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New World Triumph in *Il Gattopardo*

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Abstract

The end of the Risorgimento, a tumultuous period of Italian state unification culminating under the House of Savoy in 1861, represented a transition in Italian politics and identity. Before the Risorgimento, the Italian peninsula was a collection of kingdoms and competing political entities. As the country unified for the first time, the ruling aristocratic class became increasingly less powerful and relevant. Luchino Visconti's *Il Gattopardo* recounts the novel of Tomasi di Lampedusa, depicting this period in Italy's history by exploring the tension between the old, aristocratic class and new bourgeoisie class. Particularly, Visconti's development of the story's two leading protagonists, Prince of Salina and Angelica, highlights the social and political transition of Italian classes during the Risorgimento and demonstrates the strained relationship between those who strive for progress and those who remain stagnant in their traditional identities which previously defined Italy. The Prince's tacit consent and surrender to the new system that is overcoming his world demonstrate his realization to the inevitability of change. Angelica juxtaposes the Prince's character with her un-refined femininity which represents a sense of raw power of the new order. Through the Prince and Angelica, Visconti encourages history to face the present times, where emerging middle class and nationalist ideals triumph over the old, traditional social structure.

Keywords: Class Struggle, Luchino Visconti, *Il Gattopardo*, Risorgimento, Unification of Italy, Women in Film

The end of the Risorgimento, a tumultuous period of Italian state formation culminating with the unification of the Italian peninsula in 1861, represented a transition in Italian politics and identity. Before the Risorgimento, the Italian peninsula was a collection of kingdoms and competing political entities. As the Italian peninsula unified for the first time, the aristocratic class—which ruled the territories later conquered by the House of Savoy—became increasingly less powerful and relevant. Luchino Visconti's *Il Gattopardo* recounts the novel of Tomasi di Lampedusa depicting this period in Italy's history by exploring the tension between the old, aristocratic class ruling Sicily at the time of Italy's unification and the new bourgeoisie class, which will become the new protagonist of unified Italy. The characters of the film are used as representative spokespeople of their classes or societal group rather than unique, individual personalities (Nicholls 99; Sorlin 137). Particularly, Visconti's development of the two leading protagonists, the Prince of Salina and Angelica, highlights the triumph of the emerging middle class and nationalist ideals over the old, traditional social structure of the Italian peninsula.

The exploration of a strong male and female role in a film set in the late nineteenth century allows the audience to view the Risorgimento narrative from multiple angles (Reimann 181-183). Visconti uses the character of the Prince, acutely aware of the decline of his class, not only as a sensitive, reflective perspective for observation, but also as a critic of the Risorgimento (Nicholls 100). The Prince represents the ultimate Viscontian hero: one who removes oneself from the constraining factors of society while being fully immersed in it (Lyons 102). The Prince's status presupposes certain obligations which he fulfills, all without becoming entangled in the societal

transformation from which he does not oppose, but rather withdraws. Such non-engagement is not inaction, but rather the passive acceptance based on a deeper wisdom and sense of self which foreshadows the inevitable consequences of a major political change. On the other hand, Angelica represents for the Prince of Salina the Sicilian “Eve” from the garden of Eden (Reimann 185). Her hyper-feminized role is contrasted by her lack of aristocratic decorum. Visconti therefore presents her as a “minacciosa bellezza,”¹ almost a projection of male desires, if it were not for her societal roughness. As an epitome of the new order, Angelica’s character not only reveals power in womanhood, but also draws out personalities in other male characters—particularly the Prince—which allows the audience insight into the aristocratic class during the Risorgimento (Reimann 183-190).

Before further exploring the characters, it is critical to consider the context of *Il Gattopardo* when examining the new middle class which emerged as a result of the opportunity for social mobility during the Risorgimento (Reimann 180-194).² When the film begins, it is 1860 and the Salinas, a prominent aristocratic family have just received news that Giuseppe Garibaldi and his army were arriving in Sicily.³ Visconti uses the Prince and his family as a lens to observe aristocratic survival and transformation while Garibaldi was trying to defeat the Bourbons and unite Italy (Dombroski 99). Rather than being threatened by this conquest, the aristocratic Prince sees this as an inevitable change of political leadership and wants nothing to do with influencing

¹ Translated as, “threatening beauty.” *The Leopard*. Transl. from the Italian by Archibald Colquhoun. New York: Signet Books 1961, pp.90; Tomasi di Lampedusa, Giuseppe (first 1957). *Il Gattopardo*. 51st ed. (edizione conforme al manoscritto del 1957). Milano: Feltrinelli 1988, pp. 85.

