

Proposal for an Allegorical Reading of Folengo's *Baldus* and *Chaos del Triperuno*

by Ann Mullaney

Teofilo Folengo was a gifted writer. He excelled at narrative and lyrical poetry, at persuasive prose and witty dialog, at self-defense, self-promotion and self-obfuscation. Merlin, as he called himself, was a wily wizard of words who managed to entertain readers for five hundred years while keeping some of his best tricks concealed. Not to worry, his secrets will not be revealed here, where my aim is simply to shed light on a few of his puzzling maneuvers. Specifically, this study examines lodes of sexuality in Folengo's epic poem *Baldus* and his autobiographical *Chaos del Triperuno*.¹

As a translator my primary focus is on words: having interrupted work on Folengo's *Chaos* to correct proofs of the *Baldus* I noticed a curious textual link between the two works. A passage in *Chaos* in which one pseudonym-personality tells of painful nocturnal attacks he endured as a boy features key terms used in a *Baldus* episode involving an assault by an eel-like creature in a dark cave. Similar components of these confrontations include the vulnerability and powerlessness of the victims, sudden eerie howling, the hint that clergy were involved in corporal assaults, and the splintering of the authorial self. Where the *Chaos* presents ideas in allegorical language, the *Baldus* presents analogous ideas in terms of an adventure narrative.

1. "Brilliant allegories have been hidden under rough bark."

At the beginning of the *Chaos del Triperuno*, Folengo's mother, sister and niece carry on a dynamic conversation about the new work, then each articulates her understanding of how the

Chaos should be read. The women disagree about how personal the material is: whether Teofilo has written about himself or about everyman.² At the beginning of the third edition of the *Baldus*, which followed the *Chaos*, Francesco Folengo (allegedly a brother but more likely our author himself) alerts readers to the possibility that brilliant allegories may be hidden under the rough bark of the Macaronic epic:

“Nondimeno vedendo egli poi per colpa de alcuni leggeri di armatura, essere nata e cresciuta non so che sciocca, et al tutto falsa openione, non meno da chi sanno ricevuta, che da coloro non sanno; che cotesto volume di favole non sia dentro tale quale di fuori si mostra essere, ma che dallo istesso Autore siano sotto ruvide scorze ingeniosissime allegorie state nascose, cominciò così à puoco à puoco rallentare quella indurata sua voglia di non mai più riducersi à simile iattura di tempo, non che per lo vero egli negasse questo tale poema essere al tutto fuori di qualche allegorico senso...”³

This third edition purports to be a laundered version of the controversial epic (in keeping with Folengo’s efforts to return to the Benedictine Order). Folengo reminds us that appearances can be deceiving. He invites us to seek out the “sustantifique mouelle” under the rough bark – to borrow the well-known image used by one of his early admirers and imitators, French writer François Rabelais.⁴ Finding the essence in Folengo’s works is especially difficult because he does everything in his power to hide and reveal simultaneously. For example, after establishing the pseudonym Merlinus with his first two publications, he signed his next book *Limernus*.⁵ Then, in addition to the obvious transposition, he prefaced the book with a sonnet whose acrostics spelled Merlinus Coccai, so it is clear that the new name was not meant to conceal the author’s previous identity.

Folengo explains why he took the trouble to use fictitious characters and fake names. In the *Apologia de l’autore* published with the 1526 *Orlandino*, he claimed that he deliberately put any words that might be injurious in the mouth of a (fictionalized) foreigner, from where such errors

are wont to gush: “E in segno manifesto di mia sinceritade quelle pochette bestieme pongo sempre in bocca d'alcuno tramontano, donde li errori il piú de le volte sogliono repullulare” (234.6). He also maintained, reasonably enough, that if he were not discussing such vile matters, he would have used his own name, or none at all, “acciò che per mezzo di poter dire baldanzosamente ogni cosa, pervegnasi finalmente a la veritade; ché quando d'altra materia non cosí vile io parlassi, lo nome mio appropriato, anzi niuno, vi antiponerei” (235.9). Folengo’s goal is to arrive at the truth by boldly using all the devices at his disposal.

2. “...a priest who held many students subject, and more the handsome than the homely.”

In the preface to the second of the three *selve* that make up the *Chaos*, Folengo assures his readers that his confused jumble of prose and poetry can be untangled by dint of intellect (R 221), and I hope he is right. Later in this forest, two of the author’s pseudonym-characters, Limerno and Merlino, tell each other about nightmarish attacks. In the pages of dialogue leading up to this exchange, Limerno and Merlino banter about taking the pipe inside, blowing on the pipe and, with a twist of a phrase from Catullus, Limerno insinuates that Merlino is a beast who comes forth filthy from friendship: “Prodis amicitiae foedus.”⁶ The poignant quips and vivid verse which follow deserve to be quoted at length:

[LIMERNO.] Non voglio per niuna guisa esserti ritroso; e perché di cotesta materia latina ho molta penuria, e tu vi hai pur piantato ostinatamente lo chiodo ch’io non debbia se non latinamente cantare, non mi ritraggo a dirti alquanti versi da me anchor fanciullino composti, trovandomi su quello di Ferrara in certa villa, mandatovi da mio padre per imparare lettere appresso d’un prete lo quale molti scolari teneva soggetti, e più li belli che li brutti; nel qual luogo, per corruttela di grosso aere, soprabbondavano tante biscie, Rane, Zenzale e Pipastrelli, che uno inferno mi pareva di tormentatori. Laonde, ritrovandomi ogni sera in guisa d’un Lazzaro mendico tutto da le punture di quelli volatili animaluzzi impiagato, cosi al mio Maestro puerilmente recitai:

LIMERNUS.

O mihi Pieriis liceat demergier undis,
O veniat votis dexter Apollo meis.

Quicquid ago, fateor, sunt carmina, carmina sed quae
Non sapiunt liquidas Bellerophontis aquas.

Hic nisi densa Palus iuncis et harundine torpet,
Hic nisi stagnanti me Padus amne lavat. (Glossa: Alveus antiquioris padi.)

Advoco si Musas: pro Musis ecce caterva
Insurgit Culicum, meque per ora notat.

Dum cantare paro fletu mihi lumen inundat,
Factaque per Culices vulnera rore madent.

