

Introduction

Making fun of foolish people has been a pastime for man since the beginning of time. And in Sicily, where people have an exaggerated sense of their own intelligence-I need not quote the often cited remark by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa that Sicilians consider themselves demigods who want to be left alone-parody and satire, unlike prickly pears and oranges, seem to be native plants in Sicily and they have been practiced there even before Aristotle credited Egemone Tesio for inventing it. Indeed, Epicharmus from Siracusa, who invented comedy twenty five hundred years ago, was an ardent practitioner of parody, according to ethnologist Giuseppe Pitrè. The favor the genre has found with the people of Sicily is evident not only by the use that writers have made of it throughout the ages, but by the strong oral tradition that exists on the island. For a long time, tales of foolish people who do the weirdest things have provided comic relief to gatherings of Sicilians, whether sharing a cup of espresso at the local bar, or enjoying the company of friends at the beach or sitting around in the local piazza, and have been passed down from generation to generation. In Sicily, you would have no difficulty in finding men and women of a certain age-unfortunately the younger generations may not be quite so adept at this-who cannot rattle off a couple of tales of Giuf... from memory, or a few salacious jokes about unfaithful wives and cuckolded husbands, or stories whose language has become part of the language of every day, like "toccami Ciccu ca mamma non voli" or "a luna di Bronti". The character of Giufà who may occasionally appear not as the simpleton he is, but as a wise man, is present under a slightly different name in many countries of the Mediterranean basin, but he has a special place in the hearts of Sicilians.

Making fun of fools is closely related to "campanilismo," which may be defined as a belief that the people who live within the sound of the local bell tower are smarter than those living in nearby towns. The people from the neighboring towns are always regarded as inferior. The dummies, the spendthrifts, the cowards, the cuckolds, the promiscuous wives, and the fools inhabit a town that is always other than the one where the narrator lives.

Italy has always suffered from "campanilismo." On the national level, rivalries for supremacy in art, culture and commerce have existed since the middle ages: Florence against Siena, Florence against Bologna; Milan against Venice. In Italy, as well as in other countries, inhabitants of certain cities or regions have been tagged as avaricious or spendthrifts, stubborn or foolish, prone to violence or easygoing. In Sicily, the game of associating vices and shortcomings with the names of the cities is practiced with a vengeance. Messina is the "città babba," (the foolish city) Catania's citizens are renowned for their stinging and arrogant speech and Palermo's inhabitants carry a chip on their shoulders. "Campanilismo" colors every aspect of living in Sicily. One example from the sphere of religion will suffice: Saint Calogero is the patron saint of several cities and towns of the area around Agrigento and his supporters from Naro coined a ditty that extols the powers of their patron while disparaging the powers of the same saint venerated in the neighboring cities:

San Caloiru di Naru, miraculi ni fa un migghiaru;	Saint Calogero of Naro makes a thousand miracles;
San Caloiru di Canicatt [^] miraculi ni fa tri;	Saint Calogero of Canicatt [^] makes only three miracles;
San Caloiru di Girgenti, miraculi non ni fa nenti.	Saint Calogero of Girgenti makes no miracles at all.

Not to be outdone, the supporters of Agrigento's patron Saint (Girgenti) responded to the people of Naro with their own ditty:

San Caloiru di Naru, i miraculi i fa pi dinaru;	Saint Calogero of Naro makes miracles for money;
--	---

San Caloriu di Girgenti, i miraculi i fa pi nenti; San Caloiru di Canicatti, ni fici unu e si ni pinti.	Saint Calogero of Girgenti, makes miracles for nothing; Saint Calogero of Canicatti, made only one and repented.
--	---

