THE PLEASANT NIGHTS

Volume 2

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THE DA PONTE LIBRARY SERIES

Giovan Francesco Straparola

THE PLEASANT NIGHTS

VOLUME 2

Edited with Introduction and Commentaries by
Donald Beecher

Translated by W.G. Waters
Thoroughly Revised and Corrected by the Editor

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THE PLEASANT NIGHTS

Volume 2

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THE PLEASANT NIGHTS
(Le Piacevoli notti)

VOLUME II

Nights VI–XIII

THE FABLES AND ENIGMAS OF
MESSER GIOVANNI FRANCESCO STRAPAROLA DA CARAVAGGIO

To All Gracious and Lovable Ladies,
from Giovanni Francesco Straparola, Greeting

Dear ladies, there are many envious and spiteful men who are always and everywhere attempting to fix their fearsome fangs in my flesh and scatter my dismembered body in all directions, claiming that the entertaining stories that I have collected and written in this and the previous little volume are not of my making, but materials which I have feloniously appropriated from others. It's true, I confess, that they are not mine; to have said otherwise would be a lie. Nevertheless, I have set them down faithfully in the manner in which they were recited by the ten young ladies who had gathered for their recreation. So if I bring them to light now, it's not to gratify my own pride or to seek honour and fame, but simply to please you all, and particularly those of you who may rely on my service and to whom I owe continual devotion. With smiling faces, then, dear ladies, accept the humble gift proffered to you by your servant, paying no heed at all to those snarling whelps who, in their currish fury, would cling to me with their ravenous teeth, but read my book now and then, taking such pleasure in it as time and place will allow and give honour to God from whom all blessings flow. May you be happy, always keeping in mind those who have your names graven on their hearts, among whom I do not count myself the least.

Venice, Sept. 1st, 1553 (in the edition of 1555)

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Here Begins the Second Book of the Fables and Enigmas of Messer Giovanni Francesco Straparola da Caravaggio

The Sixth Night

The shadows of a night sombre and overcast had spread themselves everywhere around and the golden stars no longer shed their light in the spacious heavens, while Aeolus, sweeping over the salt waves with a long-drawn moan, was stirring a tempestuous sea and obstructing the efforts of mariners, when our noble and faithful band of companions, indifferent to the blustering winds and the cruel cold, made their way to the customary meeting place and sat down in due order, once they had paid their respects to the Signora. Soon after, she ordered the golden vase to be brought to her and therein she placed the names of five young ladies. The first to be drawn was that of Alteria, the second Arianna, the third Cateruzza, the fourth Lauretta, and the fifth Eritrea. This done, the Signora directed these five to sing a canzone, a command they obeyed at once, beginning with the following strains in soft and melodious tones:

Song

O Love! if faith rose with thee at thy birth;
   If ye, twin flowers of earth,
Should twine around my lady's name
And deck the presence I adore,
   Then never more
Should they divide, or time let sink my loyal flame.

She feels your power indeed, but not enough
   To let your onslaught rough
Sway all her nature, and release
Her passions kept so well in hand.
   And thus I stand
With failing hope, while my desire doth aye increase.

When the singing of this sweet and most pleasant song was ended, Alteria, who had been chosen to tell the first story, laid aside her viol and plectrum and began her tale as follows.

VI. Fable 1
Two Friends Who Held Their Wives in Common

ALTERIA

Two men who were comrades and close friends dupe one another and in the end have their wives in common.

Many are the tricks and deceptions which men practise upon one another nowadays, but among them all you will find none comparable in craft and knavery to those which friends and relatives will play against each other. Since the lot has fallen upon me to begin this evening's entertainment with a story, I've decided to give you an account of the subtlety, cunning, and treachery that a certain man employed in deceiving his closest friend. Yet even though his knavish trick, for its cleverness, was entirely successful in duping him, in the end, he found himself tricked by craft and ingenuity equal to his own. If you'll kindly hear my story, all of these things will become clear.

In the ancient and famous city of Genoa there lived in times past two friends, one of whom was called Messer Liberale Spinola, a man of great wealth and an easy life, if a little excessive in his pleasures, and the other Messer Artilao Sara, one of the leading and busiest merchants of the city. The friendship between these two was very warm and close – an attachment so great that they could hardly endure to be apart. If by chance either one needed something that belonged to the other, he could obtain it without question or delay. Because Messer Artilao was engaged in numerous merchandising ventures and had a hand in many affairs, both his own and others, he one day had to set out on a journey to Soria. Wherefore, he sought out his dear friend, Messer Liberale, and addressed him in the same spirit of sincerity and benevolence he had always felt towards him. 'Well you know, my friend, just as it is known to all men, how great the love and affection is between us, and how I've always relied

upon you, as I do now, both by reason of the friendship we have had for each other for so many long years, and of the vow of brotherhood that exists between us. Because I've settled in my mind to go to Soria, and because there is no other man in the world I trust as much as I do you, I come to you in boldness and confidence to ask a favour of you – something that, although it may cause some disturbance to your own affairs, yet I beg you to do for me out of your goodness and for the sake of our mutual good will.'

Messer Liberale, who was entirely disposed to do his friend any kindness he might ask for, without further words on the matter said, 'Artilao, my dear friend, the love we have for one another and the bond of fellowship which our sincere affection has knitted between us render all further discourse on the matter unnecessary. Tell me freely what you desire and place me at your command, for I'm ready to discharge whatever duty you may place upon me.'

Messer Artilao then said to his friend, 'My desire and request of you is that, for as long as I shall be away, you take charge of the governing of my house and of my wife, calling to her attention anything that may be needed. And whatever sum of money you disburse on her behalf, I'll repay you in full upon my return.'

Messer Liberale, as soon as he understood all that his friend desired, first gave him hearty thanks for the high opinion he had of his probity in holding him in such esteem. Then he promised, to the best of his poor abilities, to discharge the task which had been placed upon him.

When the time came for Messer Artilao to set out on his voyage, he loaded the merchandise aboard his vessel. His wife Daria, then three months pregnant as it happened, he recommended to the care of his friend, then boarded ship and departed from Genoa with his sails spread to a favouring wind and with good fortune to aid him. No sooner was Messer Artilao embarked and on his way than Messer Liberale went to the house of his well-beloved neighbour, Madonna Daria, and said to her, 'Madonna, Messer Artilao, your good husband and my dearest friend, before he set forth on his voyage, urged me with his pressing entreaties to take charge of all his affairs, together with your good self, Madonna, and moreover to keep you mindful of all the things needful and beneficial to you. For the sake of the affection that has always existed between us and still does, I promised him to perform any duty he might lay upon me. So I have come right over to let you know that you may employ me in any way that occurs to you.'

Now Madonna Daria, possessed of the sweetest and most gentle nature, warmly thanked Messer Liberale for this speech, begging him to be as good as his word if ever she found herself in need of his offices. To this Messer Liberale made his promise. Thereafter, he visited his fair neighbour most regularly, taking great care that she lacked for nothing. In the course of time it came to his knowledge that she was with child, but this he feigned not to know, one day saying to her, 'Madonna, how are you feeling? A bit strange, perhaps, what with Messer Artilao's departure?'

To this Madonna Daria replied, 'My good neighbour, you can be sure that I feel his absence for many reasons, but above all on account of my present condition.'

'In what condition do you find yourself?' asked Messer Liberale.

'I'm going to have a child,' Daria replied, 'and there's something strange about this pregnancy of mine. I've never felt myself so ill at ease before.'

Upon hearing this, Liberale rejoined, 'But my good neighbour, are you really in the family way?'

'My friend, I wish it were you instead of me!' said Daria, 'and that I had kept on my fast.'

Messer Liberale kept up the banter for some while with his fetching neighbour until by degrees he fell under her charm, seeing how pretty, fresh, and engaging she was. Soon enough he was consumed by his luxurious desires and could think of nothing else night or day except how he could satisfy them. For a time his longings had been deterred by the esteem he held for Artilao, but spurred on by the violence of his passion, which melted away all his noble resolutions, he one day went to Madonna Daria and said, "Alas, my dear friend, how deeply grieved I am that Messer Artilao has gone away like this and left you pregnant, because on account of his sudden departure, he may very well have forgotten to complete the child that he began and that you now carry in your womb. Perhaps this is the reason that your pregnancy has left you feeling ill at ease.'

'Oh, good sir,' cried Madonna Daria, 'do you really believe that the infant which I'm carrying may be lacking one or another of its members? Is that the cause of my worries?'

'To tell you the truth, that's my opinion,' replied Liberale. 'In fact, I'm certain that my good friend Messer Artilao has failed to give it the proper number of limbs. It happens often, in these cases, that one child is born lame, another blind, one in this fashion, another in that.'

'Ah, my dear friend,' said Madonna Daria, 'what you're telling me troubles my mind. Where should I look for a remedy to keep this disaster from happening to me?'

'My dear neighbour,' replied Messer Liberale, 'be cheerful and don't worry yourself over nothing, for I'm telling you that everything has a cure, well, everything except death.'

'I beg you, for the love you bear your absent friend,' said Madonna Daria, 'that you'll provide this remedy, and the sooner you can let me have it the greater will be my debt to you, for then there'll be no danger that the child will be born imperfect.'

Seeing that Madonna Daria was now in a mood favourable to his aims, Liberale said to her, 'Dear lady, it would be great baseness and discourtesy in a man if he didn't stretch out his hand to aid a friend in danger of perishing. Knowing that I'm able to correct the defects which currently afflict your child, I'd be no less than a traitor and malefactor to refuse to come to your aid.

'Then my dear friend,' said the lady, 'hurry up and do what has to be done to perfect the child; if you don't, it would be mean and downright sinful.'

'Have no doubts on that score,' said Liberale. "I'll do my duty to the full extent of my powers. Give orders, then, to your waiting-woman to prepare the table, for the corrective measures must begin with a nice meal together.'

So while the maid was setting out the table, Messer Liberale went with Madonna Daria into the bedroom, and once the door had been locked, he began to caress and kiss her, giving her the most loving embraces any man ever offered to a woman. Madonna Daria was nothing less than astonished when she realized the nature of the treatment and said to him, 'What does this mean, Messer Liberale? Is it right that we should do such things as this, even though we're good neighbours and the best of friends? What a pity it's such a great sin, for if it weren't the case, I'm not sure but what I'd consent to your wishes.'

Liberale replied, 'Tell me, then, which is the greater sin, to sleep with your friend, or let this child come into the world maimed and defective?'

'Surely the greater sin,' replied Madonna Daria, 'would be to let an infant come misshapen into the world through the fault of the parents.'

'Then you'd be committing a monstrous sin not to let me supply what your husband has left undone,' rejoined Messer Liberale.

Greatly desiring that her offspring should come into the world perfect in all its members, the lady credited her neighbour's words. So despite the close ties between him and her husband, she acquiesced to his desires, so that many times over in subsequent days they took their pleasure together. In fact, the lady found this method of restoring the child's defects so pleasant that she kept on begging Messer Liberale to take special care not to fail her as her husband had formerly done. Seeing that he had fallen in with such a dainty morsel, both day and night he did his best to make up anything that the child lacked so that it might be born perfect in every way. At last, when Madonna Daria had gone her full term, she was delivered of a lusty boy, who was the perfect image of its father, Messer Artilao, exquisitely formed and lacking nothing in any of his parts. As you might guess, the lady was overjoyed and full of gratitude to Messer Liberale as the cause of her good fortune.

Little more time passed before Messer Artilao returned to Genoa and headed straight for home where he found his wife healthy and beautiful. Full of joy and merriment, she ran to meet him with her baby in her arms and they embraced and kissed one another most eagerly. As soon as Messer Liberale got news of his friend's return, he went right away to see and greet him, congratulating him on his happy, safe, and prosperous return.

A few weeks later, as he sat at table one day with his wife playing with the child, Messer Artilao said by chance, 'O Daria, my wife, what a beautiful child this is. Have you ever seen one better made? Look at his pretty face and sweet mouth and bright eyes that shine like stars!' And thus, feature by feature, he went on praising the handsome boy.

Then Madonna Daria answered, 'It's true what you say, there's not a single feature missing, through no thanks to you, my good man, because, as you know well enough, I was only three months along when you went away, leaving the baby I conceived with members not fully furnished, and seriously endangering my pregnancy. Therefore we have great reason to thank our good neighbour Messer Liberale, who was most eager and diligent in supplying all the child was lacking out of his own strength, making good all those parts where your own work had failed.'

Messer Artilao listened carefully and knew exactly what his wife was saying – enough to turn him white with rage inside. It was as though he had a sharp knife in his heart, for he was not slow in understanding that his sworn friend had played the traitor to him and had debauched his wife. But like a sensible man, he pretended not to understand the

meaning of what he heard, held his peace, and when he spoke again turned the conversation to other matters.

After leaving the table, Messer Artilao began to reflect upon the strange and shameful conduct of his friend, whom he had loved and esteemed far above any other man in the world. Day and night he brooded and planned by what fashion or means he might best avenge himself for so great an offence against his honour. Thus enraged, the poor man devoted himself constantly to these projects, hardly knowing what course to take. Finally, however, he resolved to do something that would satisfy a very particular desire, saying then to his wife, 'Daria, make sure tomorrow that our table is furnished more generously than usual, because I want to invite our good neighbours, Messer Liberale and his wife, Madonna Propertia, to dine with us. But if you care for your life, you have to keep quiet about all the arrangements and patiently endure everything you see,' to which Daria agreed. Then leaving the house, he went to the public square where he met his neighbour, Messer Liberale, bidding him, together with his wife, to dine at his house on the following day. Messer Liberale gratefully accepted the invitation.

At the established time, the two invited guests repaired to the house of Messer Artilao, where they were most graciously met and received. When they were all gathered together and conversing about this and that, Messer Artilao said to Madonna Propertia, 'Dear neighbour, while they are getting the food ready and setting the table, you should have some toast and a little wine to sustain you.' Then he led her aside into a chamber and there poured her a glass of drugged wine and gave her some biscuits, both of which she accepted without any fear whatever, eating the biscuits and empting the glass. They then returned and seated themselves at the table and so the dinner began.

But long before the meal had come to an end, Madonna Propertia began to feel a drowsiness stealing over her so that she could scarce keep her eyes open. When Messer Artilao perceived this he said, 'Madonna, would you like to go and repose yourself a little, for perhaps last night you didn't sleep very well.' With these words he conducted her into a bedroom where, as soon as she tossed herself down on the bed, she fell asleep. Worried that the strength of the potion would wear off and that time might fail him for carrying out the project he secretly had in mind, Messer Artilao called Messer Liberale and said to him, 'Neighbour, let's go out for a while and let your good wife sleep for as long as she needs. Perhaps she just got up too early this morning and is in need of rest.'

