

## Commentary on Teofilo Folengo's *Ianus* by Ann Mullaney

The *Ianus* continues to be a stimulating work. The Latin syntax is hard to sort out, and the vocabulary is both more and less technical than one might think. The focus of the work shifts continually going from say, a broad sweeping flood narrative to small details (mollusks rotting in the grass), with all manner of volcanic cloudbursts and gentle sprinklings in between. True to its title, the 559 hexameter work expounds on various rituals associated with *Ianus*, the two-faced god of antiquity, known today in many Western languages for having given name to the month that brings in the new year. Janus is a god of transitions, of thresholds and portals, of beginnings.<sup>1</sup> And, of course, if there are beginnings, transitions and endings, there must be time.

The poem, dedicated to a young nobleman, Paolo Orsini, opens in classic epic fashion: "While we celebrate the supremacy and the people and the deeds of the tyrant Time..." Then, abruptly, the poem shifts to a breezy style: 'let some Janitor or other protect the ports of the city of Apollo, and that same fellow can protect the human race from those ambling waves, because, Paolo my friend, I've already got more than I can handle with all these poets.' If, thanks to Jean Toscan and other decoders, you are familiar with the lexicon of the Italian burlesque poets, you may have caught on, because *tempo* and *porta, porto* were used to represent the phallus and orifices.<sup>2</sup> I've put a few corroborating sources in a note, and since code words abound in the *Ianus*, I have attached a partial glossary.<sup>3</sup> Although it is a tricky code, here in the *Ianus* we are fairly safe in assigning significance to some key words: Time stands for the sodomitic phallus, port and waves (here) for vagina, and poet for sodomite. So, Folengo is declaring: I am going to sing about the power of the phallus and about gay guys and what they do – some one else can tell you about women, because I have my hands full with men who prefer men.

The poet goes on with his proclamation: "Since indeed that two-headed god, that two-form god Janus, will appear to you here at once with a single face, as from a monster a man might spring forth, you will see him in no way misrepresenting virile demeanor and gait and limbs." In this poem, Folengo takes great pains to present a Janus who is focused in only one direction and is utterly virile. He continues in his devil may care attitude: "Hinc torvos latrare Canes, et carpere lanum/ Morsibus hunc nostrum videas, sed tu urse...": Henceforth you may see ferocious dogs barking and carping at our Janus with bites, but you, Orsino..." or in other words, Let the pricks who prefer women bite me; you, Paolo, will defend me (11-15).

Next, the narrating "I" finds himself at a double entrance, and then Federcio Gonzaga comes his way. The Duke, who with his prowess in arms, makes the Muses move in rhythm and causes his Maro (Vergil) to cry out three and four times about his deeds(28-32).<sup>4</sup> After some complicated activities, Federico questions him about having wasted precious time making up *Baldus*.<sup>5</sup> The narrator in turn extols the praises of the Duke's two brothers – one a cardinal, one a revered soldier – and tells him (while addressing him as "mens" – burlesque poets habitually used *mente* as Latin *mentula*, penis) to shake off his sloth and make something of himself (53-94). Gonzaga in turn tells the poet that if he wants eternal fame, he must shun the path of the fallen people, see note at 104.

As in the two other works published with the *Janus*, sexual imagery abounds. There are the familiar bursts of liquid (140-6), things that flow beneath a leader and work with a motion and a goal (150), phallic Time determining if and when to discharge waves (151-2; 187-8). The narrator entreats “Diva” Gonzaga, mother of heroes, to grant him access to the palace (189-99). The poet is respectful but insistent about seeking a better life inside the doors, “quando hic Aevi sunt ostia” (since the portals of the Age are here, 193); this theme of an era in which anal coition is chosen and not dependent on periods when heterosexual intercourse was inadvisable or forbidden will be developed elsewhere, for now see *Pomiliones*, p. 141.

Then an elderly man, whom we learn is Janus himself, greets the poet-narrator and explains to him that there are two paths, one narrow one wide (210-25), thus returning to the topic addressed earlier by Federico. Janus cautions him to use his “time” so that it does not suddenly get carried away from him (238-41). The ancient deity tells how he evolved from serving as the Thunderer’s time keeper, to being worshipped by the Quirites as a two-faced god whose temple marked Rome’s status: open for war, closed for peace.<sup>6</sup> After briefly mentioning the rites of other peoples (the jumping priests of the Salii, the dragon who devours its own tail, 262-7), he summons ministers and they eat (268-89). Janus then begins a long narrative about origination ceremonies. While he describes how “fire” had to be treated in the home to ensure a favorable outcome for the coming year, a parallel discourse is glimpsed: Janus cautions that no one should be allowed to take the coals away from the flames,

Nam si relligio tanta haec violata fuisset,  
Nimirum gravis infesto succederet annus  
Daemone, qui segeti pubenti, qui humida duris  
Ulceras defigit Tauris, et aratra moratur,  
Tum scabie immunda teneras interficit Agnas. (308-12)

(For if this great religion were violated, without a doubt an oppressive/ painful year would ensue with an infested demon, who embeds dank sores in the burgeoning crops and in the hard bulls, and slows the plows, then kills the tender ears of grain/ lambs with filthy mange.)