Francesco Lanza's *Mimi siciliani* is a collection of stories, translated into English for the first time in this book, that combines the mocking of fools with elements of "campanilismo." The author has rewritten a little over one hundred little stories, rustic jokes, salacious tales of cuckolds and scheming wives, and peasant misunderstandings and superstitions, from a vast oral repertoire, loosely following the comic tradition established by Boccaccio, and his imitators of the fifteenth and sixteenth century. By identifying most of the protagonists who are the butt of the jokes with the name of the town they hail from, the author provides a compendium of shortcomings of many towns in Sicily. But, as Italo Calvino correctly pointed out in his introduction to a reprint of the book, you cannot conclude that the people of Butera are known as liars or those of Mazzarino are hard headed or those from Bronte are lazy. The shortcomings seem to be distributed fairly equally among the towns of Sicily. Although the author reserves special treatment for the people of Barrafranca and Piazza Armerina—indeed, being a Piazzese or Barrafranchese is in itself an insult—there is enough foolishness among the protagonists to implicate all of Sicily in this feud among bell towers. The people of Piazza, however, are characterized as the lowest rung in the ladder, almost a race to themselves. In one of the tales devoted to the town, a man from Piazza was asked, "Are you a Christian?" and he answered, "No, Sir, I am a Piazzese." I hesitated to translate the word "cristiano" used in the original as "Christian" because the word normally means "man" in Sicilian and in other southern languages. But the alternative translation would have been even more damning to the Piazzese because the question would have been, "Are you a man?" In this case, the Piazzese's negative reply would have relegated him to a different species altogether. In another tale, the man from Piazza thinks his kind is not subject to the laws of gravity, like Christians or men, and proceeds to cut the branch that he was straddling, crashing to the ground, like the Piazzese he was, added the narrator. It is not clear why the author displayed such a dislike of Piazzesi. The proximity of Piazza to Valguarnera may be a clue, but it could also be a way of providing a scale of comparison. In the world of fools, there is always someone who is a greater fool.

The people of Valguarnera Caropepe, the hometown of the author, also do not receive preferential treatment and are generally characterized as thieves and in one tale, a carrapianu is cast as a cumpari who seduces another man's wife, in essence, stealing the man's honor.

The feuding among the people of Sicily to tack the cap of fools to each other is broken only four times throughout the book. The battle crosses the Straits of Messina into Calabria, in the tales of "The She-hedgehog" and "The Three Calabrians," which are the most memorable ones. In the first, the Calabrian is definitely outsmarted by both the Sicilian husband and his wife who makes him believe that all Sicilian women are spiny like hedgehogs. In the second, the three Calabrians are characterized as pound foolish and penny wise and lose their lives and a boatful of onions in the absurd belief that each one who dove in to retrieve the one onion that had fallen in the water was trying to steal it. Sicilians seem to have the upper hand in this inter-regional feud, as we would expect.

While the particular vice or shortcoming affecting towns cannot be identified, the tales seem to focus on certain vices more than on others. In fact, it is surprising that the vice of avarice is hardly mentioned. One would have thought that the concern for the "roba" (property) that occupied such a prominent role in the lives of Giovanni Verga's characters would have been present in Lanza's repertoire. But the tightwads do not seem to exist in Lanza's universe of poor peasants. There's no conflict between the haves and have not. The conflict is usually between the poor and the poorer. The bulk of the tales pokes fun at the peasants for their stupidity and superstition, for their lack of spirituality and primitive Christian beliefs, for their infidelity and sexual opportunism, for their irreverence for sacred icons and for their senseless behavior. But while some of the tales may be

termed irreverent or blasphemous, spicy or lame, they share one thing: they are quite funny. How does the author achieve this?

Generally, comic relief is provided by building expectations that are always thwarted by reality. It is a technique as old as comedy itself. It consists of building the expectation of a certain outcome that does not occur. Cicero and Quintilian, masters of the *ars dictandi*, described the rules of the technique "ad contrarium". We can see it employed by Boccaccio in the first novella of the Decameron when he describes the exploits of ser Cepparello who was in reality "the worst man who ever lived" who fooled his confessor into believing he was a saint. In a masterful confession made of half truths cleverly disguised as virtues, Cepparello overturned the expected outcome - lack of absolution and excommunication-and was buried as Saint Ciappelletto. While the whole novella is a perfect embodiment of the procedure, Boccaccio uses the technique even in the lexical choices he makes. One example will suffice. "Cepparello, being a lawyer felt great shame when any of his legal documents-the few that he did- were found to be other than false" (my translation). The reader expects that a lawyer who cares for his integrity would be ashamed if any of his documents were found to be other than true. The difference between the premise and outcome generates laughter.

