

INTRODUCTION

The Francesists know about French matters,
the Germanists about German matters,
the other specialists know about their own
matters; those who know about marginal
and minor literary cultures are very few;
the Italianists mostly know only about
Italian matters, and this is quite a problem.

(Remo Ceserani)

In recent years the definition of ‘World Literature’ has been object of attention for a growing number of scholars. As the globalized and interconnected world of the 21st century is facing new challenges concerning politics, economics, the environment, as a result, also the academic world has become increasingly globalized and interconnected, not only in the fields of Natural or Social sciences, but also as regards the Humanities and in particular Literature, traditionally considered the most conservative and ‘classical’ field in academic studies. The problem about the universal definition of ‘Literature’ has always been extremely complex, because as stated by Remo Ceserani «for the common experience, the meanings of the term literature, and the various concepts conceived in the course of time, seem to be numerous, diversified, and incompatible with each other» (Ceserani 1999, p. 3). Nevertheless, with the relatively new definition of World Literature, many scholars (Damrosh, Moretti, Pizer etc.) expressed the need to face the problem of re-defining the very concept of Literature, starting from the correction of its Eurocentric tendencies and its distinction between ‘main’ literatures and ‘peripheral’ or ‘minor’ literatures, that strongly characterized the literary studies of the 19th and 20th centuries.

In a recent article, Wiebke Denecke summarizes the current status of the academic curricula of World Literature – traditionally held by American universities – and underlines the importance for researchers of the so called ‘peripheral’ cultures to consider – and implicitly accept – this new Literary and academic paradigm in order to gain a wider and stronger view not only toward foreign literatures, but also toward their own (Denecke 2012, p. 198). Denecke’s article, written in Japanese and published on the prestigious journal *Bungaku*,

is an attempt in this direction, as it addresses a specific audience of one of such ‘peripheral’ areas, namely the Japanese researchers of Japanese Literature.

The instance of Japan is indeed especially meaningful for the discourse about World Literatures. The Japanese word *bungaku*, that nowadays translates the term ‘literature’, was created in the late 19th century, in a period when Japan imported European literary theories, as well as the relevant foreign terminology to describe literary practices, like mimesis, metaphor, rhetoric, etc. At the same time the Japanese scholars abandoned the traditional terminology developed and used for centuries both in China and Japan by literary criticism to describe their own literature. According to Denecke and Kōno Kimiko, editors of the recent collection *Nihon ni okeru bun to bungaku* (2013), few scholars today are really concerned about the gap between the traditional concept of *bun* (文 letter, literature, writings) in Japan before the Meiji restoration (1868), and the new concept of *bungaku* (literature, study of letters) imported from abroad (Denecke 2013a, p. 5).

The point suggested by Denecke is that the problem about a correct collocation of Japanese Literature into the frame of World Literature should interest not only the researchers of Japanese studies or eastern Asian literatures. If the next step for literary studies in the 21st century is to expand the boundaries of research to get both a precise and a global view of the problems this field of studies could contribute to solve for our globalized society, this step can only be done through a careful analysis of the various cultures and literatures, starting from an inclusive vision more than a methodology based on the exclusion and field delimitations. Denecke is not the only one concerned about this issue. The collection of essays titled *Reading East Asian Writings – the limits of literary theory* (2003) already focused on the problem about the limits of the Euro-centric literary theories to describe and include various literary traditions around the world. The various essays included in this book face the problem of a literary theory from a shared point of view between students of Chinese and Japanese literatures, because, as stated by the editors «we should remember that the cultural practices in Europe and North America are just as tradition-specific as those in China and Japan. We should remember that this is a reason to rejoice: where universality ends, communication begins» (Hockx, Smits 2003, p. xii). Another collection of essays that took seriously the problem of communication between specialized but non-communicating academic communities is *Waka Opening Up to the World* (2012), edited by Haruo Shirane. In this book, published in Japanese and English, there is an obvious will to bring Japan into contact with the rest of the world, not only as an object of study (Japanese literature), but first of all as an academic community (the Japanese scholars), that usually discusses, reads and writes only in Japanese. Shirane’s introduction to this volume is also particularly interesting because it

