The third gender of Old Italian

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Our contribution aims to demonstrate that a third gender, traditionally referred to as neuter, existed as a vital category still in Old Italian, against the commonly held view that it had ceased to be a functioning gender by the transition from Late Latin to the Romance languages (cf., e.g., Rohlfs 1968 §§ 368-369, Tekavčić 1980: 66, Magni 1995: 134-137).

The present investigation moves from the clear-cut distinction drawn by Corbett (e.g., 1991) between target genders, which are morphologically visible on their agreement targets (verbs, adjectives, determiners etc.), and controller genders, that is, the classes into which the nouns of a language are divided. As recently suggested by Gardani (2009b), the number of controller genders in a language can be unmistakably determined by considering the productivity of the inflectional microclasses of that language's nominal subsystem, an inflectional microclass being a set of paradigms which share exactly the same morphological and morpho-phonological generalisations, but may differ in the application of phonological processes (cf. Dressler 2003: 35).

Novel language data from Gardani (2009a) and Faraoni (in press) provide evidence that Old Italian, as represented by the variety of Old Tuscan, displays for the time span at least up to 1400 a *genus alternans*, in terms of a controller gender. In Old Tuscan, besides the two fully productive microclasses *casa case* and *libro libri*, which feed the masculine and the feminine gender respectively, the microclasses *il braccio le braccia* and *il prato le pratora* display mid-high productivity, since they attract both conversions (e.g., *il grido le grida* from *gridare*, *il cambio le cambiora* from *cambiare*) and class shifting nouns (e.g., *il passo le passa* from *il passo i passi*, *il sogno le sognora* from *il sogno i sogni*). Their members show the same agreement pattern with a gender mismatch between singular and plural, i.e. are masculine in the singular and feminine in the plural.

Moreover, some nouns show the neuter plural morpheme *-a* on their agreement targets, viz. determiners and adjectives, such as in (*ci rovinino*) **la bagnora**, (*per le terre e per*) **la castella** (*Leggenda Aurea*, 14th century), *quella mura* (*richeggiono*) (Francesco da Buti, 1385/95), and *lab*[*b*]*ra vermiglia* (Chiaro Davanzati, 13th century). These and some further cases are witness of a language stage in which a third gender is still acting as a target gender before becoming a controller gender at a later point. The same process occurs in the southern varieties of Italian and, in particular, in Neapolitan, although not before the 14th-15th

century (cf. Loporcaro 2008). This evidence allows explaining the emergence in the 13th century of the minimicroclass *il nome le nomora* and of the indeclinable type *la unghia le unghia*, both displaying the neuter ending *-a* in the plural. This would have been groundless, if the neuter had not played any active role in the language system at that synchronic level.

By combining morphological theory and philological analysis, our research provides original insights in the evolution of the morphological system of Vulgar Latin both in terms of inflectional classes and of gender; moreover, it allows a more profound understanding of the morphological shift of the Neo-Latin languages away from the inflecting-fusional type.

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