TRINÀCRIA
A Tale Of Bourbon Sicily
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Beneath the shadiest cypress,
Within the coziest urn,
Is death any less cruel?

—Ugo Foscolo,
_The Sepulchers_ (1807)
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Catacombs of the Capuchins, Palermo.
Prologue

The Latest Invasion

PALERMO PREPARED FOR THE latest invasion. The city was confident. After twenty-five centuries of Romans and Carthaginians, Normans and Arabs, Spaniards and Britons, surely it could handle a Hollywood film crew, even one led by a Milanese duke. But at Punta Raisi, the welcoming committee faced a more formidable (if less colorful) force than Garibaldi’s Red Shirts. Armed with a five-million-dollar budget, Twentieth-Century Fox had assembled a battalion of two hundred carpenters, ten dozen make-up artists, hairdressers, and seamstresses, sixty cameramen, twenty electricians, fifteen florists, and ten cooks. “If the Allies had been this organized,” joked the pug-faced mayor, “Operation Husky would have been less a fiasco.”

The studio publicist, a propaganda officer during the war, laughed and pointed at the lanky figure on the tarmac: “The Maestro’s a better general.”

A dying breed, the mayor conceded. According to the studio press kits, which the publicist had distributed to the delegation, the director descended from cardinals and warlords, “whose massive red sarcophagi continue to awe visitors to the Duomo di Milano.” The Maestro,
the publicist said, never lost his dignity and never com-
promised his standards. “Gavin,” he once explained, in
his thickly accented English, “one must be in-tran-sigent.”
The publicist, an Illinois farm boy who had flunked out
of Purdue, had learned the meaning of the word on their
last film. When a fire broke out on the set, the Maestro
had kept shooting until the ceiling collapsed. The producer
berated him in the infirmary, but the duke — swathed in
bandages like a B-movie mummy — merely pointed to
his family crest: a blasted tower, copied from a fifteenth-
century tarot deck, and the motto: “Si fractus illabatur
orbis, impavidum ferient ruinae.” If the world should shatter
around him, the ruins would leave him undaunted.

The anecdote annoyed the city council. Where they
expected to applaud this maniac’s high-school Latin? The
duke, fencing with the media, ignored the pursed lips.
His crested hair gleaming with pomade, he seemed
dressed for a duel. He wore a black silk shirt, white linen
jacket, taupe slacks, and custom-made shoes.

“No,” he said, “this story is not a paean to the past! At
heart I’m a progressive, a humanist!”

The paparazzi hid their smirks. Like most aristocrats,
the director voted left but lived right. Though an out-
spoken Communist, he had become a duke on his father’s
death, inherited his mother’s cosmetics fortune, and owned
five cars and a dozen houses. Liveried butlers at his Roman
villa served pheasant on gold plate, while grooms stocked
his four-hundred-year-old stables at Monza with stallions
and gigolos. His Excellency rode both.

“But aren’t studio epics risky in an age of television?”
asked one reporter, a novice whose acne had become
enflamed by the airport’s heat and fumes. “The cost
alone — ”

The director’s hawk-like face radiated contempt. Never
contradict a man who called Maria Callas ... well, even
the tabloids wouldn’t print it. “Cost is meaningless!” he
hissed. “Truth alone has value! The quest for authenticity
knows no budget.”

The mayor grunted. Geniuses can jaw about authen-
ticity, but lesser mortals must deal with budgets. This
film wasn’t going to be another white elephant, was it?
Cleopatra, he had read, already had cost Fox forty-four
million and remained unfinished. But the publicist poured
oil on these troubled waters. Epics were very
marketable, he assured the mayor. Consider the largest grossing films
of the past five years: Ben-Hur, Spartacus, El Cid, Lawrence
of Arabia. Now Sicily would profit from its own epic, a
sweeping tale about its marvelous past.

