

## Giovanni Battista Folengo: Overture

by Ann E Mullaney, June 21, 2018

Giovanni Battista Folengo (1490-1559) may be the most interesting Renaissance author with whom you are not yet familiar (assuming you already know his brother, Teofilo Folengo). And the funniest: if your sense of humor extends to sexual and scriptural word-play, GB Folengo will make you laugh out loud.

In his *Commentary on the Psalms*, which runs to nearly 600,000 words, Folengo offers thousands of jolts of comedy, starting with short phrases like “innumerae pene erectae sunt” (pdf 407, p. 195) and “adstabo erectus. Pene...” and “pene adducor... adeo nullam in me cerno esse firmam” (pdf 041, p. 12v) in which *pene* is no longer merely a variant of the adverb *paene* (nearly, almost) but has taken on a life of its own as *pene*, Italian for penis. To this term, which in *Psalms* appears over 250 times, Folengo adds countless others. For example, after establishing how important hope and faith are for “praying,” the author elucidates further, telling us that hope and faith are understood to be the same as *pene*, “Spes ergo, fides, fiduciaque, quae idem pene sunt” (pdf 101, p. 241).

Throughout all his works, Folengo cites well-known biblical authorities and traces the (loaded) meanings of words across Hebrew, Greek and Latin, as here, where commentators Felix and Campensis are seen in the throes:

Sic enim Felix: Ululabo movens me huc & illuc, in meditatione doloris mei. Dictionem quippe illam, quam nos legimus, contristatus, Hebraeis vox est summae consternationis animi, dolorisque immensis testis. Prae dolore, inquit Campensis, moveo me nunc huc nunc illuc, & interorandum conturbor. Factus est, inquit scriba ille, in agonia prolixius orans.

For Felix [writes] thus: I will howl moving myself hither and thither, in meditation of my pain. Of course, that expression which we read as “saddened” in the Hebrew, is a word for the greatest consternation of the soul/ phallus, and a witness of immense pains. Because of pain, Campensis says, I move myself now here now there, and praying at intervals, I am confounded. He has been made bigger/ longer, says that scribe, by praying in a struggle. (pdf 445, p. 214v)

At other times, Folengo riffs on a simple word like *os*, *ossis* (bone), which lends itself so readily to sexual discourse that it requires little knowledge of the extensive erotic lexicon in vogue at the time. After an initial explication of the bible verse, “Sana me Domine quoniam conturbata sunt ossa mea” (pdf 47-8, pp. 15v-16), and another pass at Psalm 22.15, where bones languish and are somehow forced out of position (“perlanguescunt

ossa, & quodammodo luxantur,” pdf 165, p. 74v), our intrepid author launches into a more detailed portrayal of bones at work:

<p><b>{31.11} Infirmata est (inquit) in paupertate virtus mea et ossa mea conturbata sunt.</b></p>	<p><b>{31.11} ... my virtue is weakened through poverty and my bones are disturbed.</b></p>
<p>Ex hebraeo: Infirmata est in iniquitate fortitudo mea. vel ut legit Felix: in delicto meo corrui virtus mea... vim omnem spiritus elanguisse expostulet. Ego, inquit, qui peccatum non feci, sub alienorum peccatorum onere coactus sum cadere: quae tamen mea esse uolui, cum pro ipsis reus factus emori decreui...</p>	<p>From the Hebrew: My fortitude is weakened in my iniquity. Or as Felix reads: in my crime my virtue topples... the spirit complains all vigor has languished. I, he says, who did not commit sin, have been driven to fall under the burden of others' sins, which still I wished to be mine, when I resolved to die having been made guilty on their behalf...</p>
<p>Ossa porro sua turbata memorat, quo uel ipsis rebus inanimis occasionem praebet considerandi, cuius ponderis sarcina illa extiterit, quae non solum intestina omnia perturbationibus eiusmodi obnoxia commouerit, ac plane concusserit, sed &amp; ipsa quoque ossa, alioqui dura, atque inertia, conturbauerit. Non raro enim istuc obuenit, ut ex uehementi perturbatione permoto spiritu, ossa quoque ipsa tremant, nulliusque uirtutis sint. Quare in nonnullis morientibus id moris esse conspicimus, quod lachrymabilem quendam in modum contremiscunt, horribiliterque distenduntur prae angustia &amp; agonia. Deficiente enim uitali succo atque humore, tum ossa, tum caeterae corporis partes, utpote suo pastu destitutae, uim suam amittunt: idcirco contabescunt ac dissoluuntur, ex qua quidem re tremor ac debilitas oriri solet. Caeterum ossa in scripturis pro dignioribus animi uirtutibus interdum accipi sciunt studiosi.</p>	<p>Again he mentions his troubled bones, whereby he actually offers an occasion for considering these inanimate things themselves, whose well-known load of weight stood out, which excited not only all the innards liable to perturbations of that sort, and shook them thoroughly, but also disturbed the bones themselves, in other respects hard and inert. For not rarely it happens to that thing, that as a result of vehement perturbations from a deeply moved spirit, even the very bones quake and are of no force. For which reason, in not a few dying [souls], we observe it to be a habit that they tremble all over in a certain tearful way, and are horribly distended due to narrow straits and agony. For with the vital juice and humors lacking, both the bones and the other parts of the body, destitute of their sustenance as is natural, let slip their vigor; for that reason, they waste away and are dispersed, from which event in fact quivering and debility usually arise. For the rest, scholars know to accept bones in scripture now and then for the worthier virtues of the soul. (pdf 243, p. 113v)</p>

