

May 4, 2020





“It looks like wine bottles are better informed than mostly anyone else,” said Bombònica the next day. She was talking to Johannes Marignolli, and they were both seated on a bench in the Municipal Park, next to the Great Poet Lendvay’s bust.

“It’s not the bottles themselves, I don’t think: it’s the wine inside; or it may be that people talk more freely over a bottle of wine, so information is imparted and spreads more easily” reflected the Bishop of Bisinia on a

meditative tone.

The hairs in his beard were stirred by a gentle breeze coming from the direction of Cross Hill, and if you, like Bombònica, were of the type who payed attention to all things natural, you’d have noticed the stirring was perfectly synchronized with the chirping of a group of birds building their nests in the trees from St. Joseph’s courtyard. A few hyacinths could be seen popping their blue heads in the round-shaped flower bed surrounded by benches, of which the one occupied by the Bishop and Bombònica was fully exposed to the sun. The Crazy Woman in the Park, who normally spent a great deal of her time dancing in front of the bronze bust was not around today, so all was quiet on that front.

The Bishop had parked his bike against the base of the statue, and at first the Great Poet looked displeased with (if not downright offended by) what could have been interpreted as disrespect towards literature in general and poetry in particular—for he was reputed to represent them both. It was, Bombònica understood, an invasion of his privacy as well, so she asked his pardon and moved the bike a little further away, propping it against the church’s fence.

The Great Poet lowered his left eyebrow as a sign of approval, and the hint of a smile briefly appeared on his bronze lips. The Bishop didn’t seem to be aware of this or any other move: he had removed his tawed leather gloves and the leather hat, and was intensely watching an antique velvet box which he held in his lap. He was intent on opening the box with the greatest possible care, and recommenced speaking, this time in a tone of veneration mixed with faint suggestions of melancholy:

“I have it from my grandmother, may God rest her soul, and may her bones never be dug out from her grave for the sake of the progress of science (for I heard that in spite of Pope Boniface VIII’s ‘*De sepulturis*,’ skeletons have been extricated from ossuaries to study the anatomy of the bones; it’s been happening continuously since the thirteenth century, and I don’t think it will ever stop). She, may God grant her eternal peace, was a first-rate *chatelaine*, a real lady of polished manners, who additionally had exquisite taste in clothing. I think I inherited that from her, and I flatter myself I have a sense of fashion that is quite international in scope—take for instance those painted shoes you admired the other day: they were made in Paris, in a small shop on rue Saint-Germain des Couroiers. In fact, the Great Poet ...”

“Lendvay?” inquired Bombònica.

“No. Chaucer. He saw grandma once and wrote the following description of her accoutrements:

Thursday

*Whit was her smok, and broyden al befoore
And eek bihynde, on hir coler aboute,
Of col-black silk withinne and eek withoute,
Hir filet brood of silk, and set ful hye.
And sikerly she hadde a likerous eye.
And by hir girdel heeng a purs of lether,
Fasseled with silk and perled with latoun.”*



The Bishop sighed and shook his head gently, as if to shake off the burden of melancholy thoughts, then he went on:

“I thought, in light of our lively conversation on Monday, that I would have you choose one of her dresses, which were kept in this very box for centuries. Pick one you like and wear it; and when you do, remember me.”

From the box he took out and unfolded, one by one, several dresses which he began showing to Bombònica:

“This one is made of *cendal*, a cloth woven almost entirely of silk threads; some say it’s comparable to *taffetas*, and I tend to believe them when I touch the fabric. Family tradition has it that grandma used to wear it in the morning when she went to the chapel to say her prayers.”

He fumbled a little more with the contents of the box, then took out another silken beauty:

“It’s *diapre*, a type of ceremonial silk printed with flowers and arabesques she purchased from a merchant from Baghdad to wear at banquets.”

“This one reminds me of Mrs. Bonaventure’s Almerian *pallia rotata* silk dress,” said Bombònica.

“Oh, I didn’t know they were still weaving that kind of fabric.”

“No, and although some people say it’s been smuggled in from Spain in recent times, I have a strong suspicion she inherited the dress from her great-grandmother, who in turn had it from her own great-grand mother and so on up (or down, as I don’t find the direction to be of relevance: it really depends on one’s standpoint, that is, on where one stands at the time of observing) the line of her ancestors all the way back to *signora* Maria di Ritella, St. Bonaventure’s mother. Judging by the worn look of the silk, the dress has got to be a few centuries old.”