Hic quoque noctivagae strident ululantque volucres,
Ac ventura nigrae damna minantur Aves.

Quid referam Pulices, agili qui corpore saltant?
Utraque quos caedens iam caret ungue manus.

MERLINO.

Questi tuoi versi quantunque mi sappiano di pueritia, pur non vi manca l'arte, e (per dir meglio) la veritate, imperò che io molto più volentieri abitarei su lo contado di qualunque altra cittade che su quello di Ferrara, non già perché ella non habbia tutte le bone conditioni che si ricercano in una simil terra, così di reggimento come di nodrimento, ma baldamente dirò che causa veruna non le occorre perché de l'Aere o sia del Cielo ella si debbia lodare, che, quando la industria più de la Natura non vi havesse proveduto, guai a le sue gambe. Laonde, essendovi non so qual Poeta Mantoano, per un eccesso non piccolo, destinato dal signore a partirne in onesto esiglio, e già pervenuto su l'entrata di essa, in queste parole sospirando ruppe.

MERLINUS.

Inesperata meis salve Ferraria curis,
Tale sis exilium ne, rogo, quale daris.

Me non parva reum fecit tibi culpa, reatum
Ex te num luerit congrua poena meum?

Noster, ais, venias; nostros quoque suscipe ritus,
Vivitur humano sanguine, trade cibum.

Mantous Culicis funus iam lusit Homerus,
Mantous Culicum tu quoque gesta cane. (Glossa: Vergilius.)

LIMERNO.

Li. Che quelle bestiuole siano causa per cui lo usar in Ferrara non ti aggrada, malamente te lo credo.

Mer. Poco errore è questa tua mescredenza.

Li. Perché dici tu dunque la menzogna?

Mer. Se per mezzo de la menzogna tu intendi la veritade, perché mentitore mi fai?

Li. Mentitore sei per certo.

Mer. Sì, ma verace.

Li. Qual veritade ho io già inteso per la bugia testé fatta?

Mer. Perché Ferrara cortesa non per Mosche o Tavanelle mi è a noia, ma perché ivi raccogliansi lor vini su le groppe de le Rane. Pensa mò tu qual eccidio, qual ruina sarebbe del mio stomaco.

Li. Ferrara e Mantua di molte qualitadi si corrispondeno. Ma voglio che, si come hora ti concessi lo mio cantar latino, così non manco tu ti comporti ne l'ascoltarmi un breve capitolo...⁷

To summarize: Limerno's poem articulates how it felt to be preyed upon repeatedly by creatures that left wounds, oozing wounds, while he lacked the wherewithal to fight back. Merlino speaks of being fodder for persuasive pests ("come be ours, accept our rites"); "nigrae... Aves" as Folengo scholars have noted, likely refers to Benedictine monks.⁸ He then insists that one can tell the truth by means of a fictitious lie.

Anyone who has visited in and around Mantua and Ferrara during warm weather has probably experienced blood-thirsty insects (whose densities there match those in my homeland, Minnesota). Corroborating evidence in other poems of the era, the pointed framing and the insistence on veracity compel the reader to seek deeper meanings.⁹ In order to complain of marshland insects, Limerno would not have needed to mention a priest who preferred cute students to good ones. And while it may be natural for a humble young poet – humble in that he is willing to accept his lot amid the stalks and reeds of the sluggish Po instead of the clear waters of Olympus – to tell how his eyes flowed with tears after he was visited by gnats instead of the

Muses he'd invoked, the emphasis placed on the wounds seems curious. Are these dripping "vulnera" the poet's eyes or some other part of his anatomy? During an encounter with a ghost of gnats it may not be unusual to be branded across the mouth or face (*ora*), but why are night-flying birds screeching and howling, and "black birds threatening misfortunes to come"? What misfortunes are coming? We seem to have moved beyond a gnat attack into a more problematic area. Why was Merlin exiled from Mantua? How do the back sides of amphibians ("le groppe de le Rane") figure in? What truth is Merlin telling us by means of his lie?

3. "We need more than heart to transcend this passage, a passage so hard, so horrible, so vicious, that many times boats and people are drowned in it"¹⁰

In order to appreciate the convergence of elements in Book 21, it may be helpful to review the crescendo of violence and odd self-intrusions which precede it. Starting with Book 16, Baldus and his friends face terrifying naval battles against pirates. In Book 17, the lovely Leonardo is slain by bears while defending his virginity from a libidinous witch. Then, Baldus is reunited with the father he has never met in time to hear his last words of advice (Book 18).¹¹ A gory battle with demons follows; the most interesting demon is the clever Rubicane who flies out of Merlin's tomb when Philotheus (a transposition of Teofilo) lifts the cover (more about Rubicane and Philotheus below). Book 20 features an exceptionally long struggle with a whale (a serpent-like whale that had been an island). For hundreds of hexameters the heroes try to thwart the monstrous beast on which they are riding naked. They "row against nature" as they try repeatedly to cut off the creature's "coazzum" (big tail). In the middle of this agonizing battle with the beast, the pirates return and the two leaders, Hippol and Lyrone, become so enthralled watching Baldus fight naked, that they switch their allegiance and join him. It should be noted

that the names of these pirate brothers would be pronounced “Il Polirone” – recalling the large Benedictine monastery where Folengo resided off and on.¹² These pirates had held Philotheus/Teofilo captive. Thus, at the end of Book 20, after the men finally succeed in yanking off the whale’s head and come ashore to the immense cavern and grottoes of Moon Mountain, the reader is alert to unorthodox self-referencing and changeable antagonists.

