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**The Plastered Female Face in Fifteenth-Century Florence:
A Translation of Luigi Pulci's *Le galee per Quaracchi***

In June of 1466, Nannina de' Medici, granddaughter of Cosimo de' Medici and sister of Lorenzo *il Magnifico*, married Bernardo Rucellai, the youngest son of Giovanni Rucellai. Spread over three days, the festivities took place in the piazza in front of the newly completed Palazzo Rucellai.¹ The dramatic setting and sheer opulence of the Rucellai-Medici *nozze* are suggested by a fifteenth-century *cassone* panel depicting the marriage of Esther, a biblical story here transposed to contemporary Florence (Fig. 1): Against a monumental backdrop of family palace and parish church, the king and his retinue process across the piazza toward an Albertian loggia, lushly outfitted for a wedding banquet; guests draped in gold brocade blend seamlessly into the gilded tapestry hanging at their backs, while bride and groom, equally encrusted, are wed in the foreground. Yet the display that interests me most is not the magnificence of the Rucellai-Medici wedding but the spectacle of the honeymooners—and the beauty secrets of the luminous new bride.



1 Marco del Buono Giamberti and Apollonio di Giovanni di Tomaso, *The Story of Esther*, ca. 1460–1470, tempera and gold on wood, 44.5 x 140.7 cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1918, inventory number 18.117.2.

An *impresa amorosa*, or commemorative marriage print, shows the eighteen-year-old newlyweds embarking upon their own ship of fortune (Fig. 2). I say (their own) because the source for this image was the groom's father's emblem, a complex allegory of Fortune as the mast of a merchant ship in full sail.² But here, the patriarchal image has been pirated—or, rather, capsized: In place of a classicizing female nude, a semi-nude Bernardo stands as the mast, while an ornately outfitted Nannina sits at the helm. This topsy-turvy image and its accompanying inscription—«I let Fortune take me where she will, hoping in the end to have good luck»—allude to the freewheeling spirit of the honeymooners.

For the first eight years of their marriage, the couple made the Rucellai ancestral villa at Quaracchi their retreat of choice. Nannina was even called *«La Quaracchina»*,



2 Anonymous (Florentine), *The Ship of Fortune*, ca. 1460–1470, engraving, 258 x 169 cm, London, British Museum.

enamored as she was of the estate. Located about five miles northwest of Florence along the Arno, the suburban property provided shelter from the rigid social codes of the city. *Lo Specchio*, or *The Looking Glass*, as the villa was named, was a carefree court where rules were relaxed, if not altogether reversed.³

In 1471, the Medici-sponsored poet Luigi Pulci penned a *frottola*, a popular secular song, for Nannina, in which he enumerates all the cosmetics and cures required by the Florentine elite for a fête in the country.⁴ Pulci's lengthy inventory of natural ingredients and surgical instruments, though satirical, is clearly based on contemporaneous books of secrets, or recipes.⁵ Thus, not only is this *frottola* an invaluable primary source for understanding the materials and techniques of early modern aestheticism, but it also, in its encyclopedic range, calls attention to the dangerous lengths some women went to achieve an ideal beauty. From the harmless (pumpkin, elder flower, and lily) to the toxic (mercury, lead white, and arsenic), nature could either produce desired effects or destroy the body. Indeed, Pulci's made-up bodies would soon expire.

Having listed all of the lading, which goes on for pages, Pulci concludes his lampoon on the primping and preening habits of Nannina and her circle by describing the abrupt dissolving of the house party once the cosmetics and remedies have all run dry. Dresses may go out of style, but they don't evaporate; likewise, stockings may wear thin, but they don't melt, get rinsed off, or become absorbed. In other words, what is the spillover of evanescence upon identity? How long can the plastered faces of Pulci's *frottola* stay afloat?

Perhaps not surprisingly, Bernardo and Nannina's ship of fortune, loaded to the gunwales, would eventually sink. In 1474, on the verge of bankruptcy, Giovanni Rucellai, once the third richest man in Florence, was forced to sell *The Looking Glass*, sending the couple back to the city—behind the façade of Palazzo Rucellai. The honeymoon was over.

The galleys bound for Quaracchi
set sail to the winds
and reached safe harbor—
despite the cargo within—
thanks to some Jack,
from Contraband City,
and two local bosses,
who gave the order
to ferry the booty
straight to the border.