The past wasn’t so marvelous, the mayor brooded.
And Sicilians didn’t need epics! They needed window
fans and refrigerators! The only reason he had agreed to
this crazy scheme was to stimulate tourism. Despite
fanfare and expense, the Risorgimento centennial had
flopped. Forced to gamble, the mayor was betting this
re-enactment would do better.

Something had to be done. Palermo was bursting at
the seams. Over the last decade, the population had risen
by a hundred thousand. When a frantic Department of Public Works called for major construction, crooked contractors went into a feeding frenzy. The most prominent—a former cart driver who had hauled stone and sand in the slums—was connected to the Mafia. Thugs bribed or coerced officials to rubber-stamp over four thousand building licenses. Half the signatures were gullible pensioners, duped into applying for phantom benefits. To deflect scandal, the administration touted this house of cards, but critics called the boom the Sack of Palermo. Construction crews had destroyed the city’s green belt and Art Nouveau villas and replaced them with shoddy apartment complexes. Meanwhile, the historical center, bombed during the war, still lay in ruins.

These conditions did not deter the director, whose scouts secured the best locations for his three-month shoot. He commandeered the Palazzo Gangi, with its gilded mirrors, Venetian chandeliers, and ceiling frescoes of rococo gods, for a ballroom scene. He converted a private chapel in the Cathedral of Palermo into a set. He uprooted telephone poles, repaved asphalt roads with cobblestone, and demolished an entire postwar neighborhood. At Ciminna, a mountaintop village thirty kilometers southeast of the city, he pillaged a three-thousand-year-old temple to Demeter to construct a marble mantelpiece for a fake palazzo.

A refuge was needed from the dust, din, and heat, so a decayed country manor in the suburb of Villabate, now the property of the University of Palermo’s Department of Agriculture, was restored to its former glory and became the Maestro’s private retreat. Here he tinkered with the script, browbeat designers, and auditioned extras.

A stream of local aristocrats flowed through his door. Their fine manners, better suited for a social at Circolo Bellini than a hastily improvised cattle call, could not disguise their discomfort. Some were scandalized because an American actor had been cast as a Sicilian prince. Others, who traced their ancestry back to Justinian, resented kissing the hand of this Northern upstart. But all competed fiercely for the chance to play their ancestors, however briefly: supernumeraries begging to become supernumeraries. The director pitied them. One cavaliere, a member of the Palermo Chamber of Commerce, wore a Rotary pin beside the Royal Order of the Two Sicilies. To meet real aristocrats, he must visit the Capuchin monastery.

☞ The director traced the chiseled inscription:

Fummo Come Voi,
Sarete Come Noi

We were like you, you will be like us.

Located on the western edge of the city, the Convento dei Cappuccini was famous for its extensive catacombs. Four centuries ago, the guide explained, the good monks discovered these vaults contained a mysterious preservative that could mummify the dead. Over time, eight
thousand Palermitani—from marchesas to maids—paid handsomely to be buried here. To satisfy their patrons, the enterprising monks perfected different preservative techniques. During epidemics, they dipped bodies in arsenic or lime. They also invented new forms of embalming. But the most common method was dehydration. Bodies were placed in cells, called strainers, which resembled a barbecue pit, and dried for about eight months; then removed and washed in vinegar before being exposed to fresh air. They were dressed and put in niches, coffins, or on the walls, as instructed by the deceased or their relatives. The oldest corpse, a tonsured ghoul, dated back to the late sixteenth century. The youngest, a perfectly preserved two-year-old girl, had died in 1920 and lay in state in a special chapel. Nicknamed Sleeping Beauty, she survived the Allied bombing in 1943 unscratched. Her companions, the tourists discovered, were less fortunate.

Wandering the dank corridors, the director took notes. Made of rough-cut stone, the exhibit halls were divided into seven categories: Men, Women, Virgins, Children, Priests, Monks, and Professionals. The corpses were dressed in splendid but moth-eaten clothes and occupied their own individual niches according to history and rank. An assassin in a shredded doublet hung from the noose that had dispatched him. A Bourbon colonel wore a plumed cocked hat and a blue jacket with red piping and cuffs. An American Vice Consul rested in his coffin with a Mass card pinned to his frock coat.