Then they both went down to the piazza. But once there, Messer Artilao gave the impression that he was in a hurry to dispatch certain matters of business. So bidding farewell to his friend, he returned secretly to his own house and stole silently into the bedroom where Madonna Propertia was lying. Going up to the bed, he saw that she was sleeping quietly. Then, without being seen by anyone in the house or being noticed by the lady herself, with the utmost lightness of hand he removed the rings she wore on her fingers and the pearls from about her neck and left the chamber.

The effects of the potion had entirely dissipated by the time Madonna Propertia awoke. But when she rose up to leave the bed, she noticed that her pearls and her rings were missing. Jumping up, she searched here, there, and everywhere, turning the room upside down without finding a trace of them. Mightily upset, she rushed out and began to question Madonna Daria whether by chance she might have taken her pearls and rings, but she assured her friend that she hadn't seen them. With that, Madonna Propertia was not only aggrieved but frantic. While the poor lady stood there anxiously, having no notion of where to look next, who should come in but Messer Artilao. When he saw his friend's wife so painfully agitated, he said, 'What has happened to you, dear friend, that you are in such trouble?'

Madonna Propertia told him the whole misfortune, whereupon, making as though he knew nothing of the matter, he said to her, 'Search very carefully, Madonna, and try to remember, and perhaps you'll find them. But if not, I promise you on the faith of our old friendship that I'll make such an investigation of the matter that whoever has taken these things of yours will be made to regret his deeds. But first, before we've put our hands to the business, I urge you once more to search in every corner.'

Then the ladies, and the serving-women as well, ransacked the house from top to bottom several times over, turning everything upside down, but they found nothing. Messer Artilao, taking note of their ill success, began to make an uproar through the house, threatening punishment first to this person and then to that, but they all solemnly swore that they had no knowledge of the matter. Then Messer Artilao turned towards Madonna Propertia, saying, 'My dear neighbour, don't be overcome by this trouble, but keep a light heart, for I'm at your service to see this matter through. And you should know, my dear friend, that I'm in the possession of a secret of such great virtue and efficiency that, by its working, I will be able to lay my hands on the man, whoever he is, who has taken your jewels.'

On hearing these words, Madonna Propertia said, ‘Oh Messer Artilao, I beg you to make use of these powers so that Messer Liberale will have no cause to suspect me.’

Seeing that the time was now come when he might work his vengeance for the injury that had been recently done to him, Messer Artilao called his wife and the serving-women and firmly commanded them not to come near the room for any reason whatsoever unless he called them. When his wife and the women folk had disappeared, Messer Artilao closed the door of the chamber and began drawing a circle on the floor with a bit of charcoal, into which he set certain signs and characters of his own invention. He then said to Madonna Propertia, ‘Dear heart, lie down on that bed and make certain that you don’t move. Don’t be afraid on account of anything that you may feel, because I’m determined not to leave here until I’ve found your jewels.’

‘You needn’t fear a thing,’ said Madonna Propertia, ‘for I won’t budge an inch, or do anything at all without your express command.’

Then turning towards the right Messer Artilao made certain signs upon the floor, then turning left he made other signs and conjurations in the air, pretending all the while to be conversing with a multitude of spirits by uttering all sorts of strange noises in a false voice, all of which left Madonna Propertia somewhat bewildered. Anticipating this, Messer Artilao reassured her with comforting words, telling her not to fear. After he had been inside the circle some seven or eight minutes, he began to sing these lines in a harsh and growling voice:

What I’ve not found and you’re seeking still,
Lies hidden, deep in a hairy vale;
The one who holds it now is the one who lost it then,
So take your fishing-rod and you’ll win it back again.

Hearing these words, Madonna Propertia was no less happy than amazed.

When the incantation was finished, Artilao said to her, ‘Well, you have heard all that was said. The jewels that you lost are somewhere inside you. So keep up your spirits and with God’s good help we will find them. But it’s essential that I’m the only one who tries to find them in the place my art has revealed to me.’

The lady, who was very desirous to get her jewels back, eagerly answered, ‘Good friend, I fully comprehend all this. So don’t delay, I’m begging you, but begin your search right away.’

With that, Messer Artilao came forth from the circle and prepared for his sport by lying down beside her on the bed. She didn't move a bit. Then he removed her outer clothes and her undergarments and began his angling in the hairy vale. As he made his first cast, he drew a ring out of his shirt pocket without the lady seeing him and he handed it to her, saying, 'Look, Madonna, what a good fisherman I am, and how at the first cast I've recovered your diamond.'

When she saw her diamond, Madonna Propertia was delighted beyond measure, 'Ah, my kind and excellent friend, please do the same again. Perhaps you will get back all the other jewels I've lost.'

Messer Artilao pursued his angling with manly vigour, bringing out one jewel after another, working so well with his tackle that at last he recovered and handed back to the lady every article that had been lost. For this service, Madonna Propertia was highly grateful and most satisfied with the outcome of the whole affair. Having gotten back all her precious jewels, she said to Messer Artilao, 'Dear friend, just look at all the valuable things you've recovered for me with your line. In the same place you might win back for me a beautiful little bucket that was stolen from me some days ago and which I prized very highly.'

'Most willingly,' he replied, and resumed his thrusting with his instrument into the shady valley, struggling to make contact with her little bucket. But despite his efforts, he couldn't pull it out. At last he became so worn out that he was forced to confess, 'Well, sweetheart, I found your bucket and even touched it, but it was bottom side up, so I couldn't hook it with my rod and haul it out.'

Madonna Propertia, still longing for it and finding the game most pleasing, would have persuaded him to go on with his fishing. But our hero had no more oil in his lamp. With his wick completely extinguished, he confessed, 'Alas, my sweet, the fishing rod has a broken tip and is out of commission, but be patient for now. Tomorrow I'll take it to the blacksmith and have the tip repaired. Then at our first opportunity, we'll go fishing for the little bucket.' Madonna Propertia was fully content with his proposal and so, bidding farewell to Messer Artilao and Madonna Daria, she took her jewels and went home with a light and merry heart.

As it turned out, the next night, when the good lady was in bed with her spouse and he was fishing in the same furry vale, she said to him, 'Dearest husband, would you try through your fishing to find that little bucket that we lost a while back, because yesterday, I have to say, when I missed certain of my jewels, our good neighbour Messer Artilao was kind

enough to go fishing down in the valley and pull them all out again. But when I begged him to try another cast to find the bucket, he told me that he could touch it, but couldn't snag it because it was upside down, and that with so much angling he had broken the tip off his pole. But hopefully you can hook it instead.'

After he had heard this speech, Messer Liberale understood perfectly well the manner of repayment his neighbour had made him for his own trick. But he kept his peace and patiently pocketed the affront. The next morning the two neighbours met in the square, where they each looked the other narrowly in the eyes, but neither of them had the courage to broach the subject. So nothing was said on either side, nor did they take their wives into their confidence. Given such an outcome, their course of action was to establish for the future a common right for either one to take his pleasure with the wife of the other.

Alteria's story was so much to the taste of the company that it seemed they would have gone on for the rest of the evening remarking over it and discussing the craft and dexterity with which the one friend had duped the other. But the Signora, when she saw that the laughter and repartee promised to go on longer than time allowed, gave the word that the merriment should stop and that Alteria should follow the established custom of reciting her enigma, which she delivered without further deliberation.

A useful thing, firm, hard, and white,
Outside in shaggy robe bedight;
Hollowed within right cleverly,
It goes to work both white and dry.
When after labour it comes back,
You'll find it moist and very black;
For service it is ready ever,
And fails the hand that guides it never.

Alteria's enigma aroused as much pleasure among her auditors as her story had. Notwithstanding the fact that certain features seemed an affront to modesty, the ladies didn't refrain from discussing it, because they had on another occasion heard the same thing. But Lauretta, pretending to have no inkling of the meaning of the enigma, asked Alteria to explain it. So she, with a merry countenance, replied, 'Signora Lauretta, it's superfluous work to carry crocodiles to Egypt, or vases to Samos, or

owls to Athens. Still, to please you I'll unfold my riddle. I declare that the instrument, perforated at one end and shaggy at the other, is simply a pen of the kind used in writing, which, before one dips it in the inkstand, is white and dry, but that when it's withdrawn, it's black and moistened and ready to serve the writer holding it in whatever way he wishes.' With this explanation given, Arianna, who was sitting next to her, now stood up and began to tell her story.

VI.1 Commentary

This story begins with the betrayal of a perfect friendship and concludes with a perfect commune among the two friends and their wives. The defiance of social mores is even more pronounced in the original with the use of 'comare' and 'compare,' here rendered as 'friend' or 'neighbour,' for these terms signify a special relationship of trust pertaining to family members, the equivalent of godparents or cousins. The tale's leading thought experiment is the open sexual arrangement at the end hinting of the victory of utopian ideals over instincts, customs, and institutions in a de facto solution to a de jure dilemma. If another man shares in your property with your permission, it is a sign of mutuality, generosity, and reward. If another man shares in the favours of your wife without your permission, it is cause for revenge, violence, and compensation, unless power on the side of the seducer brings enforced temporizing. Under practical consideration, in this story, is the appropriate rigour of justice in light of past friendship and whether something more tempered might do in the place of bloodshed. At issue is the sense of injury and the craving of the ego for satisfaction counterbalanced by a cost analysis and the potential for a quid pro quo. The genius of this story is that in settling scores in kind – the enjoyment of your wife in exchange for your enjoyment of mine – justice is served according to the principle of talion reinterpreted as reciprocity, allowing the bond of friendship to be extended merely by adding the wives to the communal formula.

Readers may amuse themselves with the 'meaning' of such a tale on the assumption that writers frame their stories in ways that control the process of inference and extrapolation through pattern reduction down to a maxim or precept from which the story presumably begins. There is a folk hermeneutic at work insofar as readers are inclined to treat all such stories as allegories through which precepts are enacted at a literal social level. Yet the matter remains unclear whether, through the celebration of a harmonious *ménage à quatre*, the story proposes an ironic utopia,

a viable alternative life style, or merely a mental fantasy. In effect, two close friends agree upon institutionalized wife-swapping because it is already a fait accompli, because the ideal of Renaissance friendship takes precedence over the ideal of Renaissance marriage, and because, after all, the parties are consulted and the arrangement is discovered to be entirely mutual. Such a story is bound to divide the sceptics from the dreamers over a question of interest to all eras: whether jealousy and an instinct for exclusive enjoyment of sexual partners can be overcome through social engineering.

At the heart of the tale are two inordinately naive women. Their acquiescence to two of the most implausible rationales (ostensibly) for intercourse with extramarital partners ever dreamed up is a precondition to 'belief' in the story's world of representations. In fact, 'perfecting babies' and 'fishing for lost articles' were favourite motifs with raconteurs in Straparola's time and thought to be worth recycling like a good joke, appealing as they do to the same level of humour as the one about the child whose parents' mysterious parts were euphemized as a flashlight and cave, leading to the inevitable speleological proposal we laughed about when I was young. At the end of the tale, both men, upon hearing the innocent confessions of their wives concerning the wonderful favours they had received, knew in a trice that they were made cuckolds by reciprocal deception. Yet the story can work only if the schemes are not entirely preposterous for their time, which is the source of their particular spice, much as Jonson's gulls in *The Alchemist* fall prey to the scientific jargon and posturing of Face and Subtle, even as members in the audience compliment themselves for their superior understanding of things pertaining to alchemy as a pseudoscience.

How indeed were children formed? Why were some born monsters? Could it not be due to some aspect of the coupling that might account for the variables at birth? By the same token, necromancers specializing in the black arts might well offer as a benefit the location of lost articles through the omniscience of demons. A lengthy essay could be interpolated here to explain the range of mentalities and equivocal beliefs that characterized the Renaissance mind in its many echelons of knowledge and understanding. Such stories, in fact, contribute to the evolution of mentalities simply because readers wish to align themselves with those 'in the know.' Both schemes – that children might be perfected through post-conceptual fertilizing, and that lost objects accidentally 'ingested' into the body might be dislodged and recovered by the piscatorial operation of a male appendage – are preposterous as science, but effective folk

analogies or misguided similes: that children and plants are alike in their need of maintenance; and that fishing by sexual intercourse gives exploratory access to bodily recesses. By a subtly different process of reasoning, Daria deliberates over her choices, knowing that adultery is a sin, but that not doing all to ensure a healthy and whole child is an even greater sin; the argument from the genes overwhelms the argument from morality. She would rather have a healthy baby. That order of debate was not unknown even in medical circles, as when Christian doctors contemplated the moral implications of therapeutic coitus to cure love melancholy or erotomania – according to the universal teachings of the best Arabic physicians such as Avicenna and Haly Abbas. Jacques Ferrand demurred in his *Treatise on Lovesickness* in protest against the immoral recommendations of fellow practitioners, but the physician in the final act of Shakespeare and Fletcher's *The Two Noble Kinsmen* overrides the girl's father's moral misgivings with his medical rationale that coitus alone could save her life.

The story idea of exchanged seductions involving two friends and their wives leading to an extended family is at least as old as Boccaccio's *Decameron,* dating to the mid-fourteenth century, indebted in its turn to the French *fabliaux*.[1] Still to come is the linking of this Boccaccian plot

1 See, for example, 'Le meunier d'Aleux,' by Enguerrand d'Oisy in the *Recueil général et complet des fabliaux des XIIIe et XIVe siècles imprimés et inédits,* ed. Anatole de Montaiglon and Gaston Reynaud (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1879–90; reprint, New York: Burt Franklin, 1964), no. 33, vol. II, pp. 31–45. In this story, Marien d'Estrée goes to the mill to have her flour ground. Jakemare the miller agrees with his assistant to set the girl up for seduction in his house in exchange for a fat little piglet. Closing down the mill for the night before the girl's flour is ground, the miller offers her lodging at his house, where his wife would take care of her and feed her well. But the wife suspects something and the girl is afraid, so they agree to exchange beds. Before turning the girl over to his assistant, Jakemare decides to have a bout with her himself. Only then does he send in his boy to repeat the exercise. But from comments made by the girl the following day as she collected her grain, the men come to realize that they have shared the miller's wife between them – five times each no less – for which reason the assistant demanded the return of his fat piglet. There is high irony in the ensuing legal confrontation, which is over the pig rather than the wife, and further irony that the bailey declares the animal forfeit to the court because the miller had failed in his promise while the assistant had enjoyed the wife, thus voiding both their claims. Enguerrand was from Douai and lived in the thirteenth century. Hence this or similar *fabliaux* of that era might well have served as models for the trickery that led to the Italian double seduction plots.

with the seduction ploys of perfecting babies and fishing for jewels. There were, in fact, several stories in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries making progress in this direction, chipping away at Straparola's originality, while underscoring another substantial truth: that these story ideas were passed along as common literary property, or were, themselves, appropriations from potentially hundreds of variant renditions of the story type through the channels of popular culture. It would seem that Straparola is now working from written sources, insofar as this story shows few or none of the traits of oral transmission. But that all the motifs of the present tale occur in diverse literary versions predating Straparola is not, in itself, decisive. From the Straparolan perspective, four, nevertheless, stand out as paradigms of the several components that make up the Straparolan tale: the eighth story of the eighth day of Boccaccio's *Decameron*; a story from the *Lozana* of Francisco Delicado; no. 223 of Poggio's *Facetiae*, and the third story of *Les cent nouvelles nouvelles*, first published in Lyons by Antoine Vérard in 1486.

