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## Sexual Politics in Sixteenth Century Italy: Folengo's Macaronic Misogyny

Male/female relationships in Folengo's *Baldus* are consistently problematic. From the abrupt infatuation Guido feels for Baldovina to the vilification of Berta, Baldus's wife, everything about heterosexuality is suspect. The sexual economy is riddled with tensions between the willful and the rational. Guido elopes with Baldovina because he has been pricked by Cupid's arrow; his son Baldus marries in order to follow the dictates of custom in the rural setting in which he lives.

Baldus is brought up, not by his father (who left on a pilgrimage before the child was born) but by his mother and by Berto Panada, the peasant who took care of Guido and Baldovina after their flight from Paris. Berto is a pastoral ideal, exemplifying the simple virtues of peasant life. He married a country woman at Baldovina's suggestion; she feared that her own reputation would be ruined living with a man who was neither relative nor spouse. Berto's son, Zambellus, is raised as a brother of Baldus. After Berto's death, however, Baldus takes charge of Berto's farm, forcing Zambellus and his wife Lena to work the land for the sake of Baldus and his wife. Although Baldus had fought against people who claimed that he was the illegitimate son of Berto, he gladly enough appropriates Zambellus's patrimony, not having had one from his own father, the pilgrim who never returned. Baldus takes advantage of his situation in Berto's home as elder male child, which makes him the head of household (Montrose, 1981). The

simple-minded peasant Zambellus can only come into his rightful inheritance when Baldus is put into prison.

The main female characters of this epic exercise influence in the sphere of the country household. There is the exceptional case of the witch Pandraga, but even on her enchanted island her activities are domestic and sexual. The sexual aspect cannot, of course, be separated from the duties of the housewife.

Berta, wife of Baldus, gives a rather detailed description of the wife's tasks in her defense of women. She is responding to Tognazzo's vituperation against womankind, in which he remarks that women are worthless, vengeful and the cause of all that is wrong in the world:

Foemina sola potest omnem destruggere terram,  
tam bene scit frodas animo componere torto  
(VI: 387-88).

Berta's enumeration of women's duties, addressed to Tognazzo, compose what Christine Delphy, in a modern context, has dubbed the "domestic mode of production" (1984):

Quis vestri capitis cerchet, Tognazze, pedocchios,  
quis massaricias bruttas lavet atque mudandas,  
quis tandem spulicare queat damatina camisam?  
Si vobis nulla est mulier, vel baila, vel uxor,  
quis gerat officium pelizze, scaldaque letti?  
(VI: 518-22).

Women must do the unpleasant chores for which men are too noble, from de-fleaing husbands and children, to washing dirty clothes and undergarments. It is rather amusing how Berta says that there is no one to be the "fur coat" or "bed warmer" if one has neither a "woman, wet-nurse, nor wife" (VI: 521-22). She indicates that men, when it comes to personal care and domestic life, are like infants, needing wet-nurses and mother figures to attend to their needs. The duties of the good wife on behalf of her husband are the same as those done for babies and even for domestic animals: cleaning them, feeding them, and keeping them warm.

While no special education was required or even desired for many girls in the Renaissance, especially those who lived outside of the city

and/or below a certain class level, it was up to mothers to instruct their daughters in the many tasks necessary to run the household. This training, along with good health and a robust constitution, made up the "dowry" of lower class girls (Wiesner, 1987; Klapisch-Zuber, 1985; Ruggiero, 1985). In addition, women were supposed to reproduce these social conditions by having children and bringing them up in this atmosphere of strict division of labor (Martines, 1974).

It is interesting that Baldus, heroic descendant of Guido, famed knight at the Parisian court, should end up in prison because of his unjust usurpation of Zambellus Panada's property. Baldus thinks that he is the victim of grave injustices, since he ought to be admired and obeyed as a member of the noble stock from which he-illegitimately-comes. He is a superior warrior and it takes all of the forces of Cipada to subdue him and put him under lock and key. His dilemma is a complex one, in that his father came from a class in France which was fast becoming obsolete: that of mounted knights. (Martines, 1980; Le Goff, 1988) As power became more centralized (whether in city-states or in incipient nation states, as in France), there was less need for roving warriors, who were often considered a threat to the new social order, and greater emphasis was placed on owning and managing property. A productive mercantile class was displacing a parasitic chivalrous one. Baldus does not "fit" on the country farm nor in the city; he behaves like a feudal lord in dealing with Zambellus.

It is not merely the indeterminate status of Baldus's patrimony which causes him problems—it is also what Kenneth Burke has called the "property in human affections" (1951). Baldus derives his negative view of women from both the knightly tradition (one thinks of Yvain and Erec, for example, who had difficulties in maintaining their chivalrous reputations after getting married) and the monastic one. He ultimately leaves his wife, in order to seek adventures abroad and to rid the world of heresy, most often manifest in female witches. The power that women derive from pacts with the devil is used almost exclusively for sexual purposes: to make men fall in love and stay in love with them; to trick husbands so they won't discover their wives' lovers; to produce abortions so that the fruits of their sins will not be discovered. Baldus's misgivings would seem to be the result of con-

traditions inherent in private ownership and monogamous relationships: what Kenneth Burke writes of as the peculiar situation of private property and private family,

of ownership in the profoundest sense of ownership, the property in human affections, as fetishistically localized in the object of possession, while the possessor is himself possessed by his very engrossment. . . . The single mine-own-ness is thus dramatically split into three principles of possession, possessor, estrangement (threat of loss). Hence, trust and distrust, though *living in* each other, can be shown *wrestling with* each other. *La propriété, c'est le vol*. Property fears theft because it is theft (1951: 166-67).

