

Invitation to the Adult Renaissance: The Folengo Brothers' Volume of 1533

This may be the funniest book you ever read written in Latin. Latin and code: there was a vast “burlesque” code in vogue in the era, roughly 1450 to 1550, and while some encoded works can be enjoyed without awareness of the parallel language, this volume cannot. Certain Renaissance authors drew on what J.N. Abrams calls *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* of their Roman models, and added an astonishing array of linguistic intricacy. Tens of thousands of pages of poetry and prose by dozens of writers await your reading and deciphering pleasure: a list of authors follows [below](#). Jean Toscan published a masterful analysis in four volumes of this rich erotic lexicon, *Le carnaval du langage: le lexique érotique des poètes de l'équivoque de Burchiello à Marino* (1981). Now Toscan's excellent investigation needs to be expanded to include usages by the Folengo brothers and others. Students and scholars of literature in Renaissance Italy will find that many works which have been annotated and taught for centuries without reference to disguised meanings will be better understood once they have been decoded.

This deceptively slim volume by two gentlemen of Mantua provides a good starting point for learning how to decipher: *Dialogi, quos Pomiliones vocat* (*Dialogs, which he calls Dwarves/ Short Pieces*) by Giovanni Battista Folengo, and *Varium poema* (Diverse Poems) and *Janus* by Teofilo Folengo were published together in 1533. The same year, Teofilo also published a book in Italian octaves, *La Humanità del Figliuolo di Dio* (*The Humanity of the Son of God*). Both Folengos were in the process of being re-admitted to the Benedictine order which they had left some years earlier. Despite their official contrition, Giovanni Battista and Teofilo Folengo filled their pages with cerebral erotica and sweeping satire. The extent to which these works are coded has not yet been widely explored or even acknowledged.

You have to read it to perceive it. Please be advised that the following examples are for consenting adults only, and involve salaciousness and mockery of sacred notions.

The basic unit of the cypher is the word:

Hoc immortalis, odorifero, ac felici, impletur animus, et mens, portio utique nostri melior.

The soul and the mind are filled with this immortal, odoriferous and happy [food], without doubt the better portion of us. (p. 69)

Both soul and mind are well-established code words for phallus; odiferous needs no explanation.

Larger blocks of comical allusions are formed from simple double meanings. In the hand of a virtuoso like Giovanni Battista, a harmless concept becomes explicit advice, for example, ***Aliquando desistendum esse ab incoepto*** (Now and then what has been started ought to be stopped), the theme of *Pomilio 11*::

Quid quaeso turpius illo qui in molestiis praefracte quidem nimium dolet? Nescio sane an plus ille detestandus sit qui crudeliter in alterum desaeviat, an is qui muliebriter in iniuriis eiulet, atque ingemiscat, ut nuper ex nostris quosdam vidimus adeo confractos an, animo ut [errata corrects imout] pene insanirent, Sed, ut opinor, Stoicorum indolentiam ita probas, et asseris, ut nec ab ironia vaces.

What, I ask, is more shameful than he who in troubles feels pain really too emphatically? I don't quite know whether a man should be more detested who cruelly vents his rage on another, or one who howls at injuries in a womanly way, and moans, as just now we have seen some of our [people] so shattered in the soul, that they almost (*pene*) go crazy. But, as I see it, you endorse and assert the Stoics' freedom from pain, as though you were devoid of irony. (p. 120)

Secus vero dicendum de re bona, sed ex qua nasci potest perturbatio aliqua vel molestia (aiunt enim antiqui mala omnia a bono principio originem habere) aliquo tamen modo vel tollerenda, vel ad commodiorem statum perducenda.

However, one should speak otherwise (*secus*) about a good thing but [one] from which somehow a disturbance or an annoyance can arise (for the ancients say that all evils have their origin from a good beginning) in some way nonetheless it must be either lifted up or guided to a more convenient position. (p. 121)

The reader must be alert not only to a word for word substitution but to a number of other tricks: *secus*, signaled above, is a common adverb meaning otherwise, but also a noun meaning sex; *pene*, a variant of *paene*, means almost in Latin but in Italian means penis. A further variation on the last is found in a clever quatrain of one of Teofilo's *Diverse Poems*:

***Quae semel vento ruit acta Pinus,
Haud reviviscit, nec Acer, nec Ilex.
Nescit heu certa, semel hinc quod exit,
Lege reverti.***

That *Pinus* has fallen, once downed by the wind, it can hardly revive, nor [can] the Maple, or Holm Oak. Once it has gone from here, alas, it's unable, by firm law, to return. (*On Anger* 9.25-8)

And did you note the aside above, "as though you were devoid of irony"? Frequently in the *Pomiliones* Giovanni Battista rewards his readers with sly asides, ranging from the mock-innocent "What?" found after many a tour de force, to the more pointed, "But this should be seen as metaphor" (p.3) after an explanation of how the "soul" becomes healthy by means of vigilant action. Once readers are in on the joke, they can join me in being baffled by the persistence of straight readings which utterly ignore countless clues: can anyone count the number of times Giovanni Battista uses soul to mean phallus, and then go on to mind (*mens*) and age (*aetas*)? He even states as clearly as he possibly can what is going on in his text:

Ex quo sit, ut in iis meis Pomilionibus virtutum magis encomia, et nuda interdum elogia vitiorum, quam diffinitiones, sint enarrata.

Therefore, let it be that in these *Pomiliones* of mine, encomia of virtues and occasionally naked praises of vices are narrated rather than definitions. (p. 4)

What was the point? For Giovanni Battista (also written Giambattista), the easiest answer is entertainment, satire, chutzpa. He is good at what he does.

His skill no doubt earned him a reputation throughout Europe, and a bit of an income. For the next 25 years he would go on to publish hundreds of pages of what today is mistaken for standard biblical commentary, despite so many clues. Beautiful editions of these works, all in need of savvy readers, are available currently through Google Play Books; a list of his publications is found at www.folengo.com. In the coming years we can look forward to better answers and better questions regarding the irrepressible and brilliant Giovanni Battista Folengo.

For Teofilo, the point of using coded language in many of the 68 *Diverse Poems* is double-edged. Code allowed his playfulness to emerge more fully. The poet-narrator describes his brother's fondness for gardening:

***Nam illum utile, multiplexque semen
Occultare solo iuvat feraci,
Mox rivo tenui strepentis undae
Inducit vitreum satis liquorem***

for it pleases him to conceal the valuable and versatile/ complex seed in the fertile soil; then he introduces ample glassy liquid with a fine stream of noisy ripples (39.18–22: About Giov. Batt. Chrysogono)

And rhapsodizes on his own Hoe:

***AMO te merito Ligo ligo num
Antistes, nitidi minister horti***

I love you, Hoe, rightly so, master of hoes,
minister of the lustrous garden (65.1-2: He flatters his hoe)

Humorous, but not the most captivating aspect of his writings. Code also allowed Teofilo both here and in his previous works, *Baldus*, *Orlandino* and *Chaos del Triperuno*, to explore his role in a culturally rich but very hypocritical society. Earlier Folengo's authorial persona had expressed a sense of betrayal by monks in sheep's clothing, by vindictive authorities, but here he seems to have found his niche:

***Hic bonos Cives amor unus, una
Claritas miscet, penetrantque se se
Mutuo tamquam vitreos, nec ulla
Nube nigrescunt.***

Here, one love, one clarity brings good Citizens together, and they penetrate each other mutually as though [they were] of glass, and are not darkened by any cloud. (62.61-4: On the Blessedness of the Saints)

His niche in a world where men can admire other men for their prowess, despite the strictures of a Christian society, a world of blissful fellowship, albeit a literary world.

While a consortium of readers will be needed to do justice to these well-crafted poems, I have tried my hand at translation and illustration, please see *Varium poema* and *Additional Notes* on the web site mentioned above. Uncertainties remain: Is *Moerens anima in Christum pie invehitur* (*The doleful soul respectfully inveighs against Christ, 61*) as sexual and cynical as it might seem, or is it more akin to John Donne's *Batter my heart, three-person'd God*? Ultimately, we may have to content ourselves with glimpses of meaning – the narrative *Janus* could prove too arcanelly encrypted to be untangled by us; in fact, from the 1517 Macaronic debut to the posthumous *Hagiomachia* and *Palermitana*, enigmas will persist in all of Folengo's works, but knowledge of the code is still essential.