A singularly anguished petition to the Muses begins the nexus of fear, foes and futility that opens Book 21. The poet dreads the port of Malamocco (a narrow inlet in the Venetian Lagoon), roiling with a hundred thousand devils, a passage “so hard, so horrible and so vicious that boats and people are often drowned in it” (21.1-10). In an almost anatomical description, quite unlike Dante’s lofty “*navicella del mio ingegno*,” we are told that the poet’s ship has “a poorly pitched keel,” and is “punctured on all sides, craps straw and opens wide its windows: and through the openings the double-crossing thing takes in enemies.”¹³ The poet sees himself scorned for his fear, a fear that seems unfounded given that he has already “rowed three hundred miles” between Scylla and Charybdis (the famous strait between Sicily and Italy).¹⁴ He admits to his Muses that there will be “great strain on our backs... since we must exert our arms against whitecaps” (21.24). The poet gives no reason for his trepidation, but the earlier *fluctus* (T) was changed to *pegoras* (sheep, and by extension whitecaps), and sheep are used throughout the *Chaos* as a metaphor for monks (and cf. *Baldus* 12.109).¹⁵

The descent proper begins with “*Ibant obscuro*,” a phrase that marks Aeneas’s descent into the underworld (*Aeneid*, 6.268-9). The darkness is so extreme that the friends see nothing and cannot even greet one another. They bang their heads and shins but bear these misadventures (*damna*)

with good spirits, even breaking into song. After singing together, they hear a tremendous noise; the path splits like a Y; the cries become so deafening that the friends are unable to hear one other speak. A faint light is spotted behind a door, but their banging goes unheard due to the fury (*ruina*) of hammers inside. They break in and find a hundred naked blacksmiths (*ferrari*). Many of the words I have italicized are found in the *Chaos* passage cited above: *damna*, *ruina*, *membra*, and *ferrari*.¹⁶

The smiths are “black, sooty, unwashed and unkempt, naked and full of lice, but the chief smith does not let them lack the jug for blacksmiths hammer badly without a jug” (21.174-5); *boccalo*, used repeatedly here for jug, is the name of a character with personal associations to the author, to be discussed below.¹⁷ Suddenly from outside the forge the heroes’ horses neigh; Baldus tries to go to them but is forced back inside by a strong wind. The chief smith ridicules Baldus for his inability to exit, and the huge Fracasso retaliates by calling the blacksmiths ugly devils and filthy sorcerers who live in the dark. He vows to “*discornare*” (dehorn/scorn) their father Lucifer and their “*fratres... diablos*” (brother devils, 199-208). In the third edition, Fracasso adds to the taunt, saying that the smiths have become disgusting, “like tawny owls, horned owls and bats” (“more Civettarum, Gufforum, Gregnapolarum”). Nocturnal birds of prey were commonly associated with sodomites by writers of the era, as were blacksmiths, see the analyses by French scholar Jean Toscan, in his four-volume study, *Le carnaval du langage*.¹⁸

Reciprocal insults give rise to blows, and the smiths being naked, as we are frequently reminded, are cut through like fresh ricotta. After they are dispatched, Lirone, looking for treasure, lifts a hunk of rock and heaves it out the door. An extremely long dragon rushes in to dismember

Lirone, “who had been so foolhardy as to uncover the cave that hides the elite of heroes and the crown of leaders.” (271-2). This “luridus anguis” (ghastly serpent) does not defend itself from the horses because it is intent on killing Lirone for wanting to “enter the exposed grotto” (279). Dragons traditionally guard treasure from thieves; this dragon protects the elite from exposure. Exposure of what or to what? The dragon, we glean from the various editions of the *Baldus*, is defending a treasure trove of weapons and armor belonging to elite heroes, heroes whom Folengo frequently portrays as effeminate: Hercules, Paris, Turnus, and Vergil.¹⁹

In the meantime, the fire is snuffed out by a blast of wind; in the total darkness the men cannot use their swords. This is crucial: we are told six, seven, eight times that the friends cannot communicate and cannot use their weapons for fear of mortally wounding one other (21.30-3, 48-9, 128, 282-9, 312, 362-3, 370-7, 387-9). The horses must therefore locate the “foetentem dragum” (fetid dragon) by smell. They bite it and kick it and “hold it in by force... but meanwhile, vomiting black venom, it hisses and gyrates with its puffed out throat.” (293-300). The men are listening for it carefully, when they feel it move time and again between their legs (302-3).

All of a sudden devils in the form of yowling wild animals attack them with ferocious bites. Since Baldus and company cannot see to draw their swords, his best friend Cingar scrapes his steel sword on the rocks to send sparks into the blind holes (*busos*) so that his companions will be warned whether the devils are in front or in back. Baldus then dismembers the beasts, while Fracasso squeezes, suffocates and kills the creatures with his nails and tears them apart with his teeth, soaking himself thoroughly in their warm blood (378-84). Cingar keeps making sparks,

“But the dragon treacherously assaults him from behind and tries to prevent him from giving light to his friends” (387-89).

Cingar shouts for help and Moschino, a minor character, mounts the dragon. He presses its flanks so hard that the dragon falls to the ground and refuses to move forward. Unexpectedly, the narrator offers a heart-wrenching comparison: “It is no different when a cow is dragged to be slaughtered by the butcher: the more she is driven forward, the more she goes backward, for she sees her sisters in the distance, gutted, and their parts (*membra*) hanging from bloody hooks” (410-13). Out of the blue, the reader is asked to feel sympathy for the dragon. Then, just as abruptly, the deadly serpent turns into a pretty girl holding a book. Immediately the heroes are torn between wanting to help her and wanting to thwart her, so Merlin shows up to rescue them (418-60).

After triggering such terror, the dragon disappears without causing any physical harm. The men’s panic was due to their inability to fight back as the attack went on and on in the darkness; Merlin intervened only after the dragon had changed into an alluring witch holding a magic book. Note the vast differences in the woodcuts illustrating this episode: the one, a canvas crowded with noble steeds assaulting a fanged dragon, the chief smith beheaded at their feet (T p. 199v); the other, a comical snapshot of Moschino astride the spent serpent (T p. 201v). It is difficult to know what to make of this greatly altered view of the enemy. More than consciously honed literary creations these images seem like fragments of a nightmare allowed to surface.

It would be tempting to pursue other eel-like beasts: with the help of Enrico Gragnani's comparison table, one can track them through all four editions of the *Baldus*.²⁰ However, it seems best turn to other instances where the *Baldus* mirrors the *Chaos* in reflecting the author's intimate concerns. Quite compelling are the various characters turned into cows, asses and donkeys against their will by those wielding power over them. While there is a playful quality to these episodes – as one might expect when humans are turned into animals – there is also a sobering vulnerability.