“That may be, yet I find Mrs. Bonaventure—and that includes her Almería silk dress, as well as her griffin—a good-looking woman. Timeless beauty,” said the Bishop, tenderly fingering the latest piece extracted from the box and spreading it on his lap.



“I never thought of Mrs. Bonaventure as a timeless beauty, but perhaps you’re right.”

“Oh, I wasn’t talking about the lady. It was the silk I was referring to,” the Bishop responded.

“I wonder what will happen to Mrs. Bacon’s chimaera,” said Bombònica “now that the woman is in police custody.”

“Time will tell. But I suppose Mrs. Grosseteste will be good enough to feed the creature for as long as necessary. Suffice it to say that her billy-goat is good friends with the chimaera, given that both possess supplies of impudence enough to last for several caprine animals’ lifetime. Anyway, my dear ...”

He stopped in mid-sentence, turning towards the church: a thin, light-blue rivulet of vocal polyphony was streaming unhurriedly through the open front door of St. Joseph’s, each water drop giving off its own celestial sound. They both watched and listened to the music for

a while, then the Bishop whispered as if in a trance:

“Polyphony is the reciprocal union of several voices, joined together through a sweet mixture of consonance; yet it’s wonderful how each of these voices still retains its individual character. What is more, polyphony is gracious food for the ears ... and, come to think of it, really, my dear Ms. Bombònica it seems to me that, in the manner of ceremonial silk printed with a variety of prolations, figures, and inscriptions (just like the silks you see here in this box), polyphony restores the whole of the soul and feeds the whole of the hearing to such an extent that it deflects the attention of all other senses from their specific concerns ...”

He took a deep breath, rearranged the hairs in his beard, smoothed the creases on his oiled leather leggings, readjusted the straps of the leather purse (the contents of which gave off a series of joyful, tinkling sounds) and murmured:

“Pardon me, it’s a rather long sentence, and it’s not even mine: I memorized it from Jacob of Liège’s *Compendium de musica*. Great work, but the writing style is a little stilted, in my opinion.”

“Food for the ears? Isn’t that more like Gerald of Wales’s metaphor conjoining ‘sweet-sounding melody’ and ‘the sweetest smell,’ and turning them, thus united, into ‘food for the soul?’” asked someone from behind.

The Bishop and Bombònica turned their respective heads in perfect unison and saw Father Philippe, who apparently had just finished saying Mass and had come out of the church for a breath of fresh air. Father Philippe was the owner of a tall, elegant figure, and moved with admirable grace; Bombònica couldn’t help but think he was the most distinguished priest in

town. It was common knowledge that a remote ancestor of his had been a Bishop of Maux and an officer of the French Royal Household, and that Philippe de Vitry (for that was the man's name) was also a poet and musician in his own right: apparently five of the polyphonic motets in *Le Roman de Fauvel* were by him.

“When reading Jacob's words,” Father Philippe continued, “one becomes alerted to the fact that the writer was thinking about the *sound*, not the *sight*, of polyphony as woven cloth. In other words, he was ‘hearing with the eyes,’ to use a modern scholar's expression; but I personally think that, in addition, he was also *seeing* with the *ears*: in an attempt to better explain the sensory impact of polyphony, Jacob conjoined those senses that he believed most eloquently pleaded his case: hearing, sight, and taste. But in his view the hearing *saw* and *ate*, and sight *heard*.”

“Indeed,” joined in the Bishop. “But it looks like to these one should adjoin tactile sensations, for silk, besides being an article of sartorial significance, is touchable in the highest degree.” He turned to Bombònica: “You saw me touching those dresses with utmost care ...”

“Anyway,” cut in Father Philippe, somewhat impatiently “I think there is a name nowadays for this phenomenon: they call it synaesthesia; modern investigations of synaesthetic phenomena triggered by perceptions of musical sounds ...”

“I beg your pardon for interrupting,” said the Bishop, unmoved (I say that because not one muscle moved on his face and not a crease formed on his oiled leather leggings), “but I believe someone stole my bike.”

They looked towards the church's fence and saw it with great clarity; the bike, however, they couldn't see, so by deft application of logical inference of Sorbonnian extraction they concluded the object in question was no longer there.

Father Philippe went red in the face and hastened to say:

“I assure you the culprit cannot be one of the choir boys.”

