Book Review: 'The Professor and the Siren' by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa

In a pendant story to Lampedusa's magnificent novel, a Sicilian student has a tryst with a mermaid.

By NATHANIEL POPKIN
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The final, haunting image that Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa conjures in his magnificent, enchanting novel “The Leopard” is of a decomposing stuffed dog being tossed out the window of the Villa Salina, a grand palazzo in Palermo. Bendiciò, a Great Dane, was the trusted companion of Don Fabrizio Corbera, Prince of Salina—the Leopard. More than two decades after the prince's death in 1888, his now elderly daughter Concetta, feeling cheated by life, decides to get rid of Bendiciò's remains. “As the carcass was dragged off,” Lampedusa writes, “the glass eyes stared at her with the humble reproach of things that are thrown away, that are being annulled.”

Poggioreale, old ghost town hit by an earthquake SABING.PARENTE - FOTOLIA

Lampedusa, who died of cancer in July 1957, before “The Leopard” found a publisher, packed this final scene with mortal anguish; the novel is a dirge for an aristocratic world in steep descent. Three decades after Concetta trashes Bendiciò, Villa Salina—based on the author's own Casa Lampedusa—was annihilated by American bombs. By the time he was writing “The Leopard” in 1956, Lampedusa had seen the almost complete evisceration of the Sicilian aristocracy he was born into. The Palermitan gods, he observed, had fallen.

But the harsh Sicilian landscape that Lampedusa portrays with such melancholic love in “The Leopard” (1958) was also the playground of the Greek gods. In this last scene of the epic, Lampedusa gives Bendiciò, no mere dog, god-like powers. Thus, he notes, of the worn-out remains: “During the flight down from the window his form recomposed itself for an instant; in the air one could have seen dancing a quadruped with long whiskers, and its right foreleg seemed to be raised in imprecation.”

For a moment, the dog is seemingly metamorphosed into a whiskered leopard, so as to curse modernity for destroying him and his aristocratic habitat. From now on, no one, it seems, will find joy on this parched island.

In “The Professor and the Siren,” Lampedusa's final work and the title story of a
collection of three tales newly translated by Stephen Twilley, Lampedusa places this symbolic power in a mermaid, a siren named Lighea. (A siren in ancient Greek tradition is typically a bird with a female face, but she is part fish instead.) Here, in this strange little fable, written on the tails of “The Leopard” and published in English only once before, in Archibald Colquhoun’s 1960 translation, is an almost magical analogue of “The Leopard,” the longing for the lost world of mortal and immortal gods heightened, the novel’s despair turned into bitterness and vitriol. Lighea, indeed, is confirmation of the weight Lampedusa ascribed to Beodich, the character he called “practically the key to the novel.”

Sitting in a café on the archaic Via Po in Turin, elderly professor Rosario La Ciura, “the most illustrious Hellenist of our time” and the author of a lauded collection of essays, “Men and Gods,” meets the great-grandson of Don Fabrizio, the journalist Paolo Corbera. They reminisce of Sicily. “We spoke,” says Corbera, the narrator, “of those magic summer nights, looking out over the gulf of Castellammare, when the stars are mirrored in the sleeping sea, and how, lying on your back among the mastics trees, your spirit is lost in the whirling heavens, while the body braves itself, fearing the approach of demons.” Mr. Twilley’s translation here is both more luminous and more slender than Colquhoun’s “enchantment of certain summer nights within sight of Castellammare bay, when stars are mirrored in the sleeping sea and the spirit of anyone lying back amid the lentisks is lost in a vortex of sky, while the body is tense and alert, fearing the approach of demons.” The subject may be distant, but this revision, though not radical, brings the text forward for contemporary readers.

When Corbera is gone, the acerbic professor reads magazines and spits “out of disgust for the rubbish I happen to be reading.” The spitting is an uncontrollable reflex against corrupted modernity, he explains to Corbera. It’s “symbolic and highly cultural; if you don’t like it, go back to your native drawing room, where people don’t spit only because they can’t be bothered to be nauseated by anything.” This swipe at the complacent Sicilian upper class is reminiscent of “The Leopard,” but the professor’s contempt, as the reader soon discovers, is a cover for the despair he feels for having once had, on the eastern coast of Sicily, a sensuous but doomed encounter with the siren Lighea, his first and only love.

As a young man preparing for a university appointment in Greek literature, the future professor had gone to the isolated coast below Mount Etna, near the town of Augusta. It was 1887, not coincidentally, the year before the death of Don Fabrizio, the Leopard. He spent his days in a rowboat rocking with the tide, reading and reciting ancient verse. Early one morning, La Ciura tells Corbera, a 16-year-old girl took hold of the boat, rising “with astonishing strength straight out of the water to her waist, encircled my neck with her arms, wrapping me in a never-before-experienced perfume, and allowed herself to be pulled into the boat.”

For three weeks, La Ciura and the mermaid carried on an affair; in Mr. Twilley’s translation, the professor’s memory of romantic intoxication is no less divine than Don Fabrizio’s ballroom dance with the glimmering Angelica near the end of “The Leopard.” But the specter of the siren has haunted La Ciura since.

Facing his own mortality, Lampedusa was alive to the power the ancients saw in sublime encounters with gods and god-like beasts. La Ciura compares his affair to that carried on between a shepherd and his goat. “If the comparison repele you,” he says, “it’s because you’re not capable of performing the necessary transposition from the bestial to the superhuman plane—planes that were, in this case, superimposed .... [S]he was a beast and at the same time an immortal.” For La Ciura as for Don Fabrizio, the encounter is a final connection to the ancient world.
The reader may think Lampedusa has taken a sharp turn into fantasy here, but the other two stories in this collection confirm his considerable power of observation, his grasp of real people and their mortal desires. Throughout his works, he was particularly sensitive to the central narrative of his world, the collision between the opportunist, self-made man, the man with the dirty hands—Don Calogero Sedara in “The Leopard”—and the old-money gentry. In his “Snopes Trilogy,” William Faulkner set this conflict (in his rather Sicily-like Mississippi) in the simmering confrontation between the upstart Flem Snopes and the plantation man Will Varner. Lampedusa was taking a similar tack with what would have been his second novel, “The Blind Kittens,” about the upstart Don Batassano Ibba, a child of illiterates, like Sedara and Snopes, grown up prudish and greedy. This collection contains the first chapter of that novel, which is all that Lampedusa completed. Like “The Professor and the Siren,” “The Blind Kittens” picks up on a crumb from “The Leopard”; Batassano is closing a deal for a slice of the old family’s land. This endless selling off of almond and olive groves, estates and villas, that began in the time of Don Fabrizio continued into the 20th century. As “The Blind Kittens” opens, in 1901, the advance of men like Batassano had already “been as fast as a headlong fall, like a knife in land.” But with Bendico’s imprecation perhaps still echoing, Batassano is only annexing a cursed land.

“The Leopard” is a book that one wishes would never end, so enrapturing is Lampedusa’s authorial voice. The melancholy of the book itself is doubled by the reader’s realization that there really would be no more—that the author never even got to see his work in print. “The Blind Kittens” gives us a brief reprieve, a tasty morsel. Here once more is Lampedusa’s dry irony; here is his tender gaze at the anachronistic Sicily, its cruelty and provincialism; here is one last shot at the impotence of its shunted-aside ruling class. But would the book have reached the height of “The Leopard”? Would Don Batassano have risen hard and wily and complex, a Lampedusan Flem Snopes quick on the heels of a leopard-like Will Varner? This, unhappily, we can only imagine.

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