

Jacopone da Todi, Poet and Mystic: A Review of the History of the Criticism¹

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Jacopo dei Benedetti (circa 1230-1306) was born into a lesser noble family in the Umbrian hilltown of Todi, where he received an education typical of his class and of the historical period in which he lived. Jacopo practiced the profession of notary—lucrative not in itself but as a result of the intimate knowledge it yielded² regarding monetary and real-estate matters (Peck 5)—and, in his mid-thirties, married Vanna di Bernardino di Guidone. Their reputedly happy marriage was cut short after only one year by Vanna's accidental death at a party. According to the early *vitae* of Jacopone, shortly thereafter the distraught widower suffered a spiritual crisis precipitated by the unexpected discovery that his late wife, far from being the worldly young matron that her outward appearance proclaimed, was a secret practitioner of self-mortification, as evidenced by the fact that on the occasion of her untimely death she was wearing under her ballgown a hairshirt. Jacopo immediately renounced his own decidedly worldly ways, divested himself of his earthly possessions and spent the next decade wandering the roads of Umbria as an impoverished *bezoccone*, that is, a mendicant Franciscan tertiary (Mancini 151). In 1278 he was admitted as a lay brother to the Order of Friars Minor (Casolini 620). Jacopone dei Benedetti had become Fra Jacopone.

¹I am indebted to Paul LaChance, O.F.M., for making many helpful suggestions and to Yvonne Davis and Kelly Scolaro for bibliographic word processing.

Jacopone da Todi lived during the tumultuous period when the struggle between the Franciscan Spirituals and the Community (the more relaxed wing of the movement) was raging. In the years following the death of St. Francis in 1226, the rule of 1223 regarding strict poverty was considerably relaxed. As Moorman notes: "The Order [was] now very different from what it had been in its origin, the friar no longer a homeless evangelist and preacher, but secure, privileged, well housed, well fed, and given every opportunity for learning and study" (Moorman 192). The struggle between the two factions focused on whether to return to the strict observance of poverty, which is what the Spirituals advocated, or to permit some degree of ownership or use of property and other material comforts, which is what the Community desired. Perhaps in reaction to his acute awareness as an upwardly mobile notary of the corruptibility of the human soul by the materialism of this world (Peck 26-29; 46), Jacopone soon placed himself vehemently on the side of the Spirituals. Indeed, Jacopone did not hesitate to stand in harm's way by openly opposing a supremely powerful fellow Umbrian, Pope Boniface VIII. As a result of Jacopone's explicit condemnation of Boniface's blatant acquisitiveness and hunger for power (*Laude* LI, LIII), Jacopone was excommunicated in 1298 and kept in solitary confinement for almost five years. From *Laude* LVI and LVII we also know that the excommunicated friar twice begged Boniface for absolution, but to no avail. Indeed it was not until 1303 that Jacopone gained his freedom from the pope who succeeded Boniface, Benedict XI. Upon his release from incarceration, the friar retired to the convent of San Lorenzo in Collazzone, where he died in 1306. Inscribed in the Franciscan martyrology, Jacopone is popularly referred to and venerated as "Blessed" or "Saint," although he has not been beatified or canonized by the Church (Oliger 264; Lograsso 797).

Jacopone is remembered today not so much as an enemy of Boniface, but as one of Italy's greatest early poets and mystics. In the vernacular he wrote approximately one hundred *laude*, or non-liturgical religious ballads, treating such themes as the praise of Francis and of the Franciscan ideal of poverty, the praise of the Virgin, the admonition against all manner of worldly temptations (including secular power, hypocrisy and even learning for its own sake), the exhortation to a moral life, the abhorrence of sinfulness, the hyperrealistic description of disease and death, the call to penance, anticlericalism, and the ecstasy of mystical closeness to God. Various Latin works are also attributed to Jacopone, although critics are not in agreement as to which these are; the possible candidates are various hymns, the famous sequence *Stabat mater dolorosa*, succinct moral

teachings known as the *Detti*, and a five-page treatise on the mystical union, referred to as the *Trattato* (Contini 62; Petrocchi, 1974, 18). Jacopone's most famous laud, "Donna del paradiso," rightly treasured as a masterpiece of elegant and dramatic simplicity, also constitutes a crucial step in the development of mystery plays on the Italian peninsula.