The part about bones trembling all over in a certain tearful way is characteristic of Giovanni Battista Folengo, who is nothing if not thorough. He can take a term like “vir pacificus” and present it from many an angle, see pdf 325, p. 154v and pdf 359, p. 171v. Together with his brother Teofilo, Pietro Bembo and other talented individuals, GB

Folengo represents the golden age of the erotic lexicon, which flourished among writers from the Italian peninsula during the late 1400s and early 1500s. And there is more to these writers than salacious cleverness: they satirize the society around them, and hence, religious and civil authorities. Perhaps in working with these texts, it would be prudent to translate terms for Christian deities with those from various mythologies, Apollo, say, instead of Christ.

There is a great deal I do not know about these texts. I look forward to reading your translations and analyses of Folengo's works. Fortunately, almost all his publications are available online, through libraries and Google Play books, where they are often downloadable. I have typed up the vast topical Index to the *Psalms*, as well as his two other provocative indices, and have prepared a number of other documents that may be of help, listed in *Giovanni Battista Folengo: A Tool Kit for Adults*. The three most extensive offerings are:

1. The transcription and translation into English of his first volume, *Dialogi, quos Pomiliones vocat (Dialogues, which he calls Dwarves/ Short pieces)*, published together with *Varium poema* and *Janus* by Teofilo Folengo, 1533.
2. The DRAFT transcription of the truly immense *Commentary on the Psalms*, 1543. This is still riddled with typos and I would appreciate your help in correcting the text, but even as it stands today, it is very useful both for reading and searching.
3. A reasonably correct transcription of the *Commentaria in primam D. Joannis Epistolam* (Commentary on the Epistle of John). Because the first edition of 1546 is in those handsome italics made famous by Bembo and the Aldo Manutius press, I had to rely on the later, 1555 edition, whose Roman type was easier to recognize. So the first part of the volume (*Commentaries on Letters to Peter and James*), was also transcribed and awaits scholars. I owe a substantial debt of gratitude to Uwe Springmann, Digital Humanist, currently at the Universität Würzburg, who perfected the OCR technique that produced the basis for this file. His ongoing refinements will help scholars resurrect important texts.

A colleague asked me if Giovanni Battista himself alludes to his coded meanings, and I said yes, throughout all his publications, beginning with his first work which he describes as “now and then a naked praise of vices” (*nuda interdum elogia vitiorum*). It would be exciting to see his metalinguistic [is that the correct term?] remarks gathered together. Almost nothing has been written about the 2,000 or so pages GB Folengo managed to have printed and reprinted across Europe, during the Reformation and Counter Reformation periods. Now is a good time to explore the layers of his parodies, prepared with “summa fide, mira luce, grata brevitare” (utmost faith, wondrous clarity, welcome brevity), title to *Commentary on the Psalms*, in 940 magnificent pages.