4. “Io quae in vacca mutatam fuit in arena scripsit nomen”²¹

In the *Chaos* Limerno warns the naive Triperuno that he has offended someone powerful and is now in mortal danger (R 303). Triperuno wonders what methods his avenger might use on him, “Poison me? Kill me with a knife? ... Take my reputation?” Eventually he and Limerno settle on the dreadful but very real possibility that the enemy (named Laura and Larva) will turn Triperuno into an ass. The young protagonist is concerned that his beloved Galanta might no longer desire him if he were changed into a billy goat, but Limerno assures him that she would still want him, because she herself would be transformed into a she-goat.²² The two author-characters go on to discuss the merits of keeping silent about the truth (R 308). In the realm of the *Baldus*, a retaliatory metamorphosis is actually (well, fictitiously) carried out: Baldus's friend Boccalo, an uxorious sleight-of-hand magician, associated with both Merlin and the Folengo family, is turned into an ass by the queen witch, Culfora.

In Book 23, while Culfora presides over her retinue of perfumed dancing men and cosmetically enhanced women, Boccalo is dragged before her for stealing butter and cheese from the kitchen

and roughing up a couple of servants (23.538-92).²³ Culfora has her servants thrash Boccalo; Baldus is present and watches the vigorous beating but does not unsheathe his sword for he is invisible and “wishes to have a variety of experiences” (597-600). Culfora then turns Boccalo into an ass. Great emphasis is placed on the color of Boccalo’s hide which is *bertinus* (gray), a color identified again and again with monks’ habits (10.29, 97, 212, 449, 11.35, 55, and 23.605, 612, 647).

When Baldus finally comes to Boccalo’s rescue, he slaughters the witch’s servants “as a falcon shreds water coots (*folengas*).” Culfora hears of this rout by an unseen entity and speculates that it must be the work of *Cocaii ... Merlini* or *Serraffum*, Merlin’s double (cf. 23.620, 628).²⁴ (References to various names Folengo chose or was given, accumulate in the text at significant moments.²⁵) Baldus then drives Boccalo out of Culfora’s cloister – her domain is indeed called a cloister – poking him from behind with a prod. Since Baldus is still invisible, Boccalo the ass can see only the prod.

When Baldus finally reveals himself, Boccalo tries to show his gratitude by slobbering him with donkey kisses and trying to mount him, “ut ille/ rumpere qui voiat cum mula virginitatem” (“as though intending to breach his virginity with a she-mule,” 23.649-50). Baldus courteously endures these rude attentions, but cannot understand what the ass is braying. The marginal gloss, “Io, quae in vacca mutatam fuit in arena scripsit nomen” is shocking, because one starts to read it as “I, who was turned into a cow” (T 21 p. 220v). When read properly as “Io, who was changed into a cow, wrote her name in the sand” - it is still alarming. Ovid informs us that Io was a young virgin raped by Jove, who changed her into a cow to keep his wife from discovering his

adulterous crime; after much suffering in her cow-form, Io succeeded in revealing her plight to her father by writing with her hoof (*Metamorphoses* 1.583-746). In the first edition, as Baldus's noble friend Leonardo lay dying after defending his virginity, he wrote a couplet with his foot (P Bk. 12, p. 178, v.182). Self-referencing words like *folenga* and *Cocaii*, the ass covered in monk's gray driven from Butthole's cloister, and the "*Io ... vacca*" gloss, compel us to read this allegorically. It sounds as though the author felt that he had been mounted and silenced against his will. Both the references to Io and to Leonardo writing with his foot disappear from the "cleansed" third edition.

A threatened transformation is also significant: Here, Culfora's ministers are poised to attack Baldus's friend Fracassus:

Iamque sacerdotes gladio [sic] portando cruentos
 In primis voluere gulam schanare Fracassi.
 Ergo praecipunt curvos pigare zenogios.
 Namque volunt illum ut Vaccam scopare securi.

(And now the priests carrying bloody sword[s] wanted first of all to slit Fracasso's throat. Therefore they instruct him to bend his curved knees, because they want to slaughter/ fuck him like a cow securely/ with a death blow, P Bk. 17, p. 257, v. 366-9.)

"Scopare," used regularly in Italian today for "to have intercourse," apparently had the same meaning in Folengo's day. In subsequent editions, the author changed *scopare* to "descopare" and then "discopare," defined as a Milanese term for "to finish the slaughter."²⁶ But, perhaps the most telling detail is that the perpetrators are not butchers but "sacerdotes" who teach Fracasso how to kneel for the punishment they want to inflict on him. And lest we have any doubts about the meaning of the word "sacerdote," Folengo clarifies, "priests and friars with their surplices and their cowls... their prior wears an alb" (24.166-94).

At the same time that the sacrifice attempted on Fracasso, as though he were a cow, becomes less dramatic in later versions, a new cow transformation is added: two monks connive to convince Zambello that his cow Chiarina is really a goat. They then take her back to the monastery and devour her (8.353-471, 655-709). Cingar and Zambello participate in the feast and then bury Chiarina's bones; Cingar promises to resurrect her in three days. Her epitaph (written by Seraphus) features the cow complaining in the first person that she had fed her meat to friars, and worse, that she had been forced to live under a crazy master, "Namque sub insano vixi male ducta magistro." The concluding couplet both generalizes and personalizes her plight: "Sic nos mortales stulto sub preside stantes/ Flere licet potius quam dulcem perdere vitam" ("Thus we mortals are permitted to weep more for living under a foolish supervisor, than losing sweet life," T Bk. 7 p. 95). While it would have been a stretch to make the simple peasant Zambello the referent for "magistro," with the appearance of "praeside" in the next couplet, our poet forces us to look beyond the surface story. Chiarina's transmutation and consumption becomes something that happened to a scholar."²⁷ Folengo's identification with his literary constructs makes his claim that gods and goddesses grieve for Chiarina seem more tragic and less hyperbolic (T Bk 7, 87v). The 18 lines of dramatic *reticentia* that introduce this book invite us to read it ever so carefully. It would be instructive to examine the circumstances surrounding the appearance of *reticentia* in the four editions of the *Baldus* and in the *Chaos*: we could learn more about what Folengo found hazardous.

5. "I'll speak no further about these things, because so much fantasizing would make me lose my mind."