Boccaccio's story of double seduction is concerned with moderating revenge, with finding a milder but equally satisfying form of justice.[2] Spinelloccio and Zeppa are, after all, like brothers, and have been for a long time. But then the crisis of desire sets in like a force of nature hardly to be denied in light of the familiarity maintained between the two households. When Zeppa is accidentally on hand to witness Spinelloccio's coupling with his (Zeppa's) wife, a fact she could now hardly deny, his first negotiation is with her, arguing that her infraction not only provides him with a sexual entitlement to Spinelloccio's wife, but that she must participate in the plot. She must set up a new assignation with Spinelloccio, agree to Zeppa's well-timed intrusion, lock Spinelloccio in a chest, and

2 Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. James M. Rigg, 2 vols. (London: The Navarre Society, [1922]), VIII.8, vol. II, pp. 230–4. There are many imitations of this *novella*; several are listed by A. Collingwood Lee in *The Decameron: Its Sources and Analogues* (New York: Haskell House, 1966), p. 265. It is presented nearly verbatim in Martin Montanus's *Gartengesellschaft*, by D. Mahrold in the *Roldmarsch Kasten*, 1608, by Frey in *Gartengesellschaft*, in *Le courier facetieux*, and in *Divertissements curieux de ce temps*. Lee also includes no. 120 in Nicolas de Troyes's *Le grand parangon des nouvelles nouvelles*, entitled 'De deux voisins qui se entr'aymoint comme frères dont l'un fut amoureux de la femme de l'autre' (Of the two neighbours who loved each other like brothers, but one of whom was in love with the wife of the other). This is not in the Mabille edition, and Lee does not say where he read it. Also worth consideration is no. 142 in this same collection and its relationship to *Decameron* III.6.

then occupy herself elsewhere while Zeppa convinces Spinelloccia's wife, within earshot of her husband, to submit to his desires on the top of the very chest where he is hidden. The reader is invited, by sheer dint of the situation, to think more of each party's thoughts than the writer chooses to share or confirm. What we know is that Spinelloccio exits the chest in agreement with himself that justice has been served and that they will be better friends for it in the future, while his wife chimes in, with a laugh, that tit has been had for tat. Boccaccio is generally credited with providing the narrative source for all the stories to follow featuring this generic design – at least among the Italian *novellieri*.

Early in the sixteenth century, a modified version is included in Francisco Delicado's *Portrait of Lozana, the Lusty Andalusian Woman* which contains all the Straparolan features.[3] His principal innovation is to make Lozana the trickster mediator who masterminds both sides of the seduction plot, having the fishing after lost jewels come first and the perfection of the child's ears come second. As a procuress, Lozana looks for beautiful women on behalf of her clients. Among her customers is a physician to whom she promises a virtuous, pregnant, married Lombard woman, whose jewellery she steals from the public bathhouse to place her under obligation for its recovery. The physician is then invited to carry out the necessary angling, pretending all along to be removing the rings from her body. We pay particular attention to the lady's additional request to restore a copper pot and chain that have fallen down the well by the same means, a clear anticipation of the request made in Straparola's tale to continue the fishing in order to find a tiny bucket. (This motif turns up concurrently in Cinthio degli Fabritii's *Libro della origine delli volgari proverbi*, Venice, 1526, described below.) When the naive wife explains her happy adventure to her husband, he knows that Lozana is behind it all and thus he goes to her to compel her to arrange for his revenge in kind. It is she who convinces the physician's wife that her child will be born without ears or fingers and that the remedy was urgent and couldn't wait for her husband's return – a husband who had, in any case, failed in his duty. The seduction is carried out, and true to form, the receiver of these benefits complains to her husband of his neglect upon his return and celebrates the corrective measures, thus completing the circle of

3 Francisco Delicado, *Portrait of Lozana, the Lusty Andalusian Woman*, ed. Bruno M. Damiani (Potomac, MD: Scripta Humanistica, 1987), pp. 259–61. For further information on Delicado, see Augusta Espantoso Foley, *Critical Guides to Spanish Texts* (London: Grant and Cutler, Tamesis, 1977), vol. 18, 'La Lozana Andaluza.'

understanding. There the matter ends with the physician gently reproving his friend Lozana, who has become the centre of the narrative. Delicado has disguised the story well by integrating it within a great deal of other matter, but its affinity with the tradition under study is clear; he too is recycling a story, a version of which was already in circulation fifty years earlier in *Les cent nouvelles nouvelles* (description to follow). That *La Lozana Andaluza* was first published in Venice in 1528 holds the prospect that it came to Straparola's attention. But that it was derivative also allows for common sources and traditions.

Meanwhile, Poggio Bracciolini's tale 'Of the Friar Minor Who Creates a Child's Nose,' dating to the 1470s, is indicative of the formerly independent circulation of the 'child perfection' motif incorporated into the tales of Delicado and Straparola. A friar instructs one of his jolly parishioners that on the authority of a witch he has learned of the imminent misfortune of her unborn child.[4] By degrees the expectant mother, in a panic, worms out of the cleric that the child will be missing his nose and that only the friar can repair the defect by having sex with her. Despite her distaste for such a procedure, she acquiesces, not once but several times, in order to firmly implant the missing feature. When the child is born without defect, the friar claims the credit and the husband, duped along with his wife, expresses his entire satisfaction with the procedure. In the moralizing epilogue, we are told that great ills are performed under the cover of friendship, and that by abusing a husband's confidence the wife had been raped (*violer*), yet the story is offered up for laughter, because seduction of the ignorant is somehow comic at the same time, on the assumption that she might have known better. Poggio's story reveals the currency of the foetus-perfecting motif and its stand-

4 'De fratre minorum qui fecit nosum puero' in *Les facéties de Pogge Florentin*, ed. Pierre des Brandes (Paris: Garnier Frères, [1853]); also *The Facetiae or jocose tales of Poggio*, 2 vols. (Paris: Isidore Liseux, 1878), no. 223, vol. II, p. 152; no. 156, vol. II, p. 57. There is a later variation on this motif in the *Contes nouveaux* of Jean-Baptiste Willart de Grécourt (Amsterdam: Mortier, 1745) entitled 'Les cheveaux' (hair), in which young Alix gets herself pregnant, but when an officious party accuses her of not having the job finished properly and offers his services, she says it's none of his affair, that the baby is only missing its hair, and that she intends to have them planted one at a time [presumably by the appropriate party]. This or a similar story recurs, apparently, in the *Delictae poeticum Italie* of Gerardus Dicaeus, published in Lisieux, no. 223, 'Partus imperfectus,' vol. II, p. 152, but I have not identified or located this work.

alone potential. There were a goodly number of these in circulation during the years predating the *Notti*.

In the third tale of *Les cent nouvelles nouvelles* (1486), the story tradition is reduced nearly to a farce, yet it contains many of the future directions the story type will take, including persuasion on the grounds that sexual intercourse alone will repair a serious physical defect.[5] In this version, however, the husbands are not friends, or even of the same social standing, and there is no indication that the miller's wife is pregnant. The local *seigneur* merely informs the attractive wife, in the absence of the miller, that her front (*devant*) is about to fall off, which the woman understands in the specific sense of her private parts, which the lord offers to 'do up' (*retaper*). The job is done several times to ensure its success and the wife proudly informs her husband upon his return of the fine service their *seigneur* has rendered them, and for which they must be grateful. The miller keeps private counsel but yearns for revenge. We must accept that on the pretext of presenting a pike for the *seigneur*'s table, the miller gains secret access to the lady's bath where he finds and steals a precious diamond ring. The chatelaine, distraught, sounds the alarm, the miller falls under suspicion, avows his innocence, but promises to find the missing jewel. By divination he comes to know that the ring has entered the lady's body. He then demands a private audience to resolve the mystery and prevails upon the lady to allow him to carry out his fishing. The narrator emphasizes the equivalence between the two modes of seduction. Similarly naive, this wife too informs her husband of the favour rendered her in the location of her ring. Now wise to each other, both men agree to let the matter remain eternally in silence for all the strategic reasons pertaining to honour, scandal, and the turnabout that constitutes fair play. By how much this begins to approximate Straparola's tale some sixty-four years in advance is clear,

5 'Un prêté pour un rendu' (Tit for tat) in *Les cent nouvelles nouvelles*, ed. Roger Dubuis (Lyons: Presses universitaires, 1991), no. 3, pp. 40–5; or 'La pesche de l'anneau' (Fishing for the ring). A similar double trickery of wives occurs in Henri Estienne's *Apologie pour Hérodote*, ed. Paul Ristelhuber, 2 vols. (Paris: Isidore Lisieux, 1879), chap. 16, vol. I, p. 313. A doctor seduces the corset-maker's wife with a medical trick; the corset-maker seduces madam the doctor's wife while measuring her for a corset. It is the same basic story with the usual consequences.

without necessarily declaring this *conte* a direct source.[6] Just who made the adjustments whereby this story, in relation to Delicado's, turns into the present rendition remains typically moot, whether Straparola himself or the raconteurs of popular culture.

In the years leading up to the mid-sixteenth century and the decades following, there are a goodly number of related tales that involve intended bed tricks that miscarry and thus bring about the symmetrical seductions. Masuccio of Salerno's *novella* no. 36 of his *Novellino* (1476) offers inventions of its own on the familiar model.[7] A miller and a cobbler

6 Giuseppe Rua in his *Tra antiche fiabe e novelle: Le 'Piacevoli Notti' di Gian Francesco Straparola* (Rome: Ermanno Loescher, 1898), p. 57, cites Leroux de Lincy on Straparola's debt to *Les cent nouvelles nouvelles*, giving primacy of place to this work in the creation of the present story. Rua concurs, stating that Boccaccio is not the main source. Celio Malespini, in his *Ducento novelle*, first published in Venice in 1609, takes up his version of the story from *Les cent nouvelles nouvelles*. It is the same asymmetrical exchange of seductions in social terms, for the first to be approached is a miller's wife by the local lord of the manor; he is an aristocrat who presumes upon the naivety of a commoner by convincing her that her front is falling and that he knows how to repair and pin it up again. In the second part, the miller retaliates by gaining access to the palazzo, entering the lady's bath, and stealing one of her jewels. This tale offers the same enactment of quid pro quo by means of pleasure for pleasure rather than injury for injury. Ultimately, the nobleman is reduced to silence when he is told of the fishing party, given that he has to admit the justice of the miller's act and his wife's own gullibility, so that when the two men meet later in the streets they merely hail each other by the names of their respective ruses and promise never to mention the matter again.

7 Masuccio Salernitano, *The Novellino*, trans. W.G. Waters, 2 vols. (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1895), vol. II, pp. 187–93. The story is also told by Aloyse Cinthio degli Fabritii, *Libro della origine delli volgari proverbi* (Venice, 1526), no. 16, 'Chi non ha ventura non vada a pescar' (If you're not lucky, don't go fishing), pp. 228–36; by Celio Malespini, in his *Ducento novelle* (Venice: al Segno dell'Italia, 1609), I.45, pp. 119*ff*; and by Franco Sacchetti, *Trecentonovelle*, ed. Emilio Faccioli (Turin: Einaudi, 1970), no. 206, pp. 621–7, about the miller Farinello de Rieti who had eyes for Monna Collagia, but ended up with his own wife after the women made arrangements between them. Others to consider in this general category include 'I tonfi di San Pasquale' by Domenico Batacchi (1800), in which a priest seduces the Countess Isabella by having her maid enact San Pascuale. The act is revenged on the priest's sister by a ruse using a special charm to recover a lost item; *Le novelle*, ed. Ferdinando Giannessi (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1971), no. 10. See also Reinhold Köhler, *Kleinere Schriften*, ed. Johannes Bolte (Weimar: E. Felber, 1898–1900), vol. III, pp. 163–4.

have been friends from youth and live in close proximity, as in Boccaccio. When the cobbler takes a fancy to his friend's wife, he approaches her simply and frankly, and her reaction is to report his behaviour to the cobbler's wife. The women agree to an exchange so that the cobbler will find his own wife in bed with him, first accepting his ministrations and then berating him. But a preliminary meeting between the men spoils the plan, so that each enters his own house and performs in the dark with the woman he finds in his bed. In effect, the cobbler enjoys the wife he dreamed of, but doesn't know it, while she bears it with patience and a show of pleasure in order to make him believe she was his wife – which doesn't make entirely logical sense, but convention dictates – while the poor miller, after an innocent performance, finds himself berated with pure vitriol by a woman thinking to have taken her own husband red-handed. The high irony of this misplaced tongue lashing is the apex of the drama. Paradoxically, it is the miller, the man more sinned against than sinning, who proposes that the malice of wives had produced their better fortune and that what seemed a prejudice might be accepted as a blessing. It is the cobbler who thinks through the private benefits as opposed to the esteem of the world, which, in their time, he concludes to be a thing of little worth. From that time forward, all would be in common so that the children would know for certain only the identities of their mothers. This is almost a different tale, given the centrality of the bed trick, but it serves to create the Straparolan *ménage à quatre* without the logistics of crime and punishment.

Bonaventure Des Périers includes in his *Nouvelles récreations et joyeux dévis* (written by 1536 but first published in 1544), the story of the man who finished the baby's ear for his neighbour's wife, involving a rationalization that almost resembles a medical anecdote. This tale does not contain a retaliatory counterpart. André banters with his neighbour's pregnant wife about her baby's unfinished ears, but she takes him seriously and he sees his opportunity by elaborating that if the ears are unfinished for one child, then all those to follow will also be born without them. Revealingly, the seducer employs a phrase reappearing in Straparola, that 'there's a cure for everything except death,' suggesting its place in the line of influence. So André offers his services, claiming this as a real favour to the lady, given his many other pressing affairs. But he visits so often, in fact, that the wife fears the child will end up with five or six ears. When her husband returns, she teases him about leaving his work undone, and the penny drops concerning what had taken place, although after a few vain threats against André there was

little more to be done.[8] It is likewise included in Noël Du Fail's *Contes et discours d'Eutrapel*.[9] Another, closely related, appears in *L'élites des contes du Sieur d'Ouville* (1641), which involves a king and a gentleman neighbour who are excellent friends. The comic seduction strategy is absent and, given the king's status, his social inferior must endure his majesty's visitations with patience, but not without seeking a repayment in kind. His seduction of the queen is slow and delicate, but ultimately persuasive when she understands the king's conduct. The arrangement continues for years, and while the gentleman is known abroad as the king's cuckold, the king never discovers the truth of his own situation and thus the revenge is enjoyed entirely in private.[10] These stories are, of course, all derivative, in their respective ways, from the now common legacy.

