

## RENAISSANCE FABULATOR

by Olivier Burckhardt

*Baldo: Volume 1 Books I-XII, Volume 2 Books XIII-XXV,*

by Teofilo Folengo, translated by Ann E.

Mullaney;

Harvard University Press, 2007, 2008, each volume \$29.95.

WHEN THE BENEDICTINE monk Teofilo Folengo forsook cowl and habit—so the story goes—he took to wandering about Italy in the company of a young lady of society. Given his talent in dipping a nib into the blackest of inkpots to form well-turned verses in the Virgilian mode he staved off poverty and hunger by calling upon the lumpiest of muses to “ply their poet with macaroni and give him five platters, or eight, full of polenta”.

In 1517, under the pseudonym Merlinus Coccaius, Folengo concocted the first edition of the *Liber Macaronices*, a mock-heroic epic that recounts the exploits of Baldo, “whose highflying fame and bold name shake the earth, and the underworld beshits itself in fear”. The *Baldus*, as it also become known, is the Renaissance’s masterpiece of macaronic poetry, a burlesque satire that blends farce, humour and social commentary in hexameters that knead together Latin and various Italian dialects. The overall effect sounds like so many slips of the tongue, *double entendres*, or the Latinate effusions of an improviser akin to the 1950s prototypical rapper Lord Buckley.

The term “macaronic” refers to a crude mixture of flour, cheese and butter that was used to make the gnocchi-like predecessor of Renaissance *macaroni*. Although the use of the term “macaronic verse” was coined by Tifi degli Odasi with the publication of his *Carmen Maccaronicum* of 1488, as a literary practice it can be dated back at least to Ausonius (born 310), who employed a weird and wonderful mixture of Greek and Latin in some of his verse epistles.

During Folengo’s lifetime (1491–1544) the popularity of the *Baldus* is attested by many reprints and no less than three extensively revised editions as well as an adaptation into Castilian published in Seville in 1542. By 1606 it had been translated into German, and the French edition of that year noted that it was a model for Folengo’s contemporary—Rabelais. With a further dozen editions in the century following Folengo’s death, it is surprising that it has taken nearly five hundred years for *Baldus* to appear in English.

The burlesque epic opens with an appeal to the paunchy macaronic muses that Folengo entrusts with

the twenty-five books of the opus. Their regular reappearances both rein in the text and form a wonderful authorial foil, as, for example, when the guzzling muse is called back in book five: “But Gosa is getting a bit off track. While she thought she was making bread, she found she had made focaccia. Come back, Gosa, where are you going without me, you drunkard?”

As Baldo and his band of miscreant friends—among which the most notable is Cingar, the trickster *par excellence*—wreak havoc in Folengo’s native village of Cipada and nearby Mantua, before taking to the high seas and descending into hell itself, everyone will find a favourite episode among the many high spots of this burlesque satire. Cingar’s practical jokes at the expense of the archetypal country bumpkin Zambello include one episode, in book seven, when he convinces the latter that he can sell his faeces to the apothecary; and indeed does so, by sleight of hand. As apothecaries deal in selling purgatives, Folengo is quick to point out that “Just as crap buys money, so money buys crap.”

Other memorable moments include the biting parody Folengo reserves in book eight for members of his own Benedictine order, to whose fold he returned in 1534 after an absence of some nine years. Surprisingly, it was often monks and clergyman such as Poggio, Francesco Berni and Matteo Bandello who wrote the best caricatures and parodies of the all-pervasive church in Renaissance Italy. Folengo stands out among them for giving the thumbscrews that extra twist: his *Baldus* is not only a scandalous satire of mordant wit, but through it he managed to air some of the day’s heretical views, boldly ridiculing indulgences, Mary-sightings, and the purchase of holy statues. He seems to have harboured Lutheran ideals in a time when such views readily led to excommunication and worse.

