The Satyr in the Kitchen Pantry

Laura Giannetti

In the fourth act of Machiavelli’s *Clizia* (1525) old Nicomaco tells his servant Pirro how he intends to prepare for a night of love with the beautiful young Clizia: before dinner he plans to take a sexually reinvigorating concoction, the *satiriòn*, followed by a serving of cooked onions, a mixture of spiced broad beans and a half-cooked pigeon. Nicomaco’s planned dinner sums up the general advice of food literature at the time on how to ensure sexual potency. Traditionally “windy” and “warm” foods such as onions and *fave* (broad beans) were thought to be excellent for “exciting Venus,” while the meat of a still bloody pigeon would give an old lover the necessary strength. But the most potent ingredient in Nicomaco’s plan went beyond dietary aids: it was a medicinal potion regularly sold by Italian apothecaries at this time. The *satiriòn* was a concoction made with the bulbous root of a special orchid, the *Satyrion*, or with the similar *testiculus vulpis* (“fox testicles”) cooked and dressed with spices and seeds noted for their aphrodisiacal virtues.

Renaissance Viagra

Machiavelli’s Messer Nicomaco exemplified a character common to many comedies of the period: the old man in love with a young woman, usually ridiculed and sometimes punished (at the end of the play) for his erotic desires and amorous schemes. The search for the right medicinal concoction and special foods to revive and sustain virility was often part of the comic plot and served to point out how infatuated old men had lost their reason, and no longer conformed to the current social ideal of dependable and sober patriarchal behavior. The attention paid to aphrodisiacs in many comedies, along with the description of the erotic properties of food and other supposedly aphrodisiacal substances, effectively constitutes a discourse on the sexual impotence of elderly patriarchs and the problems they have in satisfying their unflagging sexual desires, a discourse that humanistic literature of the time
often shunned or found inappropriate. In contrast, however, the permanence of erotic urges in the aged and the difficulty they had in satisfying them were fully recognized by both medical and the commonplace culture of the time, and reworked by imaginative literature. Authors drew extensively upon dietary, herbal, pharmaceutical and medicinal tracts, adapting their specialized language and instructions to humorous effect. Renaissance comedy was the genre that most delighted in the description of libidinous old men, their sexual desires, their performance anxiety and their sentimental expectations. In the exploration of characters of old fools in love and their search for the right erotic aid, dramatists had an opportunity to address some of the deepest social and sexual tensions of Renaissance society.

Following a repeated script, probably first inspired by Machiavelli’s *Clizia*, enamored old men ask their servants to go to an apothecary shop and procure a potion often referred to as a *lattovaro/lettovaro*, a tonic drink made with several ingredients whose name derived from the common medicinal term *elettuario*. If it is not a servant it is a friend (usually of an equally advanced age) who buys the proper foods and spices for the infatuated elderly swain. Particularly popular in comedies are *pinochiati*, a type of cake made from flour, egg whites, pine nuts and sugar, pistachios and marzipan. In the Florentine comedy *Il vecchio amoroso* (written c. 1533–1536), for example, Teodoro’s friend Arrigo went to the apothecary shop, not to the food market, to buy four marzipan confections, many *pinochiati* and some vaguely described *confezioni* for his friend. But as these foods were widely recognized as having an amorous effect, the eating of the aphrodisiacal ingredients and remedies is often carried out in secret. In *Il vecchio amoroso* old Teodoro tells the audience: “I shut myself up in my bedroom where I drank two glasses of *malvagia* [malvasia] wine and had a little candied orange, two pieces of ginger root and I do not know what type of *confezioni*.”

Usually specific vegetables, roots and nuts made up the lion’s share of the most popular foods consumed by old characters in love, notably truffles, artichokes, ginger thistles and garden celery. Servants sent to the market will also be told to buy fowl such as partridges, pheasants and sparrows, considered in Renaissance perception and imagination as “hot” foods able to stimulate the senses, and thus an essential ingredient of a preparatory dinner for libidinous old men. The clever servant Tracanna in *Fortunio* (1593) reminded his master that he would need an entire series of aphrodisiacal birds, in addition to the mysterious *confettioni* and sweet/potent wines.