If it is difficult to regard the cow Chiarina as a facet of the author's inner self, it is impossible to ignore Folengo's references to himself throughout the *Baldus*. Although my case for reading the epic as allegorical autobiography depends on a preponderance of evidence, it is not my intent to be exhaustive or exhausting, therefore, I will limit my final interrogation to material found in Book 19. Conveniently, our poet begins the book "Menter ego" and ends it with a rousing cheer, "...Long live Boccalo, long live the bottle/ and long live the illustrious house of our age-old Folengos," so his paternity is not in question.

The "ego" here belongs to Merlin Cocaio, who is not content to proclaim himself the poet laureate of Bergamo and Cipada, but turns his invocation to the Muses into an uncouth jab at Vergil. Merlin calls the Roman poet "Maro castronus" and says that no one is "castronior." Why? Because Vergil rejected wine in favor of the frigid waters of the Helicon, and wrote pastoral verse for chump change (19.1-13). Merlin asks his Muses for Malvasian wine which is better than any manna, ambrosia or nectar. Later the poet ("ego Merlinus") intrudes again when he compares himself to the character Boccalo (seen above as a hapless ass). Merlin recalls an incident when a poorly cinched saddle caused him to slip under his mule's belly and jam his head into soft mud. Just so, in order to escape from a monstrous devil, Boccalo is willing to bury himself in the musk and ambergris of shit (19.570-86).

In the meantime, the author's namesake discovers Merlin's tomb: the epitaph hails Merlin as the greatest magician bar none.²⁸ However, as soon as Philotheus turns aside the cover of the tomb, a hideous devil emerges (T p. 177v-178). This devil, Rubicane (Red-Dog), is quite a character: he steals the witch Pandraga's magic book and reads from it aloud to a fellow demon, pointing out

impressive feats of various mages (19.119-265). Zoroaster (eleventh century BCE Persian thinker) is credited for being the first to summon devils to his wand and make them row; Michael Scot (twelfth century scientist and translator), is credited with many talents, one is teaching “how to enchant a cape with magic words. While the cape is being enchanted, the howls of the spirits are heard screeching through the air, for we are drawn by force,” (19.179-205).²⁹ He can also baptize a magnet so that it ceases to join with iron and binds human flesh in chains of love. One could make too much of his talent for forced initiation and unnatural attraction, but the use of the first person plural (“quia nos perforza tiramur”), and the intense presence of the author (Merlin-Philotheus-Rubicane) cause one to pause.³⁰

Michael Scot can also draw a ship on a beach and make it sail around the world; in a parallel move, Seraphus, Merlin’s double, sketches a ship in the sand, and sails off on it with a handsome young musician, Giubertus.³¹ After the magical ship lands, Seraphus guides the timid Giubertus, coaxing him into a dark cavern. Fortunately, Seraphus keeps a torch handy with flint, steel and tinder in his pocket. This episode is carefully constructed in code words that imply sexual activity (T Bk. 19 p. 192). In the “rejuvenated” third edition, there is no sailing jaunt, no excursion to a dark cave, no lit torch, no charming woodcut showing Seraphus holding Giubertus by the hand, only a quiet mention later in the narrative that, “Seraphus keeps this gallant man with him and loves him” (“quem retinet secum Serraphus amatque galantum,” 24.301-2). Obviously this thrilling tryst was too exciting even for our poet, who threw down his pen at the end of Book 19 in the second edition and pledged, “De quibus ulterius nil parlo, namque cerebrum/ Perdere me faceret fantasticatio tanta” (T Bk. 19 p. 192, translated at the head of this section). And he never does talk about these doings again, at least not here in Book 19.

In the final version of *Baldus*, Book 19 ends quite differently with an impulsive bond between the comical character Boccalo and the anomalous author Folengo. Boccalo fortuitously snatches a crucifix from Baldus's dead father and brandishes it to successfully drive off the demon horde, prompting the final cheer, "Ergo Boccalus vivat vivatque botazzus,/ vivat et antiquae domus inclyta nostra Folengae" (19. 632-3). Folengo wants credit for Boccalo's quick thinking, irreverent though it is. Just as Folengo invented Merlin to carry out tasks he himself chose not to perform, Merlin invented Seraphus to execute daring deeds (and Seraphus too had special agents), so both authorial characters called on Boccalo (the Jug) at critical times – above we saw Merlin compare himself to Boccalo for their shared willingness to immerse themselves in dreck when necessary).

The suitability of split personalities to an adventure epic might be questioned, but their presence cannot be denied. Folengo continually fashioned fictional constructs only to reclaim them as facets of himself. His works exemplify Willa Cather's affirmation, "Artistic growth is, more than anything else, a refining of the sense of truthfulness."³² Folengo pursued the truth despite psychological and physical risks. His *Baldus* and *Chaos del Triperuno* have the ring of authenticity one finds in explorations of the inner self or selves written many centuries later.³³

6. "Then sighing [Boccalo] said, "No mercy is shown in heaven to buffoons, I was a buffoon, and neither heaven nor hell can take me in, this judgment still depends on you humans: if you will do something good for me, I will go to heaven, if you ask for bad, then right away I will be dragged into hell; you decide."³⁴

In the final segment of this examination, let us focus on the pea under the shell – Why is it there?

At the beginning of the second *selva*, Triperuno exclaims that he wants the hard example of his fate to be depicted forever in blood sweat and tears, or carved into polished marble (R 223).

Throughout his chaotic journey, Triperuno laments having been disillusioned by the pastors whose life together had at first seemed so harmonious;

Un d'angeliche voci eletto coro
Entrato esser mi parve, e poi mirai
Cangiarsi e' bianchi volti in sozze Larve,
Et il lor concento in stridi e urli sparve.