The clerk from Capalle
made a very long list
of all of the lading,
which went something like this:
For the head and the hair,
first a vat full of bleach,
so filled to the brim,
I sunk an arm in;
enough aquavit to flood a canal
and for facials, a mortar slosh;
but I can't understand the rationale

Le galee per Quaracchi
dieron le vele al vento,
giunsono a salvamento
che n'era capitano
non so chi da Spacciano
e due padron' con ello
da Pinti e di Mugello.

Riconsegnò le balle
lo scrivano da Capalle,
ch'era questo l'effetto.
Pel capo e pel ciuffetto
un tin prima di bionda,
pieno 'nsino alla sponda
per tuffar ben le dita,
un canal d'acqua vita,
di mezzo e di calcina,
tanta zucca marina,
ch'i' non so dir la somma,

behind the banana squash!
 Nor that unsavory solution
 of brown water and broom—
 it could only have come
 from a sewage room.
 Who knows how many lupins,
 seemed an entire collection,
 said to soften wrinkles
 and cure bad complexions;
 plus two casks of astringents,
 both filled to the top,
 for tightening pores
 and for lightening one's mop;
 huge barrels of sulfur,
 both yellow and black,
 to mix up solutions
 for unsightly attacks;
 for still other ablutions,
 so much purified soap
 that counting it all
 was a forlorn hope.
 With horsehair by the handful
 and gum to make things grow,
 thicker manes
 they said would show.
 Oh, come on now!
 Must I write this stuff down?
 For itchy scalps and dandruff,
 they had whole jars of snake oil—
 and lizard lard, too.
 Plus heaps of ground goose fat,
 powder puffs, and poufs.
 So blanched in a talc
 of lily and squid,
 these dainties must have emptied the
 kegs
 then—heaven forbid!—
 scavenged the dregs.

To rinse the paste,
 which slims the face,
 were a good six casks
 of lemon, melon,
 and cantaloupe water;
 plus pumpkin and white figs,
 wild bush and vines;

un nugol d'acqua gromma,
 ginestra e da partire;

lupin' non ti vo' dire,
 che spengono el mal seme,

duo carrategli insieme,
 pien' d'allume di feccia
 per rimbiondir la treccia;
 un bariglione intero
 di zolfo giallo e nero,
 un baril di stillato,
 tanto sapon curato
 da panno o vuoi da seta
 di Cresci o da Gaeta,
 ch'i' non saprei contallo;

tanto crin di cavallo,
 diadraganti in granegli
 per crescere e capegli,
 ch'era una cosa iscura.
 Oltre, in mala ventura!

Ch'i' vidi grasso in giarri
 di serpe e di ramarri,
 ch'alla cotenna giuoca.
 Quivi era grasso d'oca
 gran quantità, che giova
 a 'nfarinar con l'uova,
 un moggio di volanda,
 che bastò a randa a randa.

Gicheri e seppie in polvere
 furon per uno asciolvere,
 per modo erano acconce,
 che n'avien le bigonce
 recato a 'nfarinarsi.

Pel viso assottigliarsi
 per disfar porcellette
 v'era ben sei barlette
 d'acqua di limoncini,
 cocomer', poponcini.
 Di zucche e di fichi albi,

add to that fava,
flowers, and pine;
twigs thick as branches
and sprigs and shoots;
extract of pimpernel
and other juice:
tonics of mallow and burning bush,
of elder flower and elm;
one could do a field report on each
cask—

I was thoroughly overwhelmed!
They brought dishrags and greases
to fill in the creases
caused by Old Man Winter,
who'd left their little faces
all dried up and splintered.
They packed boiled must and fresh
cheese,

iris, peach pit, and broad beans;
gypsum by the jug
to whiten the mug;
twelve gallons of lotions
and various potions
to cure the pox
and other eruptions;
to skip the infirmary,
they brought their own gurney
and loaded it down
with sea salts and mercury.
Six boxes overflowing
with camphor and borax
kept skin calm and brightly glowing.