“Of course not, Father, don't be ridiculous. Yet it saddens me no end that anyone should think it fit to steal a bike on church property. It seems an impious gesture; perhaps even blasphemous.”

The music had stopped by now, so they could clearly hear Mrs. Bonaventure's angst-ridden voice; she was approaching in a hurry and, as usual, she was out of breath:

“Good day to all of you,” she said once she got closer to the bench. One could see she had renewed the polish on her nails; she was wearing trousers today, and a Japanese silk blouse with a sensational pattern showing geishas fanning themselves with enormous fans. They, too, looked like damsels in distress, as attested by the mournful expressions on their faces; in fact, one could plainly see they were blue with anguish. The *pièce de résistance* of her outfit, though, was the *ceinture* or belt, a splendid example of *oeuvre sarasine* (Saracen work), or *orfrois*—thus called because it was made of



Thursday

silk embroidered with gold thread, and of Oriental origin. You could tell Mrs. Bonaventure was enamored with the Far East.

“Yet another object inherited from *signora di Ritella*,” thought Bombònica.

“I am almost suffocating with indignation,” shouted Mrs. Bonaventure “that rascal Mr. van Tcheluk was just seen riding the Bishop’s bike on the bridge over Garlic Creek. I am positive he stole it. Not the bridge, you understand: the bike. My griffin is very upset and started spitting fire again. And Mrs. Bacon’s chimaera has gone berserk: it hasn’t stopped bleating since its mistress was taken away, and when it’s not doing that, it keeps chewing fragments from Mrs. Bacon’s laurel tree bark. Mrs. Grosseteste has started reading the *Secreta secretorum* backwards, and I’m sure I don’t know what the world has come to.”

“What do you mean, she reads the book backwards?” inquired the Bishop.

“Well she starts with the *Explicit* ...”

“*Explicit liber Aristoteli de secreta secretorum sive de regimine principum vel regum vel dominorum et aliorum hominum Completus est tractatus de signis et moribus naturalibus hominum ad regem magnificum Alexandrum qui dominatus fuit totius orbi dictusque monarcha in septemtrione*,” recited the Bishop.

“Precisely, that’s it. I am worried sick.”

“Oh, about Mrs. Bacon,” intervened Father Philippe. “She came to confession a few days ago and said ...”

“Father, Father,” warned the Bishop “you’re about to break the secret of the confessional.”

Father Philippe went red in the face once again; then the red turned purple.

“It’s almost the exact shade of my bishop’s vestments,” thought the Bishop.

Recovering from the shock of this *faux pas*, Father Philippe, who had never expected himself to be so imprudent as to talk in public about such sensitive matters stepped closer to the Bishop and murmured in his ear:

“Bishop, I beg your pardon. I think Mrs. Bonaventure’s quasi-hysterical behavior is contagious: it makes me forget myself and say daft things. I shouldn’t have mentioned Mrs. Bacon’s confession in this context, but may I talk to you about it in private? I think it’s a matter of life and death.”

“Yes, definitely. It looks like I am available right now, since I no longer have a means of locomotion; by logical inference I can’t but think I’m sort of stuck here. Let’s go inside.”

“The matter is so serious, I propose we should discuss it in the bell tower: that way we’ll have complete privacy.”

They entered the tower through the Southern door. The climb wasn’t easy, for there were one hundred and twenty seven steps to the top (the ones leading to the first landing—of stone; the remaining ones—of wood), and neither Father Philippe nor the Bishop had had adequate physical training for some time (although the Bishop did ride his bike every day on short distances); but in due time they reached the belfry. They paused for a while to admire the panoramic view of the city, including Cross Hill and Flower Hill in the distance, and saw Friar

Thursday

William Ockham sharpening his razors in front of his shop in Old Town Square. Further down the street Fra Dolcino, the owner of *Le Roman de Fauvel*, the venerable wine shop, was changing the bottle display in the window. The Fountain of Youth in the middle of the square was gurgling softly.