What is the point? The short answer here is that writers in the generations that died or were born in the decades around 1500 seemed fond of using code to describe non-procreative sexual activity as a means of rebelling against civil, parental and church authorities, even when they were those authorities. The Magnificent Lorenzo de' Medici (1449-1492) for example insistently championed the practice of heterosexual sodomy in various *canzoni*, like the now oft-cited *Canzona de' visi addrieto* (*Song of the faces turned around*). Cardinal Pietro Bembo (1470-1547) expanded the genre, from *Rime* (*Poems*) to a semi-fictional volume of prose and poetry with a charming frame story. But *Gli Asolani* is so graceful and clever that the work retained its popularity, at least with professors and students of literature, even after the decoder key was lost (buried, it would seem, sometime during the Counter Reformation). One way to approach a reading of Bembo's opus, which he claims for "intendenti" (those in the know), would be to begin with

the riddling couplets of his *Motti*, and then move on to the most palpable parts of his *Rime*, like the unmistakably coded sonnet, *Viva mia neve*:

**Surge la speme, e per le vene un caldo
Mi corre al cor, e sì forte l'infiamma,
Come s'ei fosse pur di solfo e d'esca.**

**Né per questi contrari una sol dramma
Scema del penser mio tenace e saldo,
C'ha ben poi tanto, onde s'avanzi e cresca.**

Hope surges and a warmth rushes through my veins to my heart, and inflames it so fast/ hard, as though it were made of sulfur and kindling. [But] not for these trials does one dram dwindle from my solid and tenacious thought, which has so much then, with which to advance and grow. (*Rime*, Sonnet 28.9-14)

(You probably do not need to be told that *speme* (hope) was used for its affinity with sperm, and *cor* (heart) and *pensiero* (thought) for phallus.) Next, one could look in *Gli Asolani* for longer sequences of code. One of the more memorable is Perottino's ample depiction in prose and poetry of his ability to die – not once but twice! – and yet come back to life (1.13-7). Another is Gismondo's climactic performance at the [end of Book 2](#), followed by his mock-innocent response to his host's complaint, "E che ho io detto Madonna? (And what have I said, Madame?). One would be advised to pay special attention to alterations made from edition to edition of the *Asolani*. Then perhaps one could tackle his *Carmina*, maybe his poem about Julius II.

While it would be absurd to reduce bodies of literary output to sexual messages, it would be equally absurd to ignore these messages altogether. One reads criticism of both Pietro Bembo and Giovanni Battista Folengo for using too many superlatives, but the flag waving words ending in *-issimo* by both writers reaches such a fevered pitch that it should make readers laugh out loud, not tsk, tsk. We need to recognize an Adult Renaissance. Just as Italian writers reached back through the centuries to pull ancient authors up through 1500 years of Christianity and cobwebs, we need to reach back 500 years and pull these talented adult entertainers into the limelight they deserve. Poliziano, Ariosto, Machiavelli and many others will benefit from mature but not stodgy scholarship.*

I would hate for a simple introduction to turn into an iconoclastic diatribe, so allow me to conclude by saying, Please read this volume of 1533 which was nearly lost to us: Teofilo and Giovanni Battista Folengo went to great pains to write and publish it, and I to transcribe and translate it for you.

*In *The Prince* not sex but irony has been buried: I met an American graduate student a couple of years ago doing his Master's thesis on *The Prince* who had not even heard of Garrett Mattingly's sound article ("Machiavelli's Prince: Political Science or Political Satire?" *The American Scholar* 27 (1958): 482–491), let alone the ongoing studies of James O. Ward, "Reading Machiavelli Rhetorically: The Prince as Covert Critique of the Renaissance Prince," *California Italian Studies*, 2: 2, 2011. We get Diderot.