This basic technique seems to be the underlying structure that governs Francesco Lanza's *Mimi siciliani*. The book is primarily the world of Sicelitude turned upside down, a parody of what Sicilians supposedly stand for. It is Sicelitude turned on its head.

Let us consider one of the tales that you will read in this book:

"The Man from Burgio"

"Having to leave town, a man from Burgio did not want to leave his wife because alone she was afraid of the dark.

And she said:

"You're right, my husband, for at night it's dark in the bed and I'll have no one to keep me company."

The man went to his *cumpari* and asked him:

"Listen, *Cumpari*, I have to go away and as you are staying, please take my place and keep my wife company at night for it's dark in the bed and I don't know what could happen to her."

This little tale turns the world upside down in several ways: Sicilians are universally known for their jealousy and for taking extreme measures to protect their honor. Also, the notion that a Sicilian woman would ask her husband to provide someone to keep her company in his absence is absurd. And finally, the husband's foolish assumption that nothing would happen to his wife while in the same bed with the obliging *cumpari* is equally absurd. The husband is thus cast in the role of promoter of his own hornification (cuckolding), if I can make up a word, and as a procurer for his wife's desire. What is worse, this husband, and many other husbands in *Mimi siciliani* do not seem to mind being adorned with horns by their ever present *cumpari*. Most of them are willing to share their wives and indeed in some cases actually go out of their way to engage their services. Let us see some examples of husbands willingly acknowledging and encouraging their own "hornification".

In "The Sign of the Cross," the visiting *cumpari* from Caropepe was asked to stay over because of a rain storm and sleep in the same bed with the couple from Piazza. So they went to bed with the wife in the middle. The man from Caropepe, to protect his wife from his *cumpari*'s advances, kept his hand before her "entrance," but a lightning bolt struck and he had to remove his hand to cross himself. When he went to put his hand back, he felt that his *cumpari* had quickly slipped in, no pun intended, and instead of screaming murder he waited for him to finish and exclaimed with admiration: "Golly, *Cumpari*, you did not even give me the chance to cross myself!?" This is hardly what one would expect from a Sicilian husband. There is not a hint of jealousy, indeed, the husband actually waited for the man to complete his task before he spoke. There is no reproach for

the immoral action. The husband's only reproach was equivalent to losing a game of wits with the cumpari. This is a world turned on its head.

While in this tale the husband acted somewhat halfheartedly to protect his wife's possessions, in other tales he willingly becomes a participant in his own "hornification".

In "The Man from Palagonia," a husband unable to father a son, lets his wife ask the obliging cumpari to lend a hand and when the child is born, the proud father goes around town showing him off, saying that he was so handsome it took two fathers to make him, openly admitting his cuckold's state.

In the story of "The Little Feet," a woman was frightened by her cumpari into believing that her husband had forgotten to make the little feet to the baby she was carrying. But the matter was not desperate: the cumpari just happens to be an expert in such operations. When the baby was born the father who was apprised of the cumpari's addition, expressed amazement at how the feet had been joined to the legs without showing the seam.

In "The Hare in the Cabbage," a peasant from Santa Caterina was cultivating his garden, to use a Boccaccian refrain, when he heard a hare munching on his cabbage patch. As he had been trying to catch the hare for a while, the man did not hesitate to interrupt what he was doing to tend to his cabbage, in spite of the wife's complaints that if he did not finish the task, she would lose her hair. The man woke up his cumpari who was nearby and asked him to finish the job "otherwise the wife will lose her hair and I my hare."

