Four Images of a Neapolitan Rebellion

David Carrier

I dedicate this essay to the memory of Richard Brettell, great scholar and generous friend.

In July 1647, one of the most important political events in the life of old regime Naples took place. There was a massive revolt led by Masaniello, a plebeian Neapolitan fisherman. In response to an increase in taxes, he led a mob, which ransacked the armories and opened the prisons. But after a few days, when this sudden success turned his head, the people, in turn, rebelled against his leadership. He was murdered, and his would-be revolution brutally crushed. In the seventeenth century, viceroys sent by the ruling Bourbon kings governed Naples. These over-extended rulers administered a vast empire in Europe, Asia and the Americas. Naples, the largest city in Italy, was heavily populated, largely by the very poor, who came from Southern Italy. The taxation was burdensome, and so not surprisingly there were revolts, in which reformers tried to employ the discontents of the populace.

Masaniello became an internationally famous folk hero. An English account in 1664 was titled *An Exact History of the late Revolutions in Naples; and of their Monstrous Successes, not to be parallel'd by any Ancient or Modern History*.[1] Responding to this rebellion, the execution of Charles I and the Polish revolt by the Cossacks, Nicolas Poussin, who lived in Rome, said: "It is a great pleasure to live in a century in which such great events take place, provided that one can take shelter in some little corner and watch the play in comfort."[2] He was clear about "the danger of popular revolt and the unreliability of the people."[3] There were many books about Masaniello and even a French opera, *La muette de Porti*ci (1828) by Daniel Auber, which has recently been recorded. And recently there has been considerable debate amongst historians about how to understand him.

Visual representation of a rebellion like Masaniello's is tricky, because an artist needs to choose to present just a moment of a temporally extended action. My four small images come from eBay, a valuable

1 Alexander Giraffi, *An Exact History of the Late Revolutions in Naples; and of their Monstrous Successes*, Trans. J H. Elqr London: 1664. (modern Amazon reprint).

2 Anthony Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin* (London: Phaidon, 1967) 169.

3 Blunt, *Poussin*, 170.

Figure 1 Picture from an old German history illustrating the 1647 Naples revolt against the Spanish led by Masaniello, a plebeian Neapolitan fisherman.

A would-be revolution, when you are in the midst of it, is a confusing business.

resource for the independent scholar.[4] Some have no identification of the artist or date. I love the idea that a revolution by the Neapolitan underclass be studied using these inexpensive prints. Nowadays any significant event is presented in numberless photographic and video images. But in Masaniello's time, images had to be made individually 'by hand,' and visual art did not pay sustained attention to individual lowlife heroes.

Masaniello became internationally famous. Indeed, the philosopher Spinoza, who lived in Amsterdam, had himself depicted as Masaniello. Art historians, E. H. Gombrich noted, have little occasion to attend to "the vast mass of ephemeral propaganda prints, broadsheets, and cartoons."[5] Yet it is worth considering "these strange configurations with puzzled curiosity," he argued, "not so much for what they can tell about historical events as for what they may reveal about our own minds." Because these four images show different stages in Masaniello's developing rebellion, taken together they will function somewhat like a rudimentary film, collectively providing a fuller, sometimes contradictory perspective than any one picture could offer.

In the first image (Figure 1), the buildings have steeply slanted roofs. This picture from an old German history must have been done by a Northern artist, for the North is where you find such roofs. On the left someone is gathering stones for the throwers, who exit to the right. Is the man who is carrying a paper at the far right-hand edge Masaniello? That isn't clear. Nor do we see the target for these stone throwers. A history by Pietro Giannone (1723), translated into English in 1731 as *The civil history of the kingdom of Naples*, describes such a scene: "Masaniello and his Boys, armed with Sticks, came, and encouraging the Mob, they all began to pillage the Office where the Duty was paid, and to drive away the Officers with Stones."[6] Stones do not appear in my other pictures of the rebellion.