² It is important to note that this social mobility applied to women only to the extent that they could marry someone from a different social class. Women were still very much subjugated to men, even in the late nineteenth century.

³ Giuseppe Garibaldi was an Italian patriot and soldier of the Risorgimento, best known for leading his Spedizione dei Mille—Expedition of the Thousand—to conquer Sicily and Naples, continuing north until achieving unification of the Italian peninsula under the House of Savoy. See more at: Trevelyan, George Macaulay. *Garibaldi and the Thousand*. Longmans, Green, 1916, 1909, 1916.

the new world (Tonetti 16-97). This attitude is contrasted by the Prince's nephew, Tancredi, who embraces the changing times most notably by his engagement to a non-aristocrat, Angelica.

The Prince of Salina represents the "old world" as he continuously personifies the stereotypical aristocratic class who held power solely by birthright in pre-Risorgimento Italy. The Prince of Salina is a traditional patriarch: strong, proper and confident. He uses his family name as a means by which to maintain an elevated status and style of living. Even during this time of political change, the Prince refuses to be affected by the events around him. As usual, the Prince has his family travel to their summer home at Donnafugata. This demonstrates the Prince's unwillingness to compromise his habits, lifestyle, or identity for any new changes in Italy.

As the film progresses, the Prince's exhaustion with the Risorgimento and recurring comments on mortality are symbolic of the nobility's recognition of their decline in social power (Nicholls 97-110). In contrast, Tancredi, the Prince's nephew, wants to take part in the change by fighting for Garibaldi's army. His ambition is understood and appreciated, but not replicated by the Prince. Instead of utilizing his political and social influence, the Prince makes every effort to stay out of the changing politics, even at the expense of his power. A clear example of the Prince's stagnation is when he declines the offer to be a senator in the new government (*Il Gattopardo* 02:03). Unlike Tancredi who hopes to be a part of the shaping of a brighter future, the Prince sees himself only as he is now, and does not want to change that legacy by trying to adapt to the times: "I am a member of the old ruling class, hopelessly linked to the past regime, and tied to it by chains of decency, if not affection" (*Il Gattopardo* 02:06). This demonstrates the pride that the Prince holds in his position and his narrow perspective, wishing to remain in his "traditional world" rather than adapt to the new times of revolution. Rather than becoming part of the political change, the Prince withdraws into his personal sphere, one which is driven by both melancholy and cynicism,

away from the public, political realm. In this way, the Prince exposes a loss of his class' status and relevance, as he refuses to be part of the current political transformation (Nicholls 98).

The Prince's declination to participate in the new political order demonstrates a rigidity and unwillingness to adapt to the times. Before Tancredi goes off to fight for Garibaldi, the Prince expresses his skepticism on the success of the Risorgimento when he says, "A Falconeri⁴ should stand with us, behind the king!" (*Il Gattopardo* 00:16; Tonetti 96-107) This skepticism for the success of the Risorgimento continues later in the film when he discusses Sicilians' reaction to such change: "I doubt whether the new kingdom will have many gifts for us in its luggage" (*Il Gattopardo* 02:08). After the Prince refuses Chevalley's offer of a seat in the Senate, he explains that Sicilians (including himself), want to "sleep," or to stay the same (*Il Gattopardo* 02:06-02:08). Sicilians seem to dislike change, even if they are given "gifts." If the Prince is skeptical that the new kingdom will be giving many "gifts" to Sicilians, he surely does not think Sicilians will be excited to be "woken up" by the changing times. As a classic member of Sicilian society, the Prince desires things to go on as they have, not to change, even if for the better. Any change, at this point, risks a compromise to the Prince's power and foundational identity.