If men behave in a way that is uncharacteristic of Sicilian men, the women in *Mimi siciliani* also act "ad contrarium". If their adulterous behavior is discovered, they embrace it and shift the attention of their irate husbands to something else, as did the wife of a man from Mazzarino who, having been told that the cumpari left a mark on his wife every time he made love to her, demanded an explanation. The wife did not explain why she indulged in the adulterous behavior. She shifted her husband's attention to whether or not the cumpari actually left a mark on her. "A mark on me, my husband? What, do you think he is a fool?" she says to him and offers to prove it by fornicating with the cumpari right before him. The husband watches the coupling with wide open eyes, "lest they should try to hoodwink him," and has to admit that no mark was left on her at the end. Indeed, she looks even better than before and the husband is relieved that he does not have to bother to cultivate his own orchard. The mechanism employed by Lanza consists of shifting his focus by ignoring the main accusation while tacitly acknowledging it-the wife's adultery-onto a secondary aspect of it, -the leaving of the mark-and once that is addressed, everything returns to normal. The adultery is acknowledged as true, but it becomes irrelevant in the lopsided world that Lanza is describing. This technique is adopted a number of times throughout the book.

The tale of the man from Mistretta comes to mind: during a heated argument, the man was told by his neighbor that his wife had made him a cuckold many times over. When he went home, he related how the woman had insulted him and demanded an explanation. Instead of answering his question, the wife shifts the focus to the improper behavior of her neighbor who meddled in the affairs of her family and jumped into the fray, not to deny the claim, but to berate the woman for not minding her business. The husband's cuckold status is not only acknowledged but elevated to the status of her own wifely prerogatives. "What do you care if my husband is a cuckold many times over?" She shouted. "If he is such, it means I like it like that. Yes, a cuckold he has been, he is now and will be again, but you should not meddle in my affairs!" Then she turned to her husband and proud of having defended the honor of her house, said: "Did you hear, my husband, how I gave her a piece of my mind?"

The women's explanations for their "little shortcomings" which is the title of one of the tales, need not be cleverly disguised through shifting attention to irrelevant aspects of their behavior. Often, when faced with their failings, they offer answers that are patently absurd, but which nevertheless placate the foolish husbands. See the tale of "The Man from Nicosia" who, having been abroad from many years, returned home and found two children that the wife had managed to create thanks to his good will and her memory, the first, and the second, by wearing a pair of his trousers. Or the tale of the shepherd from Mistretta who returns home to find a house full of furniture, a wife with

new earrings and a baby not his. The wife explains nonchalantly that they were all gifts from their *cumpari* Bastiano who did it "not to bother you who were up the mountain."

The intraregional feud which occupies such a prominent place in the *Mimes* does not really establish a superior point of view in the manner of Boccaccio, to name one of the writers who come to mind. In the *Decameron* which devotes so much to the foolishness of husbands who are cuckolded by their wives, to the foolishness of peasants and monks who are hoodwinked by the likes of Ciappelletto or Frate Cipolla or Maso del Saggio, the fools are primarily sacrificed as victims to the intelligence of others. Boccaccio establishes a kind of complicity with the readers at the expense of the fools. The tension between the fools and those who expose their foolishness is dissolved by the ensuing liberating laughter. But in *Mimes* the interest of the narrator is not so much to demonstrate the superiority of his own kind, but to demonstrate how inferior the others are. The poor peasants, the whole cast of characters that appear in *Mimi siciliani*, no matter where they are from are seen in a negative light and their foolishness aggressively exposed. The fooled and those who prey on them are made from the same dough.

In the ship of fools that is the *Mimi siciliani* there is no frate Cipolla, nor even a Ser Cepparello whose intellectual prowess, for better or for worse, was such that they exercised mastery over their environment. The people who live and breathe in Lanza's peasant universe are governed by pseudo logical thinking that is more properly defined as non sense. In this book, you will meet fools who talk with the trees; who save their breath in a sack for times of need; hunters who shoot at figs thinking they might be partridges; farmers who converse with ravens about how many bushels of wheat their field will produce; men and women who cannot walk and chew gum at the same, to use an American idiom; and people like the "Carrapipani" who threaten to nail horseshoes on the feet of the living who feign being dead; or the "Nicosiani" who want to dry wet candles in hot ovens or the Brontese who enlarged their church by filling it with fava beans and water.