outlines some of the keywords that guided the research contained in my book, first of all ‘vernacular language’. Shirane outlines some common points in early vernacular literatures in Europe and Japan, like some «ideals of restraint, sympathetic humanity, elegance and refined love. More specific features they have in common are (1) an emphasis on taste or aesthetic values, (2) a stress on gender, particularly the presence of the “woman”, and (3) elegant and highly encoded forms of communication» (Shirane 2012, p. 186). Also Shirane acknowledges the possibility to get a wider, worldwide vision on specific issues like the consolidation of national vernacular languages or the role of women, the acknowledgement of social values like elegance or courtesy, or again the codification of a communicative tool like the poetry. It is therefore clear how some of these issues, while indicating a specific socio-historical environment, on the other hand are also related to elements we can easily find in many countries, even in totally different and extremely distant ages and geographical areas. The real novelty of these recent comparative studies is that the object of comparison doesn’t need to have any proven historical connection or social exchange between two regions – for example among the European countries, or between China and Japan – that was the necessary condition to address a traditional comparative literature research, like comparative Romance Literatures or the Sino-Japanese comparative literatures (*wakan hikaku bungaku*). In other words, it is as if we were trying to demolish the barriers traditionally built to define and delimitate a certain literary tradition, like national borders, language, periodization, while starting to outline new borders and coordinates to analyze international and intercultural phenomena, like the constitution of a certain kind of political system – a centered kingdom or a republic – or the issues raised by the entrance of new originators – woman writers, or the illiterate audience – in the field of literary production.

Actually, beside the discourse about World Literature, we can observe that the position of the scholars toward the analysis of Literature has undergone an ongoing evolution during the last century. Let’s consider for example the issue of love in the European poetry that will be, together with love poetry in Japan, the object of the last part of this book. We can see how, from a ‘classical’ interpretation like Denis de Rougemont’s *L’amour et l’occident* (1939), Erich Köhler proposed, in many essays from the 50’s to the 70’s (collected and translated into Italian by Mario Mancini in 1976), a new historical-sociologic approach to literature, that gave new life and a new perspective to the discourse about the relationship between literature and societies and the genesis and functions of some characteristic issues of European literatures, in this case the *troubadours*’ love songs and the Romance Literatures. The new – for that time – sociologic approach to literature proposed by Köhler enriched literary studies with a meaningful and wider point of view, stimulating a new direc-

tion for Humanities studies.

Pierre Bourdieu in the 90's, starting from a sociologic point of view, gave another important jolt to the traditional conception of literary work and literary production, with an absolute denial of concepts like 'masterpiece' or 'literary genius'. Bourdieu considers every work of art as a product made under certain social conditions, called *habitus*. It is the *habitus* that deeply affect both the possibility that a certain work will be accepted and eventually acknowledged as a 'classic', and the capacity for the author to gain prestige and a social capital through his work. Somehow for Bourdieu, the production of a literary work could seem subordinated to the canonization of that work: «the production of the (critical, historical, etc.) discourse on the work of art is one of the conditions of the production of the work» (Bourdieu 1994, p. 35). Bourdieu's studies had widely influenced the field of Humanities in the last 20 years, giving the basis for a sociocentric approach that constituted a valid alternative to the older structuralist approach. Even so, some scholars started to point out the weak points of the sociocentric theories inspired by Bourdieu's studies that can be summarized in Rein Raud's statement: «there is, however, one basic weakness in the sociocentric theory, and that is its negligence of literary quality. [...] It is still difficult to accept that the quality of the literary texts or works of art, for which there is admittedly no absolute standard, plays little or no part in the elevation of the texts to their assigned status» (Raud 2003, p. 92), or by Haruo Shirane: «it would be foolish to imply that texts are empty boxes ready to be filled by their next owners» (Shirane 2003, p. 22). In this book I will not directly deal with Bourdieu's theories or with literary theories in general, but, agreeing with Raud and Shirane's positions, I will try to give some examples that could help explain the issues left unsolved by the sociocentric theory. In other words, taking advantage of the sociocentric approach while at the same time recognizing the importance of a textual analysis of the internal qualities of a literary work. From my point of view, the seek for a new, more comprehensive literary theory is strictly connected to the definition of a new concept of World Literature, as this new approach aims to manage the object 'literature' in every country and in every historical period. That's why a distinction between 'central' and 'peripheral' cultures or literary traditions loses its *raison d'être*: on the contrary, the study of some of these so-called 'peripheral' cultures could become a valuable object to verify the real universality of the literary theories. It was probably from these premises that Raud, trying to combine «a sociocentric approach to the literary practice with one concerned with the internal textual mechanisms» suggested that «the context of classical Japanese poetry, especially in the Heian period (794-1185), is particularly suitable for this, because the social mechanisms are perhaps more visibly at work in the poetic process than elsewhere

in world literature» (Raud 2003, p. 93).