Rosacea they quelled
with a balm of lily and
powdered eggshells.
You wouldn't believe it—
the concoctions they shipped;
it's truly a wonder
the boats didn't flip!
To redden the cheeks
of those of green or yellow cast,
there was a huge ball of rouge
and two or more of witch grass.
These ladies weren't kidding!
There were stone flowers galore
and ten barrels of red dye, horseradish
and borage,
and pumpkin leaves, more

rovistico e vitalbi,
di pine e di fior di fave
o bastoni, anzi trave,
acqua di terzanella,
di malva e frassinella,
sambuco e tuttumaglio
tu puoi fare un ragguaglio
di ciascun un barile.

A filar ben sottile
untume e strofinaccioli,
pe' visi che son ghiaccioli
gran cotto e cacio fresco,

ghiaggiuol, nocciol di pesco,
fave piene la sacca,
un diluvio di biacca,
quattro cantar' d'allume
tra gentile e di piume,
zuccherino e scagliuolo,
salnitro e vetriuolo,
solimato un fangotto,
di salgemmo un barlotto,
ch'era di quel verace,

di canfera e borrace
se' scatole calcate;
di liglio e di gusciate
credi che ve ne fosse!

Per far le gote rosse,
chi fusse verde o gialla,
v'era una grossa balla
di bambagello e due
di lingua buona o piùè.
Non facevon da beffe!

than any herd could ever gobble.
To depilate their brows,
they brought a wondrous assortment:
razors and shards,
pumice and orpiment.
Mixing pots
held preparations
for poultices
and other applications;

I saw a serum of egg whites
and dried snail shells
to polish and buff
all that was rough;
but did they really need
a hundred vials of the stuff?
And there for the taking
was a forbidden fat—
suet concealed in ampoules,
said to impart a pearly luster
and to banish ugly pustules.
Acacia gum by the keg gave me pause—
there was enough to feed an army—
used, I was told, for applying gauze
to turkey necks and
similar wrecks.
For smallpox scars
and other defects,
donkey milk by the drum;
and to clean one's teeth—
as a rule of thumb—
if ground coral and brick
didn't do the trick,
they brought piles of pesto
made from a mash
of carnations and sage,
sour grapes and antler ash.
There were baskets full
of secret agents:
rosemary, honey, and garden patience.
Sponges by the dozen
and cotton pads—
but surgical dressings?
These women were mad!
Little pieces of felt
and stacks of cork

Fior di prieta a bizzateffe,
Un cogno d'acqua grana,
di rafano e borrana,
tante foglie di zucca,
che più non ne pilucca
ogni gregge, ogni armento.
Recar tanto orpimento
per rimondar le ciglia,
ch'er' una meraviglia;
vetro sottile e poi
la pomice e' rasoi,
mollette da pelare,
pentolin' da serbare
certa materia e 'ntriso
per far lustrare el viso.
Uovo stillato e chiocciole,
non n'avanzò sei goccioline,
che n'avien cento ampolle.
Fuvvi per chi ne volle
di certa sugna vieta
per parer la cumeta,
anzi pur la lumaca.
Quivi era bommeraca
per cena e per merenda
per appicar la benda,
latte d'asina a cogna,
che dicono che bisogna
a' butteri e litigginne
e leva le caligginne
e cuopre assai difetti.

Per fare e denti netti
corallo e matton pesto,
gherofan, salvia, agresto
e corno di cervio arso
un sacco, e non è scarso;

romice, mèle e barba
di ramerin, che garba
con questo, ben tre bugne;

went under the heel,
to rise like a stork.
Still other strange tools
were shipped by these fools:
pharmaceutical wrappers
and medicine jars,
flasks, vials, and mirrors—
truly bizarre!—
plus boxes and bowls,
and glasses and basins.
There were broaches and combs,
and I hasten
to add: hairpins and earrings,
some shaped like half-moons,
plus wigs of every color
to be worn by these loons.
To decorate the head
there were plenty of inventions,
like paper ribbons
and goat hair extensions;
garlands and hats
and other toppers,
so large and so many
they were held in huge hoppers;
hair ties and rubber bands
to control loose strands;
plus add-ons like braids
and other pieces they'd made.
Not to mention the pile
of hemp and textiles,
which rose—God help me—
as high as the sky!
I thought we would drown
from the weight of the crowns,
the tails and the bonnets,
the trinkets and bling,
and the thousand other
frivolous things.
O poor husbands,
you blind buffoons!
Give these girls a kick—
send 'em straight to the moon!
For I know well from where I speak;
it's three days in and all they've done
is dress up and giggle and gossip and
squeak.
One day they sailed along the shore,
a scene that was hardly serene;