The fools have a minimal understanding of language and this leads them to faulty interpretations of reality. I am thinking of the woman who was asked to prepare a "decocto" (decoction, a medicinal extract) for her sick husband and proceeded to boil a crucifix because she understood "diocotto" (boiled god) that I tried to translate by making up a word, "deocotion," or the young girl who was asked by a priest whether she cursed as a matter of habit (*per uso*) and she thought he was asking her if she was already fledged (*peluso*). The fools in this book are immersed in materiality and cannot understand symbolic or metaphoric language. So the man from Santa Caterina who was told to "go swallow Christ," meaning to go to confession and swallow the host, believed that he was supposed to literally swallow the enormous statue of Christ in the church. Lacking education and living in a sub proletarian world, the poor people of the *Mimes* believe in superstition, and reduce religion to rituals devoid of spiritual meanings. They take hearsay as reality, as did a man who, having been told that blondes had their sex perpendicular to the ground, refused to have anything to do with his new brunette wife whose sex was not horizontal as he had been told.

As you read through this collection of stories and you come face to face with people who live in a world without logic, without rationality and spirituality, who, being poor and ignorant, conduct a campaign of derision and violence against each other and those who are even poorer and more ignorant than they are, you cannot help but think that a whole class of society is being exposed to the corrosive acid of satire. Lanza, in creating his cast of characters, may have been trying to denounce the dreadful conditions of the people of Sicily who, like the *cafoni* in Levi's *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, (Christ Stopped at Eboli) have been abandoned to wallow in poverty, psychological and political isolation, illiteracy and ignorance. He is making a fierce exposition of the backwardness and ignorance of the peasants living in the small towns of Sicily in the hope that something could be learned. Lanza had indeed tried to educate the peasants by publishing a book entitled *Almanacco del popolo siciliano* which was commissioned to him by Giuseppe Lombardo Radice in a plan to reduce the illiteracy rate of the Sicilian peasants. Radice's idea, shared by Lanza, was that Sicilian peasants may be illiterate, but they carry the accumulated wisdom of the past on their shoulders. Their culture is the unwritten knowledge the peasants possess that manifests itself in their behavior. The experiment had not been a success for Lanza. Writing *Mimi* may have been

an alternative way to attack illiteracy and ignorance through shock therapy. By adding the corrosive acid of satire he was hoping to awaken, according to Corrado Sofia, the intelligence of the Sicilian peasants.

There is also another aspect at play here. We know that the chastisement of the foolish people of the world is usually an attempt at freeing ourselves of the fear of being ridiculous. By laughing at the inanities of the peasants, their faulty reasoning, their superstitions, their illogical conclusions, and their absurd behavior, the people take their distance from them, feeling safe in their own superiority. Sicilians as I said earlier enjoy making fun of others, whether they are neighbors or people from the next town. The jokes themselves are funnier to the people who belong to the same social environment than they might be to outsiders. Outsiders listening to the jokes usually find that the laughter they hear from the members of the group is exaggerated, at times even ludicrous. The readers of this book may feel a bit like spectators who walked in while a group of people from the same neighborhood are relating stories of the people they knew back then, the eccentric behavior of the butcher, the odd shaped nose of the baker, the nympho-maniacal daughter of the grocer, the religious fanatic who walked around with a lantern at her waist, etcetera. Such tales are funnier to the people who lived through them than they are to someone who hears them for the first time. The usual reaction to those who do not appreciate the stories as much as those who lived through them is "You had to be there!" The stories related in this book are basically "inside jokes" that will be appreciated more by those who are well acquainted with the social environment of the characters represented. But the whackiness of Lanza's *Sicilian Mimes* is such that even those who know nothing of Sicily will not be able to resist them. And whatever else Lanza wanted to accomplish, he wanted primarily to entertain his readers. And he does so through a narrative style that is highly original and different from what was being produced in his cultural milieu. The author was aware that his work was in contrast with the literature of his day. He described it as "folkloristic, popular, rash, sly, hard at the core and without literary value..." It is perhaps telling that in response to the negative reaction to his political activity in the town of Valguarnera, he wrote in a letter to his friend Navarra, "I remain true to my style, sly, hard and not interviewable." In reading these Sicilian tales the reader senses the author's bitter smile at the foolishness he is describing. There is no sense of participation in the suffering that you get from reading a page of Giovanni Verga, who in spite of the impersonality and objectivity Verists prided themselves in, manages to come through. You know where Verga stood before human suffering. But with Lanza the reader feels the hard slyness he referred to in the letter. The two adjectives "hard" and "sly" can be used to identify the main components of Lanza's style: "hard" relates to the author's clear eyed look at the foolishness of his protagonists, a hardness unswayed by sentimentality. This of course does not mean uncaring or aloof. The hardness comes from steeling himself to be hard, trying not to succumb to compassion or sarcasm; "sly" relates to the author's pushing the envelope in the direction of the absurd, in making his protagonist behave on the outer edge of reality with grotesque foolishness. So that it could be said that the author stands unswayed with a sly smile on his lips before the parade of fools that he has conjured up. It cannot be said, however, that Lanza wears the Pirandellian double Janus face in which the laughing face mocks the crying face.