Note on the text: Title page *IOAN. BAPTI. Chrysogoni Folengii Mantuani Anachoritae Dialogi, quos Pomiliones vocat. THEOPHILI Folengii Mantuani Anachoritae Varium poema, et IANUS* (Giovanni Battista Crisogono Folengo, of the Mantuan Anchorites: *Dialogues, which he calls Short pieces/ Dwarves*; Teofilo Folengo of the Mantuan Anchorites, *Diverse Poems* and *Janus*). End page: *In Promontorio Minervae ardente Sirio. MDXXXIII.* (On the Minerva promontory, with Sirius burning, 1533, (i.e. Punta Campanella in Campania, in late summer). Folengo scholar C.F. Goffis believed the volume was published in 1534 by Aurelio Pincio of Venice, who published Teofilo's *LA HUMANITA DEL FIGLIUOLO DI DIO* in 1533. The text I offer here was transcribed from this sole edition of which only about a dozen copies are extant. My thanks to the Newberry Library in Chicago, Houghton at Harvard, Butler at Columbia, and to Roberto Stringa for making his own copy available for the publication of a photocopy edition, *Pomiliones, Varium poema, IANUS*, for the Amici di Merlin Cocai, Bassano del Grappa, Grafiche Fantinato, 2011, edited by Giorgio Bernardi Perini, Roberto Stringa and Otello Fabris.

Not a trained Latinist, I depend on the kindness of strangers for corrections: please submit your suggestions through www.folengo.com. Thank you.

Appendix A

Partial list of Italian authors using the burlesque code in some of their works:

Anonymous

Ariosto, Ludovico (1474–1533)
Bembo, Pietro (1470–1547)
Berni, Francesco (1497–1535)
Bronzino, Agnolo di Cosimo (1503–1573)
Burchiello (1404–1449)
Cammelli, Antonio, called il Pistoia (1436–1502)
Caro, Annibale (1507–1566)
Coppetta, Francesco (1509–1553)
Della Casa, Giovanni (1503–1556)
Dolce, Lodovico (1508–1568)
Domenichi, Lodovico (1515–1564)
Firenzuola, Agnolo (1493–1543)
Folengo, Giovanni Battista (1490–1559)
Folengo, Teofilo (1491–1544)
Gelli, Giambattista (1498–1563)
Giambullari, M. Pier Francesco (1495–1555)
Grazzini, d'Antonfrancesco, il Lasca (1503–1584)
Martelli, Lodovico (1500–c. 1527))
Machiavelli, Niccolò (1469–1527)
Mauro, Giovanni (1490–1536)
Medici, Lorenzo dei (1449–1492)
Molza, Francesco Maria (1489–1544)
Poliziano, Angelo Ambrogini (1454–1494)
Pulci, Luigi (1432–1484)
Ruscelli, Girolamo (1504–1566)
Sasso, Panfilo (1455–1527)
Serafino dei Cimelli, called Serafino Aquilano (1466–1500)
Simeoni, Gabriello (1509–c. 1572)
Tansillo, Luigi (1510–1568)
Tebaldeo, Antonio (1463–1537)
Varchi, Benedetto (1503–1565)

Appendix B

Pietro Bembo, *Gli Asolani*, 1505; online at Gallica.

2.33 and part of 34, ad hoc translation by Ann Mullaney

Musicians say that when two lutes are tuned well and in one same key, who touches one, where the other is close by and facing it, both respond in one way, and that sound that the touch makes, the other [instrument] not touched and not struck by anyone makes the same. O Love – and what lutes and what lyres respond to each other more harmoniously, than two souls of yours that love each other? Both of which, not only when they are near each other and by some chance one is moved, render a like harmony, but even when they are far apart and neither the one nor the other has been moved, they make a very sweet and very consistent harmony. The distant lover never thinks of anything else than his dear lady when he can, and with thinking, sees her and hears her, nor does she continually turn her soul to anyone/ anything than to him, and they are each certain that what the one does, the other does at every moment similarly. One same faith goes through their minds, one firmness, one love. On every rock, on every tree trunk, on every river bank, even though they look there, the lover sees that sweet face of his beautiful lady and she, that of her lord. Thus we marvel at Laodamia, for whom the painted wax [statue] of his figure was necessary for looking upon her faraway Protesilaus. In this manner, O ladies, both near and far, we always find delight again and enjoyments. Since Love, just like the sun, although it changes sign [constellation; orifice], still shows itself always bright to mortals, so he [Love], even though at times he switches landscape with us, yet still he makes us feel **his sweetnesses in every part** and every place/ position. [Love] on the plain, [Love] on the mount, [Love] on land, [Love] on sea, [Love] in ports and in sure havens, [Love] in fortune and in risks, [Love] to men and [Love] to women, just like health, is always pleasing, always beneficial. He entertains the hard and wandering/ fetching shepherds in rigid caves, and in simple and poor huts. He comforts in soft palaces and in golden chambers the thought-filled minds of lofty kings. He calms the **angers** of judges, restores the exertions of combatants: in those mixing the extremely pleasing law of nature with the severe laws of men, and bringing to these, in the middle of the most harmful and bloody combat, pure and innocent peaces.

