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[-f.1r-] Second Lecture: on Rhapsody

[or, rather, Third. in marg.]

[[Recited in front of the Academia della Crusca]]

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Most Serene Principe, Most benevolent Arch-consul, Virtuous Academicians, since I considered that matters relating to Poetics would be among the most appropriate to this gathering, and that those that have the strictest affiliation with music (unless my instinct does not fail me) are the most attractive and elusive, after I have demonstrated sufficiently, I believe, although with a rather unpolished essay, that singing occurred in ancient theatrical actions also outside of Choruses, and after I have dealt with Mime and with contemporary French farces, today I have set out to discuss a subject that shall be no less novel, namely, the Rhapsody of the ancient Greeks. I shall aim to be suitably brief, both to leave others something to discuss and to preserve something [[for the Florentine Academy and for my Consulate]] for another meeting, where I hope, through the benign patronage of the Most Serene Signor Principe who is present today, to allow you to hear in practice what I shall discuss today, and to provide us with some essay of the music which I have perfected and enriched, notably, by following in the steps of the doctrine of the ancient Greeks, to the satisfaction of those who perhaps do not have complete faith in what I said or I will say in future on this matter. I shall do this as long as my personal [-f.1v-] misfortunes will not conjure up some unforeseen obstacle or delay which may disrupt this Enterprise, as it happened to me three years ago in Rome in the Academia de gl' Humoristi, at the presence of Principe Signor Don Camillo Colonna who, despite being well-disposed towards my arguments just as those virtuous Academicians were, nevertheless, since some speakers who took part in the Academia were too prolix, the entire matter unravelled completely. This caused me some displeasure at the time. However, this shall be remedied with much greater satisfaction of mine, if this habit, already introduced centuries ago by that famous nation, who taught every refinement and noble practice, and renewed by the most florid centuries, will rise again in our times and in this Homeland of ours. This will enrich the glory of he who runs and governs it succesfully with such justice and peace that, among the noise of this war that resound all around, we are even able to enjoy these pleasant studies and the company of the Muses with outmost peace and quiet. Let us come to our proposed topic and let us start, as the good method requires, from understanding the meaning of the word. I maintain that, although Rhapsody is understood as [-<f.2r>-] a poem or another sort of literary composition stitched and drawn together from various individual elements, just as that the Romans called a Cento, nevertheless its true and specific meaning is that of some epic poem suited to public solemn gatherings and recited with singing. We shall be able to know that this is absolutely true from the examples and authorities that I shall adduce. Some take the ethymology of this word from [rhabdos], which means stick in Greek, and [ode], as if it were [<rh>abdodia], on this evidence, namely, that those who recited it used hold in their hand a small stick of laurel

or myrtle, or something else of this sort. Others (and with greater probability) connect its origin with the verb [rhapto], which means to sew, because legend has it that Pisistratus, ruler of Athens (others attribute this to Hipparcus, his son) since he was very fond of Homer's poems whose verses were sung at the time randomly and without any order, he collected them diligently and divided them into certain sections orderly, which correspond to those into which, up to the number of twenty-four, as many as the letters of the alphabet, we see that both the Iliad and the Odyssey are divided. Nevertheless, there are some writers who attribute such division to later Grammarians. However, Giulio Cesare Scaligero [-<f.2v>-] gathered judiciously from a verse of Hesiodus' that the matter has a much earlier origin, since he notes that this word [rhapso<dein>] in Hesiodus means nothing else but 'to compose', which is almost a way to stitch one verse after the other. Suffice it to say that this division of Homer's work corresponds to the division of Roman authors into books, and of our Tuscan ones into Canti, with this difference though, namely, that in the most ancient authors Homer's Rhapsodies were not distinguished according to their number and order – First, Second, Third – on the basis of their subject-matter, for instance, the catalogue of the ships, Hector's death, the killing of the Proci, and so on. Therefore, Rhapsody meant a poem or the part of a poem of a considerable length to be recited or sung in front of an audience, and Rhapsodes were called those who exercised such profession, who it is certain that had to be equipped with all those qualities and skills that are required to practice it, such as attractive appearance, resounding and pleasant voice, singing expertise and rethorical and acting ability, which was called [hypocrosis] by the Greeks. Such were, without a doubt, those sent by Dionysius, tyrant of Syracuse, to the Olympic games to recite his poems, so that they would make a better impression in that so solemn gathering and so that his own reputation would be enhanced. [-<f.3r.-] The names of some of them have been preserved in the books of Plato, Athenaeus and others. They were Ion, Cleomenes, Hegeisas, Hermophantus and Simonides of Zacynthos. I believe them to be specifically comedy actors, especially since we have some firm evidence of this in the case of Hegesia. They were also called Homeridae because they often recited Homer's verses. Homer was regarded, as everyone knows, by the Greeks almost as an oracle and almost a God of poetry. The first who had them recited in the theatre was Demetrius Phalereus. They did not recite only Homer's poems, but one reads that the works of other illustrious epic poets were recited, such as those of Hesiodus and Empedocles, as well as those of the Iambic poets such Archilocus and Simonides, of the writers of tragedies, such as Aeschylus and Sophocles, and of Elegiac verses, such as Mimnermus and Phocylides. Moreover, Greek curiosity reached such a point that even works in prose, such as Plato's Dialogues, according to Plutarch, and the Herodotus' Histories, according to Athenaeus, were recited by Rhapsodes in a public theatre and performed with gestures. Also, this particular habit of theirs is documented, namely, that those who were going to perform the Iliad appeared in front of the public holding a stick of laurel painted in red, perhaps to indicate the killings and the bloody nature of the tale, while those who performed the Odyssey [-<f.3v>-] carried a branch painted in yellow, because this colour was associated with the exiles. As to what Aristophanes' Commentator (who was Eustathius' source) writes, namely, that who recited Aeschylus used to hold a branch of myrtle, while those who recited Homer used to hold a branch of laurel, I would believe that this ought to refer to private conversations, as for instance during banquets and parties, where many kinds of jolly poems were sung such as the Scolia (on which much was written by Aristoxenus and Dicearchus quoted by Athenaeus) rather than to public ad regular celebrations. Among the Rhapsodes