The second image (Figure 2) is by Louis Turgis (the inscription is tiny), a nineteenth-century French artist. The long narrative at the bottom describes the events. And at the far right is a sign that reads "Bureau de Taxe," identifying this as the site of the rebellion. Traditionally, Masaniello was shown as an impoverished, shoeless young man. But here, elegantly dressed, he marches with his wife Leona, musket in hand. Fish at the right front edge identify this as the market. But the turmoil around Masaniello and Leona is impossible to decipher. The three figures, male and female confronting the armed man at the right—are they Neapolitan activists? That's hard to tell.

The third image (Figure 3), *Scene from "Masaniello" at the Royal Italian Opera*, shows the market. In "La Muette de Portici" the performers include Masaniello, who was then believed to be from Portici, a nearby port city, and a mute woman, his wife, who was played by a dancer. This fantasy about his wife comes from a Walter Scott novel, *Peveril of the Peak* (1823), which

4 I got this idea from doing a review of a Manhattan gallery show of contemporary eBay images; see my "Acquired on eBay (and from other surrogate sources)," *Brooklyn Rail*, February 2020.

5 "The Cartoonist's Armoury," reprinted in his *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* (London: Phaidon, 1963), p. 127.

6 *The civil history of the kingdom of Naples* (London: Ecco Print Editions, n.d.), 762.

Figure 2 Image by French artist Luis Turgess depicts Masaniello as elegantly dressed, holding his musket in the market.

tells a completely different story. When Masaniello dies, Vesuvius erupts. That too is fiction, for the eruption came some years later. The high steeple at the center is vaguely like the bell tower of S. Maria del Carmine, a prominent landmark. But the rest of this stage set has very little connection with this part of Naples. Nor is it clear what action is taking place here. Are the soldiers rebels? So far as I can see, Masaniello himself is not in this picture.

A would-be revolution, when you are in the midst of it, is a confusing business. In his account of a 1920s riot in Vienna, Elias Canetti says:

> *Nothing is more mysterious and more incomprehensible than a crowd.*
>
> *It was scattered, driven away, and sent fleeing by attacks; yet even though wounded, injured, and dead people lay before it on the streets, even though the crowd had no weapons of its own, it gathered again . . . .* [7]

His modernist narrative is, in its general style, not unlike Stendhal's accounts of Napoleonic battles. When people rush by on every side, it's all but impossible to comprehend what's happening. The Neapolitan crowds,

7 Elias Canetti, *The Torch in My Ear* (London, Granata: 2011), 250.

Figure 3 *Scene from "Masaniello" at the Royal Italian Opera* probably does not contain an image of Masaniello himself. The opera is loosely based on the historical uprising of Masaniello in 1647.

similarly, were thought to be mindless, incapable of any self-consciousness; they were said to be like a force of nature, akin to the eruption of Vesuvius or the plague. Hence the Archbishop's suggestion that in this rebellion they "'boiled' like some liquid" or his claim that "they resembled a thoroughbred horse which disliked saddle and bridle."[8]

Image four (Figure 4) is an engraving of a painting by a nineteenth-century Frenchman, Edouard Hamman. The rulers receive Masaniello at that brief moment when he was in power. He is on the left, elegantly dressed but barefoot, in the posh interior. Armed guards keep the populace outside. The stern gestures of the men facing him are inscrutable. Masaniello's fate is sealed.

Just as Akira Kurosawa's classic film *Rashomon* (1950) presents incompatible, divergent versions of one story, so these four scenes present fragments of a narrative that is difficult to synthesize. Indeed, without the captions you would hardly know that they all are *of* Masaniello. Minor historical records, they have at present an

8 Peter Burke, "The Virgin of the Carmine and the Revolt of Masaniello," *Past and Present*, 99 (1983), 6.

Figure 4 Engraving of a painting by a nineteenth-century Frenchman, Edouard Hamman. The rulers receive Masaniello at that brief moment when he was in power. He is on the left, elegantly dressed but barefoot, in the posh interior.

interest out of all proportion to their artistic quality, because they reveal his international fame. Imagine a group of people performing some common action. They can be subordinated to one central figure. Or they may be acting independently to serve some shared goal. Under the old regime, individuals acted collectively when subordinated to the rule from above. But in a rebellion, they briefly acted under the spell of a shared will.