Baldus's identity is a conflation of birth and social status, which in turn should have determined his education, occupation, marriage, etc. But, as we have seen, his identity is probematized by his parents' illegitimate union and by his mother's precarious social position. Although Baldovina was daughter of the king of France, she has forfeited her claim to her father's wealth by eloping with Guido. Her claims, however, even had she married legitimately according to her father's wishes, would not have been as great as those of a son. In Renaissance society in general, the only share of the patrimony accorded women was their dowry, a one-time settlement of cash and goods such as linens, clothing, foodstuffs.

Baldus's situation, then, moves uneasily between his upbringing in a peasant cottage and his "innate" nobility. Since both his parents are landless, he cannot assume his "rightful" place in the social hierarchy: he is doomed to the social constraints of, on the one hand, an agrarian, rustic existence and, on the other, a mercantile urban world which can only be effected by landed wealthy nobility or newly monied citizens. Baldus is a knight without a king to serve, a comic anachronism in the civic world of the city-state.

Renaissance women, on the other hand, had a more fluid identity: at first they "belonged" to their father and his family, but this was often conceded as, in many respects, a temporary situation. From her father's home a Renaissance woman could either enter a convent as a "bride of Christ," or, what was more likely, she could marry and assume the identity of her husband's family. In both fact and fiction,

however, we find examples of husbands who go to their in-laws' when they have problems with their wives: see, for example, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, day seven, tales four and eight. It appears that the woman's behavior could tarnish the reputation of her natal family long after marriage. But even as this is acknowledged, Renaissance husbands still felt that their honor was highly vulnerable to the dishonor which cuckoldry, the "forked plaque," would bring them.

In addition to Tognazzo's enumeration of the wife's proclivities to make the husband miserable, we have later in Baldus the portrayal of women who make their husbands cuckold. "The very sovereignty that the male absolutely arrogates to himself, as an essential aspect of private property in human affection, introduces a secret principle of self-doubt." (Burke, 1951: 182). Men are in constant peril of losing control of their wives, because unlike other forms of "property," women can talk and act. A wife had to be safely guarded in order to safeguard the belongings of her spouse (of which she is but one). The socially and theologically sanctioned state of matrimony is all that assures a man that his property will be passed on along with his name (if he has sons). This same institution guarantees the impoverished state of unwed mothers and their "bastards," as we saw in Baldus's case. It is only if a father acknowledges a bastard as his own that he takes on the financial responsibility of rearing the child. Because men controlled all aspects of the economy, from guild-membership to inheritance practices to the laws governing these institutions, they could ensure that mothers and out-of-wedlock children would remain stigmatized. The only time illegitimacy threatened a man was within the conjugal bond itself, when a wife tried to pass off another man's child as his. The anxiety which men suffered from the fact that they could never be completely certain about the paternity of the children their wives bore is to be found in nearly all literary genres, in conduct books, chronicles, histories and medical treatises.

The husband's anxiety about his wife's fidelity was due to a property battle. The typical ownership scenario was complicated by the woman's "will"—a problem potential in "animate" property. A wife who had sexual relations with a man who was not her husband was effectively cheating him out of her value, while the "other man" was like a thief.

The woman's worth diminished with each use, or, more accurately, with each user. A different type of historical example which illuminates the husband's control of his wife's body is that of wet-nursing: the husband hired out his wife's services and *he* was paid for the milk and labor she provided for other men's children. The husband who hired the wet-nurse often did so in order to free his wife to bear more children, as breast-feeding is usually accompanied by a temporary suspension of menstruation and the suppression of ovulation (Klapisch-Zuber, 1985; Harrell, 1981).

Baldus, too is betrayed by his wife in the end: while journeying through the earth's nether regions he comes across his own twin sons. They have been abandoned by their mother, who decided to live with another man. Berta has illegally done what many widowed Renaissance women were forced to do: because their principal attachment to their husband's family is severed by his death, her own family often calls her back, dowry and all, in order to put her on the marriage market once more (Klapisch-Zuber, 1985). Any children usually remained in the husband's family, as they "belonged" there. The children just as often hoped that their mother would stay, if only for monetary reasons: restoring her dowry would deplete the patrimony they hoped to receive. Woman's lack of a fixed identity, then, made it difficult for her to please the two families who made claims upon her. Berta may have thought that she'd fallen victim to the same fate as Baldovina; once the spouse had left on his "pilgrimage" or adventure, she might never see him again. Such a consideration, though, was not a part of Folengo's world-view.

I began this study by observing that inter-gender relationships in *Baldus* were a source of tension, and I attempted to trace some of the strains back to their origins in Renaissance socio-cultural institutions. Paradoxically, women were viewed, *en masse*, as having no fixed identity; I say paradoxically because they were fixed in the minds of Renaissance men as being unstable, indeterminate. The fact that many male authors portrayed women as an almost undifferentiated collection of beings, united by their common biology, is consistent with the de-humanizing effects of any stereotype. Misogyny is the pernicious expression of this stereotyping. It is interesting to note, in studying these

considerations, that the very institutions men created for their benefit and assurance gave way to situations beyond their control; for there would be no cuckoldry if there were no marriage, no private property in human affections.

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