(It seemed to me that I'd entered a select choir of angelic voices, and then I watched the white faces change into filthy larvae, and their harmony vanished in screams and shouts, R 339)

Triperuno wanted to be part of the angelic choir but instead found himself in a beasts' grotto drinking unclean marsh waters and weaving pliable reeds, “Non mi levai dal dosso mai la gonna,/ Onde l'immondi Vermi di piu sorte/ M'erano sempre intorno vigilanti,” (“I never took off my tunic, so the filthy worms of various sorts were always circling me vigilantly,” R 328). He is trapped in a labyrinth that earlier had been God's house yet now is populated by phantasms, dreams, black larvae, Erinyes and horrid black birds of prey that never stop shrieking (R 329). And yet, Triperuno prevails. In the last *selva* of his *Chaos*, he offers a detailed account of bees living together more or less happily. Their elected leader “sostien la verga” (holds up the rod) and is armed by his majesty so that he does not worry about the “umido mucrone” (humid stinger, R 369). We see many of the younger bees laying waste to flowers, sucking and licking and coming back with swollen legs: “La turba d'ogn' intorno succia e lambe,/ Nè cessan riportar l'enfiate gambe,” R 371). This “Vermo si robusto” strives to satisfy both its divine duty and human “gusto” (R 371). When there are wars with neighboring bees, you see some of them “ritirandosi lor Duci fiacchi” (pulling back their flaccid Dukes, R 372). A gloss at the beginning

of this detailed portrait teases, “Si non vis intelligi, neque intelligaris, lector” (“If you don’t wish to understand, may you not be understood, reader,” R 367).

Merlin embodies a similar ethos: after allowing his heroes to experience many terrors on land and sea, the plump bard enters his epic to save them. He then takes a moment to tell us how he was born to the Folengo family and raised at public expense so that Cipada, his hometown, could dominate Pietole, Vergil’s birthplace (22.1-132). Just as Plato was fed by bees, Merlin is fed by a merle carrying food in its beak, hence the name. Then the boy is turned over to a wise and learned pedant, and once sufficiently skilled in verse and prose, he is sent to study in Bologna.³⁵ However “while little Piero Pomponazzi lectures and turns all of Aristotle’s books inside out,” Merlin devotes himself to the Macaronic arts and cooks sausages in the pages of his texts (22.125-30). After this delightful autobiographical digression, the mature Merlin leads Baldus and his friends back into the smiths’ workshop, where he makes them confess their sins to him, since he is a priest. Those heroes who are hybrid creatures do not have to confess to the Church anything they have done with their animal parts (22.185-6, 195-6).

Merlin represents tolerance for natural behavior, he ushers in a new regime that is neither violent nor treacherous, but playful. The change is immediately verified when, after being sent off by Merlin, the heroes are aided by Seraphus and two handsome young men. Seraphus and his winsome helpers are invisible and playfully use their fists on Baldus and his friends (22.514-34). Once they have had their fun, Seraphus materializes to help Cingar, whose nose had been bewitched into a cumbersome size. Seraphus rubs the gigantic nose with an unguent and then gently squeezes it while pulling it down (22.595-602). Folengo has staked out Merlin’s territory between the intractable *dragonem* and the compliant *nasonem*. His various selves welcome the

“vermo mirabile” but deplore the “luridus anguis.” Or, as our poet says more eloquently in “Clio” at the center of *Chaos*, “Qual gode in carne perche in carne viva...” (R 291).

Another way to explore these issues might be to start with the premise that during the early sixteenth century an intelligent, creative boy was raped by a man, perhaps by a priest, and later came to enjoy sexual activity with men. What could he say, especially if he lived in a monastery at a time when radical reform groups were attacking monasteries? Almost certainly he would need to disguise his message. And he would need to renounce hope of being considered a major writer. Whether fueled by abuse he himself suffered and witnessed, or by a general climate of exploitation and deception, or just his imagination, Folengo has given us multilayered prose, poetry and prints. His hybrid language and range of registers and genres may have baffled not only the external censors of the Catholic Church and the Venetian Republic, but also the internal censors of his conscious mind. His humorous mix allowed novel facets of his self to enter his works, facets that were welcomed by early readers.

Unlike contemporary artists who painted self-portraits at distinct points in their lives – Albrecht Dürer and Titian come to mind – Folengo superimposed his self-portraits. On some level he must have recognized that this overlay technique was ahead of its time. Initially he presents his Macaronic epic as part of a trove of books found in a subterranean chamber; its author and all its heroes are already dead and buried, except for the buffoon Boccalo. The traveling herbalists who make the discovery remove the stopper (“cocaio”) from the playful illusionist’s urn and find him still toying with his cups and acorns, because he has not yet been accepted by either heaven or

hell. The explorers learn that it is up to humans arriving later to decide his fate.³⁶ Watch closely as Teofilo Folengo makes himself appear and disappear.

¹ My work on Teofilo Folengo's writings would not be possible without the solid foundation of research established by scholars in these fields, especially by the dedicated Folenghists. The ideas presented here were first offered at a symposium entitled "Macaronic Writing in the Renaissance: The Case of Teofilo Folengo (1491-1544), April 3, 2009" organized by Massimo Scalabrini and sponsored by the French and Italian Department of the University of Indiana.

² *Chaos del Triperuno*, page numbers are from the edition by Umberto Renda (R) for Scrittori d'Italia (Bari: Laterza, 1911), R 177-182. An anastatic copy of the 1527 edition has been published by the Amici di Merlin Cocai, Bassano del Grappa, 2010; an electronic version with page numbers from both editions is found at www.folengo.com.

³ *Francesco Folengo alli lettori*, "Nonetheless, seeing then, through the fault of a few flimsily equipped persons, that there surfaced and spread I don't know what ridiculous and utterly false opinion, received no less by those in the know than by those not in the know: that this volume of fables is not on the inside the same as it shows itself to be on the outside, but that by the Author himself brilliant allegories have been hidden under a rough bark, he began to ease up on his steadfast decision to never go back to a similar waste of time; not that he actually denies that this epic is utterly removed from any allegorical meaning..." (*Macaronicorum poema*, c. 1535, quoted here from the reissue by Boselli, 1555; translation mine). The message of truths hidden under bark is repeated in the posthumous *Argomento sopra il Baldo* (1552).

⁴ François Rabelais, *Gargantua, Prologe de l'auteur* (Paris: Garnier, 1971), 7.

⁵ *Orlandino*, edited and annotated by Mario Chiesa (Padua: Antenore, 1991), 4-5.

⁶ R 273-5; for corroborating significance of *pipa*, see *Orlandino*, 5.2. Catullus used the expression *foedus amicitiae* to describe his relationship with Lesbia, "aeternum hoc sanctae foedus amicitiae" (this eternal pact of holy friendship), *Carmina*, 109.

⁷ Possible translation of quote, *Chaos* R 276-8:

LIMERNO.