Jean de la Fontaine redevelops the story out of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, but includes, in keeping with the tradition, the story of the incomplete ears whereby the protagonist imposes upon a close friend's gullible wife.[11] When she relates all to her husband as a meritorious service, the husband broods upon his revenge, offering a great deal more rage and anger in dealing with his own wife than with his one-time friend. As in Straparola's tale, under her husband's instruction the lady must lure her lover into her bedroom one last time and send him into hiding when he arrives. Then she must go next door and tell the man's wife that her husband is

8 Bonaventure des Périers, 'De celui qui acheva l'oreille de l'enfant à la femme de son voisin' (Of the man who finished the baby's ear for his neighbour's wife) in *Les nouvelles recreations et joyeux devis* in *Oeuvres françoises* (1558) (Paris: P. Jannet, 1856), no. 9, vol. II, pp. 46–50. See James Woodrow Hassell, *Sources and Analogues of the Nouvelles Récréations et Joyeux Devis of Bonaventure des Périers*, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press [1957], 1969). After 1601 the work was known as *Les joyeuses adventures et nouvelles récréations*. This work is known in English after 1583 as *The Mirrour of Mirth and Pleasant Conceits*, now in a modern edition, ed. James Woodrow Hassell ([Columbia, SC]: University of South Carolina Press, 1959).

9 (Rennes: Noël Glamet, 1586), pp. 142*ff*; (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1875).

10 Antoine Le Métel, Sieur d'Ouville, 'Un roy de Naples, abusant de la femme d'un gentilhomme, porte enfin luy même les cornes' (A king of Naples, taking advantage of a gentleman's wife, in the end wears the horns himself) in *L'élites des contes*, ed. G. Brunet, 2 vols. (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1883), vol. II, pp. 47–53. Another version of the story is also to be found in Antoine de Saint-Denis, *Les comptes du monde aventureux* (Paris: Estienne Groulleau, 1555).

11 'The Ear-Maker and the Mould-Mender' ('Les qui pro quo' or 'Le faiseur d'oreilles'), in *The Complete Tales in Verse*, trans. Guido Waldman (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 37–42. See also *Tales and Novels by J. de la Fontaine*, 2 vols. (London: The Society of English Bibliophilists, ca. 1895), vol. II, pp. 177–84.

about to be maimed. When she arrives, she learns that, tit for tat, she is about to have her children's noses repaired as well as the mould, thereby remedying the defect in all future offspring. The woman is relieved that her husband will escape with such a light punishment, and allows the seduction to take place on the very bed under which her husband is hiding – a man content to wear horns so long as he can keep his ears. That the story echoes Boccaccio and Bracciolini combined may point to Straparola, or to La Fontaine's own confectionary skills.

Thomas-Simon Gueullette, perhaps the greatest appropriator of materials from the *Piacevoli notti* after Mme. d'Aulnoy, may have made selective use of this tale in a complex fantasy about two friends betrayed by women who later recover their friendship upon discovering the many coincidences that continue to unite them. The story is, in effect, 'orientalized' and is called 'Of Al-kuz, Tahar, and the Miller.' Despite their friendship, Tahar falls in love with his companion's bride, Liva, and flees with her.[12] Al-kuz, in his grief, becomes a wanderer, settling down with a girl named Solle whom he rescues from a fire, only to be jilted by her as well. When the two men meet again, Tahar offers a long and abject confession and the two embrace, so desensitized have they both become by the perfidy of women, for Liva had also abandoned Tahar. They then discover that Tahar had taken up with the girl rescued from the fire and found himself trapped in a marriage with a pregnant wife who is, in fact, carrying Al-kuz's child. The two men now consider themselves quit, having received injury for injury. But Gueullette desires to multiply the effect by having the two men form a *ménage à trois* with a miller's wife. They then encounter the miller in a similar *ménage* with the two unfaithful wives, Liva and Solle. The entire creation becomes a study in plot symmetry, betrayal, and accommodation, creating a comedy of coincidence rather than an investigation of psyches. The story is entirely cynical, particularly about the fidelity of women, yet paradoxically idealistic regarding male friendship and the ability to overcome possessive instincts. The wives are pardoned in a gesture of reconciliation, and each is returned to her rightful husband; there is no talk of a communal solution. Given Gueullette's unacknowledged employment of Straparola's tales throughout this *oeuvre*, we are invited to think that this story too,

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12 Thomas-Simon Gueullette, *Thousand and One Quarters of an Hour* (1723), trans. Leonard C. Smithers (London: H.S. Nichols, 1893), pp. 181–209. Straparola's story is transcribed or adapted by Sansovino in *Cento novelle*, VII.2, and by Chappuis in *Facetieux journées*, VII.2.

despite the many substitutions and the orientalization of names and circumstances, may have found its origins in the *Piacevoli notti*.

As a little coda it may be mentioned again (as in a footnote above) that Cinthio degli Fabritii, in his prolix collection of tales in illustration of proverbs, gives a version of the present story in which he includes the angling for a 'secchielletto,' the equivalent of the little bucket in Straparola.[13] This is the object which Madonna Propertia requested her fisherman to find after he had located all her 'missing' jewellery. This idea may owe something to Cinthio, adding him to the list of potential sources, all of which Straparola may have had ready to hand in order to compound the present version. The passage also gives rise to another of Straparola's playful metaphors for sexual conduct. Waters, in his translation, faithful in all matters except these, has Artilao say 'Most willingly would I do this, were I not somewhat wearied just at present over what I have already done.' But Straparola speaks of lamp oil, a dull point, and blacksmith's tools to sharpen it, all of which Waters, no doubt, found pointlessly excessive. This story also appears to have had an afterlife among the folk, if it did not exist in a folk tale from which all of the abovementioned authors derived their materials – a now familiar dilemma with regards to stories and their origins. In a Russian folk version, the fisherman says he found the little bucket the lady so desired to retrieve, but that it was 'upside down, so that his instrument couldn't quite get hold of it and draw it forth.'[14] On the strength of this story's resemblance to Straparola's, the adventurous scholar may wish to give everything back to the oral culture of Straparola's time, as so many previous stories have invited us to do. That would appear to be somewhat too adventurous in this case, but that such tales existed in parallel folk cultures even as far back as the sixteenth century appears more probable, in light of Straparola's early registry of so many others.

13 Aloyse Cinthio degli Fabritii, *Libro della origine delli volgari proverbi* (Venice, 1526), no. 16, 'Chi non ha ventura non vada a pescar (If you're not lucky don't go fishing),' pp. 228–36.

14 *Kryptadia*, vol. I, *Contes secrets traduits du russe* (Paris: H. Welter, 1883), no. 43, pp. 60–1.

VI. Fable 2
Castorio's Welcome Castration

ARIANNA

Castorio, desiring to grow fat, had Sandro cut off both of his testicles and very nearly died from it. But at the last, by a merry jest of Sandro's wife, he is relieved of his trouble.

The fable Alteria just told us with so much grace and discretion puts me in mind of a certain drollery as comic as hers which I heard told, a short time back, by a merry dame of the nobility. But if I'm not able to set it forth with the same distinction and elegance it was told to me, I ask to be held excused, seeing that nature was stingy with me when it came to the fine qualities so liberally granted to the lady I mentioned.

Not far from Fano, a city of the Marches situated on the shore of the Adriatic, there is a small town called Carignano, including in its population many lusty youths and fair damsels. There among the others lived a peasant named Sandro, one of the wittiest and most rollicking fellows nature ever produced. He hadn't the slightest concern for what happened, but let things go as they would for better or for worse. He grew so fat and ruddy that his flesh resembled nothing more than a piece of fresh-cut larded bacon. Now this chap, when he came to the age of forty, married a woman as good-humoured and fat as himself [...] A week never went by without this good woman carefully shaving her husband's beard so that he might look more handsome and frolicsome.

By chance, a certain Messer Castorio, a rich, young gentleman of Fano, although not very bright, purchased a farm for himself in the commune of Carignano. A moderate-sized house stood there, where he would spend the greater part of the summer with two of his servants and a lady whom he entertained for his pleasure. One day, as was his custom, Castorio was walking through the fields after dinner when he noticed

Sandro, who was turning up the earth with his plough. Seeing what a fine, fat, ruddy fellow the peasant was with his smiling face, he said, 'Good neighbour, how is it that I'm so lank and lean, as you can see, while you're so ruddy and well rounded? Every day I eat the best food and drink the finest wines. I lie in bed as long as I please, and there isn't anything I need. Nobody in the world longs to grow fat more than I do, but the more effort I make, the thinner I get. All winter long you eat only the coarsest food and drink watered-down wine. You rise up to your work when it's still night and all summer long you don't have an hour's rest. Still your rosy face and your well-covered ribs make you a pleasure to behold. So given my desire for a bit of girth, can you help me put on some pounds, the best way you know how, or show me how you've managed to get so fat? I'll give you fifty gold florins up front, and beyond that I promise to reward you in such a way that, for the rest of your life, you'll bless me and call yourself happy.'

Now this Sandro was a cunning rogue by nature, being a red-haired type, so at first he refused to teach Castorio the way. But after a little while, listening to Castorio's prolonged pleading, and keen to finger the fifty gold florins, he consented to show him how. Then he left off his ploughing for a time and sat down beside him, saying, 'Signor Castorio, you say you're astonished by my rotundity and your own lean condition, thinking that a man gets fat or thin by reason of what he may eat or drink. But in this you're entirely wrong, for any day of the week you can see diners and drinkers in great numbers who gulp down their food and yet they're as thin as lizards. But I can tell you, if you want to do for yourself what I've done, you'll be as fat as I am.'

'And what is it that you did?'

Sandro answered, 'Why, about a year go I had my balls removed and from that very moment on I grew as fat as you see me now.'

'Well, I'm amazed you didn't meet your death in the process,' replied Castorio.

'What do you mean death?' cried Sandro. 'The practitioner who did the business for me had such a skilled hand that I didn't feel a thing, and since that time, my flesh is like that of a child. To tell you the truth, I've never felt myself as well and happy as I do right now.'

'So then, tell me the name of this fellow who slices off testicles with so much skill that you don't feel any pain,' said Castorio.

'Ah, he's dead,' replied Sandro.

'Too bad! So what can we do, seeing he's dead?'

Sandro then answered, 'Not to worry, because this great practitioner who died taught me the art and from that moment I mastered it. Since then I've removed the nuts of countless calves, poultry, and other animals, all of which became remarkably fat. If you'll leave all this business to me, I pledge my word you'll be entirely satisfied by my handiwork.'

'But I'm afraid I may die under the operation,' said Castorio.

'What do you mean, die? Look at the calves and the capons and the other animals with their balls cut off. Not one of them ever died,' cried Sandro. Now desiring more than any man alive to get fat, Castorio began to consider the matter.

Once he had fully made up his mind, Sandro told him to lie down on the fresh grass and open his legs. As soon as he did that, Sandro, who had a knife with him as sharp as a razor, pulled on his scrotum, took his cods in hand, and with an oil to soften things up, carefully made a cut, stuck two fingers in the incision, and with all his skill and dexterity he extracted them both. Once done, he took some sweet oil and the juice of certain herbs and made a dressing which he applied to the wound, and then helped Castorio up on his feet. Now he was as proper a capon and eunuch as there was anywhere in the world. Putting his hand in his pocket, Castorio then took out the fifty golden florins and gave them to Sandro before taking his leave and heading back to his house.

But before he had known an hour's experience of life as a gelding, Castorio began to feel the greatest pain and anguish that any man has ever known. He couldn't get a single moment's rest and daily his suffering increased. The wound became so infected and gave off such a fetid stench that those around him could hardly endure it. When this news came to Sandro's ears, he was terrified and heartily began to wish he'd never played such a scurvy trick on Castorio. What if his victim should die of his injuries? Castorio, meanwhile, found himself in a most lamentable state, enraged by the pain he suffered, not to mention the disgrace he would soon endure, and so made up his mind then and there that he would kill Sandro, whatever the risk. To carry it out in the manner he judged most fitting, he went to Sandro's house, accompanied by two of his servants, where he found him at supper. 'Sandro, nice work you've performed on me to cause my death. But before I die, I swear I'll make you pay the price for this wickedness of yours.'

Sandro replied, 'The business was your own choosing, not mine. You're the one who begged and talked me into doing it. But let me show you that it's not the fault of my skills, and that I still deserve the reward, and

that I won't be the cause of your death. Meet me early tomorrow morning in my field and then I'll help you out, and stop worrying about dying.'

No sooner was Castorio gone than Sandro broke into bitter weeping, certain he'd better flee the country that very moment into some foreign land, for all he could imagine he heard was the footsteps of the law right at his heels about to place him in jail. Knowing nothing of the cause, but seeing how grief-stricken he was, his wife asked him why he was in such a tragic mode. Then he told her the whole story, word for word. As soon as she fully understood the cause of his dismay and had taken stock of his stupidity and the chance that he might die, she didn't know what to do – well not at first – except berate her husband for his folly in running into so much danger. But afterwards, when she had calmed herself down, she comforted him, telling him to keep up hopes and that she'd set to work to arrange matters so that he would escape the risk of death.

The next morning at the appointed hour, the wife took her husband's clothes, put them on her back, pulled a cap down over her head, and went into the fields with the plough and oxen. There she set to work with the furrowing, watching all the while to see whether Castorio would meet his appointment. Sure enough, before long he appeared, and taking Sandro's wife for Sandro himself at work ploughing his field, he said, 'I'm a dead man certain, Sandro, unless you help me. That incision you made is still not closed and the flesh of those parts is so festered, and the stench of it so strong, that I fear for my life. Unless you give me the needed remedy, you'll see me die at your feet.'

Then the crafty dame in her Sandro disguise asked him to let her look at the wound, saying that she'd take charge of curing it. With that, Castorio took off his shirt and showed the wound, which was all putrid. After a brief inspection, the woman said with a laugh, 'Castorio, my good man, you're just scared because you think your case can't be cured. But you're totally wrong, because the cut that I got is a lot bigger than yours. It still hasn't healed up and stinks like you wouldn't believe compared to yours. Still, you see how fat I am and plump and fresh as a lily. What's more, so you can trust me in what I'm telling you, you can see the open wound for yourself.' Saying that, she planted one leg firm on the ground and the other on the plough, pulled up her clothes, let fly a hidden rocket, and put his head down to show him the gash. Once he saw Sandro's cut to be much larger than his own, still gaping, with a stench that went right up his nose, and saw that he'd lost his pecker into the bargain, his spirits rallied, making him determined to endure all of his

own reeking and pain. Not long thereafter, his skinny physique was transformed; Castorio grew fat, just as he always wanted to be.