Raud's suggestion helps me to introduce the main subject of this book: an analysis of Japanese poetry of the Heian period (8th-12th centuries), carried out in comparison with the early Italian poetry of the 13th century. First of all, comparing various aspects of the same problem in different environments is one of the most basic strategies to conduct an analysis, not only on a scientific basis, but also in a more abstract, logical or philosophical way. It is therefore obvious that, since the most ancient times, the contact between two extremely different cultural macro-regions like Europe and eastern Asia stimulated first of all a search for differences and similitudes, not only from the Eurocentric point of view. Even if the debate about the definition of a World Literature has been mainly conducted by the American academies (Denecke 2012, pp. 174-7), we can find also among the Japanese scholars the interest for a wider and more global point of view toward literature in general, and also toward Japanese literature. An example could be the extra-curricular course titled 'Multi-disciplinary exchange seminar – Contemporary world literature (多分野交流演習 今日の世界文学 *Tabun'ya kōryū enshū – Kon'nichi no sekai bungaku*) held from 2003 to 2006 at the Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology of the University of Tokyo (the lectures have been partially collected in a small volume *Moji no toshi – Sekai no bungaku*, Tokyo University Press, 2007). Even if this effort can't be compared to the works in English I cited before, it collects some interesting essays that try to get past the traditional concept of comparative literatures – as the direct historical connection between two or more literary works – that is still the majority among Japanese academies. An example could be Fujiwara Katsumi's lecture comparing a masterpiece of Japanese classical literature, the *Genji monogatari* (early 11th century), with the 17th century French novel *La Princesse de Clèves* (Fujiwara 2007), two literary works that, of course, didn't directly influence each other. In a different publication, Fujiwara made another attempt at contextualizing the Japanese court poetry of the 9-10th century into a worldwide point of view, referring to European scholars and authors, from T. E. Hulme to T. S. Eliot, from Judith Gautier to Rainer Maria Rilke, discussing theoretical definition like 'modernism' from a wider and somehow de-contextualized point of view (Fujiwara 2004). Of course, Fujiwara is not the first to perform this kind of attempt in Japan. In the early 60's Ochi Yasuo, inspired by Rougemont's *L'Amour et l'Occident*, pointed out a similitude between the Japanese love poems of the 10th century and love songs of the European *troubadours*' of the 11-12th century (Ochi 1963). The problem of 'love' is of course a macro-theme findable in almost every literature, but in the case of Japan it needs to be re-examined in an even wider and more elastic perspective. Yanabu Akira's study underlined how, while the modern ideal of love in Europe had been set by the

troubadours' tradition, the concept of 'love' in Japan had a such different evolution, so that he even went so far as to state that before Meiji's period (1868-1912), «love didn't exist in Japan» (Yanabu 1982, p. 89-91). Yanabu's point is that the meaning of the word *ren'ai*, that used to translate the Western words 'love' or 'amour' from the Meiji period onward, was clearly different in use from words like *koi*, *ai*, *jō*, *iro*, used before in Japan to describe a love relationship. The most interesting point in Yanabu's study is that it reminds us the deep difference and the original 'fact of belonging to a geographic area' of the Euro-centric modern concept of love, and how this concept has been forcedly received and accepted by 'peripheral' cultures.

As clearly expressed by Tomi Suzuki, the occidental ideology of love has been quickly absorbed – not without contradictions – by the Japanese writers of the so-called I-novel (*watakushi-shōsetsu*) genre (Suzuki T. 1996, pp. 74-76). The concept of love passes inevitably through literature, with a particular attention for a new kind of reader: the young women of the eras of Meiji and Taishō (1912-1916). In these terms we can find analogies in the point of view expressed by Yanabu about the import of 'love' in Japan, with that of Denecke about the concept of Literature/*bungaku*; therefore finding a common field to conduct a coherent and articulated discourse about Literature shared by the scholars of different cultural areas and academic traditions it seems possible to. Discussing each other's positions is indeed the great task scholars and researchers are called to in the years to come. As clearly declared by Denecke during an interview, «only in this way can we overcome the engrained habit of imposing Western literary categories onto the rest of the world and develop a true understanding and respect for other cultures» (Schwab 2013).

The volume *Crossing the Bridge: Comparative Essays on Medieval European and Heian Japanese Women Writers* (2001) is a good example of the attempt the various scholars made to mix and exchange their knowledge on some issues we can find in many – and directly unconnected – cultures, in this case, the figure of women writer. Another important and recent contribute is Wiebke Denecke's *Classical World Literatures: Sino-Japanese and Greco-Roman Comparisons* (2014), where the author compares the development of new literary traditions and their relationship with the older ones, taking as example the four countries/traditions of China-Japan, and Greece-Rome.