I don't want to be reserved with you in any way; and both because I have a great dearth of this Latin material and also because you have been hammering obstinately at the nail that I should only sing "Latinly" I won't hold back from reciting to you some verses composed by me when I was still a young boy, finding myself in a certain villa in that area around Ferrara, sent there by my father in order to learn letters at the home of a priest who held many students subject, and more the handsome than the homely; in which place, due to a corruption of the filthy air, there abounded so many snakes, frogs, mosquitoes and bats that it seemed an inferno of tormentors. Wherefore, finding myself every night like a mendicant Lazarus wounded all over by the punctures of those little flying creatures, I thus recited childishly to my master:

LIMERNUS.

O that I may be permitted to plunge into the Pierian waves, O that Apollo might come to my prayers! Whatever I produce are poems, I concede, but poems that do

not taste Bellerophon's limpid waters. Here only a dense marsh lies sluggish with reeds and canes, here only the Po washes me with its stagnant stream. [Gloss : the river of the ancinet Po.] If I summon the Muses, instead of Muses, behold, a swarm of gnats rises up and brands me about the face. While I prepare to sing, my eyes flood with tears, and the wounds the gnats have made drip with dew. Here too night-flying birds screech and howl, and black birds threaten misfortunes to come. What shall I say of the fleas, who jump with agile bodies? By now for/from slaughtering them both [my] hands lack nails.

MERLINO.

These verses of yours, although they smack to me of immaturity, still they're not lacking talent, and better yet, truth; for this reason, I would much more willingly live in the vicinity of any other city than that of Ferrara, not because it doesn't have all the good conditions that one looks for in a similar region, both as to governance and nourishment, but boldly I will say that it has absolutely no reason why it should congratulate itself as for the air and the skies, since, if industry had not provided for it better than nature, what a problem for ones legs. Wherefore, there being I don't know which Mantuan poet, on account of a not-small transgression destined by the lord to depart from Mantua in honest exile, and having already come to the entrance of Ferrara, he broke out in these words sighing:

MERLINUS.

Greetings, Ferrara, unexpected [place] for my studies, I ask that you not be an exile such as you are given. Didn't a small offense make me guilty to you, so won't a commensurate penalty discharge my crime from you? "Come!" you say, "be ours; accept our rites as well. One lives on human blood: surrender food! Earlier, the Mantuan Homer mourned the funeral of a gnat [Gloss: Vergil]; you, also a Mantuan, sing the deeds of gnats!"

LIMERNO. That those little creatures are the reason for which the practice in Ferrara is not pleasing to you, I find it hard to believe.

MERLINO. This disbelief of yours is hardly in error.

LIMERNO. Then why are you telling the lie?

MERLINO. If by means of the lie, you understand the truth, why do you call me a liar?

LIMERNO. You are a liar for sure.

MERLINO. Yes, but a truthful one.

LIMERNO. What truth have I understood then by means of the fib told just now?

MERLINO. Since courtly Ferrara is bothersome to me not for house flies and horseflies, but because there they harvest their wines on the backs of frogs.

Think a moment what a devastation, what a waste that would be of my stomach.

LIMERNO. Ferrara and Mantua correspond in many aspects. But, just as you conceded to my Latin singing a moment ago, so I want you to behave no less [well] in listening to a brief *capitolo* of mine...

⁸ Folengo associates monks and specifically Benedictines not just with black birds, but with other black creatures, for example "la Greggia de' cornuti Negri," *Chaos*, R 375,

and “genti negre,” in *Orlandino* 3.65 and see the note by Mario Chiesa, op. cit; see also Carlo Cordié, *Opere di Teofilo Folengo* (Milan: Ricciardi, 1977), 684-5.

⁹ Mosquitoes symbolizing the sodomitic phallus are the subject of two poems by Agnolo Bronzino: “A Messer Benedetto Varchi: In lode delle zanzare” and “Esortazione del Bronzino pittore alle zanzare” in *Rime in Burla*, edited and annotated by Franca P. Nardelli (Rome: Treccani (IEI), 1988) 45-63.

¹⁰ “Non bastat nobis animus transcendere passum,/ passum tam durum, tam horrendum tamque cativum,/ in quo multoties barchae gentesque negantur,” 21.8-10: text edited by Mario Chiesa, *Baldus*, Turin: UTET 1997, and in *Baldo* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 2007-8). For changes across the four main editions see the helpful comparison table and commentary by Enrico Gragnani, “Le quattro redazioni del *Baldus* 1517-1552,” thesis, University of Rome, (padis.uniroma.it.) I will cite from the fourth, posthumous edition (V), except when earlier editions are specified: the editions are known as: P (1517), T (1521), C (c. 1535) and V (1552).

¹¹ In the third edition only, Guidone’s speech to Baldus is amplified by 34 lines in which the long lost father cryptically warns his son against the path that leads to marshes enveloping muddy reeds, and insists that at the crossroads between the true path and the deceptive one, leaders are not absent, “Hic non ductores desunt ad compita verae,/ fallentisque viae” (Boselli p. 156v; after 18.349).

¹² For the insight into these names, see Otello Fabris, *Le Doctrinae cusinandi di Merlin Cocai: In coquina Iovis* (Nove, Biblioteca Merliniana, 2005), 32–5.

¹³ This last line, “et per fissuras recepit traditora nemigos,” appears only in the third edition (C), after 21.24.

¹⁴ Play on the word *vogare* (to row) for the sex act in both texts, see *Baldus* 20.195-6 and 19.175, and *Chaos* R 259.

¹⁵ Sheep as metaphor for clergy: *Chaos*, R 224-5, 235-7, 324-6; *Baldus* 25.230-41, T Bk 7 p. 93v, and as noted, perhaps at 12.109, “nam pegoris natura dedit sequitare priorem” (for it is the nature of sheep to follow the prior one/ prior); verse added in C and V.

¹⁶ *Ferrari* in the final edition is used here as a synonym of *fabri/fabbri*: Folengo emphasized variations of this word throughout the four editions of this episode and these occurrences require further study.

¹⁷ Boccalo’s transformation into an ass will be discussed shortly, *Baldus* 23.568-667 and notes; for Boccalo’s tie to Folengo see Book 19.632-3 and below.

¹⁸ Jean Toscan, *Le carnaval du langage: le lexique erotique des poètes de l’équivoque de Burchiello a Marino* (Lille: Presses Universitaires, 1981): Vulcan, pp. 609-11; smiths, p. 646; nocturnal birds of prey, pp. 1570-8.