As per the recipe for macaroni, what makes the *Baldus* a great work is that the ready-mix of apparently disparate ingredients, burlesque fun-poking and merry-making is laced with social parody, and sheer fantasy is allowed unrestrained flight throughout. My personal favourite moment is at the end of book twenty-five. Having vanquished the kingdom of witches in the netherworld (about which, as Mullaney notes in her introduction, Folengo seems to have known more than he should), Baldo and his companions stumble into yet another cave. A parody of the mind itself, filled with a thousand chimeras, dream images, and castles in the air, this cave is called the Cage of Fools or “the house of Fantasy, full of silent murmuring, of tacit clamor, of movement in repose, of chaotic order, of a norm with neither rules nor art”. Everyone here falls silent to the outside world and “pecks at his own brain and fishes for flies in the air”.

This new edition is published in two volumes in the handsome I Tatti Renaissance Library series of Harvard

## BOOKS

University Press, with the original macaronic-Latin text on facing pages. Mullaney has produced a very accessible prose translation of Folengo's last revised edition of *Baldo*, which was published posthumously in 1552. Apart from the fact that this last edition was over twice the length of the first 1517 edition, its polish reflects the dedication that Folengo bestowed upon this work over three decades—gradually removing personal grudges, refining and increasing its macaronic quality, and making it more delightful.

The present English translation is not a critical edition: the twenty-odd pages of notes in each volume are confined to elucidating only the more obscure points and only rarely point to the divergences with the previous editions, such as Folengo's removal of a direct reference to "a certain Erasmus and Martin Luther" in book nine. Unfortunately what is omitted is the open letter to the reader by one of Folengo's many *alter egos*, Vigaso Cocaio, that prefaced the 1552 edition and which ends with the memorable invitation to the reader to "Come ye all who are famished; see, read, eat, stay

your hunger ..." Mullaney's translations of the prefaces to the various editions, including Vigaso Cocaio's, however, are available online at [www.folengo.com](http://www.folengo.com).

Given the nature of the piece any translation must perform be a black-and-white rendering of a tapestry in primary colours. But if the form, both in terms of the rhythm and sound of hexameters, and the wonderful play of words that is engendered by the mix of languages, cannot be readily transposed into English, the jolly boisterousness of the tall tales told by this Renaissance fabulator are plain as pie.

*Baldo* is not for the faint of heart or delicate of nose, and at times one needs an iron gut to digest some of the tall tales, but as long as one keeps Folengo's own injunction in mind, to at all times laugh *with* and not *at* its author, then welcome to the world of macaroni, eat you fill, hold your sides, be gripped, words will never taste the same.

*A shorter version of this review was published in the Guardian (Review) in December.*

## WHIN-GOLD WOODNOTES

by Suzanne Edgar

*Our Shared Japan: An Anthology of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, edited by Irene de Angelis & Joseph Woods; Dedalus Press, 2007, 20 euros.

THE WORD *ANTHOLOGY* means, literally, a "collection of flowers". This one was launched to mark fifty years of diplomatic relations between Ireland and Japan. The book contains many haiku and tanka, poems that need to be taken in sushi-type bites. Most of the contributors write using the five-seven-five syllable pattern, and Seamus Heaney's is a fine example:

Dangerous pavements.  
But I face the ice this year  
With my father's stick.

In fact, modern haiku writers frequently use a shorter, sketchier style because the Japanese forms are based on sound-units that are more compact than our syllables.

Heaney has also provided "Petals on a Bough", a provocative after-word. He finds an affinity between haiku, tanka and ancient Irish verse, a somewhat surprising claim for the garrulous Irish! Heaney, however, is convincing: "The hermit poets who wrote in Old Irish

in the little monasteries were also masters of the precise and suggestive"; he quotes:

The small bird  
let a chip  
from its beak:  
I heard  
woodnotes, whin-  
gold, sudden:  
the Lagan  
blackbird.  
(ninth-century Irish)

He detects another quality the Old Irish poets share with their modern Japanese counterparts:

this worldness. ... Both are alert to their physical surroundings yet possess a strong sense of another world to which poetry promises access. In each case, it's as if the poet is caught between the delights of the contingent and the invitations of the transcendent.

Maurice Harmon's "Afternoon Tea" has those very qualities.

The best haiku, although succinct, express a pregnant simplicity, and the first of Frank Ormsby's "Six Haiku" is a perfect example:

The field full of snow  
so much a field full of snow  
it needs a blackbird.