He nourishes the young, sustains the elderly, delights one and the other, and often does that which seems so marvelous to behold, given that in old barks [Love] restores the vigor of not yet ripe plants [*fanciulle piante*; alt.: youthful “tears”] and, under pale and smooth scalps, shows there to be a thousand white and wizened thoughts ahead of their time. He makes departures sweet for us, because he prepares returns from them more dear and full of greater celebration. Very sweet the returns and the lingerings, which, with the thought of their joys, make every separation of ours then agreeable to us. He brings us very happy days in which two suns make light for us and are resplendent many times; but even more [happy] the nights, as those that don’t constantly take our sun away from us. Which, when it happens, O Love, and how many more sweet things are there that our hearts usually feel through you than there are stars that by chance turn in the sky. But even when it does not happen, it does not fail for the most part that courteous sleep may bring us and bestow on us those same celebrations which during [wakeful] vigils are taken away and denied, and thus we marvel at each other, and thus we reason together, thus we recount our reasons, thus **we draw near cheek to cheek**, as do those who more truly experience it whenever it’s there. Every day pleasures grow, every night occasions abound, nor for those that arise, do those underlying die off or diminish, on the contrary, like beautiful snows surpassed by beautiful snows, in that way keeping themselves fresher and more lively, just so with amorous pleasures: under the sweet coverings of the last, the first preserve themselves as sweeter. Nor do the old diminish the new, nor are those of today [diminished] by those of yesterday nor do they ever lose their force, on the contrary, as one number draws near to another, it makes a much greater sum than they can make alone and separate, so too our celebrations, the ones laid out and joined with the others, present each of us more sweetness, than they would have when made [individually] by themselves. Alone, they are sufficient, accompanied they grow. One makes a thousand, and of this thousand, a thousand are generated for each. Expected, they are extremely joyful, unexpected they are lucky. Effortless, they are dear, but not effortless they are dearer, in so far as victories acquired with some effort make the triumph greater. Granted, stolen, earned, rewarded, reasoned, longed for, cried for, broken off, restored, first, second, false, real, long, brief – all are enjoyable, all are lovely. And in short, as in springtime meadows, fields,

woods, shores, valleys, mountains, rivers, lakes, everything one sees is appealing: the earth laughs, the sea laughs, the air laughs, the sky laughs; every part, every thing is full of light, of songs, of fragrances, of sweetness, of tepidness; thus in Love, what one says, what one does, what one thinks, what one sees, all is pleasing, all is dear. With celebrations, with amusements, with games, with delights, with pleasures, adventures, with joy, with relaxation, with peace – every state, every spirit is filled.

...

Then, Madonna Berenice, having started out with the others toward the palace, said, “Be that as it may, Gismondo, whether you have argued enough or not, we are nonetheless very grateful that tomorrow’s discussion has to be by Lavinello; if we did not know him to be more temperate in his words than you have been today, I, for my part, don’t know how I could make myself come here.”

“And what have I said, Madame?” responded Gismondo. “Have I said anything other than what one does, and even less? For if I have displeased you all so much, I know well how to counsel you, Lavinello, that you discuss what one does not do, if you want to please them.”

Note: Later editions show slight but significant alterations: all the words in bold above were retained in both the 1515 and 1525 editions, but were changed or omitted by the posthumous edition of 1553:

1. [speaking of Love] “yet still he makes us feels **his sweetnesses** in **every part** and every place/ position” (**in ogni parte**, in ogni luogo, **le sue dolcezze** ci fa sentire): the more sensual and sexual **dolcezze** (sweetnesses) is changed to **doni** (gifts), and **parte** (part), a term heavily marked as a sexual zone, is removed, the phrase thus became, “in ogni luogo de suoi **doni** ci fa sentire.”
2. [Love calms the] “**angers** of the judges” (le **ire** de’ giudicanti): the term **ire**, heavily marked as sexual ardor, is changed to **noie** (hassles).
3. **we draw near cheek to cheek** becomes: **we take each other by the hand** (**per man ci prendiamo**).