The English history from 1664, *An Exact History of the late Revolutions in Naples; and of their Monstrous Successes, not to be parallel'd by any Ancient or Modern History* says: "A city is a ship, and divisions are the leaks, through which, while the mariners fight one with other, the water enters and drowns all."[9] The funeral for Masaniello

> *Was the occasion of one of the most intense experiences of collective existence and of a feeling of unity in the entire history of the city . . . . It was precisely at the moment, then, that the gravity of the crisis began to be understood.* [10]

The revolt thus created very briefly a public sphere, but then failed to destroy the old regime. *Masaniello of Naples* (1865), a

9 Giraffi, *An Exact History*, 9.

10 Rosario Villari, *The Revolt of Naples*, Trans. James Newell (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 156.

history by Mrs. Horace Roscoe St John, offers an ultimately optimistic reading. Masaniello failed, but "a spirit as dauntless, a heart as disinterested, and an arm better inured to the service of the sword, were found . . . when Garibaldi hastened to the deliverance of Naples."[11] Alas, her optimism was not justified, for less than sixty years later Mussolini came to power.

Some years ago, I published an essay about the two large contemporary history paintings showing Masaniello.[12] I focused on Domenico Gargiulo's *Piazza del Mercato during the Revolt of Masaniello* (late 1640s-early 1650s), which then was on display in Museo di San Martino, high above the city.[13] A luxurious, relatively isolated site, Certosa di San Martino is only a few kilometers from the scene of the plebian political revolt, which is far below in the historic center.[14] Since my account is accessible, I won't repeat the details here. But one point I didn't fully discuss is of interest for our present purposes.

Sometimes philosophers have odd blind spots. When looking at *Piazza del Mercato*, I realized that in my numerous trips to Naples, I had never visited the marketplace shown in that painting, which is but ten minutes away in a swift cab ride downhill. (I had, however, visited Galleria Spada, a small Roman museum, to see Michelangelo Cerquozzi's *La rivolta di Masaniello*, the other large painting that shows this revolt.)

You can learn something, sometimes, from visiting the site depicted in a painting. And so I immediately went to the market. Later, when I got the catalogue *Micco Spadaro: Napoli ai Tempi di Masaniello* (2002), I discovered some other smaller images and prints that show this violence close up.[15]

You can better understand *Piazza del Mercat*o by visiting the market. At the Piazza Mercato, the market is on the South side of the historic center, divided from the nearby harbor by a wide, busy divided street, Via Nuova Marina. During World War II, this area was heavily bombed because it is close to the harbor. Still, even today you cannot escape seeing the causes of Masaniello's revolt; densely populated impoverished neighborhoods, which fueled this rebellion, surround the square. There is no monument to Masaniello in the square, but there is a plaque on the nearby house where he was born. And S. Maria del Carmine, with the high steeple, which has been restored, looks just as it does in the painting.[16] The pulpit from which Masaniello harangued the populace is there. And behind the high altar is a large, much venerated fourteenth-century Byzantinesque icon, *Madonna della Bruna*.

If you walk from Piazza Mercato to "Masaniello," which is a very good, modestly priced restaurant, you can dine beneath a life-size painting of the failed revolutionary. A

---

11 (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1865), 247. (Modern reprint: Forgotten Books: London, 2015).

12 "Two Representations of Masaniello's 1647 Revolt in Contemporary Neapolitan Paintings," *Source*, XXVII, 1 (Fall 2007): 32-38.

13 *Napoli sacra. Guida alle chiese della citta* (Elio de Rosa: Napoli, 2010), 13, 805- 825.

14 See Christopher Marshall, "Causa di stravaganze": order and anarchy in Domenico Gargiulo's Revolt of Masaniello," *The Art Bulletin*, 80(3), 478-497.

15 (Napoli: Electra, 2002).

16 See Napoli sacra, vol. 9, 536, 272.