mentioned above, the most famous was Ion of Chios, under whose name Plato wrote the Dialogue of the Divine Rapture. This man achieved deservedly the greatest praise in many poetical genres that he cultivated, and particularly in his Tragedies, in which he competed with the greatest writers of his age, winning many contests. He was one of the Homeridae, or Homer's descendents, so, it is no wonder that he worked particularly hard to keep alive Homer's memory, and for this reason his life was highly regarded and lauded among the others. From Plato's Dialogue mentioned above one can gauge how highly regarded these Rhapsodies were, since the performances and gathering of such artists did not take place only in Athens [-<f.4r>-] in the great Panathenaic celebrations, but also in Epidaurus in the solemn feasts of Aesculapius, where Ion was declared winner. Moreover, I like to believe that they occurred in the other most famous cities of the Greek world. Also, it appears that in the most ancient times they had a specific festival of their own, as Athenaeus mentions at the beginning of the seventh book. Some refer the Hilarodia, the Magodia and other similar poems (which were short and mostly cheerful and comical poems sung and acted in public by a singer accompanied by the sound of instruments) to the Rhapsody, although more correctly they occupy the middle ground between Rhapsody and Mime. Despite the fact that the Hylarodia (whose name derives from [hilaros] which means cheerful and [ode] which means song) had a cheerful and happy content, nevertheless, it is closer to serious drama than the above mentioned Magodia, which, to say the least, tended mostly to the obscene and often depicted spells and other magical practices, from which its name derives. Similarly, the performer who staged it was called Magodus and used to appear on the stage with tambourines, cymbals and similar comedy equipment and he sang accompanied by the flute or by a stringed instrument which was played by a boy expert at playing it. The same occurred in another genre of performance which was called Lysiodos, but with this difference, that, while in the latter men dressed as men performed [-f.<4v>-] as female characters, the Magodus was dressed ordinarily as a woman, but performed actions and situations involving men. The Hylarodus had a more serious character and the performer was in white and dressed as a man, wearing boots in the earliest times and open sandals (called [krepides]) according to Greek fashion in the most recent times. He wore a golden crown on his head according to the ancient custom of the citharedes and such characteres. They devoted great attention to this attire, in order to appear attractive and authoritative. One can believe that this sort of poems would be serve commonly as filler numbers and *intermedi* between the acts of the more regular and developed dramatic actions that were performed in theatres. The Rhapsody, both because it was more ancient than other theatrical actions and also because of its more noble and authoritative character, was performed by Greek performers, before theatres were invented, from a pulpit or a similar higher and exposed position, where they could be seen and heard by everyone. We can consider as a kind of Rhapsody the recitation of poems by young students which usually takes place in some school, large room or oratory, more as a form of exercise for themselves than as a show of perfect and exquisite art. In fact, albeit no true singing and accompaniment of musical instruments takes place, nevertheless, [-<f.5r>-] it is true that the tone of the voice is varied in a way that approaches true singing, so that all the poets boast of being singers. Albeit their gesture is not entirely expressive and actor-like, as it was the one of the ancient Rhapsodes, nevertheless, if it is performed correctly, it can be classed as half-way between the two extreme manners of the orator and of the comedic actor, just as - according to Albinus, an ancient Roman music writer quoted by Boethius – the singing of epic poems occupies a

middle ground between simple spoken voice and true melodic singing. To understand this fully, one must note that, although uneducated people perceive no difference of high and low in common speech, nevertheless, those who possess some rudimentary notion of music can recognise easily some variety of intervals in any sort of speech and in any language (although Scaliger, who is otherwise very careful, ascribes it only to the Piemontese in Italy and to the language of those who inhabit the Auvergne, in France) with the exception of the lilting tone of the town criers and of the annoying pronuntiation of certain preachers, who pronounce almost every syllable with a single and uniform tone. The grammarian Fortunatianus calls this type of speech monotony, a very appropriate choice of word. This being said, it can be noted manifestly that, when one recites some verses, as it is common occurrence, with some energy and feeling, one can be heard vary the tone of the voice and use more close and recognisable intervals more considerably than one does [-<f.5v>-] in common speech. This is even more obvious when one sings the melody of some *ottava* or other such tune, which is truly the sort of singing that is the most apt to the true Rhapsodies and that is called commonly Recitative Style. However, as to its application, I admit that I am not entirely satisfied with it. In fact, if I consider the reports of the ancient writers and many important reasons, it seems to me that it is more apt to the pulpit and to poems expressing feelings of sadness than to the stage and to dramatic poems. I will agree, however, that when entire actions are recited to music, as it occurs nowadays, it is not unsuited to Prologues (proof of this is that most beautiful melody in the *Euridice*) narrations, dialogues and similar passages where there is no great expression of feeling. However, since I have discussed these matters elsewhere with greater subtlety (such as which way to adopt in resuming the practice of the Rhapsodies, as I described in my Discourse on the perfection of Melodies, and how the Recitative, the Representative and the Expressive Style differ from each other in the Annotations on the Compendium, discourses which have all been published already) in order not to repeat myself, which goes against my temperament and my habit, and in order to adhere to the boundaries of succinctness assigned to me without causing you excessive boredom with rushed arguments devoid of every adornment, I am happy to conclude here, leaving room for someone else who may be better able to satisfy your refined ears.