A crucial source for many 16th-century recipe books was the most successful food treatise of the 15th century, *De honesta voluptate and valetudine* (first Italian edition 1487) written by Bartolommeo Sacchi, known as Platina (1421–1481). Platina lists an impressive number of foods and recipes with aphrodisiacal properties, among them onions and tubers, broad beans, rocket, pine nuts, turnips, marzipan and pies in a special broth, while truffles, oysters and partridges are considered particularly powerful in exciting even “flagging” or “deadened’’ passion. In the 16th century, many of Platina’s recipes were repeated or slightly revised and recycled in the highly successful *La singolar dottrina di Domenico Romoli sopranominato Panunto* (1560), where highly
reputed aphrodisiacs were vegetables such as onions, carrots, chick peas, artichokes, rocket, marjoram, pine nuts and leeks. Similar dietary notions are to be found in Baldassare Pisanelli’s *Trattato della natura de’ cibi et del bere* (1583), one of the best examples of a new, popular genre that fell between the culinary and the nutritional. Among authors of food treatises there was in fact a general agreement that foods promoting sexual performance included meat, oysters, wine, bread and eggs, which were considered to be particularly nourishing (strengthening) foods, while capers, chickpeas, pine nuts, artichokes, asparagus, turnips, truffles, arugula and parsley were “hot” foods (inciting lust), and leeks, carrots, parsnips and tubers in general were deemed “windy” (inflating) foods. Dietary lore was still basically informed by classical authorities, but authors of cook books and health treatises in the 16th century often added pragmatic advice related to their own experience. In many cases the aphrodisiacal properties of food for the young and the aged were presented as if they were common knowledge accessible to everybody. In fact, cook books and food treatises explored the medicinal properties of food in a process of mutual exchange, imitation and simple copying, to the extent that there was seldom a clear-cut distinction between food treatises and health manuals, especially in the 15th and 16th centuries. Works such as the *Libro de tutte le cosse che se manzano* (c. 1450–1452) dedicated to Borso d’Este by the physician Michele Savonarola (c. 1385–1466), or the *Libro de homine* (first ed. 1474) by Girolamo Manfredi (1430–1493), were at the same time culinary and medical works. In the volume dedicated to Borso d’Este, the entry on truffles first illustrates the properties of the plant according to classic Galenic theory, includes several preparation and cooking suggestions in the last paragraph, and at the very end adds, almost as an afterthought, that truffles were a meal perfect for “old men with beautiful wives.”

Renaissance comedies refer to other remedies for impotence beyond foods and potions. Besides the mysterious *confetioni/confetti* there are occasional mentions of expensive rubs, such as in Cornelio Lanci’s *Ruchetta Comedia* (1584), where Beco asks old Averardo about the purpose of the pricey lotion he has bought. Averardo responds: “To rub myself. It has so much power that it is able to resurrect the dead.” In *La Cortigiana*, written in 1526 by Pietro Aretino, the expert *ruffiana* (procuress) Alvigia also speaks about a lotion that is purportedly able to “resurrect the flesh of the codpiece.” To return to Machiavelli, the fertility potion of the mandrake root had a central place in his famous comedy *Mandragola* (written 1518), but the potion Lucrezia was given to drink in effect was “hypocras,” a mulled wine mixed with spices, considered to be both aphrodisiacal and digestive. The issue of the impotence of the elderly husband was also broached in the *Mandragola* when Messer Nicia, anxious to defend himself from doctor Callimaco’s doubts, asserts: “Impotent me? Are you joking? I doubt there is another man in Florence as rugged and hard as I am.” In Machiavelli’s *Clizia*, Messer Nicomaco more modestly recognized that he needed some help and decides to have recourse to the *satirión*, possibly the most famous remedy of the time, to enhance his virility.
The Satyrion Potion

