

## **A few remarks about the true story of Lucina Savorgnan and Luigi Da Porto, the Friulian “Romeo and Juliet”**

During forty years of researches, Cecil H. Clough former Professor of Renaissance Italian and Veneto Literature at the University of Liverpool, has found and proved that the plot of the Shakespearean tragedy “Romeo and Juliet” descends from a novel written by Luigi Da Porto, almost seventy years prior to the English playwright.

Da Porto lived from 1485 and 1529 between Veneto and Friuli. He was a poet and an historian but he was also a soldier. In 1510 he joined up the Venetian army where, with the rank of captain, he led fifty light horsemen at the stronghold of Cividale del Friuli.

The setting of the 14<sup>th</sup> century Verona under the rule of Bartolomeo Della Scala, the star-crossed love of Romeo and Juliet, the feud between the Montecchi and Cappelletti families (Capuleti in Shakespeare), the names of the protagonists themselves, are already outlined in Da Porto’s novella “Giulietta”. The novel has a clear autobiographical matrix: it mirrors Luigi’s personal unhappy love-story with his cousin Lucina Savorgnan of the Del Monte branch. Luigi’s mother belonged to the noble friulian family of the Savorgnan, of the Del Torre branch. Therefore we may ultimately state that the roots of the story are friulian and that its effective antecedents go back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century Udine, and not to Verona.

In 1510 Luigi is in Friuli, he fights at the side of his uncle, Antonio Savorgnan Del Torre, against the imperial Apsburgic army, during the war that since 1508 opposes the Venetian Republic to the Emperor Maximilian of Austria. This war brought about the division of Friuli between the two powers. Antonio is a mighty and influent politician and he looks after the economic and political Venetian interests in the “Patria del Friuli”.

Luigi is twenty six years old when he first met and fell in love with Lucina, during a Carnival ball held in Udine, at the Savorgnan Palace, on February 26<sup>th</sup> 1511. Lucina is fifteen years old, she requites Luigi’s love, but their families are in dispute, so that they cannot freely declare their love. For this reason they made each other a secret marriage promise.

The day after the ball, on February 27<sup>th</sup> 1511, a tremendous and bloody peasants revolt bursts in town, the better known “Zobbia Grassa”, in friulian language “Joibe grasse”, during which two opposite factions faced towards. These were the “Zambarlani”, pro-venetians, supporting the commons, the peasants and the recent nobility, whose leader was Antonio Savorgnan Del Torre and the “Strumieri”, pro-imperial, supporting the ancient feudal nobility, led by Alvise Della Torre and heavily in arms against Antonio.

The two lovers, against their will, remained involved in the feud that followed to the clashes of the “Zobbia Grassa”. During an ambush between Cormòns and Gradisca, Luigi was wounded in the neck by the spear thrown by an imperial horseman. The wound damaged his spinal marrow and made him paralyzed on his left side for ever. Suddenly he lost everything: health, a promising military career and, above all, Lucina’s love. In fact, in 1517, Lucina married a cousin of Luigi, Francesco Savorgnan Del Torre. Da Porto was persuaded that, due to his infirmity, she preferred the more robust and good-looking cousin to him.

On the basis of the stylistic analysis of the oldest known existing manuscript of the novel, we can reasonably state that its plot is autobiographical: it opens with a dedication to Lucina herself, as the mention to the close relationship existing between the poet and the dedicatee clearly hints at: they were, in fact, cousins. A very dry tirade against the ungrateful women of his time, who desert their lovers when they are no longer able to fulfil their needs, closes the novel. It contains a direct allusion to Lucina’s lack of faithfulness: she broke her marriage promise, unlike the exemplary loyalty displayed by the novel heroine, Giulietta.

Text and translation by Francesca Tesei ©

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