As Garibaldi and the Risorgimento movement continue to take over more territory, the Prince keeps a detached and rigid perspective on how things should be, maintaining that Sicily should belong to the Sicilians (Hay 42). It is important to note that at this point, the Prince seems to take no blame for the declining power of Sicilian aristocrats. He rather objectively says "we were the leopards, the lions; our place will be taken by the jackals and the sheep" (*Il Gattopardo* 02:15). This dejected attitude demonstrates the Prince's acceptance of the changing times and an unwillingness to fight it. Instead of fleeing, changing, or adapting, the Prince "accommodated"

⁴ Tancredi is a member of the Falconeri family, the nephew of the Prince of Salina.

himself to the circumstances of changing Sicily. The Prince carries this pattern of inaction due to a forced perception of complacency with him throughout the film.

Visconti brings the fall of the old order into perspective by setting up a dialogue between the old and new orders. He uses Tancredi and his fascination with Angelica to highlight the dichotomy between the old and new order: the aristocratic family of Tancredi, represented by the Prince, and the rising new class order depicted by Angelica, the daughter of a self-made man, Don Sedara. When the Prince asks Don Sedara for his daughter's hand in marriage on behalf of Tancredi, the Prince is acknowledging the power of the emerging class. The Prince's request for a non-aristocrat to have Tancredi's hand in marriage sacrifices the purity of his noble bloodline (Lansing 418). The survival of the House of Salina is dependent on its ability to remain influential in the new state of political affairs (Nicholls 97-110). This is significant because the Prince's familial origins define him: aristocracy, old money, traditional legacy—all characteristics which are opposite to the 'slimy' Don Sedara who went against the status quo and climbed the social ladder. Through Don Sedara's generous dowry offer, Visconti makes it clear that the Prince's wealth has been surpassed (*Il Gattopardo* 01:36). The Prince is therefore forced into a tacit relationship with Don Sedara, a concession of the old order to the new (O'Mara 639). The "submergence and transformation" of the House of Salina is represented by the marriage to Angelica (Nicholls 98; Nowell-Smith 101). Tancredi wanted to marry Angelica and the Prince did not see any other options which would allow him to maintain such wealth for his family, whose relevance and fortune are withering away.

Angelica juxtaposes the Prince's character with her rawness which represents the roughness of the new order. Her social status is derived from social mobility and her father's cunning skills. Visconti highlights this by allowing Angelica's unrefined characteristics to be

revealed publicly at inconvenient times, including when she first meets the Salinas at the dinner and at the opulent Ponteleone ball. During this time, Angelica attempts to straddle between the two worlds. She tries to respect the aristocratic legacy but her apparent inability or unwillingness to fully conform to those norms illustrates a tension between the old and new order. Angelica is in an awkward position as she cannot completely embody the aristocratic class due to her true identity. The Prince faces a reciprocal tension, as he will never be able to become part of the new order due to his ties to traditional aristocracy. Visconti brilliantly portrays this juxtaposition at the ball.

The climactic waltz scene between the Prince and Angelica demonstrates the new class overtaking the old. The ball itself is a representation of the dying aristocratic class which is embodied by Visconti's casting of old Sicilian families as real-life guests (Tonetti 102). Without much dialogue, Visconti uses the Prince's perspective as a lens through which to see the party. The scenes of the ball create a notion of emptiness as the Prince observes from a passive perspective. Visconti depicts the worst parts of the old and new orders when all of the women are bouncing on the pillows (*Il Gattopardo* 02:26). As a witness, the Prince tiredly examines his reflection in a nearby mirror, and without words echoes the internal tension he voiced earlier in the film, "I belong to an unfortunate generation, straddling two worlds, and ill at ease in both" (*Il Gattopardo* 02:06). On one hand, the Prince can recognize the beauty, charm, and grace of the ball—and his world. On the other hand, he is painfully aware of the irony he has put himself in because of the suffering he has endured as a result of the changing times (Tonetti 102-103).

This sense of exhausted detachment ends when Angelica walks in to greet the Prince. Before asking him to dance, the Prince contemplates his death and remarks that for Tancredi and Angelica, death seems distant and awful. The Prince contrasts their views on death with his view

that death represents a release from the worst parts of the class he embodies. Therefore, rather than fearing death, the Prince wishes to embrace it (Meyers 308-315).