The notion that certain plants or herbs could stimulate or restore sexual potency in the elderly existed well before Renaissance comedy exploited this *topos*. Already in the Greco–Roman period, from Dioscorides to Pliny the Elder, there were repeated mentions in medical and naturalist treatises of the quasi-legendary plant of the orchid family called *satyrion* [in Latin, *Satyrion*] whose well-known aphrodisiacal properties also played a literary role in the famous *Satyricon* [in English, *The Satyricon*] by Petronius Arbiter.25

Why was the bulbous root a particularly strong sexual symbol across the centuries? The root’s similarity to human testicles and the flower’s often striking resemblance to a human phallus were possibly the most important factors. Phallic images of this plant circulated in medieval *herbaria*, in early modern medical and dietary treatises, and in early modern botanical texts, such as the particularly explicit representation found in Giambattista Della Porta’s work *Phytognomonica* (1588). The plant’s properties, as described by such treatises, were invariably described as aphrodisiacal: eaten alone, mixed with other ingredients or simply held in one’s hand, the root was effective in provoking lust.26 Underlying this conception was the belief in the doctrine of “signatures,” already known in ancient times but clearly defined by Paracelsus (Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, 1493–1541) in the 16th century. According to the Swiss-born physician and alchemist, all plants and animals had a purpose or virtue precisely inscribed in their shape, color or appearance, which is why the orchid’s roots had medicinal properties that could be beneficial for male genitals.27 Although Paracelsus may have systemized the notion of “signatures” from a theoretical point of view, it was a widely held piece of common wisdom and as such it was included in many *Books of Secrets* published in the 16th century or earlier. According to the *Medicinal Secrets* (1561) by the doctor Pietro Bairo, simply keeping in the mouth a little piece of *verga di lupo seccata* (dried wolf penis) was believed to have an immediately stimulating effect for performing the sexual act.28 Similarly, quail testicles are used as the main ingredient for an ointment “to erect the member” in *I Segreti de la Signora Isabella Cortese* (1561), a popular recipe book.29

Medieval *herbaria* contained drawings of the *testiculus vulpis* plant and dedicated similar entries to the *satureja hortensis* (summer savory), a plant also considered to have aphrodisiacal powers.30 The original recipe for the satyrion potion, sometimes called simply *confetto*, was reportedly invented by the famous doctor Yūwas r ibn Māsawaih (known in Europe as Mesué) who lived in Baghdad in the IX century. It continued to enjoy great popularity for centuries in medical, pharmaceutical and dietary literature up to the 17th century. The recipe for the “original” Arab electuary was provided, for example, in the entry for “*Diasatyrion*” attributed to Mesué that appears in the *Nuovo Receptario*, a collection of medical recipes approved by the College of Doctors in Florence that was first published in 1498 and often reprinted in
The following century. The Florentine apothecary Stephano Rosselli includes no less than two recipes for biscuits containing satyrion root in a manuscript book of instructions for his sons (1593) and affirms that they had been sold in his shop “for a long time” with “great effects” and also “sent many times to Rome,” which assertion was meant to demonstrate that these aphrodisiacal biscuits were in demand even outside of Tuscany. Rosselli also left a Zibaldone di segreti diversi (now in the Biblioteca Marucelliana in Florence), in which appears a recipe titled “morselletti da eccitar Venere” (little biscuits to excite Venus), while an ointment defined as being useful “a eretione” (to provoke erection) was made with the satyrion root and 18 other ingredients, some hard to identify due to bizarre names such as carpobalsamo and astrologia, while other ingredients were more familiar, such as ginger, pepper and pine nuts, well known also to our characters in comedies. In that many medicinal treatises of the first half of the 16th century included the satyrion root amongst the ingredients for their recipes, it comes as no surprise that Machiavelli and other playwrights were well aware of the various Viagra recipes of their time, and used them to humorous effect in their comedies.