The ladies laughed merrily at Castorio, thinking about how he was bereft of his gear. But the hilarity among the men was greater still when they saw how Sandro's wife, disguised as her own husband, showed him her great amen, making him believe that both pebbles and prick had been amputated. Seeing that no one in the company could restrain their laughter, the Signora, clapping her hands, called for silence and urged Arianna to keep the protocol by reciting her riddle. Not to seem less obedient or obliging than the others, she recited the following:

My friend, I bid you, if you please,
To lay you down, and for your ease
I'll take the thing and hold it fast
Betwixt my hands, and at the last
I'll clap it in the gaping place.
Then pushing two and fro apace
With heedful look I'll force along
A liquid thick and warm and strong.
You cry enough, and sore complain,
I'll kill you quite, but still amain
I work and work with all my might.
No stopping now till wearied quite
We both call truce and stop the fight.

Arianna's enigma wounded the ears of her audience, which they found more than a trifle immodest. The Signora rebuked the damsel sharply, making her displeasure most plain. But the gentle maid, all smiling and merry-hearted, excused herself with a frank and open face, saying, 'With your permission, Lady, there's no just reason to be angry with me, for my riddle is meant only to move your mirth. It isn't the least immodest, as you might think, and here's why. When anyone administers an enema to a sick man, doesn't he ask him to lie down? Then afterwards, doesn't he take the instrument between his two hands and insert it in the hole? And seeing that the patient generally dislikes the operation and complains, doesn't he ask him to be brave and take it well? Moreover, doesn't the person administering the enema push the pump back and forth to fill the place full of injected liquid? This done, doesn't he stop, now weary

with the pains he has taken over his patient? So you see, most noble friends, my enigma is not so foul and evil as you thought it to be at first.' Hereupon the Signora, after hearing and duly weighing this subtle interpretation of the merry riddle, relaxed her severity, saying that from then on each lady would be free to say what she liked without fear of rebuke. Hearing that full freedom was accorded her to say whatever came to her lips, Cateruzza, whose lot it was to tell the third tale, began it in the following manner.

VI.2 Commentary

In placing this scatological tale after a story about double seduction, Straparola appears determined to launch the second volume of the *Piacevoli notti* in a far naughtier vein than the first. This tale is little more than barnyard humour based on the principle that if capons may be fattened by castrating them, the same operation performed upon a dumb townsman by a wily peasant will have the same effect – and did. It is outrageous enough that Sandro performs the operation on the spot with a pocket knife and botches the job rather badly, but it is doubly so when the farmer's ludicrously unsavoury wife, by impersonating her husband, places her own nether anatomy on exhibition as evidence of Sandro's own unhealed castration-cum-amputation, thereby convincing Castorio that he had nothing to complain about. The tale begs its redemption only on the grounds of wit, for it was deemed so smutty by Waters, its late Victorian translator, that he left the entire scene of the impersonation in the fields in the French of the Larivey translation. Such a tactic suggests that only those with a talent for languages are fit to read this immodest fare, or worse, that French was the natural language of *grivoiseries*. For him, at least, this story was the first to cross a line regarding taste, followed immediately by that of the three nuns (VI.4), most of which Waters also preserved in sixteenth-century French. It would seem that Straparola had fallen under the tutelage of Morlini, in the process redefining his readership and the little society to which these stories are told.

The hermeneute may find some enjoyment in teasing out the underlying assumptions upon which this story is based with regard to its particular brand of humour, the fears it may express, the class distinctions it registers, and the region in which it is set. Straparola makes it specific to the market town of Carignano, near Fano (south of Rimini) on the Adriatic coast. Messer Castorio – the choice of names says it all (perhaps with overtones of *castoro*, the beaver, which, according to Pliny and his

sect, was thought to castrate itself to escape its pursuers) – has a naive longing to become fat and for that reason falls afoul of Sandro, the crafty peasant who is offered a handsome reward to make it happen. Contrasting town and country mentalities, and the tricks put upon one by the other, was a staple of the medieval tale; that theme, as represented in the Italian *novelle*, has come under recent investigation, this story serving as a prime example.[15] A special kind of humour pertains to the triumph of peasant cunning over the presumed intellectual superiority of high culture, epitomized by the half-millennium long tradition of *The Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolphus* in which the world's wisest man is repeatedly outwitted by a deformed local rustic.[16] That formula finds new expression here.

Concerning castration as a 'complex,' the less said the better, insofar as this story has none of the interrelationships that could give such an analysis meaning. Nevertheless, the story inevitably evokes the primal fear of injury to that region and all that pertains to anatomy and the masculine condition. The foolish indifference to such concerns on the part of Messer Castorio for the sake of putting on a little weight profiles this ultimate booby and establishes the grounds for Renaissance laughter. Apart from that, Castorio is simply young, well-to-do, not very bright, and concerned about his appearance in relation to an overactive metabolism about which he knows nothing. It is a mystery to him how a hard working peasant on meagre rural fare could have such girth. When putrefaction sets in following the 'operation' and complaints arise, Sandro panics, but his more level-headed wife devises a scheme to put off the threat of arrest by using her private parts to rhetorical ends. Messer Castorio makes but little of the fact that he still has a penis, she not, and forgets that Sandro had already claimed that his operation was an entire success. But such cavilling is merely to spoil a good joke, which everyone in the audience seemed ready to enjoy, the women laughing at the prospect of a man who had lost his manliness, and the men laughing at the size of the woman's wicket. What aspect of psychology or of humour

15 Marie-Françoise Piéjus, 'Le couple citadin-paysan dans les "Piacevoli notti" de Straparola,' in *Ville et campagne dans la littérature italienne de la Renaissance*, ed. Anna Fontes-Baratto (Paris: Université de la Sorbonne nouvelle, 1976), p. 160, from which I take the suggestion about the beaver.

16 *The Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolphus*, English translation of 1492, ed. Donald Beecher (Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions, 1995).

does this entail?[17] One thing certain is that the story will be of little help to those wishing to make of the Renaissance an age in the fashioning of sex and gender. Those in the audience sniggering over a man's willing abandonment of his gonads and of a woman pretending to be a castrato by just being a woman can hardly get more essentialist; men and women, monstrous or mutilated, are male and female still.

Alteria is willing to play the hoyden in telling this tale, brazenly and without apology, for the sake of a laugh. It is related, moreover, not quite as an old wives' tale – which it undoubtedly was in fact – but as an anecdote recently picked up from a noblewoman as something more akin to gossip. The story is told as remarkable because it also purports to have happened. Alteria regrets only that she cannot tell it with the same spirit of elegance and distinction as her high-society source, which is merely part of telling her immodest tale as refined parlour fare. Such posturing is part of the storytelling sport, and part of Straparola's own campaign to bring folk stuff to the elite through print. Safely through this exercise, Alteria comes to her riddle and proposes something equally *risqué*, to the point of exasperating the hostess who was ready to discipline her for smut. The name of that game, however, is to lead the imagination through the gutter and then to come back with an innocent gloss that places the responsibility with the auditors. Once again, the hostess is satisfied, insofar as the enigma signifies merely an enema rather than intercourse, despite its administrator playing with the bottle and working the tube in and out; do we ask why a kinetic clyster is more acceptable to socialite sensibilities than a sexual cluster? Thus, in coming to book 6 and the inauguration of the second volume of tales, Straparola has progressed from clean family fun to brown wrapper entertainment, turning his coterie readership into a huddle of sniggerers, at least as an overture. But more tasteful tales will follow.

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17 The answer to that rhetorical question is perhaps best supplied by François Rabelais in the fifteenth chapter of 'Pantagruel,' in which he discusses how Panurge demonstrated a very new way of building the walls of Paris. Along the way he concocts the fable of the lion, the fox, and the old lady who had fallen over backwards and revealed her old wound that went from her backside to her navel, no doubt the result of a hatchet blow, which the lion asked the fox to wipe continually with his tail to keep off the flies. Meanwhile, he went for moss to stuff the wound, while the old woman 'pooped and blew, and stank like a hundred devils,' making the poor fox rather uncomfortable. So much for masculine innocence and gynaecological hyperbole. *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, ed. J.M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin [1955], 1970), pp. 220–1.

That Alteria attributes her anecdote to an aristocratic lady with an earthy sense of humour may be but a rhetorical ploy. Yet her attribution may also harbour a truth: that the story was in local circulation. Its potential history is now a rather familiar profile, consisting of scattered Eastern analogues and scant traces in early sixteenth-century European storytelling. For an Eastern source, Somadeva's eleventh-century *Katha sarit sagara* again provides an early prospect. A Brahmin allows a demon to heal his injured leg, only to be threatened by death if he fails to bring in further wounds to be healed. The Brahmin thinks of his daughter, whose vulva might impress the demon as a wound worthy his attention but hardly subject to healing. The demon becomes discouraged by the failure of his arts, particularly when he discovers a second wound underneath the first from which the young lady lets fly a timely fart.[18] Surely we are in the right territory, although half a millennium away. Yet the story does not turn up in Europe in a form resembling Straparola's before 1531 (unless we include Rabelais's 'The Lion, the Fox, and the Old Lady,' recounted in a footnote above). Hans Sachs, bless him, tells the one about the farmer who, at the request of a bear, cuts off his testicles so that he might become a monk. The bear, discomfited beyond measure, threatens the next day to emasculate the farmer in revenge. But true to the version we know, the farmer's wife, dressed in her husband's clothes, assuages the bear and gives him encouragement to endure by showing him her 'tear' before frightening him away with a fart.[19] This story is related to ATU 1133, 'The Gelding of the Bear and the Fetching of the Salve.' Again, from slight records we can infer a circulation adequate to have made the story known in Germany and Italy at the same time, and that Straparola worked from a version in the vicinity, thereby providing the second telling in the European literary record – a place that might easily slip to third or fourth with the discovery of other early renditions.

Of related interest, but presumably not connected to the implicit stemma linking Sachs to Somadeva, is Jacques de Vitry's sermon exemplum based on the foolish and malicious man who, to get even with his wife, mutilated himself and thereby deprived her of all future pleasure,

18 *The Ocean of Story, being Tawney's translation of Somadeva's Katha sarit sagara*, ed. N.M. Penzer, 10 vols. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1968), vol. III, pp. 32–5.

19 Hans Sachs, *Sämtliche Fabeln und Schwänke*, ed. Edmund Goetze & Carl Drescher, 3 vols. (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1900), vol. III, no. 25.

forgetting that in the process he would be harming himself.[20] There is another by Poggio Bracciolini about the man so jealous of his wife that he castrated himself so that if his wife ever became pregnant he could prove her an adulteress.[21] Or consider the following by Bonaventure des Périers in which a priest, carrying on with his landlady, came under the suspicion of her husband, so that at the lady's request, he put out the news of his forthcoming castration, as though this served for proof of his disinterest in things sexual. He goes so far as to inform his family and friends and pays Master Peter a significant sum to feign the procedure. But the landlady's husband, seeing through the ruse, paid Master Peter double the sum to turn it into a reality, and thus the priest endured in earnest the unkindest cut of all.[22] The topic of castration under a variety of guises and motifs was a popular one and seemed always good for a laugh in those hearty days of cock fights and public executions. What all these stories confirm, including Straparola's, is that *couilles* are synecdochic for the man, the 'witnesses' (testari) to an essential virile condition upon which all further social credibility of a masculine persuasion depends, and that any man foregoing them lightly is deserving of ridicule.

20 'On Self-Mutilation to Spite His Wife' in *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermones Vulgares of Jacques de Vitry*, ed. Thomas Frederick Crane (London: Folklore Society, 1890), no. 22, pp. 7–8.

21 *Les facéties de Pogge* (Paris: Garnier Frères, ca. 1900), no. 225, pp. 277–8.

22 This story originated, no doubt, in the sixty-fourth tale of *Les cent nouvelles nouvelles*, ed. Roger Dubuis (Lyons: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1991), pp. 252–5. It is concerned with a clergyman who was a practical joker, so that when a castration specialist came to town, he proposed that they set up a false operation in which he would spin about at the last moment and avoid injury. But the host plays the better joke by paying the specialist double to whack them both off before the *curé* could execute his manoeuvre. The news of the castrated priest travels quickly thereafter, to the alarm of a few women but the universal delight of the men.

VI. Fable 3
The Widow's Broken Promise

CATERUZZA

Polissena, a widow, has several lovers. Her son, Panfilio, reproves her, whereupon she promises to mend her conduct if he refrains from his scratching. He agrees to this, but his mother dupes him, and finally they both go back to their original ways.

Once a woman is thoroughly wedded to a certain practice, whether it is good or bad, she finds it hard to abstain, because the habits learned from sustained usage she will keep to the end of her days. I propose now to tell you the story of a young widow who could not break off the wanton life she had for some time been living. Even when in loving kindness her own son reproved her, the crafty dame played a wily trick upon him to carry on with her evil ways. You'll hear about all this in the course of my tale and fully understand.

Gracious ladies, not long ago in the splendid and renowned city of Venice, there lived a pretty widow named Polissena, still young in years and exceedingly beautiful in person, but of a very low estate. To her husband, who is now dead, this woman had borne a son named Panfilio, a youth of good parts, a virtuous life, and praiseworthy manners, and who by trade was a goldsmith. Because Polissena was young, handsome, and graceful, there were many gallants who cast amorous eyes upon her and wooed her persistently, among them some of the principal nobles of the city. Because in her earlier days she had tasted freely of the pleasures of the world and of the sweet delights of love, she was not slow in giving assent to the solicitations of her wooers and so delivered herself up, both body and soul, to all those who would have her. Her temper was so hot and amorous that in no wise would she confine herself to the endearments of just one or two – which in a woman so young and widowed so early in life would have been but a venial fault. But she granted

her favours to all comers, having no regard whatsoever for her dead husband's honour or her own.

Panfilio, enforced to witness her shameful behaviour, was tormented nearly to death by it and suffered greatly, as may well be supposed. Living from day to day with his soul vexed by these displeasures and often feeling that the burden of his disgrace was more than he could bear, the wretched youth took counsel with himself whether it wouldn't be better for him to slay his mother outright. But when he remembered that she had given him life, he abandoned such a cruel intent and resolved instead to see if he could prevail upon her with words and induce her to adopt a more proper style of life. One day he seized an opportune moment. Sitting down beside his mother, he addressed her affectionately, 'My beloved and honoured mother, it's with the greatest grief and distress that I bring myself to speak, and I'm certain you'll not refuse to listen carefully to what I have to say. It is something I've kept closely hidden in my own heart until this moment. Formerly I believed you to be wise, prudent, and circumspect. But now, to my great sorrow, I know too well that you are none of these things, which makes me so grieved that I wish to God I were as far from you as I am near to you now. As I see it, you're involved in the most scandalous life imaginable, one that stains your own honour and the good name of my late father. But if you won't have any regard for you own reputation, I beg you at the least to show some consideration for me, seeing that I'm your only son and the only person you can depend upon as a firm and faithful support in your old age.'