When Angelica invites the Prince to dance, the Prince has an opportunity to be young again. The Prince is acutely aware of his mortality and place in society. He is respectful of tradition and desires a long legacy, but he knows that cannot be achieved. As a result, he compromises his family status to preserve his legacy with the public engagement of Tancredi and Angelica. For the other party guests, the Prince's dance with Angelica serves as a symbol of praiseworthy modernization with a dignified attitude towards this new political order. Official support for Tancredi's marriage and a dance with Angelica may serve as evidence for such a commendable view, but for the Prince, it represents a moment of self-pride and deeper desire being filled for the last time. In this way, the dance serves as a self-sacrifice where the Prince and his class may be released into their death (Nicholls 105-109).

The Prince's acceptance to dance with Angelica also reveals deeper implications for his identity. At his core, the Prince is an alpha-male and Angelica's beauty raises an uncontrollable carnivorous desire within him. At some level, the Prince is jealous of his nephew Tancredi, who does not feel bound by the older generation and who is young enough to have beautiful Angelica as a wife. It seems that the Prince would have wanted to pursue a woman like Angelica in another life where he was younger (Lucente 102). However, he would not have done so because she is not of noble blood. Even in fantasizing, the Prince suffers from tension due to the limits he places on himself on preserving an untainted status, even against his tempting erotic desires.

In this same scene, Angelica uses her femininity as power to overcome the "old order," represented by the Prince by allowing him the opportunity to find his youth again while dancing with her. Rather than accepting Angelica's proposed Mazurka dance, the Prince instead agrees to

dance the first waltz with young Angelica—a compromise, given his tired age. Visconti highlights the age difference between Angelica and the Prince through the conversation about death, and the Prince’s refusal to join Angelica for the “young people’s” dance.

The waltz between the Prince and Angelica is highly sexual and political. Throughout their dance, the Prince seems almost as if he is leaning away from Angelica, whose beauty entices him. As the two dance, everyone else clears the dance floor and observes the elegant partnership. Tancredi is visibly uncomfortable and possibly jealous of the connection between the Prince and Angelica (Nicholls 105). This connection is not solely sexual tension. Rather, it is a tension that reflects the dichotomy between old and new. For onlookers, the dance represents the Prince’s modernity and his dignified attitude towards the reality of this new order. For the Prince, the waltz represents a last moment of self-pride and youthful sensuality where he engages with his youth through Angelica. At the same time, the Prince “embraces both his deathly release and that of his class” (Nicholls 105). The waltz highlights Angelica’s beauty and power over the Prince, who slowly withers away after the dance has finished. In this way, Visconti uses the waltz between the Prince and Angelica as a kind of death dance, validating the Prince’s notions of loss of youth and anticipation for his end (Meyers 308-309). This transitional waltz demonstrates the end of traditional aristocracy represented by the Prince and the triumph of the new bourgeois power represented by Angelica (Nicholls 104-110).

Throughout the film and culminating at the scene of the ball, the Prince recognizes that his class is dying, but refuses to change anything about himself to adapt to the large scale political and social shift on the Italian peninsula. This inaction is ironically similar to his earlier criticism of Sicilian peasants ‘sleeping’ as the world changes (*Il Gattopardo* 02:07-2:08). By the end of the film, the Prince is convinced that nothing truly matters since death is approaching. He recognizes

that he has a fatal inability to act and blames his inaction on his life circumstances (Meyers 308-315). Visconti starkly contrasts the Prince's character with Angelica, who bridges classes through her father taking advantage of social mobility and increases her own power and status through marrying Tancredi.

The ball represents the worst of the excess of his old, aristocratic class and the waltz presents an opportunity for closure, a fulfillment of the Prince's longing for an end (Nicholls 105). The waltz between the Prince and Angelica represents the fall of the old order and triumph of the new order (Meyers 308-315). The Prince's tacit consent and surrender to the new system that is overcoming his world demonstrate his perceived inevitability of change. His sense of helplessness leads to inaction which will be his downfall. Just like death, change is unavoidable. That is why it is important to be part of the change you want to see. As Tancredi said, "if you want things to stay as they are, things will have to change" (*Il Gattopardo* 00:17). The Prince decided not to be part of that change, and as a result, he is witness to the death of his way of living.

The new order, distinguished by nationalist ideals and social mobility, overcomes the complacency and inaction of the old order. Through the character development of the Prince and Angelica, Visconti illustrates the social and political transition of the Italian peninsula during the Risorgimento and echoes the continuation of a strained relationship between those who strive for progress and those who remain stagnant in their traditional identities which previously defined Italy.

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