On the whole, the satyrion potion enjoyed a solid reputation in medical, pharmaceutical and dietary manuals, as well as in the literary production of early modern Italy. A host of different factors, as we have seen, contributed to its fame. The circular exchange of ideas regarding the natural world, medical and scientific theories, word metaphors and shape similarities helped form the legend of the potent satyrion potion in a wide range of disciplines and genres. An apt example of how many factors interacted in this mythical remedy can be seen in the explication a satyrion recipe found in a 17th-century treatise, the Theatro farmaceutico dogmatico e stagirico a pharmaceutical summa by Tomaso Donzelli (1596–1670). While providing one stock recipe for the “Diasatyrion by Mesué,” Donzelli adds an explanation regarding the plant called testicolli di volpe that humorously summarizes the cultural spectrum of the discourse on the plant. He begins by relating its mythical origins: the roots of that plant were called “Satirij,” because they were discovered and used by satyrs to boost their libido while chasing nymphs who fled into the woods. Immediately, however, he added a judicious qualification noting that some more discretely argued that the name came from the root’s power “to provoke an erection, called Satyriasis, by the Greeks.” The full range of medical, botanical, etymological, and literary knowledge was thus accounted for in one short entry.

From the plant name satyrion came the subsequent etymological cluster—and confusion in meanings—of words such as sátiro (satyr), satirio/satirij (satyrion root/roots), sàtira (satire), satirióne/satirióinne (potion) and satirión (both a potion and a poisonous mushroom). The Machiavellian reference to the remedy satirión in its loose derivation from the word satyrion calls to mind the ithyphallic satyr, the half man, half animal creature that pagan mythology, followed by medieval and early modern culture, saw as the “embodiment of lust.” It is fascinating to note that at the same time that the satyrion root
and satyrion potions became popular in the early modern period in medical, herbal and pharmaceutical treatises, lascivious images of satyrs with an erect phallus began to circulate broadly in visual media, sculpture and painting, while satyr scenes were even to become a favorite staple of late 16th-century pastoral literature.

The bulbs of the exotic orchid were often substituted with the roots of a more commonly available domestic plant called *testiculus vulpis* or *testiculus canis* as Pietro Matthioli explains in his medical *Discorsi on Dioscorides* (first edn. 1544). According to Prospero Borgarucci, a 16th-century doctor and apothecary working in Venice, several *spezieri* in his city regularly prepared the *satiriôn* with the *testiculus canis* root instead of the satyrion as it was more difficult to obtain. However, he warned that for problems related to sexual impotence, it was best to use only the bigger roots because the smallest would have a contrary effect. One of these recipes called for boiling the roots in a chickpea broth and adding, among other things, rocket seeds, asparagus, cinnamon, long pepper [the dried fruit of the Indian plant *piper longum*], pine nuts, pistachios and two ounces of sparrow brain. Given the ingredients, Borgarucci promised, the recipe would produce “marvelous effects.” The Venetian doctor Giovanni Marinello in his *Le medicine pertinenti alle infermità delle donne* (1574), listed 16 pages of *elettuari, satirionì* and foods for restoring lost virility. While his preoccupation with a functional sexuality in marriage is understandable—impotence could be the legal ground for annulment of a marriage—the attention he devoted to old men and their problems is particularly noteworthy. Following humoral theory, Marinello suggested substances that were believed to increase the flow of blood and warm the cold body of the elderly, such rocket seeds, various kinds of pepper, mustard, saffron, cinnamon and cardamom. His inventive formulas often added satyrion to the mix and, in one case, an especially potent prescription called for thirty sparrow brains (the sparrow was notoriously libidinous) to make a *nociuola* or pill to be eaten before going to bed with a woman. Marinello followed medical tradition and popular lore, but he did add some savvy and practical advice. He suggested that having a satisfying sexual relation involved more than potions or lotions, it also required the right environment, the absence of preoccupations, the role of imagination and general moderation in eating and drinking.