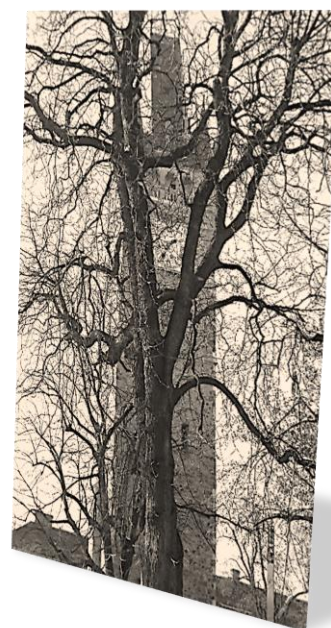
With his elegant, elongated fingers (“the fingers of a violin player,” thought the Bishop, who also noticed that Father Philippe’s fingernails were well cared for) the priest took out an envelope from his pocket and showed it to the Bishop. It was addressed to Mrs. Roberta Bacon, had been mailed from America two weeks earlier, and the sender was one A. Theodore MacRobius, Jr. The Bishop took the letter out of the envelope, unfolded it, and began reading:

“Dear Mrs. Bacon,

This is Theodore (Teddy), Mr. MacRobius’s son in Dallas, Texas. I suspect this missive may come as a surprise to you, since we haven’t seen each other in recent times. You may, however, recall that when I was a boy of fifteen (your chimaera was just a puppy at the time) you were so kind as to suggest I should study Latin so I could read the *Secreta secretorum* to your laurel tree. That I did, and today I am proud to say I am able to read, write, and speak that language with perfect fluency and diction, to the extent that I now enjoy my neighbors’ full respect and admiration here, in America—something that never happened in the old country. In fact, I have just finished reading Pope Gregory IX’s *Decretales* (you know, the one beginning *Gregorius episcopus servus servorum Dei dilectis filiis doctoribus et scholaribus universis bononie commorantibus salutem et apostolicam benedictionem Rex pacificus pia miserationem disposuit...* and so on etcetera), and when I got to the *Explicit* I thought about you with affection and gratitude.

Anyway, my dear Mrs. Bacon, the first thing I would like to say is please excuse my interfering with your private life. Yet the matter I am about to communicate is extremely serious. Although I haven’t talked to or corresponded with my father for some time (for you may know he and I had a quarrel some years ago), I was fully aware of the loving relationship between the two of you, a relationship which everyone who wrote about it from back there referred to as ‘exemplary.’ I find it most unfortunate that, for reasons that shall remain unknown to me, my father and you have decided to part ways.

I was also informed that recently my father has become involved with a woman of low morals, an actress thirty years his junior. My correspondent wrote that this woman (who, on top of it, is being unfaithful—from what I am told, she is also seeing a viola player from the Hungarian Opera Orchestra) is planning to get married to him; my correspondent was positive that this despicable creature plans to inherit the little house on Red Creek Street, as well as the adjacent orchard (you may know about the unique Beurre [or Beurrée] Hardy Pear tree [*Pyrus communis Beurre Hardy*], which produces a most delicious, sweet, mouth-watering kind of pear developed in the 1820s by Mr. Bonnet of Boulogne) and the blue hydrangeas, once my father is no longer of this world. My informant alerted me to the fact that the woman in question has access to a variety of pharmaceutical paraphernalia, including numerous poisonous substances such as laurel leaves, and that she isn’t beyond using any of these to achieve her infernal goal—



Thursday

which I suspect is to quietly get rid of my father once their relationship is legalized, so she could become the heir to his fortune.

I am afraid her plans are so diabolical that she may even succeed on putting the blame on you—as you are known in the neighborhood and perhaps in the whole area as the proud possessor of a laurel tree of old age and large dimensions.

Please be careful, my dear Mrs. Bacon.

Kindest regards,

Teddy

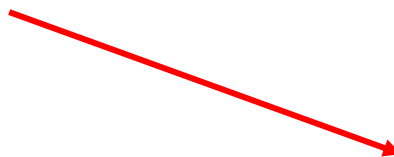
The Bishop shook his head, refolded the letter, and returned it to Father Philippe, who put it back in the envelope.

“And did Mrs. Bacon give this letter to you on the occasion of her confession?”

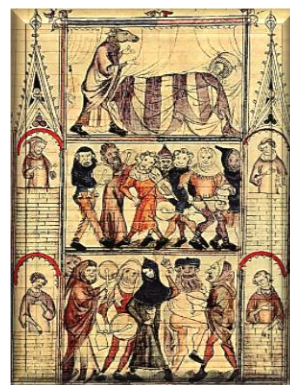
“Yes. She asked me what to do, and I told her we couldn’t take any action based on mere suspicion. But now I see Teddy might have been right: he hastened to warn her of a possible imminent danger.”