His mother, hearing him talk like this, fell to laughing and went about her business. Panfilio, seeing that she wasn't in the least affected by his entreaties, resolved not to waste any more breath over it, but to let her go on as she pleased. Then a few days later, by a stroke of ill fortune, Panfilio became infected with the itch and in so malignant a form that he was almost like a leper. Besides, the weather was then very cold, which prevented him from finding relief. In the evenings poor Panfilio would sit near the fire, its heat inflaming his blood all the more, aggravating the itch tenfold and causing him to scratch non-stop, working him nearly into a frenzy. One evening, sitting in front of the fire tenderly rubbing his scabies, one of his mother's lovers came to the house and the two of them carried on their love banter for a long time right in front of him. The miserable fellow, besides being annoyed by his irritating scabs, was saddened at heart by the sight of his mother's dalliance. When her lover finally left, Panfilio, still scratching his lesions, said to her, 'Mother, some time back I exhorted you to restrain your lust and abandon this evil and

ill-mannered life, which not only shames you, but injures me, your son. Still, like the wanton wench you are, you turned a deaf ear to what I had to say, preferring to carry on with the guilty indulgence of your carnal appetites rather than hear my counsel. Ah, my dear mother! I entreat you to have done with this disgraceful way of living. Keep that honour which is your duty to preserve and cast this shame from you to avoid killing me with grief and shame. Don't you realize that you could be called to account at any moment, inasmuch as death is always by our side? Don't you hear what evil things are said of you at every corner?' And all the while he spoke, he kept up the chafing.

Polissena, when she heard his preaching and saw his scratching, then and there planned a joke to play on him, hoping thereby to put a stop to his complaints about her conduct. She did it so adroitly, in fact, that it had exactly the outcome she predicted. Turning to her son with a mischievous smile, she said, 'Panfilio, you're forever grieving and complaining to me about the evil life I lead. Well, I confess that my life is not entirely upright and that your caveats and counsels mark you out for a good son. But I ask you now whether you'll do one single thing to please me as proof that you're as jealous of my honour as you protest. If you'll consent to this, for my part I promise to place myself in your hands, to have done with all my lovers, and to lead a good and holy life. But if you fail to gratify me in this one respect, well then I'll pay no more attention to your wishes and give myself up to practices more vicious than any I've indulged in before.'

Longing to see his mother return to an honest way of life more than anything else in the world, he made her this answer, 'Mother, command anything of me you want, for even if you asked me to throw myself into the fire and be consumed to ashes I'd gladly do it for you if that would free you from the shame and infamy of the life you're now leading.'

'Listen carefully then to what I'm about to say,' said Polissena, 'and consider my words, for if you carry out diligently the injunctions I lay upon you, everything that you wish for will be fully granted to you. If not, the turn of affairs will only increase your scorn and damnation.'

'I bind myself to observe and perform any duty or task you may put upon me,' said Panfilio.

'Then,' replied his mother, 'I'll tell you what I require, which is nothing more arduous, my son, than that you promise not to scratch yourself for three whole evenings, and then I'll promise to satisfy your wishes.'

Upon hearing his mother's proposition, Panfilio sat for some time thinking it over, knowing full well, with his itching craze, that her conditions

would not prove easy to keep. Nevertheless he accepted them and, as a token of good faith, shook hands with her to seal the bargain. When the first evening rolled around, quitting his workshop, Panfilio went home, threw off his cloak, and began walking up and down the room. After a little, finding himself somewhat cold, he sat down in a corner of the chimney close to the fire, and then, provoked by the heat, the troublesome itch began to molest him so sharply that he was greatly tormented and longed to scratch himself to get some relief. Cunning jade that she was, his mother had taken care to have a fierce, hot fire on the hearth, warming Panfilio all the more. Now when she saw him writhing and stretching like a snake, she said to him, 'Panfilio, what's the matter with you? Watch out that you don't break your promise. If you keep your word, I'll assuredly keep mine.'

To this Panfilio answered, 'Never doubt my constancy, mother. Make sure you stay resolved yourself, because I'm keeping my pledge.'

All the while they were speaking, they were both of them raging with desire, the one to scratch his itching hide, the other to find herself once more with one or other of her lovers.

So the first evening went by, bringing great discomfort both to mother and son. When the second came, Polissena again caused a large fire to be made. Then with a good supper prepared, she awaited her son's return. Firmly set on keeping his word, Panfilio clenched his teeth and put up with his trouble as well as he could and thus the second evening went by without any misadventure. Polissena, when she saw how steadfast Panfilio was in his determination, and considering how two evenings had already gone by without him once scratching himself, she feared she might lose after all and began to feel some regrets. All this while, her amorous fury greatly tormented her. It was her incentive to find something, anything, to set her son scratching so she could get back to her lovers' embraces. The next evening she prepared a most delicate supper with plenty of costly and heady wine and then waited for her son's return. When Panfilio came in and noticed the unaccustomed luxury of their evening meal, he was taken aback. Turning to his mother, he said, 'Why on earth have you set out such a princely feast as this, mother? Can it be possible that you've really changed your mind?'

To this Polissena made answer, 'Certainly not, my son. I'm more firmly set in my purpose than ever. Yet the thought struck me that you work hard every day at your trade from early morn till nightfall, and beside this I couldn't fail to notice how sorely this accursed itch has worn and emaciated your body, almost leaving no life in you. So I felt compassion

for your suffering and decided to make you a fancier dish than we usually have so that you can regain your strength and your nature will be enabled to withstand the torments you suffer from the itch.'

Young and simple as he was, Panfilio didn't detect his mother's cunning scheme, or see the snake hidden among the flowers of her kindness, but sat down to the table with her, himself still close to the fire, and began eating with a zest and drinking his wine with a merry heart. Meanwhile, the cunning and malicious Polissena kept stoking the flames, poking the logs, and blowing the embers to make them burn more fiercely, plying the poor fellow with the delicate and savoury dishes, seasoned up with all manner of spices that would make his blood more inflamed with the food and the heat of the fire, and thereby force him to scratch his itch. And indeed, at the last, when Panfilio had sat for a time close to the hearth and filled his belly to repletion, such a fury of itching came over him that he thought he would die if he couldn't scratch himself. Still, by twisting his body and fidgeting now to this side and now that, he continued to endure the torment as best he could.

But after a while the heat of the food, which had been carefully salted and seasoned, and the Greek wine, and the scorching fire so sorely inflamed his blood that the wretched Panfilio found his torment greater than he could bear. So tearing open his shirt to lay bare his chest and untrussing his hose, then turning up his sleeves over his elbows, he set to scratching himself with so much abandon that the blood ran down like sweat from every part. Turning to his mother, who was laughing heartily to herself, he cried in a loud voice, 'Let each go back to his own trade! Each back to his own profession!'

Although she saw clearly that the game was now hers, the mother feigned her sorrow, saying to Panfilio, 'My son, what folly is this of yours? What is it that you want to do? Is this the way you keep your promises to me? It goes for a fact now that you'll never again be able to throw it in my teeth that I haven't kept faith with you.'

Panfilio listened, scratching himself with all his might at the same time, and answered his mother with a troubled mind, 'Let's for the future just follow the bent that each likes best, mother. You go about your business and I'll go about mine.' And from that hour the son never again dared question his mother about the course of her life, and so she returned to her usual marketing, now trading brisker than ever.

All the listeners were mightily pleased with Cateruzza's fable, and after they had spent a while laughing, the Signora called upon the damsel

to propound her enigma, and she, being disinclined to interrupt the accustomed order of the entertainment, smilingly gave it in these words:

> What is the thing we ladies prize:
> Five finger's breadth will tell its size;
> Divers fair nooks you find inside;
> No outlet, though the gate is wide.
> The first attempt will give us pain,
> For free access is hard to gain;
> But later it will grow long and straight,
> Or large and short, t'accommodate
> The shape of him that doth employ
> His pains to work this pleasant toy.
> It's always ready to oblige
> The user's taste, whate'er the size.

Caterruzza's obscurely worded enigma gave abundant details for the ladies and gentlemen to consider. But no matter how carefully they debated it from every point and turned it over and over in their minds, they were not able to hit upon its real interpretation. Wherefore the prudent Cateruzza, seeing that they were all still wandering in obscurity and unable to grasp the meaning of her riddle, said promptly, 'So as not to keep this honourable company any longer in suspense, I will forthwith give the interpretation of my enigma, while submitting myself also to the judgment of others who may better understand and interpret it than myself. My riddle signifies nothing other than the glove you wear to protect your hand. This, you know, will sometimes cause you slight hurt when you first put it on, but once on soon accommodates itself to your pleasure.'

The explanation was held to be quite satisfactory by the honourable company, and when Cateruzza had ceased speaking, the Signora gave sign to Lauretta, who was sitting at Vicenza's side, to take her turn in the storytelling. Then with a pretty boldness of manner and speech, Lauretta turned her fair face towards Bembo, and said, 'Signor Antonio, it were a great shame, kindly and gallant gentleman as you are, if you, with your usual grace and talent, did not tell the company some fable. For my part, I would willingly relate one, but just now I can't call one to mind that would be pleasing and funny at the same time. Therefore, I beg you, Signor Antonio, that you perform the office in my place, and if you grant me this favour, I'll ever consider myself beholden to you.'

Bembo, who had no thought of telling a story that evening, answered, 'Signora Lauretta, although I feel myself most unfit for the task, yet because a request from you is as powerful with me as a command, I will accept the charge you lay upon me, and will strive to satisfy your wishes as much as I possibly can.' And the Signora, having given her gracious permission, he began his story in these words.

VI.3 Commentary

This story has no known sources. Rather, it is a vignette or a social anecdote, putatively true, and in fact, in a more mundane way, it could have been so. It does not have the properties of a folk tale, but illustrates, instead, a real or imagined proverb about the necessity of scratching that which itches. As in the tale of Modesta and her collection of shoes, the material counterparts to her sex life (V.5), in this story Panfilio's itch from scabies or the scurf becomes the graphic counterpart to Polisenna's 'itch' for sexual partners. In that regard, the story turns on the semantic plurality of the word insofar as any compulsive craving for the pleasures of the flesh may be referred to metaphorically as an itch, arising from the evolutionarily selected propensity for irritated or infected skin to signal a relentless need for chafing as one of the body's adaptive features. Such was the birth of a metaphor and a verity – that what itches is a manifest destiny to seek release through friction. The story arises in pitting one instinct to fricative satisfaction against another in a contest of abstention, of mind over matter, or will over instinct.

By these terms, the conflict arising over a widow's gaiety and her son's offended sense of modesty and decency will be resolved according to the logic of a game or contest. The mother, unwilling to give up her lovers, and the son, outraged by her shameful ways, had come to an impasse. Best to let the conditions of a contest determine the outcome by both agreeing to a set of rules. The first to acquiesce to the itch, she in dalliance, he in scratching, would cede to the wishes of the other. The rest of the story is about the cheating, or surreptitious advantage, taken by Polisenna whereby, in showing her son the utmost of consideration, she exacerbates his instinct to scratch to an irresistible level of intensity. Her ploy is predicated on medical knowledge then current, that foods and wines are calibrated according to their degrees of heat, flatuosity, and venereal incitement. Rich meats and spicy wines were provocative, inflammatory, aphrodisiac, and prickly. Thus, under guise of comfort and joy, she warmed her son, both within and without, with food and fire, driving

him to frenzy. The *peripeteia* of the entire tale is a scratch fest that draws blood, with the simultaneous acknowledgment of defeat and the concession that from thenceforward his mother could follow her will. From three days' abstinence she gained a widow's licence.

The social and legal circumstances of this vignette are insufficiently drawn to make of it a sociological document pertaining to the family, the mores of widows, a male code of honour, or legal regulations. Quite simply, Polisenna was determined to have her lovers to the chagrin of her son, and the son was determined to curtail her activities for the sake of his deceased father, the reputation of the household, and by extension his own place in the mercantile community. Nevertheless, it allows for questions about a son's lien on his widowed mother's sex life, legally, socially, or psychologically, and about a woman's right to ignore him. In Calderón's Spain of nearly a century later, the issue was vitally alive in such plays as *La dama duende*, in which a widowed sister's capers provoke a narrowly averted bloody showdown between her high-strung brothers exercising their rights over her person and an innocent friend staying in their house. Honour underwrites Straparola's story, but lacks the martial force of a revenge culture, even though the thought of murder passes through Panfilio's mind. There is, nevertheless, a sense of honour that pertains even to the minimalist of nuclear families: that what a mother does reflects upon the son; that her life is in violation of a son's emotional investment in her purity; and that both their lives are under the invigilating scrutiny of a censorious community. Ultimately, however, the tale is about a trick played on an unsuspecting son by a mother determined to resist all constraints upon her social life. By the terms of the story, we are brought to champion her cunning in securing her pleasure and autonomy. The story goes no further, so that what Polisenna may represent as a destabilizing social force in casting her glances at all manner of men in a potentially closed community, or as the catalyst to a son's sex nausea, or the cry for widow's rights are not demonstrable parts of the story.

VI. Fable 4
Who Will Become Abbess?

ANTONIO BEMBO

A dispute having arisen between three sisters of a convent as to which of them would fill the post of abbess, the bishop's vicar general decrees that the office should fall to the one who gives the most eminent proof of her worthiness.

Modesty lends a great charm to all who possess it, yet judgment I rate even higher when it is in the possession of a man who knows himself. With the permission of the gracious ladies around me, I propose to tell a story no less witty than beautiful, although in certain ways it's silly and indecent. I will hence do my best to relate it to you with as much modesty and propriety as is due and proper. But if by chance any part of my discourse affronts your chaste ears, I would now forestall your pardon for the offence by entreating you to hold back your censure for another time.

In the noble city of Florence there is a certain convent with an illustrious reputation for holiness of life and pious practices. The name of it I will not reveal just now for fear of marring its glorious name with a spot of scandal. It came about some years ago that the abbess of this house, afflicted by many grave infirmities, came to the end of her days and rendered up her soul to her Creator. She being dead and her body buried with all the solemn rites of the Church, the surviving sisters called a meeting of the chapter by the ringing of the bell, so that all who had a voice in the matter should be called together. The vicar general of the bishop, a prudent and learned man who desired that the election of the new abbess should be carried out according to the strict letter of the law, gave word to the assembled sisters to be seated. Then he spoke, 'Most respected ladies, you know well enough, I'm certain, that the sole reason for gathering you here today is that you may make choice of a new head over you all. In such a case, it behoves each of you, at the bidding of the

conscience which is in each of you, to elect that one who seems to you the best fitted for the office.' All the sisters agreed that such was the course they were minded to follow.