¹⁹ For Hercules: *Baldus* 1.562-73, 20.648-51; Paris: 1.312-5; Turnus: 25.6465-9, where Achilles and Aeneas are also belittled, and at 16.24, Lirone is compared to Turnus; Vergil: 19.5-13, 22.104. (The dragon’s ferocious protection of the elite from exposure may be related to a passage in the *Orlandino*, in which a young ass is said to have robbed the monks of their discretion by escaping from a convent after 20 years, “Pensate quante pene, quanti danni/ivi sofferse l’animal scontento,” *Orl.* 2.15.)

²⁰ One significant appearance of “mortiferos... angues” which disappears after the second edition shows Baldus in prison, surrounded by serpents who vitiate his food. The abandoned hero invites the snake-haired Furies (“*sorores/ anguigeras*”) to bewail his fate

with their tragic bellowing (P Bk. 4, p. 69, v. 107-8). This edition also includes a challenge to the tyrant-mayor Gaioffo, to prove that Baldus has committed “the smallest vice” – mention of the “*minimum vicium*” provokes great laughter thus making it seem like a code word for sodomy (P Bk 4, p. 66, v. 24 and cf. “parva... culpa” *Chaos* R 277, quoted above). And also in this edition, Baldus’s friend, Cingar, is accused of being given the *ravanello* (code word for penis) and the *botone* (code for anus), glossed in P, “Ravenellus et botonus methaforice ponuntur,” (Radish and bud/little vase are placed [here] metaphorically, P Bk 2, p. 48, v. 263); and in T, p. 50. Baldus accuses community leaders as the real scoundrels who hide their wicked deeds under their togas (specified are *doctores, nodari, Procuratores, Iudex, Barisellus, sbirri*).

²¹ “Io, who was changed into a cow, wrote her name in the sand,” marginal gloss in T Bk. 21 p. 220v.

²² Incidentally, there is a long section in *Chaos* involving a talking ass, but this is not part of our discussion here, for this see Nuccio Ordine, *Giordano Bruno and the Philosophy of the Ass* (orig. title: *La cabala dell’asino*, 1987) New Haven: Yale U P, 1996).

²³ The witch Culfora’s name could be translated Butt-hole from Latin *culus*, buttocks, and *foro*, Italian for orifice, or *forare*, to pierce. A marginal gloss in the 1520 re-issue of the Paganini edition, defines the name as “Culfora .i. culum habe[n]s foras” (Culfora, that is having the bottom outside). Culfora was later changed to the less offensive Gelfora.

²⁴ Cocaii was changed to Coclen in C and V, 23.628.

²⁵ My dissertation explored some of these junctions of Folengo names, “Teofilo Folengo: Ecce homo,” Yale University, 1984.

²⁶ This definition of *descopare* is given by Chiesa, citing F. Cherubini, *Vocabolario milanese-italiano* (1839-56), in *Baldus*, edited and annotated by Mario Chiesa (Turin: UTET, 1997) 971; as far as I know only one other appearance of *scopare* surfaces in Folengo’s writings: “Quicumque in piazza scopatur sive bolatur” (Whoever is screwed/beaten with a broom in the piazza or branded [is from Cipada]), T Bk 2 p. 48v.

²⁷ In the third edition, Chiarina specifies that she fed her own meat (*propria... carne*) to defrocked friars and her bones are carried to a ditch in Cipada which is full of frogs croaking up to the stars; frogs could represent homosexuals or bisexuals (cf. *Chaos* R 373). In C and V the final couplet appears as part of Chiarina’s epitaph, and thus *nos* changes to *vos*: “Sic vos mortales stulto sub praeside ducti,/ plangite plus tostum quam dulcem perdere vitam,” 8.735-6.

²⁸ The two versions are, “Merlinus iacet hic cuius stat nomen apertum/ In magica nemo sibi par fuit arte magistro” (P Bk 14 p. 202, v. 71-2) and “Merlinus iacet hic, natus sine patre, propheta/ vixit, et in magica nulli fuit arte secundus” (T Bk 18 p. 178). In the last two editions, the name Philotheus is changed to Philofornus, and the tomb belongs not to Merlin but to two other wizards, cf. 19.63-7: *forno* (oven) is used by contemporary poets for orifice, see for example *Canzona de’ fornai* by Lorenzo de’ Medici, or *Capitolo del forno* by Giovanni della Casa.

²⁹ Used twice here, *cappam* is found at 8.389 and 10.88, 97, 390 for a monk’s habit. Being able to stop a magnet from attracting iron may have been an ability commonly attributed to sorcerers and sorceresses, e.g. Propertius, *Elegies*, 4.5.9-10.

³⁰ The passage was reworked extensively from the second to the third edition. In the *Chaos*, Triperuno hints at a forced initiation when calling attention to how the “greggia

de' cornuti Negri" used a hidden blade "I say hidden blade to our more detrimental ruin," and they always concealed birdlime and glue to trap and lacerate (R 375).

³¹ The descriptions of the conjuring feat are nearly identical: T Bk 18 p. 179v and T Bk. 19 p. 192.

³² Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark* (NYC: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), 409.

³³ One book that strikes a similar cord is the harrowing autobiographical account, *When Rabbit Howls*, by The Troops for Truddi Chase (NYC: E.P. Dutton, 1987).

³⁴ "Tum ille suspirans, 'Nulla gratia datur in coelo buffonibus; buffonus extiti, quo nec coelum nec infernos possunt me suscipere, in vobis tamen humanis hoc pendet arbitrium: si boni aliquid pro me feceritis, ad coelum pergam; si malum imprecabimini, prestiter in infernum strassinabor, videte vos,'" *Laudes Merlini eiusdem Magistri Aquarii Lodolae ad illustrem Dominum Pasarinum Scarduarum Comite...*, T p. 6, and first version, *Magistri Aquarii herbolatti...*, P p. 5 (iii v).

³⁵ The piling up similar terms ("viro savio doctoque pedanto") the author appears to signal a sodomite, redundancy being a salient feature of equivocal language, see Toscan, op. cit., pp. 168-72.

³⁶ *Laudes Merlini*, T p. 6.