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GOETHE, ROLLI, AND "SOLITARIO BOSCO OMBROSO"

BY GEORGE E. DORRIS

PROFESSOR GEORGE E. DORRIS holds a doctorate from Northwestern University. He is now on the staff of The University of the Pacific, Stockton, California.

IN his autobiography, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Goethe writes that his first acquaintance with the Italian world—later to be so decisive in his career—was through his father's collection of engravings of Rome and through a song, performed "by a cheerful old Italian teacher named Giovazzini," who assisted the elder Goethe. As the poet describes the incident:

The old man did not sing badly, and every day my mother became accustomed to accompanying him and herself on the clavichord, so that I got to know and soon learned by heart "Solitario bosco ombroso" even before I understood it.

R. O. Moon, the most recent translator of the autobiography, has credited "Solitario bosco ombroso" ("Lonely shady wood") to Pietro Metastasio, the most famous Italian poet and dramatist of the eighteenth century, but the proper credit for this graceful song belongs to the lesser-known Paolo Antonio Rolli (1687-1765), a former school-fellow of Metastasio in their native Rome. Rolli spent nearly thirty years of his life, 1715-1744, in London, where he published this song in his *Di Canzonette e di Cantate, libri due* of 1727.

Although Rolli was overshadowed by Metastasio even in his own lifetime, his English career is not without considerable interest. As

a teacher of Italian he had most of the royal family and many of the aristocracy among his pupils; as a dramatic poet he supplied libretti for the Italian opera in London, writing for Handel, Bononcini, and Porpora, among others; as an editor he worked to introduce the Italian classics to English readers; as a critic he corrected Voltaire without being refuted; most important, perhaps, he also worked as a translator, and in 1735 he published the first complete translation of *Paradise Lost* into Italian.¹ But during all of this activity Rolli also published his own poetry, including the present volume of songs, which was dedicated to Mary Howe, Countess of Pembroke.

Although described on the title page as *Di Canzonette e di Cantate, libri due* (*Songs and Cantatas in Two Books*), Rolli's book is actually in three parts. The twenty-four unnumbered pages which precede the texts of the canzonette contain, one to a page, the tunes for the twenty-four canzonette set to the words of the first stanza; the second part (Book I) is the complete texts of the canzonette, simple strophic poems on amorous pastoral themes. The third part (Book II) contains the texts of the twenty-five cantatas, poems also dealing primarily with love, but more elaborate and dramatic than the simple canzonette—No. X, for example, is for the character of Cleopatra, No. XII for Penelope, and No. XIV for Medea, while the last, No. XXV, is a duet for Pyramus and Thisbe.

The nature of Rolli's poetry may best be illustrated by quoting a few stanzas, the first, sixth, and eighth, from Goethe's early favorite, "Solitario bosco ombroso," the second of the canzonette, a charming, if conventional, pastoral lament.

Solitario bosco ombroso
 A te viene afflitto Cor
 Per trovar qualche riposo
 Nel silenzio e nell' orror.

Sento un dolce mormorio,
 Un sospir forse sarà:
 Un sospir dell' Idol mio,
 Che mi dice, tornerà.

¹ The Rutgers University Library copy of *Del Paradiso Perduto* contains the second title page, dated 1736, which was merely added to the already published volume, perhaps to bring it "up to date."

Ma se torna, sia pur tardo
 Il ritorno e la pietà;
 Chè pietoso invan lo sguardo
 Su'l mio Cener piangerà.

Lonely shady wood,
 To you comes an afflicted heart
 To discover some repose
 Amid your silence and your terror.

I hear a sweet murmur,
 Perhaps it is a sigh;
 A sigh from my Idol,
 Which says that she will return.

But if she return, they will be too late,
 Her return and her pity;
 How piteous that in vain her eyes
 Will weep over my ashes.

Although one cannot be certain, Goethe may not have been aware of Rolli's authorship of this song, and since no other credit is given for the music it must be assumed to be by Rolli as well as the words. In 1730 an Italian adventurer from Turin, the cavalier Michael Angelo Boccardi di Mazzera, issued *Di Canzonette e di Cantate* at The Hague, not even reprinting the volume, but merely replacing the original title page with one proclaiming his own authorship and dedicating it to the Elector of Bavaria, an example less of literary piracy than of bibliographical hi-jacking. But as a result, knowledge of the true authorship may well have been obscured.

The copy of *Di Canzonette e di Cantate* in the Rutgers University Library is of unusual interest. It was formerly in the collection of Horace Walpole, and still bears the pressmark from the Strawberry Hill library, although the Walpole bookplate has been removed. On the evidence of the pressmark the Walpole provenance has been sustained by W. S. Lewis, editor of *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*. The Walpole copy, which still retains its original eighteenth century calf binding, has been in the Rutgers University Library since 1942, although the original ownership has only recently been demonstrated.