Natalino Sapegno dubbed Jacopone "forse la più potente personalità della nostra storia letteraria prima dell'Alighieri [perhaps the most potent literary personality before Dante Alighieri]" (1954, 28). Yet sadly, Jacopone today remains an object of relative neglect among scholars of literature and mysticism, and among historians of the Franciscan movement. For instance, in Duncan Nimmo's recent authoritative history, *Reform and Division in the Franciscan Order* (1226-1538), Jacopone receives only a brief passing reference. This neglect is due in part to the fact that the study of Jacoponian language is rendered difficult by the lack of autograph manuscripts, the wide range of variants in extant manuscripts, early copyists' eagerness to amend the manuscripts, and the difficulty of attributing authorship of various texts, both Latin and vernacular (Furia 44-49). Questions regarding the orthodoxy of Jacopone's texts have also dampened the enthusiasm of some researchers concerned with questions of Christian spirituality (Nessi 1981, 49-52). In an effort to focus much needed attention on the life and works of Jacopone, this article will present a brief review of the history of the criticism of this important 13th-century poet and mystic and consider the present status of Jacoponian studies. Though a few bibliographic essays on Jacopone have been written, many are in Italian and hence inaccessible to most North American readers. George Peck's 1980 English-language biography of Jacopone contains an excellent bibliographic essay; however, it makes no reference to research published after 1975. The contribution of the present essay, therefore, is to shed light on this important 13th-century mystic and to bring English readers up to date on more recent Jacoponian scholarship.²

Jacopone appears to have been well known as a preacher, poet, and mystic during his own lifetime and in the years immediately following his death. Manuscripts of sermons, lauds, and other texts composed after Jacopone's death show that his ballads were widely imitated and that Jacopone himself was held up as a model of the Franciscan ideal of poverty

²The following have proved useful points of reference in the preparation of this essay: Ageno, Contini, Mancini (1974), Nessi (1981), Peck.

and humility (Peck 187-88; Contini, *Duecento* 62). In the 15th century, Franciscan “biographies” of Jacopone were recorded in writing, the most famous of these being the *Franceschina*, attributed to Jacopo Oddi, O.F.M., d. 1488 (Oliger 263). In 1490, Francesco Buonaccorsi published an edition, based on Umbrian manuscripts, of Jacoponian *laude*. The Buonaccorsi edition proved to be so important that it remained the primary source for subsequent editions until the publication almost five centuries later of Franca Ageno’s *Laudi, Trattato e Detti*.

The scholars of the Neoclassical period were, not surprisingly, hardly attracted to the *laude* of Jacopone, characterized, as many of these are, by a seemingly uncontrolled crudeness of expression. Giulio Perticari (1779-1822), for example, clearly expressed this negative attitude when he labels Jacopone a poet “assai goffo e squisitamente plebeo” [rather clumsy and exquisitely plebeian] and generally denigrates his poetry for its lack of classical restraint, rationality, and harmony (Perticari 25). In the second half of the 19th century, critics tended to define Jacopone’s importance principally in terms of his mysticism, thus effectively devaluing his poetic abilities. For example, in 1851, M. Villemain negatively compares Jacopone’s poetry to that of Dante: in marked contrast to the “sublimity” of Alighieri’s *Comedy*, Jacopone’s “bizarreries” [quirky stylistic peculiarities] are written in “un style assez grossier” [a rather heavy-handed style], making him “le buffon du genre don’t Dante était le poète” [the clown of the genre of which Dante was the poet](3-4). Two decades later, Francesco De Sanctis (1817-1883) wrongly insisted not only that Jacopone knew nothing of the cultured lyric poetry of the troubadours but also that he was ignorant of theology and philosophy (31-32). Similarly, the epithet “giullare di Dio” [God’s minstrel], which Allesandro D’Ancona (1835-1914) appropriated from Francis’s locution *ioculatores Dei* and applied with inappropriately derisive connotation to Jacopone, tended to reduce the mystic’s status to that of a plebeian jester whose verses were as unoriginal as they were uncultured.

After the Romantic judgment of Jacopone as a “poeta mancato” (Ageno xvii) or as a crude versifier unworthy of the title of poet, the critics of the first decades of the 20th century began to see Jacopone in less monochromatic hues. Still, it must be noted that Italian literary criticism of the early decades of the 20th century was tinted by yet another palette of philosophical and aesthetic values, namely those espoused by Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), who sought to divide a literary text into “poesia” (i.e., arising from pure intuition) and “non-poesia” (i.e., contaminated by

intellectual and moral influences). Croce applied this system—with dubious results—to Dante's *Commedia*, dividing it into lyrical and ideological sections. Not surprisingly, the Crocean aesthetic tended to affect the evaluation of the Jacoponian corpus in a negative manner. Jacopone was deemed not a poet, but, at best, a “mistico-poet” (Russo 50-53). Nevertheless, in the early decades of our century a flurry of scholarly activity produced a re-evaluation of the Jacoponian corpus, with the result that several new, if partial, editions of Jacopone's works by Ferri and Caramella and another by Papini appeared, all based on the 1490 Buonaccorsi edition.