With this book, I want to give my modest contribution to this new field of studies about World Literature, and in the more specific field of «classical world comparative literatures (世界古典比較文学)» defined by Denecke (2012, p. 196), comparing and analyzing the two cultural areas whom, for different reasons, I belong to: Japan, since my original research field is Japanese Literature, and Italy, as an Italian native speaker. In particular, this book analyzes the poetry of the so-called Sicilian School at Frederick II of Hohenstaufen's

court (13th century), and the poetry of the Heian court in the 9th and 10th century. The main concern about this choice was the risk implied in leaving my usual field of study (Japanese literature), and ‘invading’ a different and relatively unknown one (the Italian medieval literature), almost without any specific knowledge, having as unique advantage – compared to non-Italian speakers – of a direct access to the most recent and updated studies on that subject, thanks to my knowledge of the language. Indeed, an important part of the academic resources about the specific field I chose – the Italian court poetry of 13th century – is still only available in Italian. I am thinking in particular of two recent publications: the *Enciclopedia Federiciana* (2005), a huge and detailed encyclopedic work about Frederick II’s court and culture, and the three volumes of *I Poeti della Scuola Siciliana* (2008), that for the first time offered an exhaustive edited version of all of compositions of the Sicilian School poets. Fortunately, during my studies, I found an unexpected encouragement from the words of one of the greatest scholars of Provençal literature, the above quoted Erich Köhler. When Köhler tried a comparison between his field of study (Occitan literature) and a different one (German literature), he too was aware of the danger of entering an unknown field of studies – even if still within the European literatures – that’s why he decided to use «as a starting point the statements of trusted scholars of German literature» (Köhler 1976, p. 275), to give his comparative discourse reliable bases. That is exactly the methodology I chose for my research: quoting the results of the most acknowledged researchers and specialists of medieval Italian and European Literature – Roberto Antonelli, Costanzo Di Girolamo, Alberto Várvaro, Mario Mancini, etc. – trying to compare them with the researches and results of my field of studies, the Japanese Classical Literature. Actually, Köhler gave me a further and even more important encouragement, when he suggested that, exactly because of his ‘external’ and ‘not specialized point of view (on German literature), he could on the contrary be blessed by a «long eyed perspective allowing him to catch some aspects with even more lucidity» (Köhler 1976, p. 296), that is almost the same concept of the «distant reading» theorized by Franco Moretti about World Literature (Moretti 2000). Moretti states also that «World literature is not an object, it’s a *problem*, and a problem that asks for a new critical method; and no-one has ever found a method by just reading more texts. That’s not how theories come into being: they need a leap, a wager – a hypothesis – to get started» (Moretti 2004).

The reader will be free to judge whether in this book I accomplished the aim of catching some aspects with even more lucidity, but even in the event the results fail to meet the expectations, at least I hope I have suggested a new way of looking at two quite specific literary contexts – 9th century Japan and 13th century Italy – and have presented some of the most interesting results

of literary studies published only in Japanese and Italian language and made them available to a wider public.

Both in Japan and in Italy there is indeed a strong presence of ‘traditional’ comparativism, «interested in the sources and in the lending of themes and genres or styles from one country to another» (Ceserani 1999, p. 314) – namely the Romance literature comparativism in Italy and the Sino-Japanese comparativism in Japan – but we still lack a solid tradition of the ‘new’ comparativism «that studies analogies and contrasts, linguistic structures and cultural objects, as well as the historical background, on a world scale» (ibid.). This research is a contribution to the second kind of comparativism between the two specific ‘minor’ cultures of Japan and Italy, following the example of what is usually called World Literature. This is probably the first attempt to compare Japanese Heian poetry directly with Italian poetry of the Sicilian School in such an extended way.

In other words, this book is my answer to the double challenge proposed by Wiebke Denecke: «you’re kind of poking both the Eurocentrists and the too culture-specific philologists out of their holes and saying, ‘Let’s look at all these traditions together, in mutual illumination’» (Schwab 2013).

Contents of the book

This book is divided in five parts. In Part I I will try to outline some similitudes and differences between the historical background behind the literary works produced in the Sicilian (Italian) court of Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen (1194-1250), the so called *Magna Curia* (Great Court), and the early Heian court of 9th century Japan, in particular during the lifetime of Emperor Saga (786-842) and Emperor Uda (867-931).

Starting from the direct comparison between these rulers and their political strategies, in Part II I will focus on the relationship between power and literature, and court culture in more general terms, but still under a comparative point of view.

In Part III I will introduce the problem about the origin and consolidation of vernacular language as a literary canon, focusing on two specific poetical collections, the *Kokinwakashū* 古今和歌集 (or simply the *Kokinshū*, Collection of Japanese poems ancient and modern) in Japan, and the poems of the Sicilian School in Italy. I will attempt some answers to the reasons behind the consolidation of these two collections as literary canons, through a textual analysis of prose works such as Ki no Tsurayuki’s *Kanajo* and Dante Alighieri’s *De vulgari eloquentia*.

In Part IV I will discuss the problem of formalization of poetic language, underling the similitudes between the rhetorical devices of the *Kokinshū* and

the Sicilian School, with particular attention to the translation process from other languages and to poetic traditions.

