

Teofilo Folengo was funny and inventive, his books portray the world of his day: lawyers, cooks, cops, monks, inn-keepers, his own self. Even compared to other Renaissance men and women, Folengo stands out as extremely knowledgeable and versatile, his writings encompass literature past and present, sacred and profane, geography, sexuality and many other fields. Poet, publicist, commentator and performer, he presented himself in his texts in every possible way: his *Chaos del Triperuno* is a dazzling probe of the interior written 500 years ago. His wit, his heart and his painstaking precision draw one in: Words are forged like parts for a bridge loved ones will depend on forever. Folengo wants us to laugh while we go back and forth.

Folengo deserves more readers. Well known in his day, he published 7 books and left others to be published after his death; the French writer Rabelais openly imitated him – so why did Folengo’s reputation fade? One reason is that teachers stopped teaching students how to read the erotic language that permeated his works written in Italian, Latin and a clever fusion of the two called Macaronic Latin. Another reason for Folengo’s relative obscurity was suggested by C.F. Goffis, a respected scholar in the field: religious authorities deliberately eliminated every trace of the efforts Teofilo and his brothers made to express their Lutheran-leaning views.¹ Certainly by the mid-sixteenth century the “Church” was making a concerted effort to marginalize and silence dissenting voices. The Council of Trent drew battle lines to staunch the flow of money and church members to rebel groups. The resulting Counter Reformation in Italy was not kind to free-thinkers; in this same period, in what became Central America, agents for the Catholic Church began to ruthlessly destroy all Mayan writings. I say this not to stir resentment but to bolster the argument Goffis put forth: the Church was capable of eliminating opposition. Our ability to comprehend Folengo’s texts diminished under the domination of education by the Roman Catholic Church and by other churches as well (Lutheran, Episcopal/Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, to name a few of the Christian ones). With the help of modern comedians and scholars it should not be difficult to overcome our oblivion.²

Yet another reason Folengo’s works lost their strong following was the subject matter. Playful homosexuality as a sidedish to antics which resulted in lawful children, or a cardinal’s hat, continued to be acceptable, but homosexuality as a main course did not fully find favor. Folengo spoke of the dawning of a new era, an era in which the new man could openly embrace other men (while women and men and those in religious orders would also be free to choose one another); but even now in the 21st century that new era hovers just under the horizon.³ Some individuals managed to have it all: Federico Gonzaga (1500-1540), after taking the reins from his illustrious mother, Isabella d’Este, and becoming ruler of Mantua, at age 20 had a child with his gorgeous mistress, Isabella Boschetti (Baldassare Castiglione’s niece). Still in his twenties, Federico paid the great Giulio Romano to build a sumptuous palace for him and his mistress – even now a wonder to visit. Made Duke at 30, a year later he married a wealthy 21 year old Marchioness and had seven children with her (children who went on to assume titles of their own, including those of duke and cardinal). And in the midst of all this noble reproduction Federico was Folengo’s lover and figured prominently in his publications. As for the possibility that Folengo is not well known simply because he is not a good writer, how would we know if we do not understand the language in which he wrote? As more readers become familiar with the burlesque code (*burla* in Spanish and Italian means joke) popular with

writers from 1450-1550, they will be able to see for themselves if Folengo merits further attention.⁴

One of the problems scholars face with the code, called also Bernesque after one of its masters, Francesco Berni (1497-1535), is the vast scope of the lexicon. In fact this is a signature trait: glorifying the most banal words (eels, peaches, urinals) and constructing detailed discussions of sexual matters around them. Authors varied their terminology interminably, partly for the fun of it, partly because the whole idea of using encryption is to convey a message to your intended receiver without it being intercepted, so connotations that become too obvious are altered. While meanings changed over time, it is often possible to define the significance of a term from context. The Latin word *sacellum*, for example, is normally translated “a shrine, a small sacred enclosure.” In the *Pomiliones* written largely by Teofilo Folengo’s brother Giovanni Battista, the author-narrator nicknamed Chrysogono, talks at length to a phallic spirit, and finishes the dialogue by saying, “Abiit infelix. Ego autem sacellum pedore foedum, luniperi, ac Myrthi bacca, cum lauri folio, lachrymans perlustravi” (The wretched thing went away. I, however thoroughly treated my little shrine vile with filth, with berries of juniper and myrtle, and a laurel leaf, while crying).⁵ So, here *sacellum* means anus. Even while seeing this usage clearly, I thought to myself, yes, but Teofilo uses *sacellum* for chapel – in that little poem about the dedication of a shrine to John the Baptist, the one with the weird ending about snake-haired Furies. Oh. I’d always wondered why the poet suddenly worried about keeping “anguicommas” out of the new chapel (*Varium poema*, 51-2). If you require more evidence see a poem by the writers’ uncle, Nicodemo Folengo, emphatically not encrypted, in which *perula* (purse, little sack) stands for the same anatomical opening his nephews later gave to *sacellum*.⁶

I first saw the massive study of the burlesque code by Jean Toscan in 2008 and found that his detailed analysis answered a thousand nagging questions from my then 32 years of Folengo research.⁷ Now, perhaps one could go too far in applying the code to other well-known works of the day, thinking for instance that Pietro Bembo was using it when he quoted a line from Dante, “La spada di qua su non taglia in fretta,” particularly when he went on to quote Boccaccio, “*Fa truova la borsa, voce d’invito e da sollecitare altrui a fare alcuna cosa, che ora si dice Su comunemente,*” seeing in this passage reference to a common theme addressed in Toscan.⁸ It could well be that the sexually loaded language which characterized this era is figurative as much as literal (it would have to be, wouldn’t it?), perhaps no more sexual than someone today saying, “I really got screwed at work today.” Yet, if knowledge of the burlesque code is advisable for reading many Renaissance classics, it is essential for appraising Folengo’s production.

Teofilo Folengo longed for an epoch in which one would not need to resort to words like plow, hoe and mattock, “how much more beautiful the mantle of nature is without art” he writes in that cunning way he shares with Poliziano, Ariosto and other poets of the era, “and more authentic, because a spontaneous work is more pleasing than others.”⁹ The bridge they constructed so carefully is ready to carry us to their Golden Age.

¹ C.F. Goffis, Introduction to the *Varium poema* (Torino, Loescher, 1958), p. vii.

² The notion of modern oblivion came to me from Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and In Modern Oblivion* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983).

³ Let one reference suffice for now, from the *canzone*, “De la pueritia et aurea staggione” in *Chaos del Triperuno* where Folengo speaks of a Golden Age in which the poet seems to envision freedom, regardless of sexual orientation or religious persuasion, *Chaos*, pp. 48-51 (R 215-17), especially stanza 5, verses 7-18, and see part of this poem quoted below.

⁴ *Il primo libro di Opere burlesche di Francesco Berni* [and many other poets], (Florence, 1552) is currently available (gratis) at <https://play.google.com>.

⁵ *Pomiliones, Visum inferum*, p. 153/ p. K v; a photocopy edition of the volume *Dialogi, quos Pomiliones vocat* (dated 1533) is available through the Associazione degli Amici di Merlin Cocai (Bassano del Grappa, Grafiche Fantinato, 2011).

⁶ Nicodemo Folengo, *Ad Chrestum Patycum [Pathicum]*, in *Carmina*, edited by Carlo Cordié and Alessandro Perosa (Pisa, Scuola Superiore Normale, 1990), at www.perseus.tufts.edu.

⁷ Jean Toscan, *Le carnaval du langage: le lexique érotique des poètes de l'équivoque de Burchiello à Marino (XVe-XVIIe siècles)*, (Lille, Presses universitaires, 1981).

⁸ Pietro Bembo, *Prose del volgar lingua*, 3.77; Toscan on the quickness of anal versus vaginal sex, op. cit. pp. 286-7, and elsewhere throughout his four volume analysis.

⁹ *Chaos*, cited above, quoted below; *manto* translated mantle, means a cloak, and hence a deceptive appearance and a protective covering; Manto is also, alternately, an Etruscan god of the underworld and the mother of the founder of Mantua, Folengo's birthplace.

De la pueritia et aurea staggione (On Childhood and The Golden Age), stanza 3.10-18, 4.1-8:

<p>Rinverdasi da se homai la terra, Valete aratri marre falci e Zappe, Non più vepri saranno cardi e lappe. Quella natia virtù, che 'n lei si serra Senza, ch'altri la sferra, Uscendo stessa ci dimostra quanto Sia di Natura il manto Più bello senza l'arte e più verace, Ch'opra di voglia più del altre piace.</p> <p>Ecco di latte scorreno già i fiumi, Sudano mele i faggi, oglio li abeti, E su' per què laureti, Celeste manna ricogliendo vanno Le virgin' Ape; e i Rosignoli lieti, C'han d'or le penne, entro purpurei dumi Nidi d'argento e fine perle fanno, Securi di rapina od altro danno.</p>	<p>... now let the earth renew itself: farewell plows, mattocks, sickles and hoes, there will be no more thorns, cockles and burrs. That inborn virtue, which is closed up [in the earth] so that others cannot harm it, appearing on its own shows us how much more beautiful the mantle of nature is without art, and more authentic, because a spontaneous work is more pleasing than others.</p> <p>Look – the rivers already flow with milk, the beech trees exude fruits, the firs, oil – and up on those laurels, the virgin bees go gathering celestial manna; and the cheerful nightingales who have feathers of gold, in purple brambles make nests of sliver and fine pearls, safe from plunder or other harm.</p>
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