tanta bambagia e spugne,
a dozzine e pennegli,
e sugheri e feltregli,
che sotto le calcagna
nascondon lor magagna,
e altri strani arnesi,
de' quai questi compresi:
capegli e pettinuzzi,
cartocci, alberelluzzi,
fiaschetti, ampolle e specchi,
bossolin' nuovi e vecchi
e scatole e scodelle,
bicchieri e catinelle,
spilletti e fuseragnoli,
lunette e orecchiagnoli,
seta e cape' ritratti,
per ingannare e matti.
Da 'nzolfar pergamene
le zane n'eran piene,
corbelletti e buglioli
di pel di cavriuoli
per empierre e mazzocchi,
grillanduzze e batocchi
v'eran sopra alle sbarre.
De' frene' da ritrarre
se n'empieron le pecce.

Velier', voggoli e trecce,
campanelle, stregghioni,
corna di più ragioni
ve n'era pure assai.
Carte, lino e vespai
e canape e tessuti
v'alzâr, se Iddio m'aiuti,
di sopra alle ginocchie!

Mazzocchini e pannocchie,
cappucci a iosa e fruscoli,
ch'erano altro che bruscoli,
brocchette e smancerie
e mille altre pazzie
v'eran da fare a' 'nviti.
O poveri mariti,

ciechi, pazzi e gaglioffi!
Copriteli d'ingoffi,

for with all of their humming,
 the whole world heard them coming.
 But then,
 at the end—
 it felt like a dream—
 all of a sudden
 they ran out of steam.
 They no longer cared
 about the flies in the air,
 nor bee stings nor bites,
 nor disheveled hair.
 Why the dismay?
 Their cosmetics used up,
 they could no longer play
 Miss Priss or PinUp.
 So take my advice:
 Steer clear of a wife.
 But if you've already fallen
 into her trap,
 curse her often
 and give her a slap.
 The galleys bound for Quaracchi.

chi ne può lor porre!
 E però non la tôrre,
 dice el proverbio antico,
 ch'io so ben quel ch'io dico;
 ché, 'l terzo giorno appena,
 ve ne fu sino a cena
 di tutte queste ciance,
 tanto al capo, alle guance
 se n'avien posto in pria
 per la cicaleria.
 L'altro di costeggiorno:
 a Capalle arrivorno,
 non creder di segreto,
 ché pareva el passereto.
 La mosca e la zanzara
 le mordevano a gara,
 senza dir «Chiscio»!
 Ché non v'era più liscio,
 contradizion né feria.
 Non facien mona Ismeria,
 come prima a sollazzo;
 Però chi non è pazzo
 guardisi dal tôr moglie
 Se pure ella ti coglie,
 fa' giuri ispesso e bacchia.
 Le galee per Quaracchia.

References

- 1 See Giovanni Rucellai *ed il suo Zibaldone*, vol. I: *«Il Zibaldone Quaresimale»: Pagine scelte*, ed. by Alessandro Perosa, London 1960, pp. 28–34.
- 2 See Aby Warburg, «Francesco Sassetti's Last Injunctions to His Sons,» in idem, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, intro. by Kurt W. Forster, trans. by David Britt, Los Angeles 1999, pp. 223–262, esp. p. 242.
- 3 See Perosa 1960 (see note 1), pp. 20–23.
- 4 Luigi Pulci, *Opere minori*, ed. by Paolo Orvieto, Milan 1986, pp. 21–30 accompanied by my translation; all liberties, nuances, and idiosyncrasies of the translation reflect my own

preferences and should be understood as such. I wish to thank Karina Attar and Maneesha Patel for their assistance. For a partial translation, see Charles Dempsey, *The Early Renaissance and Vernacular Culture*, Cambridge, Mass. 2012, pp. 92–96.

- 5 On books of secrets, see esp. Elena Lazzarini, «Le corps construit. Pratiques esthétiques et canons de beauté dans la collection des livres des secrets de la BNF, XVIe et XVIIe siècles», in: *Revue de la BNF*, 2014, vol. 47, pp. 78–84, and Meredith K. Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy: Women and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy*, Cambridge, Mass. 2015.