Part V is dedicated to love poetry, a leitmotif both in the *Kokinshū* and in the Sicilian poems. I will show how the new notion of love appears the same under many points of view, particularly the idealization of love, in the elaboration of the Japanese and Italian poets of the reference period, and influenced by some changes in the social background; but at the same time how it differs in some substantial aspects, such as in the ‘ennobling force of love’.

As I will demonstrate in this book, the choice of these two particular contexts – the Sicilian court of the 13th century, and the early Heian courts – is motivated first of all by some strong similitudes in the History of Literature. 13th century Italy and 9th century Japan, more precisely under Frederick II, Saga and Uda’s courts, are usually considered important turning – or, with a different nuance, starting – points for both countries’ literatures, especially as regards the ‘literary canon’. Therefore, the keywords that will orient this research are ‘court literature’ and ‘vernacular language’, two central elements not only for these two periods, but also for the entire history of world literature, as the relationship between court culture and vernacular culture has been underlined by many by previous studies.

Court and vernacular in Japan

As stated by Li Yuling, the main characteristic of the Heian literature, compared to previous and later periods, is that the greatest part of its literary works can be properly considered ‘court literature’ (*kyūtei bungaku* 宫廷文学), namely «literary works created on the stage of the court» and «literary works that were enjoyed at court» (Li 2011, p. 2). In other words, the core of the Heian literature was composed by and for the nearly exclusive use of court members.

It is not an exaggeration to say that during the three centuries of the Heian period, the main part of the cultural production, especially literature, was strictly tied to and rooted in the center of the capital city Heiankyō (modern Kyoto) at the court of emperors and regents. That is why the Heian literature as a whole is often defined as court literature: its role, function and its very existence cannot be properly explained outside the social-historical frame of the court.

Of course, the Heian court was not the earliest in Japan, and neither the first whose members produced a particular kind of literature. It is common knowledge that Japanese Literature is usually supposed to have started with Nara’s period (710-794) when the earliest literary works we know today had been written. Nara’s politics was based on a jurisdiction known as *ritsuryō system* 律令体制 (translated sometimes as «statutory system», cfr. McCullough 1999),

an imitation of a Chinese law code carrying the same name. The *ritsuryō* government featured the foundation of a centralized bureaucracy composed by the ruler and his officials, gathered in a kind of court usually indicated with the Japanese term *chōtei* 朝廷 (Imperial Court). But it is only at the beginning of the Heian period that this concept of ‘court’ evolved to a more centralized and localized society composed by the sovereign, his family and the courtiers living in close contact with and in a relationship of direct dependence on the ruler. This new court that appeared in the early Heian period, characterized by the centralization of power around the emperor’s physical persona and his residence, is usually indicated with the term *kyūtei* 宮廷 (literally: Court of Palace), to underline the centrality of the imperial palace (宮*kyū* or *miya*) in this new society.

In fact, it is first of all with the foundation of the new capital Heiankyō that according to Masuda Shigeo, the upper classes and court members that lived in the capital became aware of the difference between the people living in other regions of the country, at the time called the ‘country of men’ (*hito no kuni*) and those living in the capital (*miyako*) where the *tennō* (emperor), who was believed to have divine origins, lived (Masuda 2004, p. 3). This new social assessment that consolidated in the first decades of the 9th century led to the birth of a new and ‘real’ aristocratic class, different from the former aristocracy of Nara period, still tied to local traditions and territorial power. For the first time in the history of Japan we witness the birth of a «purely consumer class» (Ibid.), whose economical and political power didn’t come from the direct possession of lands, but instead from the duties they fulfilled in court bureaucracy.

This social change will be the basis for a big cultural change during the Heian period, because this new social class will be the main actor in later cultural developments: «The aristocrats start to establish new life-styles, and start to foster a new sensibility about life» (Ibid.). As summarized by Morota Tatsumi, the birth of the aristocracy in the early Heian led to an «aristocratization of culture» (Morota 2007, p. 96).

One of the earliest examples of this new court society’s cultural activity is the compilation of three anthologies of poems in Chinese language known as the *Chokusen sanshū* (勅撰三集, Three collection by imperial orders): the *Ryōunshū* (凌雲集, Cloud-borne collection, 814) and the *Bunkashūreishū* (文華秀麗集, Collection of literary masterpieces, 818) ordered by emperor Saga, and the *Keikokushū* (經国集, Collection for administrating the State, 827) ordered by his brother Junna (786-840). At the peak of the import of Chinese culture in Japan, Saga’s Kōnin era (810-824) and Junna’s Tenchō era (824-834) represent the first stage of Heian court literature, also from a chronological point of view. As stated by Wiebke Denecke, during Saga’s lifespan

we witness one of «the most ‘literary’ period in the history of Japan » (Denecke 2013b, p. 93). According to Denecke, it is during Saga’s period that for the first time Japanese literati tried to define a personal historical identity, as representatives of a ‘modern age’ (近代 *kindai*) compared to the former one of the previous Asuka and Nara period. At the same time the Japanese poets acquired a new consciousness of the shared features of Japanese and Chinese literature; Saga’s period poems are much more refined than those of *Kaifūsō* and of the previous periods, and the literary scene is enriched with new genres. We observe a general process of *literarization* (文学化 *bungakuka*) of culture (Denecke 2013b, p. 99).