The difficulty in translating the stories in this book was not in finding a language that manages to recreate the original expressions, so many of which are literally transported from the Sicilian into Italian, but in recreating the atmosphere, creating the internal connections on which the stories exist. Much of Lanza's work is connected with local sayings, proverbial foolishness, Sicilian realities that do not have a counterpart in the United States. Trying to find equivalences between Italian expressions and their English counterparts is like riding a seesaw that always misses the mark. The difficulty lies in keeping the seesaw from swinging too high or too low off the mark. I hope I succeeded in this balancing act.

A word about the title of the book: Francesco Lanza had chosen *Storie di Nino Scardino* as the title of his collection. The title, however, was changed at the suggestion of writer Ardengo Soffici who saw a similarity between Lanza's tales and a newly published collection of stories by the Greek poet Eronda, (III BC) whose work had been discovered originally in 1891 by Giuseppe Pitrè. The

collection was published in 1925 in Italian translation. The title of *Mimi siciliani* was accepted by Lanza and it has remained to date. Nevertheless, as Salvatore Di Marco correctly pointed out in his *La storia incompiuta di Francesco Lanza* (Ila Palma, 1990), the title is somewhat misleading and does not accurately reflect the contents of the tales nor any of the stylistic devices that could justify calling them "mimes". The word "mime" refers to an actor who performs through bodily gestures and movements a story on the stage, or if used metaphorically it could refer to a certain theatrical component of the stories, whether in their use of dialogues or their visual representation of reality. The association with Eronda's book has been repeated by most critics without bothering to check the appropriateness of the remark. Di Marco's careful analysis of Eronda's text convinced him that the association was made somewhat hurriedly. The critic concluded that the two books are very different from one another and that the association was unwarranted. We concur with Di Marco and while we could not change the title of the book, we thought that adding a subtitle would make the contents clearer for the American audiences. Thus we added the subtitle, "A gallery of sly and rustic tales," which is certainly more in tune with the book's contents.

About the Author

Francesco Lanza was born in Valguarnera in the province of Enna on July 5, 1897. The fourth of seven children, Francesco completed his secondary studies in Catania and then went to Rome to study law. But his interests in literature began to manifest itself when he wrote some poems to commemorate his brother's death during the First World War. Francesco himself was drafted toward the end of the war and served as an artillery officer in 1918. In 1920 he contracted Spanish fever that damaged one of his lungs, a source of many health problems for him.

He received a degree in jurisprudence from the University of Catania in 1922. He met educator Giuseppe Lombardo Radice who invited him to collaborate on a project to improve the education of Sicilian rural population. His *Almanacco per il popolo siciliano* was conceived as a text to help farmers learn to read and write, containing readings, useful information on farming, tips and advice on things that would stimulate their intelligence. His interest in the age-old wisdom of the Sicilian peasants and in popular imagination manifests itself through his attachment to Giuseppe Pitrè, Giovanni Verga and Giovanni Meli, all of whom devoted their lives to Sicilian themes.