According to the guide, the painter Velasquez also was buried here. The director doubted it, but Goya might have felt at home. Dangling from the limestone walls, elegant horrors wore top hats and tails, hoop skirts and bonnets. A clutch of doctors in dusty white coats consulted over a patient long past their aid. A series of mitered skeletons in gold vestments raised their bony hands in a blessing. Two eyeless tots in frayed Fauntleroy collars played catch with an invisible ball.

Without outside support, the guide continued, these mummies would crumble to dust. Fortunately, generous donations came even from overseas. Commendatore Attilio Tumeo, a Sicilian American businessman and philanthropist, whose maternal ancestors rested here, maintained this glassed crypt. The brass plaque read: “Valanguerra.” Spaniards, thought the director. Judging from the 18th-century clothes, they must have come to Sicily with the Bourbons. A gentleman secretary wore a quill pen in a rotted ear. An amateur scientist held a pendulum and a tarnished pocket watch. A Carmelite nun knelt in prayer. A wooden rosary bound her wrists, probably to keep her fleshless hands from falling off.

But the most striking figure was a shrunken harpy, dressed in the late fashion of the ancien régime. She wore a moldering shawl, yellowed lace, and a cameo of Pallas Athena. Rubies glowed in her gorgon-headed walking stick, but her large wig was crooked. A beaded veil covered her ravaged face.
The director consulted his guidebook:

**Zita Valanguerra Spinelli**  
(1794–1882)  
Marchesa of Scalea, known as Trinàcria, was a 19th-century literary figure and caricaturist. A child prodigy, she captivated the Queen of Naples during her brief exile in Palermo. Widowed early, she ran a salon, wrote epigrams, and entertained the court at Caserta. When an indiscretion made her unwelcome, she allied herself to the growing Romantic movement. She promoted Bellini’s operas and supported the poet Leopardi, until their rupture.

Practical and progressive, she cultivated the friendship of the wine merchants Benjamin Ingham and Joseph Whitaker, but a failed lawsuit against her business partners ruined her reputation and compelled her to withdraw to her country estate at Villabate. Embittered and reclusive, she became an eccentric and wrote tracts against liberalism, but her viciously funny political cartoons still appeared in the popular journal *Don Pirlone*.

Spinelli’s reactionary politics became more rabid after Garibaldi’s troops destroyed her prized carriage. This outrage probably contributed to a paralytic stroke. Confined to a wheelchair and nursed by her granddaughter, she spent her last twenty years writing, translating Lichtenberg’s aphorisms and producing a monograph on Hume. Her history of 18th-century Palermo, *Feste, Forche e Farina* (*Festivals, Gallows, and Flour*) became a source for Lord Harold Acton’s two-volume *The Bourbons of Naples*; but her erotic memoirs remained unpublished until forty years after her death. Her manor at Villabate, donated to the University of Palermo, is still used for special occasions.

My hostess, thought the director. He was about to bow, but the small, imperious figure checked him. Rage had frozen her expression into a silent shriek, which squelched all flippancy. Even so, the director wondered if he should incorporate her into his film, a bit of local color to set off a scene. He gazed at the woman’s clouded face, but his attempt to pierce her veil failed. The beads were as numerous as flies on a windowpane. Only the empty sockets were distinct. Their depth unnerved him. Lost in those caves, he felt faint.