For all these changes, first of all the birth of a real aristocratic court culture, and the consequent production of a ‘court literature’, we can consider Saga’s reign the perfect starting point for our study on court poetry.

If Saga’s reign can be considered as a valid starting point for the study of court literature in ancient Japan, the same can’t be said about the other keyword of this research: vernacular language. Although we can correctly indicate Saga as the promoter of a new cultural tradition, the literary works in his court were mainly, if not exclusively, written in Chinese.

In the early Heian court, Chinese –like Latin in Europe – was the language of law, bureaucracy, Buddhism and culture in general. Moreover, because at that time Japan hadn’t developed a native writing system yet, Chinese was the only system available. However, even if largely used for writing and official duties, Chinese never totally replaced the native language of Japan, Japanese, also called *Yamato kotoba* (language of Yamato, the ancient name for Japan). In other words, Chinese was, and continued to be, a foreign language radically different from the spoken Japanese of the time – the vernacular Japanese – despite the enormous influence it had on Japanese, especially from a lexical point of view.

The introduction of Chinese in Japan first of all met the need to write and keep records. The earliest surviving literary work written in what we can call Japanese – albeit transcribed with Chinese characters here and there with phonetic or semantic meaning – is the *Man’yōshū* 万葉集 (*Collection of a myriad of leaves*, second half of 8th century), a huge anthology of *waka* 和歌 (Japanese poems) compiled during Nara’s period. Even if some of the poems included in this collection – such as the poems by Kakinomoto no Hitomaro and Ōtomo no Yakamochi – can be considered court poetry, having being composed in public occasions such as banquets or court ceremonies, the *Man’yōshū* itself is usually considered a private collection, and its heterogeneous structure and complex compilation process makes it hard to consider it as a representative example of court literature of a specific court.

To have a Japanese literary work that matches both the key words ‘court literature’ – also in the sense of ‘official literature of the court’, such as the *Chokusen sanshū* – and ‘vernacular literature’, such as the *Man’yōshū*, we have to wait until the beginning of the 10th century, with the compilation of the first imperial ordered collection of Japanese poems, the *Kokinwakashū* in 905. The *Kokinshū* inherited from *Chokusen sanshū* the tradition – and status – of imperial collection, as well as its basic structure – the division in sections and themes, the presence of prefaces – and symbolizes the passage of the baton from *kanshi* (poetry in Chinese) to *waka* (poetry in Japanese) as the court’s official poetic language. Moreover, it is in the *Kokinshū* two prefaces, one in Japanese, the *Kanajo* (仮名序) and one in Chinese, the *Manajo* (真名), that the political vision of poetry, as symbol and direct effect of emperor’s virtue, makes the *Kokinshū* appear closer to *Chokusen sanshū* than to *Man’yōshū* (cfr. Masuda 1976, p. 32).

The historical boundaries of vernacular language in Japan are anything but clear, therefore it will require a careful analysis of the development of vernacular literature in Japan from the *Man’yōshū* to the *Kokinshū*, on the background of the whole Heian period. Although the compilation order of the *Kokinshū* came from emperor Daigo (885-930), many documents testify the importance of his father, emperor Uda, in the process of rehabilitation of the *waka* and Japanese vernacular culture which the *Kokinshū* represents. For these reasons, in the study of court literature and vernacular literature in Japan, both Saga’s and Uda’s courts seem to be the most appropriate candidates for a comparison with the European court and vernacular literature.

Court and vernacular in Italy

Since Dante’s time, the Sicilian court under emperor Frederick II has been unanimously considered the cradle of Italian literature. Aside from a few exceptions such as Saint Francis of Assisi’s *Cantico delle Creature*, and five fragmented lyrical texts in various Italian dialects (Di Girolamo 2008, pp. XX-XXXVI), for the first time an Italian dialect, the Sicilian vernacular, had been adopted as literary language to express the most highly regarded genre of literature: poetry. This so called Sicilian School of poetry became a model for almost every Italian poet or author that from then on decided to write in vernacular instead of Latin, until then the classical language of culture and writing. The relationship between the European medieval courts and vernacular romance languages is very interesting, and the origin of the Italian *vernacular* literature is a perfect example of this process. Therefore, the poetry of the Sicilian School at Frederic II’s court perfectly matches the two keywords of ‘vernacular language’ and ‘court literature’ marking this study.