Mario Casella (1886-1956) is the scholar credited with having shifted the critical focus from Jacopone as mystic to Jacopone as poet. Casella's articles on Jacopone emphasized the high lyricism of the mystic's lauds, a lyricism that is anchored in the traditions of Bonaventure and Hugh and Richard of Saint-Victor; the result, in Casella's view, is an exquisite record of the joys and anguish of a soul in search of union with God. The scholarly contribution of Ernesto Giacomo Parodi (1862-1923) is likewise important because it holds that Jacopone was not an uneducated mystic but a highly cultured man, whose poetry embraced not only grotesque and rough imagery and language but also sophisticated and aulic³ elements, as evidenced by sophisticated rhyme schemes, cultured poetic forms, and Latinate vocabulary. Parodi acknowledges the conscious artistry of Jacopone, his fecundity of expression and of imagery, and dubs him an occasionally “grande poeta” (140-41). Francesco Ugolini further deepens our appreciation of the sophistication of Jacopone's poetry by isolating two poetic currents in it: the refined Provençal and French lyric tradition, on the one hand, and popular, indigenous Umbrian poetry, on the other (109).

In 1937, Giuseppe Ungaretti (1888-1970) delivered a series of lectures on the emergence of modern European poetry, in which Jacopone figures prominently. Ungaretti unqualifiedly links Jacopone's name with those of five other greats—Guido Cavalcanti, Dante Alighieri, Michelangelo Buonarroti, Torquato Tasso, and Giacomo Leopardi—whose poetic contributions, in Ungaretti's view, placed Italy at the pinnacle of European artistic achievements (46). Ungaretti divides Jacopone's poetic production into three periods: an initial stage of fiercely realistic autobiographical

³I used the word “aulic” for two reasons: to avoid the adjective “courtly,” which has been overused to the point of meaninglessness, and to convey the magisterial tone of cultured as opposed to popular poetry.

poetry filled with the preoccupation of death; a middle phase comprising both political satire and lyrical verse (“Donna del paradiso” and the “Stabat mater” in his view belong to this period); and a final period of “poesia pura” (56), in which, according to Ungaretti, Jacopone’s poetry urgently and spontaneously reveals itself as a direct expression of his soul (63-64).

Three recent editions of Jacopone’s *laude* represent the culmination of decades of collective labor and bear witness to the fruitful renewal of Jacoponian research in this century. Franca Ageno’s 1953 volume, the first complete edition of the *laude* of Jacopone since Buonaccorsi’s 1490 edition, contains not only 93 *laude* in the vernacular, but also, in an appendix and with an Italian translation, a five-page Latin treatise on the mystical union and 11 short Latin *detti*, or moral teachings, attributed to Jacopone. Ageno’s edition, important because of the rigor of its philological methodology, eliminates Tuscanizing elements prominent in the Buonaccorsi edition and restores Umbrian linguistic forms found in manuscripts originating from that region. Ageno sees Jacopone as a well-educated poet who consciously used popular rhymes and rhythms and crude locutions in order to produce the desired poetic effect. In other words, Ageno believes that Jacopone was using art as an instrument of God’s will (xv-xvi). The Ageno edition provoked much scholarly debate and increased critical awareness of the manifold philological difficulties in producing an authentic archetype.

In 1955, Luigi Fallacara produced an edition of Jacopone’s *laude* that is linguistically more accessible—especially to non-native speakers of Italian—because of its modern Tuscanized orthography. The Fallacara edition follows the order adopted by the Buonaccorsi edition and presents 102 lauds in the presumed order of their composition.

As important as Ageno’s and Fallacara’s contributions are, that of Franco Mancini is far more significant. The 1974 Mancini edition, comprising 92 lauds, is based on a hitherto unknown manuscript tradition, the Oliverian 4 manuscript of Pesaro, that predates the earliest known Umbrian *laudari*, or collections of lauds (389). Thus, this edition provides, for the first time, readings of the lauds based on both Umbrian and non-Umbrian sources. The result is a text that is linguistically more difficult because it is more distant from the Tuscan dialect that forms the foundation of modern Italian. Nevertheless, the thoroughness of the Mancini edition renders it the unrivaled point of reference in Jacopone studies today.