A draft blew through the catacombs, and somewhere a door slammed. A chill prickled the director’s skin, and his ears buzzed. He could almost hear the mummies whisper: “You alone on earth are eternal, death ...”
Part of the Villa Palagonia’s gallery of ancestral busts.
YOU ALONE ON EARTH ARE eternal, Death. All things return to you. You cradle our naked being. In you, we rest secure—not happy, no, but safe from ancient sorrow. But why should that concern you happy children of this modern age? That warning at the gate does not apply to you. So you think. Much has changed since those words were carved, but one thing never changes: We all die, but still the mind clings to illusion until it rots. That is why we tell stories. To pretend otherwise, to rock ourselves to sleep and turn oblivion into a lullaby. Is it any wonder God never listens? Is it any wonder time unweaves every word?

We dead mock the living. And the more you chatter, the more we laugh. Our one consolation. Every joke is an epitaph for a feeling. It numbs regret and kills tedium. *La noia,* we call it. The cosmic boredom that is our common fate. And so we pass time listening to gossip. The Three-Twenty-Seven bus has become so bumpy. The pastries at Guli’s are so over-priced. The public works commissioner should be jailed. *Divertimenti* for an eternal salon.

These catacombs are cool and damp. Like the underground chambers in Bagheria, where we escaped the sirocco. Now we find refuge from life’s heat. Muffled by
stone, the traffic above us purls like a stream in a grotto. I would love to see these new machines, for father’s sake. Made in Turin, I understand. More Piedmontese presumption. What do these Northerners know about carriages? They never parked at the Marina, in a car of ebony and gold, making love and eating jasmine-petal ices till two in the morning. They never defied Lord Bentinck’s edict and drove through the Quattro Canti in a coach and six, the coins for the fine sown in the horses’ plumed headbands and picked by the carabinieri. Ciccio, Regina’s husband, did better work. But I cannot afford to be a snob. My great-grandson sells horseless carriages in America, and his money pays the rent and keeps me in style. The least he can do, considering he killed me.

Legally, I should not be here. Mummification was banned the year before I died, but the Villabatesi conspired on my behalf and confected ghost stories for the abbot. I prowled the fields at night in the shape of a she-wolf, they claimed. Dissolving into mist, I mingled with the oranges and lemons, turned into a poisonous cloud, and choked the field hands at dawn. I beat my former groom in his sleep. The old man could show his reverence the bruise from my crop. Somehow, they said, I must be appeased. My spirit would not rest, until I joined my ancestors. The abbot refused. The next morning, he awoke and found the saints knocked off their pedestals in the main chapel. He hastily obtained a dispensation and personally embalmed me.

Such stories shock the American tourists, but Sicily pampers and exalts her dead. On the Feast of All Souls, relatives come to offer us gifts and to change our clothes. Sometimes they reinforce our rotting limbs with wire hangers. A necessity, I’m afraid. Although we try to remain presentable, time and gravity can be cruel. Most of us miss a jaw, a hand, or a foot. Every time I see my reflection, I sigh. Did this scarecrow seduce at one ball the Princes of Salina, Assoro, Trabia, and Camastra? Penance for my sins. When I was young and glib, I angered Archbishop Pignatelli by calling the mummies baccalá, dried cod. Now look at me ...

“You’re still well preserved, Zita,” Don Benjamin said. He took my blue-veined hand in his paw and kissed it. Charles II was right. Merchants are England’s truest gentry.

I nearly forgot to be cross. “Does this flattery mean my order isn’t ready?”

His nostrils flared slightly; otherwise, his face remained calm. In the security of his baglio, his dockside warehouse, Don Benjamin was imperturbable. Even after buying his title, Baron of Santa Rosalia, and mingling with the best of Palermitan society, the old Englishman still supervised his interests, here and in Marsala, and remained formidable behind a counter.

“On the contrary, Marchesa. We filled it immediately.” He called: “Picciotti!”
Two aproned lads scurried to the back, and Don Benjamin patted his belly. The baglio hummed like a beehive. Hammers rang in the cooperage. Rolling barrels rumbled. Clerks chirped over the accounts. So different from my manor at Villabate, where only the cicadas rattled. But Don Benjamin remained silent, the unmoved mover, as serene as Aristotle’s God. His bulk had increased with his wealth. Fifty years ago, he was fit and trim. He wore high collars and elegant cravats, and his auburn hair was feathered in a Titus cut. Now he barely fit into his swivel chair, and a button was missing from his serge suit. His complexion had reddened, his nose broadened, but he remained strangely virile. His musky cologne penetrated the miasma of ripening grillo. Even so, I had never forgiven him for siding with Don Joseph, who was touring their vineyards in the Mazara Valley. My failed lawsuit hung between us like a bad odor.

“Congratulations again,” he offered, “on Regina’s confirmation.”

“We were going to buy fireworks,” I said, “but it seems Garibaldi will provide them.”

“Nonsense!” Don Benjamin grunted. “Young bloods stirring up trouble, that’s all.”

Together, we had survived many upheavals, most recently the April riots, so we were indifferent towards the rumor of another invasion. Nothing fundamentally would change, except perhaps we would be forced to speak Turinese instead of Neapolitan. Back then, Turin manufactured revolutions rather than carriages.

“We’ve played this lottery before,” I said: “’20, ’37, ’48. All losing numbers. It’s not entirely our fault. The game is rigged, God help us; but you’ve always known that, haven’t you? That’s why you prospered. You were never a gambling man, Don Benjamin.”

“Not in politics, certainly; but trade is full of risks. Luck and pluck make profits.”

“Then hide your cash box,” I warned, “or the Red Shirts will confiscate it.”

Jefferson Gardner entered, breathing fire. He was still youthful-looking, despite the mop of graying hair. His foster father, like other American sea captains, had come from Boston after the war with England and had settled in Marsala before prospering and moving to Palermo. Now Signor Gardner owned the captain’s dry good stores along the Marina. He acted like an old salt himself. His manners were blunt, and he spoke Sicilian with a Boston accent.

“Look at this!” he sputtered, rattling a torn poster. “Some scamp pasted this outside!”

A cartoon showed a resplendent Garibaldi liberating a cemetery. He rode a white charger and wore a sash emblazoned with the words “Fedele e Verace.” Overjoyed, the dead danced and scattered coins. The caption read: “Anche i mercanti della terra piangono e gemono, perché nessuno compera più le loro merci.” And the merchants of the earth shall weep and mourn, for no man buyeth their goods any more.

“Socialist trash!” Signor Gardner said.
“I apologize for the iconography, gentlemen. Not in the best of taste.”

“I don’t understand,” muttered Don Benjamin, his voice thicker than Yorkshire pudding. “The man was lionized in London. And what is he?”

“A gaucho,” I said. “Poor Nelson wasn’t deified until after his death.”

“The admiral’s morals were not always the most admirable.” That was his great uncle, the famous Methodist, speaking. Don Benjamin attended the Anglican service at Palazzo Lampedusa every Sunday. Nevertheless, rumor accused him of wanting to be preserved in the Cappuccini. Perhaps he was following Jeremy Bentham’s example.

“Then he should have stayed in Sicily. We like our heroes wicked. They make better tenors. But hawkers are notoriously tone-deaf. No English tradesman will accept an adulterous admiral with poor credit. What did Napoleon call you? A nation of shopkeepers” — and I unfurled a Cheshire grin. As the Romans said: *maior risus, acrior ensis*. The bigger the smile, the sharper the blade.

For the first time, Don Benjamin frowned. “True, Marchesa. But we beat Boney, didn’t we, and everyone prospered; even our enemies. All we ask, in return, is a little gratitude.”

A rebuke. Without shares in Ingham & Whitaker, I could not manage our estate. I resented the reminder but swallowed my bile. “Does Yankee Doodle agree?” I asked. “Can this commercial age afford to honor heroes?”

Signor Gardner pursed his lips and thought. “That depends, Marchesa,” he said. “America certainly honors its heroes. But since their greatness depends on pleasing the people, they are always expendable. That is democracy.”