Of course, the Sicilian School is not the earliest vernacular court literature in Europe, as the Sicilians themselves imitated their elder cousins, the troubadours of southern France. Actually, a comparison between the troubadour and Heian vernacular literatures seems anything but inappropriate, because the discourse about vernacular culture and court environments, or vernacular poetry as the starting point of a new tradition, affected – and undeniably started in – French and Occitan courts as well.

But in the general process of the centralization of power – that in the following centuries in Europe led to the birth of the modern nation states – and in its relationship with cultural politics, we can see in Frederick II's court an even more appropriate term of comparison with Heian Japan. Not only many of Frederick's government features resemble Saga's, but also in a wider view, the shift from *chōtei* to *kyūtei* described before seems to be somehow comparable to the shift from the feudal system, typical of southern France, to Frederick II's centralized *state* and *regal* court – the Magna Curia. The point is that unlike the fragmented troubadours' courts, «the state in which the Sicilian poets lived is a courtly one, and no longer feudal» (Luperini, Cataldi 1999, p. 124). This also means that between the troubadours and the Sicilian poets there was first of all a *social* change that determined a different approach to literature and a different type of poet. Now, although a parallel between Japan and Italy in these terms can be made, I think we need to be extremely careful in jumping to conclusions. It would be in fact totally wrong to define the court of Nara period or the *ritsuryō* state system, a 'feudal system' like we use to do in the European medieval courts. The *ritsuryō* was indeed based on a firmly centralized state structure, so the difference with feudalism, where the king, the emperor or the pope legitimated various landlords to possess, govern and exploit land under highly autonomous conditions, is by contrast quite remarkable.

So, the parallel between the Heian court with Frederick II's court I am addressing in the first part of this book will focus on the process of the personalization of court politics pursued by the ruler, that through a precise plan of law and administrative reforms, progressively led to a shift of powers from the upper aristocratic clans – like feudal barons and vassals – to bureaucrats and men under the direct control of the ruler.

Undeniably, similarly to what happened in the early Heian period, as a consequence of the political changes sought by Frederick, a new social class was born in Sicily: the notary class, a state bureaucracy that like the Heian aristocracy would characterize the tastes and features of this new literary tradition. Again, I am not equating the Heian aristocracy with the Sicilian notary

class; instead I would like to outline the typical features of each environment and verify whether, over a long period of time, a similar evolution and process related to literature may be identified in both contexts.

In the first place, even if we cannot talk about an aristocratization of courtiers like it happened in Heian-kyō, it is common knowledge that the Sicilian Poetry is anything but a sort of popular poetry. The language used in the Sicilian poetry, usually called ‘illustrious Sicilian’, was not the dialect spoken by the commoners. Let’s not forget that Sicily also featured solid multi-linguism with complex historical roots. Instead, this was a highly elaborated and conventional language, enriched with numerous loanwords from Latin and Occitan. The distinction between *noble* and *humble* language was one of the main issues raised also by Dante Alighieri in his *De Vulgari eloquentia*, that awards the highest rank to Sicilian, criticizing other Italian vernaculars, as in the following example:

One of them is so womanish, because of the softness of its vocabulary and pronunciation, that a man who speaks it, even if in a suitably virile manner, still ends up being mistaken for a woman.

(DVE I-xiv, 2)

There is also another vernacular, as I said, so hirsute and shaggy in its vocabulary and accent that, because of its brutal harshness, it not only destroys the femininity of any woman who speaks it, but, reader, would make you think her a man.

(DVE I-xiv, 4)

It is with Dante, and thanks to the work of the Tuscan copyists who at around the same time transcribed in Tuscan vernacular the poems of the Sicilian School, that this poetry was acknowledged as a canon, the first stage of Italian vernacular literature of art.

A direct comparison

So, like the Heian literature of the 9th-10th century, the Sicilian School became a canon of taste and style whose influence is evident in later Italian and European Literature. Moreover, as well as Li Yuling defined the Heian literature as a ‘proper’ court literature – unlike Nara and the post-Heian literatures – we can say that literature at Frederick II’s court is – if not the most – the earliest suitable literature fitting this denomination in the history of Italian Literature. The status of ‘court literature’, with the same universalistic meaning, fails to appear in the later Italian literature, first of all among the Sicilians’ closer prosecutors, the Tuscan poets. These poets, such as Guittone d’Arezzo or Dante Alighieri himself, lived in a very different socio-political environment,

that was not the court of a king or emperor, but a new dynamic and democratic space: the state-cities called *Comuni*. Half a century after Frederick II's death, it was Dante who denounced the lack of a central court environment in Italy when he theorized that the ideal 'Italian vernacular' was expected to be «illustrious, cardinal, aulic and curial» (DVE, I-xvi, 6), with 'curial' meaning 'courtly' in the sense of belonging to the court. Although some later courts, like the Este's court in Ferrara, gave birth to important pieces of literature – e.g. Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato* and Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* – they were not *national* courts, nor *royal* or *imperial* ones, as was instead Frederick II's and his son Manfred's Magna Curia.