In 1920 he became interested in politics and founded a section of the Socialist Party in Valguarnera and became its first secretary to the disapproval of the local gentry. He was animated by humanitarian concerns more than ideological convictions. He wanted to improve the lot of Sicilian peasants. And that was also the reason for his joining the Fascist party later. He believed that Mussolini intended to improve the lot of the poor people of Sicily.

During a period of convalescence in Valguarnera he devoted his attention to the theatre and wrote *Fiordispina* a dramatic fable which was published in 1928. Other plays he wrote are *Giorno di Festa* (A Holiday), *Cosa darei per sapere come è fatta una donna* (What I would give to Learn How a Woman is Made) and *La moglie brutta*, (The Ugly Wife).

In 1923 Lanza began to publish *Storie di Nino Scardino* in *Fiera Letteraria*. At the suggestion of Ardengo Soffici, Lanza changed the title to *Mimi siciliani*, owing to a similarity between the work and a collection of tales written by the Greek Eronda.

In 1927 he founded a journal entitled *Il Lunario siciliano* which was shortlived but significant to his development as a writer. He established a relationship with the Sicilian writer Nino Savarese. From 1928 to 1932 his activity was intense: he collaborated as a journalist with various newspapers and journals such as *L'Italia letteraria*, *Il resto del Carlino*, *La Gazzetta del Popolo* and others. He traveled to Hungary, Romania, Poland and Russia. During his stay in Tripolitania he conceived a sequel to his *Mimi siciliani* entitled *Mimi arabi* (Arabic Mimes).

In 1931 his mother died. He had tried with much difficulty to find a position that would allow him to earn a steady income and dedicate himself to writing. He felt his living in Valguarnera was something of a trap he could not escape. When he finally was hired to work for the Italian Ministry of Aeronautics in 1932, he was looking forward to his new life. He talked about the future, for the

first time with great expectation. He had met a young lady with whom he would have shared his life. He was eager to undertake new projects and give free rein to his creativity. But on his way to Rome he developed a high fever that forced him to stay in a hotel in Catania and when it was clear that he could not go on, a friend brought him back to Valguarnera where he died a few days later. It is ironic that the ignorance that he had tried to combat with his Mimes was the cause of his death. On January 6, 1933, he passed away from septicemia caused by a syringe that had not been properly sterilized. He was barely 35 years old.

A number of editions of *Mimi siciliani* have been printed in the past fifty years, proof that the work is as fresh today as when it was published over 80 years ago. Lanza's work probably deserves more critical attention than it has received. While this is not the place for an examination of what the critics have written about Lanza, we can say that interest in him is growing and his contribution to Italian letters is being reevaluated, starting with the full length book devoted to Lanza by Salvatore Di Marco entitled *La storia incompiuta di Francesco Lanza*. In his book Di Marco considers Lanza's Mimi one of the fundamental books of the last century. Sarah Zappulla Muscarà recently published Lanza's opus in a single volume. The Italian text we used for the translation was from her edition of Lanza's *Opere* published by La Cantinella, Catania in 2002. Short but significant critical studies have been written on Lanza by Italo Calvino, whose introduction to the Sellerio edition of Mimi is full of insights; other perceptive and interesting articles have been written by Leonardo Sciascia, Antonio Piromalli, Andrea Camilleri, Enzo Barnabà, Mariano La Martina, Augusto Navarria, and Corrado Sofia, who was a traveling companion with Lanza during his trip to Russia and elsewhere, who also wrote the introduction to the another edition of Mimi published by Editrice Il Lunario in 1991, and Luigi LaMartina who wrote a short piece on Lanza's use of the dialect of Valguarnera in Mimi. For an interesting and illuminating insight into Lanza's character, see "La vita come speranza," by Maria Rina Virzi Lanza. An elegantly written little book on Lanza was published by Antonio Di Grado, entitled *Il mondo offeso di Francesco Lanza*. We would be remiss if we did not mention a web site dedicated to Francesco Lanza where most of the articles written by the people mentioned above can be read. The site's address is <http://www.francescolanza.it>.

(Francesco Lanza, "Sicilian Mimes: A Gallery of Sly and Rustic Tales", Introduction and Translation by Gaetano Cipolla, Legas, Ottawa, 2010)