An honest answer, if nothing else. “But that doesn’t prevent you from boasting you’re Paul Revere’s grandson,” I said. “Perhaps modern heroes need a trade. Signor Revere, I believe, was a silversmith who made false teeth.” I tapped mine, for emphasis.

“Ha, ha, ha, ha!”

Olympian laughter. They were gods, after all, the English Croesus and his Yankee Mercury. The two controlled Sicily’s most lucrative exports — wine, lemon, cotton — but most of their millions came from American investments, most notably New York transportation. We pretended to be friends again and discussed the company’s holdings. I welcomed this chance to practice my English; but still, what a falling off! I, who had recited Pope for the King and Queen at the Palazzina Cinese, who had dined with the Hamiltons and entertained Coleridge, forced to parrot a prospectus. A huge map of New York State hung behind Don Benjamin’s desk, highlighting the railroads and the Erie Canal, with the cities fat and brown as the figs ripening at our *masseria*. One was called Syracuse.

“Siracusa,” I mused. “Does America plan to annex Sicily?”
“Not likely,” Signor Gardner said.
“And yet she sends rifles to the revolutionaries. That
will be bad for business, no?”
“Business survives everything, Marchesa. Even revo-
lutionaries.”
“Yes,” I said. “Garibaldi didn’t do well in L’America, I
understand. Tried raising cash for the cause.” This was
twelve years ago, after the debacle in Rome. The New
York papers had arranged a dockside welcome, supervised
by that charlatan Barnum. The brass band came aboard,
and the reporters found the General in his cabin, seasick
and doubled over with rheumatism. They ignored his
protests and hoisted him on their shoulders. Like a bale
of goods. The General roared with pain, and the crowd
cheered. Then came a gauntlet of civic groups and
philanthropic societies. Then a month of superlatives in
the press. Then ... nothing. “Death and fashion are sisters,
gentlemen. The General spent the rest of his exile grinding
sausages and shipping guano.”
“Well,” Signor Gardner said, “a little hard work never
killed anyone.”
Muffled thunder. The stockers had returned with six
casks of wine. Don Benjamin ordered them brought to
my carriage. “Now, Zita,” he said, “I must insist. Half
price.”
“I don’t need charity, signor,” I said sharply.
“Please,” he said soothingly. “Consider it Regina’s
confirmation present.”

I relented and counted the money — one, two, three
coral-pink notes — for the finest stravecchio on the island.
As I left, Signor Gardner rolled up the poster and placed
it in his desk.
“We’ll use his face to sell vinegar,” Gardner said. “You,
of all people, should approve.”

☞ Poor Garibaldi. I hated that gaucho for wrecking my
world, but he deserved better than to be turned into a
condiment. What hero can survive in an age that does
not distinguish the man on the horse from the man on
the label? My great-grandson is one of the worst offenders.
When I last saw Attilio, he had become an old huckster.
Accompanied by the mayor and six councilmen in cere-
monial sashes, he touted his latest scheme. With enough
investors, he boasted, he could open a factory near Tràpani
and make horseless carriages. For promotion, he had de-
dsigned a red racer named the Garibaldi, “La Macchina dei
Due Mondi.” I searched his face for some redeeming flicker
of irony, but no, he was completely sincere. As Cagliostro
the charlatan once told my father: “One must believe in
miracles to convince others to believe in them. Success
in this world depends on self-deception.”

Attilio’s slogans made the mayor and his entourage
bob like sparrows at a feeder. Soon the whole flock
cheeped. Words, words. The Sicilian vice. Honey puffs
to fill the void. Myths, creeds, philosophies: all words.
Ancestral bust from courtyard of Villa Palagonia.
About the Author

Praise for Trinàcria

“History,” T.S. Eliot observed, “has many cunning passages, contrived corridors.” Anthony Di Renzo’s novella Trinàcria: A Tale of Bourbon Sicily demonstrates how cunningly we all contrive to find in history only the lessons we want to. The book’s narrator, to our initial surprise, is the mummified corpse of Zita Valanguerra Spinelli, Marchesa of Scalea (1794-1882), who had adopted the nom de plume of Trinàcria, an ancient name for Sicily. But soon the voice of this long-dead wit and salonnière — arrogant, erudite, and vengeful — grows as familiar to us as the thousand little lies we tell ourselves each day.

Donna Zita represents Di Renzo’s spirited rejoinder to Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s classic novel Il Gattopardo (The Leopard), a nostalgic portrayal of old aristocratic Sicily and its privileged world, swept away by Garibaldi’s conquest. Less objective than Lampedusa’s Prince Fabrizio Corbera, Marchesa Spinelli blames the commercial and materialistic forces unleashed by Sicily’s unification with the new kingdom of Italy for ushering in a vapid culture in which the presiding deity is money. But more “things” will never make people better: “We aristocrats have plenty of things,” Donna Zita remarks, “and we are proud and vicious.”
Di Renzo’s writing is vivid and brimful of sardonic humor. He specializes in crisp evocations of outdoor scenes, such as the bustling streets of Naples or the unforgettable cruel festival of the Cuccagna; but the main attraction is the marchesa herself, a force of nature as powerful and inexorable as the Sicilian sun in July.

— Peter D’Epiro and Mary Desmond Pinkowish, authors of Sprezzatura: 50 Ways Italian Genius Shaped the World

“The past never dies,” says Zita Valanguerra Spinelli, Marchesa of Scalea, the narrator and protagonist of Trinàcria: A Tale of Bourbon Sicily. Neither does the eternal appeal of Sicily. The Italian American writer Anthony Di Renzo has breathed new life into the glorious tradition of the Sicilian historical novel.

This fascinating book dialogues with literature, cinema, and the figurative arts. Di Renzo not only evokes the history of the Bourbons and the Risorgimento but also captures Sicily’s aura as a “paper island,” an imaginative world created by Italy’s most important modern writers. His novel will remind readers of De Roberto’s The Viceroy and Tomasi di Lampedusa’s The Leopard, two different and perhaps even opposite works. The first seems to have inspired Di Renzo’s love for the surreal and grotesque, the second his lyricism and elegiac melancholy.

Donna Zita is a fascinating character. She is romantic and enlightened, rebellious and ambitious, beautiful and mysterious. Her nickname Trinàcria, one of Sicily’s most ancient names, shows her complete identification with this paradoxical island: wild but cultured, timeless but ephemeral, sparkling but bleak. For Zita, as for Sicily, the present is transient, while the past is eternal. Sicily here is simultaneously myth and reality. While the novel’s historical data is accurate and authentic, this book appeals to the eye more than the mind. From the opening scene in which a Hollywood crew prepares to shoot an epic about Garibaldi’s Thousand in Palermo, the reader is carried away by a montage of beautiful images. Through sheer witchcraft, Anthony Di Renzo recreates the timeless spell of the Medusa.

— Margherita Ganeri, author of The Italian Historical Novel

A triumph of wit and eloquence, Anthony Di Renzo’s Trinàcria: A Tale of Bourbon Sicily displays a thorough knowledge of Italian culture, weaving fascinating historical material with astute commentaries about Italian life, ancient and modern. Di Renzo creates unforgettable scenes sometimes operatic in their intensity. His confident, beguiling style will remind readers of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s in The Leopard and of Salman Rushdie’s at his very best. Like these authors, Di Renzo adroitly dips in and out of magical realism, but never lets technique interfere with fast plotting and vivid characterization.

The novel’s brilliant, bedraggled narrator, the Marchesa
of Scalea (nicknamed Trinàcria, after the three-legged symbol of Sicily), is always lively, even when speaking from her tomb, full of wisdom, caustic humor and eccentric charm. Her tragicomic story makes Trinàcria an enormously satisfying historical novel.