Other characteristics like the role of the ruler as cultural promoter, the lack of a political theme and the centrality of love in vernacular poetry, give meaning to the comparison between the early Heian court and Frederick II's Magna Curia, and it will be this book's subject of analysis. In particular the discourse about love in poetry is not only a central macro-theme of the literary traditions of both Italy and Japan, but it is also another important issue showing the novelty of both the Sicilian School and the *Kokinshū* and their value as turning points in the evolution of world literature. Love becomes a poetic theme detached from real life experiences, an idealized love: in the *Kokinshū*, «love is taken as a simple subject, without dealing with concrete love experiences; it becomes abstract and idealized» (Masuda 1976, p. 42), also in the Sicilian School; it becomes a «literary myth, increasingly transcending the concrete reality of social relationship» (Roncaglia 1978, p. 382).

The research published in this book is not intended as a contribution to the field of comparative literature between the east and the west, but as an experimental study that, taking advantage of the previous results of different and until today unconnected fields of research – Italian medieval literature and Classical Japanese literature – and proposing new methods of analysis, aims at casting new light on some big issues of world literature, such as the consolidation of national vernacular languages, its relationship with power, or the centrality of the love theme. In the specific instance, this research is also an attempt to insert Japanese court literature into the wider frame of world literature according some generally accepted categorizations, such as 'court literature' or 'vernacular literature'. I will try to verify whether these categories, already outlined and analyzed by studies on European literature, are valid also for Japan, and if not, to understand why.

In this sense, I think the instance of the Sicilian School and the *Kokinshū* should deserve further attention. The comparison presented in this work should not to be read as a mere 'quest for similitudes', but rather as an attempt to open the debate on questions like 'what is court poetry in Europe and Japan' and the meaning of vernacular traditions through the analysis of a precise

social and historical area and of two highly representative texts – the Sicilian School poems and the *Kokinshū*.

So, the comparison between the cultural-politics of Frederick II and Saga or Uda is intended as a helpful introduction to the many similitudes in the historical, political and cultural background – and also as a starting point from which the early Italian literature and the Japanese classical literature may be compared like never before. One of the questions raised by the present research is if a very particular social environment – the court – and a similar cultural background can give birth to analogous literary aptitudes, for example the formalization of poetry, or a similar aesthetic taste.

The choice of these two particular periods is therefore motivated by some actual similarities both in the social and textual contexts. So, it is the sum of all these elements, in combination with a new and particular idea of literature as ‘state activity’ sustained by the rulers to legitimate and consolidate their power, and the centrality of the imperial court that makes this comparison meaningful. In other words this research starts from the observation of the history of the Italian and Japanese Literatures, and from the identification of three important turning points coincident to the reigns of three rulers in particular: the birth of Italian poetry with the Sicilian School at Frederick II’s court, the birth of the imperial collections at Saga’s court, and the return of the *waka* and the vernacular language during Uda’s lifetime, culminated in the compilation of the *Kokinshū*.

Therefore, the first object of analysis and comparison will obviously be the personas of the rulers that were also pivotal centers of their own court’s cultural activity. Saga may be compared to Frederick in the political reforms, their role as organizers of cultural activities with a political aim, and the stress on the ruler’s centrality. Uda may be compared to Frederick because of their coinciding support to literature both in high language (Chinese/Latin) and in vernacular language (Japanese/Italian). In this first part I will also analyze the role of two poets/bureaucrats in particular, Sugawara no Michizane (845-903) and Peter de Vineia (it. Pier della Vigna, lat. Petrus de Vineia, 1190-1249). We can anticipate here how Michizane, who became the main tool of Uda’s politics, had a role and a position quite similar to Peter’s one at Frederick II’s court. Both lacked strong political backgrounds, both were skilled in ‘high’ writing (Chinese/Latin) as well as in vernacular (Japanese/Italian), and thanks to the direct favor of the ruler both reached the highest position in court. The fact that both Michizane and Peter’s lives will end tragically – the former dying in exile, the latter perhaps committing suicide in jail – may just be a coincidence; nevertheless, it is interesting to analyze these two poets as symbols of a particular environment linked to the literary production.

Finally, we must underline that the choice of focusing the textual compar-

ison only on two works, namely the *Kokinshū* and the Sicilian School poems, doesn't invalidate the general meaning of the research, since, as David Damrosch stated «world literature is not an immense body of material that must be somehow, impossibly, mastered; it is a mode of reading that can be experienced intensively with a few works just as effectively as it can be explored extensively with a large number» (Damrosch 2003, cit. in Denecke 2012, p. 198 n.9).