As it came about, there were three nuns in the convent among whom there was a very keen competition as to which of them should become the new abbess, because each had a certain following among the sisters, each had the respect of other superiors, and each had a great desire for the title. While the sisters were preparing themselves to elect their new head, one of the three nuns just mentioned, Sister Veneranda, rose from her seat, turned towards the other sisters, and addressed them: 'My sisters and my children whom I hold in such high affection, you are all aware of the loving zeal with which I have bestowed my best energies in the service of the convent, not only growing old but veritably decrepit in the performance of my duties. Therefore, on account of my long devotion and my advanced age, it seems only just and proper that I should be elected as your head. If my long-continued labours, the vigils and prayers of my youth fail to persuade you to choose me, at least let my old age and infirmities appeal to your consideration, which should compel your reverence above every other thing. It must be apparent to you all that I can expect to live but a short time longer. Assure yourselves that before long I will leave my place to another among you. For this reason, my well-beloved daughters, I beg that you will give me this brief season of ease and pleasure, keeping foremost in your hearts the good counsels I have always given you.' In this manner she ended her speech and burst into a fit of weeping.

The appeal of the first sister concluded, Sister Modestia, a woman of middle age, rose from her seat and spoke in this manner: 'Mothers and sisters of mine, you have heard and understood the claims openly stated by Sister Veneranda, who happens to be the most advanced in age among us. But this fact, in my estimation, does not give her a special claim to be chosen as our abbess inasmuch as she is now come to such a time of life that senility has diminished her powers of counsel, so that before long she will herself require control and care instead of controlling us. But if you, in your mature judgment, give proper consideration to my good estate, to the trust you can place in me, remembering my ancestry, surely you cannot, in all conscience, choose anyone but me to be your lady abbess. As every one of you knows, our convent is greatly harassed by legal suits and procedures and is much in need of support and protection. What greater defence could you provide to our house against its adversaries than the endorsement and patronage of my family, who would

give not only their wealth and goods in your defence, but their very lives if I were elected your head.'

Hardly had Sister Modestia resumed her seat before Sister Pacifica rose to her feet, and with a show of deep humility, she spoke in the following way: 'I am well assured, most honoured sisters – in fact, I take it for certain that you all, for the prudent and well-advised ladies that you are, will feel no little astonishment that I, who came as though it were but yesterday to abide among you, should now desire to put myself on the same level, or to even supersede the two most honoured sisters who have already spoken. On the score of age and experience these ladies are far above me. But if you consider carefully, with the eyes of your understanding, how many and great my qualifications are, surely you will rate the freshness of my youth over the decrepit age of the one and the family claims of the other. As all of you must well know, I brought with me here a very rich dowry that has enabled our convent, very nearly fallen into ruin through the passage of time, to be rebuilt from foundation to roof-tree. I won't mention as well the houses and farms that bring to our convent every year such vast sums in rents. On account of these, along with my other qualifications, and in recompense for the many great benefits you have received from me, it is your bounden duty to choose me for your abbess, seeing that your food and raiment depend upon my endowment and upon no other.' Having thus spoken, she sat down.

With the discourses of the three sisters brought to this conclusion, the vicar general summoned all the nuns into his presence one after the other and asked them to write down the name of the sister they wished to be raised to the dignity of abbess according to their conscience. When this was done, and all the sisters had recorded their votes, it was discovered that each was equal to the others in the votes cast – there was no difference between them. Then a most acrimonious dispute arose among the sisters, some championing the first, some the second, and some the third for their head. Nor was there any means found to pacify their contention. The bishop's vicar could plainly see how doggedly obstinate each faction was, and he realized, in light of the special qualifications presented, that each of the three sisters might be promoted to the honourable office of abbess. Thus he tossed about in his mind to find ways and means for retaining one for the post without causing undue offence or disaffection to the others. He then ordered the three contending sisters to be summoned into his presence and there he addressed them: 'Well-beloved sisters, I comprehend fully your many virtues and qualifications, and I must say that any one of you would be in the highest sense

worthy to be chosen abbess of this convent. But among you three honourable sisters the contest for election has been incredibly rigorous and the votes cast have produced a deadlock. For this reason, and to the end that you may continue your peaceful lives in love and tranquillity, I hereby propose to you what I hope will be a means of election that will end this contention to the complete and mutual satisfaction of everyone. The method I propose it this, that each of you three sisters who have made a bid to succeed to the office of abbess will take the next three days to prepare some particular feat, one that is praiseworthy in itself and worthy of remembrance, to be performed in the presence of us all. Whichever of you shows herself able to perform a work of the greatest glory and virtue by the good consent of all the sisters shall duly be chosen Lady Abbess, to whom shall be accorded all the honour and reverence belonging by right to the said office.'

This proposition of the vicar general won the approbation of all three sisters, who with one accord promised to observe the conditions laid down. When the appointed day had come for the trial and all the nuns belonging to the convent were convened in the chapter house, the vicar general called before him the three sisters aspiring for the high post of abbess and questioned them individually as to whether they had given due thought to their affairs by performing some noteworthy feat as he had ordained. They all answered that they had. So as soon as all were seated, sister Veneranda, the oldest of them all, took her place in the middle of the floor. She then drew from her hood a little Damascus needle which was fastened there, lifted up her clothes and her undergown in front, and raising one leg to the side, in the presence of the vicar and the entire sisterhood, she pissed so delicately through the eye of the needle that not a single drop fell to the ground without first passing through the hole. Seeing this, the vicar general and the nuns all thought for certain that Veneranda must become the abbess, for it seemed impossible that anyone could do a more cunning feat.

When this was over, Sister Modestia, who was the second eldest, rose from her seat and sat herself in the centre of the chapter house. She drew out a die and laid it on a bench with the five-point side uppermost. She then took five little grains of millet seed and placed one in each of the five points of the die. Baring her backside and bringing her buttocks near the bench on which she had placed the die, she let fly so great and terrible an explosion that the vicar general and nuns took fright. Now although the fart flew out of the hole in a giant puff, yet it was passed with such adroitness and dexterity that the grain that was in the middle

spot stayed in its place, while the other four entirely disappeared and were nevermore seen.

The entire assembly considered this feat as wonderful as the first, yet kept their peace, waiting to see what sister Pacifica would so. She presented herself in the middle of the chapter house to perform a feat too agile for the aged, but possible for a young hoyden like her. Pulling from her pocket a solid peach-stone, she tossed it in the air, and then instantly baring her backside and pointing it up, she caught the stone between her buttocks and there she squeezed it so vigorously that she crunched it up smaller than the finest dust.

Then the vicar general, sage and well-counselled man that he was, forthwith began in all sobriety to confer with the sisterhood and duly consider the performances of all three sisters. But finding within a short time that there was little prospect of a consensus, he took time to deliberate over what the final decision should be. Inasmuch as there was nothing in his learned books that might guide him in making his judgment, he abandoned the matter as insoluble. Even to this day the dispute is still pending. Therefore, I call upon you, most learned and prudent ladies, to disentangle this question which, by reason of its importance, I would myself never dare approach.

This story of Bembo's proved to be more a source of mirth to the men than to the ladies, seeing that for the shame of it all, the ladies hid their faces in their laps and dared not look up. But the men discussed first one incident and then another of the story they had just heard, finding great diversion in the matter, until at last the Signora, disapproving such unbecoming laughter, and aware too that the ladies sat as though they had been transformed into so many marble statues, commanded silence and so put an end to their profligate mirth, in order that Bembo might follow the rules and give his enigma. But he, having already said more than was appropriate, turned towards the fair Lauretta and said, 'It's now your turn, Signora Lauretta, to set an enigma. I may have satisfied you in one matter, but that is no reason why I should satisfy you in another.'

Having no wish to put up resistance because he wouldn't do his duty, cheerfully she began.

My comrade awaits me for the bout,
With open'd legs and arms stretched out.
I mount atop, my mate below,
And getting ready, off we go.

Then something long I take in hand,
And temper it with an unguent bland,
And place it where it ought to go,
Then work it featly to and fro,
And swing and sway it up and down,
Until success my efforts crown.

Everyone declared that the enigma proposed by Lauretta was no less entertaining than Bembo's story, but insofar as few of the company could fathom its meaning, the Signora directed her to give the interpretation. Then Lauretta, in order not to impose further delay, spoke up, 'My riddle means that there were two men who set to work to saw a huge beam of wood in pieces. One of these took in his hand the saw, which is a long thing, and went up above, while the other remained in the sawpit beneath. The first then smeared the saw with oil and placed it in the fissure of the beam, and then the two companions working together ran the saw up and down in order to accomplish their task.'

This ingenious interpretation of the enigma gave the greatest pleasure to all the company and, after the talk had died down, the Signora gave word to Eritrea to begin telling her fable, which she delivered as follows without any further need for persuasion.

VI.4 Commentary

Straparola's choice of a tale for presentation by Antonio Bembo is a *conte mignon* about nuns in competition for the leadership of their community who, after making solemn appeals tainted by a hypocritical show of humility replete with the pious rhetoric of 'my sisters and my children,' 'high affection,' and 'loving zeal,' arrive at an impasse in the democratic process verging on acrimony. In order to assign this indivisible prize, the presiding vicar calls upon each candidate to perform a deed that is praiseworthy in itself and meritorious of future fame. Each, with ceremonial solemnity, performs a feat of precision, whether in pissing, farting, or dexterity with the gluteus maximus. This *pince-sans-rire* convent humour is hardly anti-clerical, really; the point is to have those in the society deemed models of propriety and discretion perform these remarkably scatological feats. There is nothing to suggest that anything of its kind had ever transpired or was in any way typical of convent life (although the invention is worthy of Swift in his Lilliputian satire on the assigning of offices in the British parliamentary system). This is mere inventive

fantasizing. If there is satire, it is in the three opening campaign speeches, the second of which is about entitlements based on ancestry, legal skills, and family patronage as opposed to piety, service, and seniority, while the third admits that she has neither age nor experience, but reminds the community that their material well-being is entirely due to the largesse of her family. They are depictions of convent politics and a reminder that these institutions were often beholden to the world of wealth and power.

Bembo presumably achieved his desired effect upon his audience, for the story is a social provocation of a particular kind. The men laughed openly, exclaiming over the merits of the respective talents presented, while the ladies, in show of real or feigned embarrassment, looked down into their laps in shame and confusion, until the Signora halted the guffaws and restored them to activities in which the two genders might negotiate with equality and propriety. The story, with its delicate indelicacy and calculated immodesty, had sundered the group, exposing differences according to gendered predilections. Tellingly, the ladies' reaction was prescient in terms of the future of the story, for it was among the first to be suppressed in subsequent editions of the *Notti*. Moreover, the present story is listed in the *Biblioteca Scatologica* and was among the works to elicit the attention of the nineteenth-century critics pioneering in the field of historical pornography.[23]

All of Straparola's former editors are in agreement that this story has no known written sources and that it does not correspond to any story types circulating among the folk in the nineteenth century, so that by right or default, Straparola may enjoy authorial credit. There is slight evidence, however, that a model may have been in circulation, for Pietro Fortini retells the story as no. 18 in his *Giornate delle novelle dei novizi* in a manner similar to the present tale, although the victory in the end is assigned to the elderly nun who urinates through the eye of a needle without spilling a drop – a decision that once again sets the convent wrangling and causes the two losers to quit the community in a huff.[24]

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23 Pierre Jannet, Jean-François Payen, Auguste Veinant, *Bibliotheca Scatologica* (Scatopolis [Paris]: Les Marchands d'aniterges [P. Jannet], [1845], 1850).

24 *Le giornate delle novelle dei novizi*, ed. Adriana Mauriella, 2 vols. (Rome: Salerno, 1988), no. 18 (III.4), vol. I, pp. 321–36. The three sisters are named Contessa, Agnesa, and Cecilia, upon whose respective natures Fortini elaborates considerably. The tale is set in Bologna. When the convent divides up its loyalties into thirds, the bishop is called in and Cecilia, as in Straparola, recounts how the entire church had

The doubt arises because Fortini's chances for reading the story in the *Piacevoli notti* are rather slight, thereby necessitating a common source. (He was a member of a noble Sienese family and died in 1562.) His *novelle* are traditionally assigned to his younger years and were unquestionably written before 1557 (the year in which events culminated in the fall of the Sienese republic). Thus, the period is indeed limited during which Fortini could have lifted and modified the story from Straparola. Inversely, Fortini's work was not published in his lifetime, precluding imitation by Straparola. As in the case of Machiavelli's 'Belfagor,' thought must be given to a common folk tradition known simultaneously in Tuscany and the Veneto. But there are further considerations.

Straparola's debt to Morlini for some twenty or more of the stories to follow is well known, although this story is not among them. Nevertheless, mention must be made here of his story of the three women who find a precious pearl (no. 81), because it too concerns an indivisible prize contested by three women and the appointment of an arbiter who will make his decision based upon an outrageously scatological contest.[25] They agree to abide by the decision of Palemon who proposes that the jewel be awarded to the one who had experienced the most ridiculous or disagreeable misadventure. As can be imagined, his plan becomes the pretext for three remarkably salacious vignettes. The confession of so much ignominy for a pearl carries an irony all its own. The first woman tells of embracing a statue resembling her deceased husband and finding herself riding a priapus from which she could not descend even when, after many hours, a great crowd had assembled to watch. The next and younger tells how she was caught by her husband as she was being mounted horseback style with a bridle in her mouth by a servant boy with a hyperbolical phallus. The third and youngest was pleasuring herself with a rotund leek when her husband entered. She got her skirts down in time, but was made to follow him through the streets with the

been restored at her family's expense down to the beds and dishes. In Straparola's leaner version, the events are reversed and no ruling is deemed possible. Fortini's bishop is likewise confused by so much virtue, and later by so much craft and skill. The tricks are performed only for him and not for the community. But in the end, he is able to decide, and Cecilia, with her precision pissing, becomes the abbess. Arguably, Fortini took his tale from the *Piacevoli notti*, but equally plausible is that both found it in versions current among the popular tales in their respective parts of the country.

25 Girolamo Morlini, *Novelle e favole*, ed. Giovanni Villani (Rome: Salerno, 1983); *Les nouvelles*, trans. Fernand Caussy (Paris: E. Sansot, 1904), no. 81, pp. 184–7.

instrument still in place until she fell down, in full view of all, her skirts over her head, and the vegetable, bloodied by her erotic diligence, was extracted as forage by a passing donkey. Indecision overcomes this judge as well, leaving the reader to determine which is the greatest calamity (or howler) of the three. The analogous structure could have served Straparola as a frame for his invention and Fortini's imitation might have followed as a compliment to our author's wit. The alternative, as stated above, is a common source, not currently known, which would render the Morlini template extraneous. The delicate decision in these matters must likewise be turned over to the judicious reader.

VI. Fable 5
The Virtue of Stones

ERITREA

Father Zefiro works a spell on a youth who was eating the figs in his garden.

It has often been said, dear ladies, that mysterious powers reside within words, herbs, and stones. But stones assuredly may be thought to excel both herbs and words in persuasive virtues, as you will come to understand from this little tale.