“I think we should show the letter to the police.”

And the two men started slowly making their way down the one hundred and twenty seven steps.



Fra Dolcino's *Le Roman de Fauvel* Wine Shop Sign in Old Town Square



In the context of thirteenth-century crusades, Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303) excommunicated all who dared offend the bodies of the defunct by boiling them in water to separate flesh from bones, so that these bones could be returned to consecrated land to be buried. ‘*De sepulturis*’ was given in Lateran on 12 Kal. Mart. (18 February) of the sixth year of his pontificate” (1300): *Corpora defunctorum exenterantes et ea immaniter decoquentes: ut ossa at carnibus ferant separata sepelienda in terram suam ipso facto sunt excommunicati. Capitulum vnicum; see Extravagantes communes ad proprios titulos applicate: prepositis singulatim sumarijs et multis additionibus adiectis, cum Interpretis Joannis monachi varijs in locis annexis, Liber tertius* (Ticini: ex arte & industria solertis viri Jacob Paucidrapesis de Burgofraco, 1517), f. 22r-v.

For the streets of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Paris, see *Le Dit des rues de Paris (1300) par Guillot (de Paris)*, ed. Edgar Mareuse (Paris: Librairie générale, 1875) Guillot (id., 35) records the rue de la Peleterie (street of Furriers) as running parallel to the river on the northern side of the Île de la Cité in an area comprised between the Grant-Pont and the Planche de Mibrai, straight across from the Palais. Nearby, drapers were living and working on the rue a Feves [*febvres*]; another nearby street, the rue de la Kalendre took its name from a machine for buffing cloth probably found in one of the workshops there; and next to it one found oneself walking on the rue de la Ganterie—that is, the street of Glovers. Furthermore, when crossing the Grand Pont into the Ville (*Quartier d’Outre-Grant-Pont*), some of the first streets to be walked on the river bank were the rues de la Megisserie (Street of Tawyers [makers of white leather]) as well as the rue Saint-Germain des Couroiers (makers of belts) standing in close proximity to each other.

For the Chaucer fragment, see Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales: The Miller’s Tale* 3238-3240; 3243-3244; and 3250-3251.

For different types of silk, see Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Dictionnaire de l’ancien français juqu’au milieu du XIV^e siècle* (Paris: Larousse, 1969), ss. vv. *cedal, samit, diapre (diaspre, diaspré)*; see also E. Jane Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading Through Clothes in Medieval French Culture* (Philadelphia, 2002).

For polyphony as described by Johannes Marignolli, Bishop of Bisinia, see Jacobus Leodiensis, *Jacobi Leodiensis Tractatus de consonantiis musicalibus, Tractatus de intonatione tonorum, Compendium de musica*, ed. Joseph Smits van Weasberghe, Eddie Vetter, and Erik Visser, *Divitiae musicae artis A/IXa* (Buren, 1988): 118. My translation.

For Gerald of Wales, see Christopher Page, “Reading and Reminiscence: Tinctoris on the Beauty of Music,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 49 (1996): 1-31, esp. 17-18.

Thursday

For “hearing with the eyes,” see Christle Collins-Judd, *Reading Renaissance Music Theory: Hearing with the Eyes*, Cambridge Studies in Music Theory and Analysis 14 (Cambridge, 2000).

For *orfrois* or *oeuvre sarasine*, see Eunice Rathbone Goddard, *Women’s Costume in French Texts of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1927; repr., New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1973), 63-4 (for *ceintures* and belts) and 178-82 (for *orfrois*).

For *Secreta secretorum*, see Robbins manuscript 4, Robbins Collection of Roman and Canon Law, University of California at Berkeley, ff. 90^a-106^v_a; for Pope Gregory IX’s *Decretales*, see Robbins manuscript 5, *ibid.*, ff. 1^r-294^v.

Illustrations

On p. 49: Charivari (noisy serenade), in MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, fr. 146, *Le Roman de Fauvel* in the edition by “mesire Chaillou de Pesstain,” 1316 (or 1317)-1318.

On p. 50, below: Map of Paris, c. 1300, in *Le Dit des rues de Paris*, ed. Mareuse, insert after page 130.



Location of the little shop on rue Saint Germain de Couroiers, where Johannes Marignolli, Bishop of Bisinia had his shoes made by a master shoe-maker:

