REVIEW


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Many cultures have itinerant rituals like mumming in Ireland and England. Folklorist Steve Siporin focuses on one such ritual still prevalent in Italy, the befanata, which takes place on Epiphany Eve (January 5). On the evening in question, squads of performers follow a prearranged itinerary to arrive at neighbors’ houses, some as musicians and others costumed as the Befana and her family; the Befana is an old witch whose name is derived from the word “epiphany,” and the members of the squad perform songs and skits about her and her family. The visits to the households can last between fifteen and forty-five minutes, and the performers are offered drinks and food for their efforts.

Starting in 2001, Siporin spent several years observing the befanata in Pitigliano, a township in southern Tuscany, and the result is this in-depth analysis of the tradition. Divided into eight chapters, the book explores the history of the befanata, its relation to other similar traditions in Italy and elsewhere in Europe, the socioeconomic context that influenced it, and the key aspects of the ritual. Thus, while it focuses on the befanata in one small community during the brief period of several years, it provides a panoramic view that makes it relevant to the tradition throughout Italy.

Following an introduction that lays out both the tradition and the approach of the book, the first chapter is dedicated to the history of the befanata. A Napoleonic survey of Italian customs provides the earliest documentation of the custom, dating back to the first decade of the nineteenth century. While not specific to Tuscany per se, the survey depicts the befanata in a manner recognizable even today, and nearly a century later, in 1901, folklorist James George Frazer described the befanata of Rome as also relatively similar. Those texts speak of rural ceremonies of people going house to house, dressed as the Befana and her family, and singing songs that are sometimes transgressive in humor. The written record of the befanata in Tuscany, a song text, begins in 1885. The overview of the documentation indicates that the custom was widespread and stable throughout Italy, and southernmost Tuscany seems to be the area where the ritual has persisted the longest.

The second chapter examines the relationship of the befanata to other folkloric practices in Italy, such as the spring festivals of carnival and Lent. Local Italian carnivals may contain such rituals as burning or sawing in half an effigy of an old woman (brucia la vecchia or sega la vecchia, respectively), which are like the befanata in several ways: with the figure of an old woman, of course, but also with the transgressive humor of the associated skits. Nonetheless, there are also important differences between them, and it is in the third chapter that Siporin teases out those differences. There, he examines the economic system of sharecropping, mezzadria, that
shaped the befanata of Tuscany. For over six centuries, the tenant farmers of Pitigliano kept only half of what they produced, paying the rest as rent to the landowners. The system of mezzadria—literally, going halves—resulted in the impoverishment of the farmers despite the relatively high production of the area. Begging days may have developed to aid those who were less fortunate; to this day, the squads avoid the homes of the poor so as to not shame them for their meager tables of food. In other words, the evolution of the befanata appears to be strongly linked to the economics of sharecropping, in that it allowed assistance to the poorer farmers of the area who could perform for nourishment.

The following three chapters, "Food," "Song," and "The Old Woman," analyze the important elements of the tradition. They highlight how, unlike other traditions, such as mumming, the focus of the performance is the music and not the skit. The squad assembles and sings outside a home before they are invited in, performing songs that can be adapted according to each family and addressing the different age groups who are present. These songs consist of repeated verbal formulas that are the hallmarks of verbal compositions, and Siporin notes that he heard almost every phrase also appear in some of the previous transcriptions; in other words, the songs are formulaic and the tradition is stable. The focus of the performance is the Befana herself, an old woman who embodies numerous contradictions; she is grandmotherly but witchlike, kindly but fearful and powerful, domestic and also a wanderer. There are numerous legends about her, including those that have entered Italian commercial culture that cast her as benevolent. In the oral tradition, however, she can intercede like a saint or help the unmarried find husbands, but she can also curse the crops. In this regard, she is more in line with the popular beliefs in Italy about the saints, being helpful and frightening at the same time.

The last two chapters address the befanata in recent decades. Chapter 7 looks at the reaction when, in 1977, the Italian government, to reduce the number of nonworking holidays, decreed that Epiphany would stop being a holiday. A widespread grassroots rebellion occurred, and only five years later the government partially reversed itself; it fully reversed itself in 1986. The book closes with Siporin reflecting on the tradition two decades after he observed it at the start of the twenty-first century, highlighting how it is further evolving. In conclusion, Siporin offers a wide-ranging view on the local tradition of Pitigliano. He gives his readers the historical and geographical scope of the befanata while remaining focused on the customs of one specific locality.
AUTHOR BIO

Fabian Alfie is a professor of Italian at the University of Arizona, specializing in medieval literature. He received his PhD from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in 1997, where his PhD minor was in folklore. He has published extensively on Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch and has translated the poetry of Rustico Filippi, Folgore da San Gimignano, and Domenico di Giovanni, nicknamed Burchiello (with Aileen Astorga Feng).

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