There once lived in the city of Bergamo a miserly old priest called Father Zefiro, who, by common report, was said to be possessed of as much wealth as any man of the cloth. This prelate had a garden located beyond the city walls near the Penta Gate, itself surrounded by walls and ditches in such a way that neither man nor beast could get in. It was well planted with fruit trees of every kind, among which there was a great fig tree with branches spreading on all sides. Every season it was laden with beautiful and excellent fruit, which the priest not only enjoyed himself but shared with all the gentlemen and notables of the city. These figs were of a mixed colour between white and purple and they dropped tears of juice like honey. They were so precious that they were guarded every night by a watchman.

When by chance one night he forgot to send the watchman, a youth clambered up into this fig tree. There he chose out the ripest of them and silently set to work to stow them away, skins and all, just as they were, in the storehouse of his belly.

Suddenly, Father Zefiro remembered that there was no guardian in his garden and rushed back, only to see straightway the fellow sitting in the tree eating figs at his leisure. The priest began by begging him to come down, but the boy paid no attention to his words. Father Zefiro then threw himself upon his knees and conjured him by heaven, by earth, by the planets, by the stars, by the elements, and by all the sacred words

written in the scriptures to come down from the tree, but still the youth ate steadily on. Father Zefiro, seeing that he made no progress whatsoever by these solemn appeals, now gathered certain herbs that grew round about in the garden and once more conjured the rascal by the virtues that dwelt therein to come down, but he only clambered up higher so that he could fill himself up more easily.

Then the priest said, 'It is written that "in words, herbs and stones there are secret virtues." I have conjured you by the first two and they have been to no avail in bringing you down from the tree. Now by the virtue of the third I once more conjure you to come down to the ground.' Having said this, he began to hurl stones at the thief with great rancour and fury, smiting him now on the arm, now on the leg, now on the backbone, so that in a short time, all swollen, clobbered, and bruised as he was from the frequent hits, the youth was obliged to come down from his perch. Then he took to flight, dropping all the figs he had stowed away in his shirt. Thus, stones proved themselves superior in power and virtue than either words or herbs.

No sooner was Eritrea at the end of her brief story than the Signora asked her to follow it up with her enigma, which she presented without further delay.

Gallant knights and ladies gay,
Tell me truthfully, I pray;
Answer quickly my behest,
Which bedfellow you like best?
One that's bound close and tight,
One that makes you writhe by night,
Or one that in the evening grey
Drives you from your bed away.
If my speech you fathom well,
Tell me, gentles, quickly tell.

All the listeners were greatly perplexed by Eritrea's cunningly made riddle and none knew what answer to make. But the Signora pressed each to give an opinion, so that one finally gave preference to the trim, tight, and closely clad one, another to the hot, ticklish one that makes you writhe all night, and another to the gay, tricksome one that will not let a man rest in his bed. Yet none of them understood the true signification of the enigma. So Eritrea, seeing their bewilderment, said, 'I think it not good that this gentle company should be left longer in doubt, so I'll say

it outright, that the one which is tight and closely tied is the scurf, which to be cured must be doctored and tied up tight with bandages. The quick, tricksome one is the flux, which constrains a man to rise from his bed at all hours to relieve his belly, while the hot, ticklish one signifies the itch, which towards evening and in the night so heats and enflames a man's skin that he is inclined nearly to tear his flesh with his teeth, as the widow's son did in the tale so elegantly told by Cateruzza a short time ago.'

The pleasant interpretation set forth by Eritrea to her knotty riddle gave general satisfaction, and when the listeners had all taken leave of the Signora, the hour now being late, they went their several ways under promise to return next evening to their customary place of meeting.

The End of the Sixth Night

VI.5 Commentary

Straparola's source for this sketch – it is hardly more than a single episode in demonstration of a proverb turned upside down – is incontestably no. 61 of Girolamo Morlini's *Novellae, fabulae, comoedia*, published in 1520 – a book concerning which there will be more ado in the commentaries to follow.[26] The vignette, that of the wealthy priest who seeks by all the virtues invested in words, herbs, and stones to bring a fig thief down from his precious tree, employs a saying of unknown antiquity, one attributed to the wise Solomon himself, as the basis for the tripartite attack on the felon. The efficacy of stones redeems the dictum when beseeching words and the power of herbs fail. The joke depends upon the recognition of a paradigm shift in which the occult power residing in precious stones is exchanged for rocks as simple projectiles. The reversal, in effect, represents a peasant's or pragmatist's deflation of erudite learning, for according to the original dictum, 'In verbis, herbis, et lapidibus sunt virtutes' (or 'magna est virtus'), all three have great powers, herbs in their pharmaceutical virtues, precious stones in their occult powers through the principle of correspondences or by innate properties, and words through their magic significations, as well as through prayers, curses, and spells. But always among these, whether according to science, magic, or the Scriptures, the greatest was the word, including that 'which

26 Girolamo Morlini, *Novelle e favole*, ed. Giovanni Villani (Rome: Salerno, 1983), pp. 292–5; *Novelle*, trans. Fernand Caussy (Paris: E. Sansot, 1904), pp. 134–5.

was made flesh and dwelt among us.' Thus, while there is a vignette to be imagined in the mind's eye of a recalcitrant poacher and an irate priest trying in incremental fashion to bring him down, the humour turns on the reversal of this bit of official learning. For that reason, the story type must have belonged initially to scholastic culture, featuring a schoolboy send-up of the famous maxim by granting to stones the greatest virtue, as with the proverbial apples that distance doctors when they are aimed right. It is the same joke because the virtue of the fruit suddenly becomes its efficacy as a missile. Such schoolroom spoofing of proverbs provides the opening segment of *The Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolphus,* in which Solomon and the German peasant hero (cited by Luther on more than one occasion) have a contest in which the peasant deflates high wisdom. When Solomon warns, 'Woe to that man that hath a double heart and in both ways will wander,' Marcolphus replies, 'He that will two ways go must either his arse or his breeches tear,' or again, 'Of abundance of the heart the mouth speakest,' to which Marcolphus replies, 'Out of a full womb the arse trompeth.'[27] The genesis of the present story resides in the same cultural nexus.

Those interested in tracing the proverb's history should consult Hans Walther's *Proverbia sententiaeque latinitatis medii aevi: Lateinische Sprichwörter und Sentenzen des Mittelalters.*[28] There, among the several entries, will be found one by an earlier Walther: 'Christus vim verbis, vim gemmis, vim dedit herbis: Verbis maiorem, gemmis herbisque minorem,'[29] again confirming on the grounds of the Scriptures that of the three, gems and herbs come in second. The proverb was known to John Gower who, in his *Confessio Amantis* (last quarter of the fourteenth century), wrote:

> In ston and gras vertu ther is
> Bot yet the bokes tellen this,
> That word above alle erthli thinges
> Is virtuous in his doings
> Wher so it be to evele or goode.[30]

27 Ed. Donald Beecher with Mary Wallis (Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions, 1995), p. 151.

28 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), vol. II, nos. 11787, 14224, 7310, and 2748 (the Walther quotation).

29 Christ gave power to words, gems, and herbs, the most to words, the least to gems and herbs.

30 *Confessio amantis*, bk. VII, in *The English Works of John Gower,* ed. G.C. Macaulay (London: Oxford University Press, 1901), vol. II, p. 82.

The phrase appears in a more comic setting in Henry Chettle's *Kinde-hartes Dream* (1592) embedded in a tooth-drawer's little charm to ease the pain of his patient. First he must write the name and age of the patient on a piece of paper, on top of which he writes 'In verbis, et in herbis, et in lapidibus sunt virtutes,' followed by such 'Chaldean' gibberish as 'Ab illa hurs gibella,' allegedly representing the name of blood devils causing pain that are expelled when the paper is burned with a little frankincense. The very words, still attributed to Solomon, like those of the Mass itself, have become magic.[31]

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the saying remained in wide circulation as a commonplace, an incantation, and a scientific nostrum.[32] Straparola and his predecessors could count on its familiarity as the prerequisite bit of cultural literacy for chuckling at their vignettes, but it remained, at the same time, an operative principle and the subject of heavy philosophical speculation, as in Johann Rudolf Glauber's *Explicatio oder Auslegung über die Wörten Salomonis: In herbis, verbis, et lapidibus, magna est virtus,* in two volumes, published in Amsterdam by Joannem Janssonium in 1664. For in effect, the dictum holds in résumé the underlying principle of every lapidary and herbal and all that pertains to the secret nature of things with which God has invested the world; it is a preamble and mantra to the pursuit of science bent upon discovering those mysteries for the benefit of mankind through the unfolding of the laws of nature and of the universe.[33] It may well be asked, as it was during the Middle Ages, whether words, through their power to name, capture, emblematize, and create, do in fact hold pre-eminence in the philosophical

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31 H[enry] C[hettle], *Kind-hartes Dream* (London: William Wright, 1592 [1593]), p. D4. See also Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1971), p. 180.

32 Giordano Bruno, writing his *Il candelaio* (The Candlebearer) in 1582, assumed that the phrase was familiar to his audience of readers. At the beginning of the third act, Bartolomeo states, 'When philosophers discuss the essence of things they usually begin with the old division: *in verbis, in herbis et in lapidibus*.' It was something like the categories of things represented in 'animal, vegetable, or mineral.' Bartolomeo, ultimately, laments that the saying did not also include 'metals,' for as a pseudo-alchemist he was interested in their value and transformation. *Renaissance Comedy: The Italian Masters*, ed. Donald Beecher (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), vol. II, p. 377.

33 The magic associated with herbs in their occult pharmaceutical actions, in words through incantations and spells, and in precious stones through their semiotic properties corresponding to elements within the body were a part of the mentality of magic that invested all aspects of medieval science. Edward Peters studies related

firmament. When Father Zefiro conjures the youth to descend in the name of words and herbs, he is in fact conjuring in the manner described in such works as the *Clavis* or *Clavicula Salomonis* in which the practitioner in the first conjuration calls upon the demons by the waters and by the sea, by the winds, the whirlwinds, and the tempests, by the virtues of words, herbs, and stones, by all that is in heaven, earth, and hell, and by the holy names of God, for it is in the magic configuration of these incantations that the secret forces may be commanded. This, the greatest of all the medieval grimoires, pretends to have been written by Solomon himself, and to have been rediscovered by Byzantine scholars while repairing his tomb.[34]

Morlini's source would appear to be Lorenzo Abstemio in his *Hecatomythium*, or Franco Sacchetti's Novella 67, the latter related as an event in the life of Messer Valore de' Buondelmonti (d. 1357), in which he explains that he has found greater virtue in a little pebble than in a millstone, or in precious stones, or words, or herbs, and that experience has taught him in which of the three God has placed the greatest virtue. There was once a young man who had gotten into his fig tree. Messer Valore began by testing the power of words in commanding him to come down. Failing that, he proceeded to herbs, but to no greater effect. Then he launched a stone, telling him to get down, and when he started to pick up the second rock the boy descended from the tree in haste.[35] This story dates to the third quarter of the fourteenth century, confirming both the long-standing history of the anecdote and the tradition of writing comic fiction in illustration of proverbs. Alternatively, Morlini's vignette may be an elaboration upon the story as it is told by Abstemius, writing less than thirty years before the publication date of the *Novellae, fabulae …* He tells in a page how a boy pillaging apples made light of the old man's words and mocked his herbal powers, but scampered down

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matters in 'The Medieval Church and State on Superstition, Magic and Witchcraft: From Augustine to the Sixteenth Century,' in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Middle Ages*, ed. Karen Jolly et al. (London: Athlone Press, 2002), pp. 173–245.

34 *The Key of Solomon the King* (Clavicula Salomonis), trans. Samuel L.M. Mathers (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, & Trübner, 1909), chap. IV, the First Conjuration.

35 Franco Sacchetti, *Il trecentonovelle*, ed. Emilio Faccioli (Turin: Einaudi, 1970), pp. 171–2. Undoubtedly one of the most amusing accounts of the virtues of stones is found in Boccaccio's story (VIII.3) in which two men impose upon Calendrino's ignorance by telling him of the remarkable powers of the 'heliotrope' stone to make its bearer invisible. *Decameron*, trans. J.M. Rigg, 2 vols. (London: Navarre Society, n.d.), vol. II, p. 188.

with the hurling of stones, 'lapidesque quibus gremium impleverat, in iuvenem iactens, illum descendere & abire coegit.'[36] There the inquest into the matter of sources must rest, without absolute assurance that Morlini relied upon either, so many were the potential contributors.

It is revealing, nevertheless, that the idea of reversing this proverb in casting stones to efficient ends also circulated outside of Italy, reflecting the pragmatic humour of other times and places. Straparola's story is anticipated in England by a quarter of a century in *C Mery Tales and Quicke Answeres* (1535?), in which an old man conjures a boy out of his apple tree with stones, repeating the same familiar tripartite structure based on the old adage.[37]

Nevertheless, boys in fig trees are largely an Italian matter, while the *böse Weib* is the matter of the Germans, and hence the adaptation of the plot to the taming of a shrew in Pauli's *Schimpf und Ernst* (1522).[38] The prelude explains that in the time of King Solomon, his praise was great throughout the land. He would give audience to anyone, although his answers were short and enigmatic. Those who lingered to question him were conducted to the door. When a man appeared before him complaining of his evil wife, the king replied, 'In words, plants, and stones are great powers.' Although the man was baffled, there was no time for

36 *Laurentii Abstemii Maceratensis, Hecatomyhthium primum hoc est centum fabulae* (Venice, 1520), no. 91, pp. O1r–v. Lorenzo Abstemio (Laurentius Abstemius) wrote Latin fables that were first published by Valla in Venice in 1495. He was born in Macerata around 1440 and was still active in 1505, working in Urbino at the time of Guidobaldo and Pope Alexandre VI. His fables were translated into several vernaculars, including English by Roger L'Estrange in his *Fables of Aesop and other eminent Mythologists* (London, 1692). No. 91 deals with the matter of the present story. See also *L'hecatomythium, ou fables* (Orléans: Gibier, 1572).

37 *Mery Tales and Quicke Answeres* in *Shakespeare jest-books*, ed. W. Carew Hazlitt (London: H. Sotheran & Co., 1881), no. 80, p. 98. See also 'Tales and Quick Answers,' in *A Hundred Merry Tales* (1526), ed. P.M. Zall (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), pp. 301–2. (In the original, fol. Hiir).

38 Johannes Pauli, *Schimpf und Ernst*, ed. Johannes Bolte (Berlin: Herbert Stussenrauch, 1924; Hildesheim, Georg Olms Verlag, 1974), no. 134. See also the story below, 'Conjugal Correction' (XII.3). For further tales on the correcting of wives by throwing stones after the failure of words and herbs, see the list by Johannes Bolte, *Schimpf und Ernst*, vol. III, p. 293, which includes references to Hans Sachs, *Das bös Weyb mit den Worten, Würtzen und Stein gut zu machen* (The evil wife made good by words, herbs, and stones), 1553, *Fastnachtsspiele*, no. 49, vol. IV, p. 125; and Adolf Holtzmann, *Indische Sagen* (Karlsruhe: G. Holtzmann, 1846), vol. II, p. 258.