— Edward Hower, author of *The New Life Hotel* and *Storms of May*

Anthony Di Renzo’s *Trinàcria* peels away layers of 19th-century Sicilian history in a way that academic and popular studies of this period cannot. The novel provides an intimate perspective on sweeping public events. Di Renzo tells the story of Zita Valanguerra Spinelli, Marchesa of Scalea, who is a composite of two historical figures: Antonia Vassallo, Princess of Bellaprima, and Alessandra Spadafora, Duchess of Santa Rosalia. During her long life, Donna Zita meets kings and queens, great composers, poets, and foreign entrepreneurs seeking to make their fortunes off her island’s bounty. Di Renzo’s sardonic depiction of the Marchesa’s deeply felt cynicism often kicks the modern reader in the gut: the brutality of husbands toward wives; the cruelty of fathers toward children; the impact of a woman’s revenge and of her unyielding, unforgiving pride; above all, the lost promise of Italy’s Unification to Sicilians. This finely crafted novel glitters with polished metaphors and sparking epigrams. It is a marvelous work in the tradition of Dacia Maraini’s *The Silent Duchess*.

— John Keahey, author of *Seeking Sicily*

What a great read this novel is, better than a trip to Sicily! Full of shock and delight, *Trinàcria* forms a fascinating epic about Bourbon Palermo on the eve of disaster. In the book’s title character, the Marchesa of Scalea, Anthony Di Renzo creates a woman who demonstrates the folly and passion of living life defiantly on the brink. Few writers are better at showing the intimate, sometimes comic connections between the past and the present, between the old world and the new. If you love wit and discovery, you will enjoy *Trinàcria: A Tale of Bourbon Sicily*.

— Jeanne Mackin, author of *The Sweet By and By* and *Dreams of Empire*

*Trinàcria: A Tale of Bourbon Sicily* is a completely original look at a long-maligned and misunderstood island—a part of and yet always apart from the modern political construct of Italy. In a work rich with history, Anthony Di Renzo takes the reader into Sicily’s pre-unification past by having the mummified dead of Palermo’s Capuchin catacombs confront a film crew from Italy’s *dolce vita* era. This fascinating metaphysical and psychological landscape is replete with Red Shirts, petty nobility, studio hacks, and two centuries of bitter Sicilian wisdom. “We all have skeletons in the closet,” says the Marchesa of Scalea, the novel’s narrator and protagonist. “If they must rattle, they may as well dance.” And dance they do in a macabre but spirited tarantella.

— Paul Paolicelli, author of *Dances with Luigi* and *Under the Southern Sun*
Most historical fiction paints the past in flattering oils. *Trinàcria: A Tale of Bourbon Sicily* is etched in acid. Goya could have created this novel’s caustic characters, particularly its protagonist and narrator, Zita Valanguerra Spinelli, the baleful Marchesa of Scalea, whose crest is modeled after the three-legged gorgon of Sicily. Donna Zita recounts her life from a crypt in Palermo’s Capuchin Catacombs. Outrage over lost privilege has given her a posthumous case of acid reflux. But as the Marchesa relives past violations—her land scorched to dust by the pitiless Sicilian sun; her carriage hacked to pieces by Garibaldi’s Red Shits; her crest and *nom de plume* Trinàcria, the ancient name of Sicily, turned into a label for cheap, mass-produced vinegar—readers learn to sympathize with this spiteful banshee.

Anthony Di Renzo’s masterful, richly textured and layered narrative never hesitates to challenge its own discourse of storytelling, to question the ways craft transforms history into fiction. But it also poses an ethical challenge. Like the Marchesa, the author confronts our complacency and demands that we examine our own vanities, political hubris, and fragility. Will we take responsibility for our individual and collective histories or float into oblivion, thinking life was all a trick? This spellbinding narrative leaves us with no answers, only the lingering scent of broom.

—Shona Ramaya, author of *Flute, Beloved Mother, Queen of Night* and *Operation Monsoon*