancient legend because it was told by Dionysius of Halicarnassus and then taken up by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*. Stasi, in fictionalizing the story, imagined that this episode had taken place in the two Caves of Poetry (Grotte della Poesia) in Roca (Melendugno).

On the right side of Massimo Pasca’s cover these two episodes are represented, while, turning the image upside down, we recognize the references to the myth of Proserpina (and Etna) inserted in the shape of a heart.

The ending of this “Mediterranean passion” explains and brings out to the romantic Salento consciousness the love that the author, Carlo Stasi, poet of the enchantment and narrator of creative Salento legends, has for his and our beloved land.

By creating this beautiful literary “legend”, Carlo Stasi not only creates the myth of Leucasia, but transforms Leuca itself into a myth, using the “para-etymological pun” indicated by Guarracino in the first edition:

Then, this is for me the beautiful literary “legend” of Carlo Stasi, a story that will never die, indeed, by creating the myth of Leucasia, Stasi transforms Leuca itself into a myth, using, as reported by critic Vincenzo Guarracino in the first edition, the “para-etymological pun”:

“E Leuca...sia!” that is: “And Let Leuca...be!”

Maurizio Nocera