Ernesto Menestò’s editions of *Le vite antiche di Iacopone da Todi* (1977) and *Le prose latine attribuite a Iacopone da Todi* (1979) continue the

important tradition of producing critical editions of texts attributed to or concerning Jacopone da Todi. In Menestò's view, the Latin works attributed to Jacopone constitute the most neglected side of Jacoponian studies.

During the 1960s various scholarly approaches to the interpretation of Jacopone evolved that linked his poetry to other currents in lyric poetry. Giorgio Petrocchi interprets the texts of Jacopone as being linked to all the "vicende spirituali del Duecento" [spiritual vicissitudes of the 13th century], including the penitential movement, Joachim of Fiore, Hugh and Richard of Saint-Victor, and the turbulent reign of Boniface VIII (1965, 670). Some Italian scholars, Emidio D'Ascoli, Paolo Toschi, Natalino Sapegno, and F. Neri among them, discover in Jacopone a precursor to the Romantics and identify a particularly close affinity to the melancholic Italian master of 19th-century lyric poetry, Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837). Rosanna Bettinari's excellent stylistic study, *Jacopone da Todi e il Laudario Urbinate*, provides an invaluable compilation of vocabulary, imagery, motifs, and syntactical patterns recurring in Jacopone's poetry. For Mario Apollonio the term "giullare di Dio" is still appropriate, not in the sense of common uneducated minstrel, but rather with the meaning of "maestro e scrittore" (1962, 415).

In recent decades, several important conferences have been devoted to the study of Jacopone. The first of these took place in 1952 in Todi under the auspices of the mayor of that town; participants included Franco Mancini and Franca Ageno. In 1957, the Centro di Studi sulla Spiritualità Medievale sponsored in Todi a conference on *Jacopone e il Suo Tempo*, the 1959 proceedings of which consider Jacopone's relation to art, music, and sacred drama, as well as to more traditional foci such as mysticism and the Jacoponian manuscript tradition. A 1960 conference focusing on *Il movimento dei disciplinati* [the penitential movement of the mid-13th century] produced a number of significant studies that examine Jacopone's place in the broader context of the European lyric tradition; contributors include such august medievalists as Ignazio Baldelli, Mario Apollonio, and Aurelio Roncaglia.

In 1980, the Commune of Todi sponsored yet another important conference on the occasion of the 750th anniversary of the mystic's birth; O. Capitani, Silvestro Nessi, P. Scarpellini, Vincent Moleta, Ernesto Menestò, Franco Mancini, M. Pericoli, and G. Comez presented papers on various aspects of Jacoponian studies which were published in 1981, under the editorship of Ernesto Menestò, today's leading expert on Jacoponian

mysticism. At that conference, Silvestro Nessi advocated the creation of a center for Jacoponian studies; to my knowledge, none has been established, although the Centro di Studi in Todi does devote attention to Jacoponian studies, among others (1981, 64). One important contribution emerging from the 1980 conference is Nessi's detailed analysis of Jacoponian criticism. Nessi's otherwise excellent review confines itself, however, almost exclusively to Italian scholarship. While this is not surprising, especially given the Italian context of this congress on Jacopone, it is nevertheless regrettable that many Italian scholars tend to disregard valid English-language contributions to the debate. This sort of intellectual isolationism can only lead ultimately to a more impoverished understanding of the texts under study.

Indeed, significant contributions in English have been made, especially in our century.⁴ Evelyn Underhill's eloquent 1919 "spiritual biography" of Jacopone traces the slow and travailed evolution of the mystic who, in her opinion, "represents better than do any other of the early writers the characteristic blend of popular and mystical religious feeling, the double stain of wisdom and simplicity, of moral austerity and lyrical joy, which were the peculiar marks of the Franciscan revival as understood by the Founder himself" (5). It is to be noted, however, that Underhill's Edwardian sensibilities prohibited her from including among the poems those sensuous or grimly realistic texts "which can hardly be offered to the modern reader" (84). Underhill also emphasizes the importance in biographies of mystics of understanding and accounting for the specific realities of the historical period in which the mystic lived (18-19).