One sees the expected concern for crops and herds, and at the same time a concentration of images which imply that the concern is also for a disease, an infected demon, that the other “annus” might bring, like syphilis, that could attack the stalks full of sap – the hard bulls – and leave them with oozing sores; this disease will slow down the plow (phallus) and ultimately will kill off these vigorous stalks of grain. This is a theme dear to many writers of the time, who championed sodomy as a way of preventing syphilis. Folengo addresses the issue repeatedly, and no where more directly than in the poem “De aurea Urna” found at the end of *Chaos*.<sup>7</sup>

The *Janus* goes on to tell of Mother Earth’s bitter complaint against the human race because they dig up her gold and presume to invade the Thunderer’s space with a tower (329-43). Janus is ordered to build a ship and with it to save his offspring and their herds from the punishing

flood to come. Much attention is given to ship building, all the hard bodies of trees (including the *sectilis Alnus*) that are opened with firm wedges, the thrusting of tow into the fissures, the black pitch, the barely controllable guiding of the completed vessel into the water which it splits with a final groan, making the banks moan: “Oceanus shudders at the unusual mass, and is amazed that so many men attempt such bold feats, and he arrogantly recoils from bearing this yoke and succumbing to the hollow wood (406-8).

Janus regales us with tales of fierce animals enduring confinement voluntarily, and of his ability to handle various swollen snakes and horned vipers and to calmly place them in their enclosures (418-34, see note at line 431). The remainder of the poem reads much like the biblical story of Noah’s ark, complete with the promise of a rainbow (529-32), but with emphasis on cataclysmic bursts followed by gushing waters (465-8) and that memorable post-deluge image of mollusks rotting in the grass (516-7).

In the end, Janus congratulates himself: after starting out with only marshy reeds he managed to muster plump domestic animals. He claims to be a new man who sows new plants in the garden; the very one who discovered how to press sweet white wine from grapes (547-53). Janus is not after all two-faced, but rather single-minded. Folengo is irrepressible despite the very real dangers of this “new” path – not only the dangers to his lasting fame which have proven nearly insurmountable, but mortal dangers which are discussed more fully in the *Pomiliones*.<sup>8</sup> In his *Janus* he indulges himself and his readers by divulging the ins and outs of his favorite pastimes, poetry and performance arts.

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<sup>1</sup> The Wikipedia article on Janus is marvelously thorough; I grew up thinking that Janus was a female deity but have since learned otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Toscan, *Le carnaval du langage: le lexique érotique des poètes de l'équivoque de Burchiello à Marino (XVe-XVIIe siècles)*, four volumes, Lille, Presses universitaires, 1981.

<sup>3</sup> [This is not an entry level work – new readers would probably prefer to begin with the commentary on *Chaos*, or on the *Varium poema*.] The word *tempo* has a long history with burlesque poets, initially it was used to signify “that time of month” for women, but eventually came to stand for the phallus: blunt Pietro Aretino (1492-1556), a contemporary of Folengo’s, ends his collection of erotic sonnets saying “...e lascerò voi, cazzi, in culi e in potte.// Chi ha le voglie corrotte/ legga cotesta gran coglioneria/ che il mal'anno e il mal tempo Dio gli dia! (: ... and I’ll leave you pricks in butts and cunts. He who has corrupt desires, let him read this cockup, may God give him a bad year (anus) and bad weather (penis), *Sonetti lussoriosi*, Bk. 2.13, 14-17. In the *Janus*, Folengo sets aside the nuanced and varied use of *tempo* that graces his *Chaos del Triperuno*, to settle on that of the phallus, predominantly the sodomitic phallus, and its concomitant *ostia*. Another near contemporary of our author, resourceful Pietro Bembo (1470-1547), leaves little doubt as to the meanings of these words when he explains how one must move his *legno* (wood) to stay afloat and not lose *speme*, and the poet-narrator, aware of his options, moves his *tempo* from the vaginal waves where it flounders into the anal port: “Chi vole in mar si stia,/ E 'l legno suo di speme non disarmo:/ Ch'io del mal posto tempo e studio

accorto/ Fuggo da l'onde ingrato, e prendo il porto," *Rime*, 10 (58), offered online by Giuseppe Bonghi, <http://www.classicitaliani.it/index078.htm>). Toward the end of *Chaos*, Folengo has a portal speak for itself, urging man to enter:

<p>LA PORTA.          Huomo, che vedi a quanto honor ti degna          L'altissimo Fattore,          Hor entra ad obbedirlo, acciò che 'l cuore          Da te già in gratia ti 'l mantegna.<sup>3</sup>          Ma nè la gioia tua, c'havrai si lieta,          Fa' che l'affreni accortamente...</p> <p>Gloss: Natura divina et humana.</p>	<p>The Portal          Man, you see to what honor the supreme          Creator esteems you, now enter [in order]          to obey him, so that he may maintain your          heart already in grace by your [merits].* But          in your joy, which you will have so blissful,          make sure to rein in [your heart/ penis]          carefully...</p>
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The Portal goes on at length about *legno* and *ligno*, *Chaos* p. 234-5 (R 377); see also pp. 82, 103, and p. 226 (*uscio*); and *Varium poema*, 61 (*porta, ianua, limen*)

<sup>4</sup> Indeed Folengo measures himself against Vergil, and readers attuned to the more famous Maro will hear echoes from his works; line 32: *marrone* (chestnut in Italian) is commonly used in the plural for testicles.

<sup>5</sup> In lines 59-70, Baldus appears to be used as phallus, a meaning attested to for both Baldo and Baldovino (see commentary on names).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Orlandino*, 1.41, an octave about Iano (Janus).

<sup>7</sup> Syphilis was believed to have become suddenly prevalent in Italy in the late fifteenth century (during invasions of French troops), but this notion was not new, see Leon Battista Alberti, *Rime* 15, 1-4; Federico Gonzaga (1500-1540) is said to have died of syphilis contracted through his father (I don't have a proper source for this yet); the brief poem about the Eucharistic urn still shocks with its sacrilegious nastiness:

<p>De aurea Urna qua includitur Eucharistia           Urnula quam gemmis auroque nitere videmus          Quaeritur angusto quid ferat illa sinu.          Haud ea pestifero Pandorae infecta veterno          Intulit omnivagas orbe adaperata febres.          At pretium, quo non aliud pretiosius, ipsa haec          Quod rerum amplexus non capit, urna capit.</p>	<p>On a golden Urn in which the Eucharist is contained.           A small urn which we see glisten/struggle with          precious gems and gold, is asked what it carries in          its narrow hollow. By no means infected with the          pestilential listlessness of Pandora does it inflict          widespread fevers across the land once it is opened.          But a prize, more precious than any other,          [Pandora's box] does not hold as far as its embrace          of things, the urn holds.</p>
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*Chaos*, p. 238 (R 383), and see an earlier iteration, "They are born together: man, and the deep forgetting of the right journey set before him – I mean the path, which in the end offers two forks, one sweet and narrow, the other flat, treacherous. This way one arrives at the joyous, that [way] at the wicked state....," *Chaos*, p. 201, R 344.

<sup>8</sup> See *Dialogi, quos Pomilones vocat*, pp. 142-7, and see *La Humanità del Figliuolo di Dio*, Book 7.98-9 (p. 140), <https://play.google.com>). The issue of sodomy in sixteenth century Europe will be treated elsewhere on this site by a scholar in the field.

Partial glossary of coded terms in the *Janus*:

<p><b>phallus:</b>  aevum (mobile)  alnus  animus  arbitrio  arundine  calamus  canis  cannis  Colossis  dux  flumina tumida  ingenio  legno  navim  nox  ossa  Tempus  templa  truncus  turrim  vertice turrito  mens</p> <p>Categories: trees, animals</p> <p><b>male homosexuals:</b>  gens  plaebem caducam  populus  vatis  vulgus mobile, instabile</p>	<p><b>buttocks, anus, etc.:</b>  angusto meatu  arcto recessu  astra  calendas (calendario)  campos  foribus  gemino aditu  lanus  limina  litus, littora  moenia  murorum  orbita duplex  ostia  portas  ripas  seculum  semita  signis  sinus  sydera  umbrae  via</p> <p><b>female orifices:</b>  aras  undas*  zonas  ne</p>	<p><b>reaching orgasm, orgasm:</b>  amplos honores  erumpunt  fluxerunt  gemere, ingemuere  ictu grandineo  increpitans  obnitenti  sonans  tonant  torquentia fulmen  vulcano urgente</p> <p><b>sperm:</b>  aspergine placida  caeno  flamma  liquore  Massica (white wine)  musta  nivis Hyperboreas  nubes nitidissima  pluvias, pluvio humore  rutilo vapore  semina</p> <p><b>(sexual activity:)</b>  <b>Winds:</b> Auster, Aquilo, Eurus,  Notus, Zephirus.</p>
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