This necessary "topographical background" (Underhill 19) is precisely what American historian George T. Peck brings to his 1980 biography of Jacopone, *The Fool of God*. Peck describes and analyzes the everyday realities of life in Todi: the horrifying squalor, widespread disease, and staggering mortality rates; the equally staggering interest rates (from 20-42 percent); the psychological conflicts and social excesses produced by the emergence of the new middle class; the violent, devastating wars brought on by the ongoing struggle between Empire and Church; the masochistic mortification of the flesh that characterized the flagellant movements; and

⁴Curiously, extremely few Spanish-language studies have been conducted on Jacopone. The only one I am aware of is Alma Novella Marani's *Jacopone da Todi* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de la Plata, 1964). Scholarly interest in Jacopone among French- and German-speaking researchers is somewhat greater.

the concomitant belief that the world was coming to an end in 1260. The high degree of historical detail that Peck provides helps the reader envision the physical world in which Jacopone lived, struggled and died. In short, it places a heaven-bent poet in an all too earthbound context. Peck's 246-page monograph is solidly researched, written with an erudite yet self-deprecating and sometimes humorous style, well grounded in an expert knowledge of various aspects of the history of the Middle Ages, and manifests a keen understanding of the spiritual conflicts Jacopone underwent and hence of the subtle, unconventional qualities of his poetry.

In 1982, the Paulist Press published an English translation by Serge and Elizabeth Hughes of 93 of Jacopone's lauds. The Hugheses are to be congratulated for translating linguistically and technically difficult texts although it must also be noted that this most recent English translation of Jacopone is often a loose version of the original and, at times, not strictly accurate. The volume also contains a 65-page introduction by Serge Hughes which sketches a portrait of the mystic and considers the problems entailed in producing a translation of such highly idiosyncratic poetry. Two young American scholars have recently written dissertations on Jacopone: Bradley B. Dick's "Jacopone and the Poetics of Franciscan Spirituality" appeared in 1993, and Gary Triplo's "Mysticism and the Elements of the Spiritual Life of Jacopone da Todi" followed in 1994.

While the above review of the history of the criticism shows that considerable research has been conducted on the mysticism and poetry of Jacopone da Todi and on the cultural ethos surrounding him, it is also clear that research in this area is by no means a closed chapter. The mystic's lauds and the Latin works attributed to him trace a fascinating personal journey and illuminate a troubled yet vibrant period of Italian history. A contemporary of Giotto, Roger Bacon, Marco Polo, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Frederick II Hohenstaufen, Jacopone was a participant in some of the most important movements of the 13th century: the nascent development of Franciscanism from its primitive roots through its split between the Spiritual faction and the Community; the waning yet still virulent struggle between Papacy and Empire; and the rise of the middle class. As a personal witness to weighty historical events, Jacopone's importance must not be undervalued. For what other 13th-century figure both locked horns with Boniface VIII and conversed with Franciscan brothers of the first generation, and then documented these momentous vicissitudes in texts that we still possess?

Though not all of Jacopone's lauds may be considered elevated poetry, still his *laudario* constitutes an invaluable key to the past, because it traces not only the intimate spiritual journey of one individual but also the astonishing swift course of social and political change in a strategically situated region of 13th-century Italy. Recognizing the far-reaching significance of the Jacoponian corpus, scholars are now focusing their critical attentions on a variety of topics, including the treatment of Jacopone in Franciscan sermons and in writings of the Quattrocento, his interaction with other mystics including Clare of Montefalco (1194-1253) and Angela of Foligno (1248-1309), Jacopone's relations with the Benedictines and the Dominicans, the Latin works attributable to Jacopone, the relation between Jacopone's poetry and the music and theatre of the period, and the fascinating psychology of the man. Feminist research in the Middle Ages has recently produced a multitude of rich and insightful studies; and I believe Jacopone will prove to be a fertile area of study also from this perspective, especially to the extent that Jacopone may be viewed as a male counterpart to the contemporary Beguine movement.

Jacopone appears to have been a cluster of dichotomies: was he saintly or heretical? Cultured or uneducated? Masochist or male warrior? Poet or mystic? Sane or insane? Perhaps the best solution to these enigmas is to see Jacopone as a personification of the "triumphant anarchy" that Moulin believes characterizes the entire history of the Franciscan Order (31). Certainly, the considerable Jacoponian corpus—both vernacular and Latin—presents today's scholars with an unusual and perhaps unparalleled opportunity to comprehend the inner workings of the mind and soul of a 13th-century mystic.

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