The purported properties of the satyrion potion continue to appear in medical lore well into the 17th century, although even specialized literature becomes a bit vague about what it is exactly. For example, the *Antidotario Romano Latino e Volgare* (1668), a *summa* of medical remedies, gives several recipes for *Diasatyrion* made with the *testiculus canis* root, but guiltily admits that there is uncertainty about what root it is and suggests that one might make do with any bulbous root regularly consumed in everyday cooking such as onions, leeks and scallions. It would seem that the popular medical lore circulating in the 16th-century *Book of Secrets* with its exotic ingredients has been abandoned in favor of more commonplace items from the larder, but with equally guaranteed effect.
Lustful Senescence: Literary Humor Versus Humanist Denial

To return to Renaissance comedy, the enormous popularity of Platina’s work with its multiple editions and translations, along with the proliferation of food treatises and health manuals in the 15th and 16th centuries, can certainly account for the repeated mentions of specific foods and cures for impotence that appear in many plays.49 But did dramatists believe in the power of lattovario and special foods as did (apparently) doctors and the authors of health and dietary treatises? Should playwrights be seen as being more skeptical than not, considering that the “miraculous” properties of many remedies were usually playfully discussed or even mocked in comedies? The gullibility of the amorous old fools who believed in such popular aids and remedies for impotence was often underscored in scenes specifically dedicated to them, while clever servants usually reveled in revealing the foolish credulity of their masters. In the comedy Calandra (1513) by the future Cardinal Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena there is a famous line by the servant Fessenio where he laughingly comments on the power of love, saying it was “Just like truffles! They both make young men’s affairs come to a head and old men fart.”50 This scathing comment was typical of a series of mocking tropes on contemporary medical and dietary literature that were to appear in Renaissance plays. For example, in the comedy Fortunio by Vicenzo Giusti (published 1593), Messer Anselmo conferred with his servant Tracanna about what to eat to prepare for a night of love. Tracanna responded using a parody of a “scientific” explanation to dissuade his master from eating oysters, arguing that they were a “cold” food, useful to excite young people but with unpleasant effects on the aged.31 In Loredano’s Li vani amori (1588), Garbino waits in line an hour at the apothecary shop for a preparation of a lattovario for his master Crispo. When the servant returned with the fresh potion, Crispo feared it would not suffice to overcome his problems and urged him to return to the market to buy garden celery and thistles. Garbino tried to dissuade his master, warning him humorously about the properties of garden celery by pointing out that he would not be able to do anything beyond a windy serenade from the “lower regions” of his body, as this particular remedy would make him full of wind.52 Later, Garbino speaks openly to the audience about the foolishness of his master, mockingly describing him about to gulp down “recipes” believed to be able to resurrect the dead.53 In another comedy by Francesco Mercati da Bibbiena, Il Lanzi (1566), servants decide to have fun at the expense of their foolish master Ruberto and teach him that his sexual appetites were not appropriate for one of his age. To this end they made Ruberto meet with a (false) doctor who would supposedly provide him with a miraculous lattovario, made with the “youth apple from Calicut” to make him young again.54 In Giovan Battista della Porta’s La Furiosa (1609), the strategy is told from a feminine perspective: the protagonist is a young wife married to an old doctor who is desperate for a cure for her husband’s impotence. She laments to a servant that her husband’s cures and attempts to “revive dead bodies” were of no use to her because he
could not revive his own member “more dead than death itself” neither with ointments nor with caresses.

Besides plays, other literary texts express doubts on the power of aphrodisiacal foods, while admitting that they had a recognized role in the popular imagination as cures for impotence. In Pietro Aretino’s Ragionamenti (1534–1536), for example, Nanna instructs her daughter Pippa on the supposed power of certain foods for would-be libidinous old men, such as oysters, hot lattovari from France, truffles, thistles and pepper. She also noted mockingly that Pippa, during such meals, could eat without restraint since the old men were too busy, anxiously stuffing themselves with fortifying foods in preparation for what they hoped was to follow. Unfortunately for these elderly swains, in another section of the dialogue Nanna admits to her friend Antonia that the most popular aphrodisiacal foods, such as truffles, artichokes and lattovari, did not actually seem to have much effect. Similarly, in a short 16th-century novella by Anton Francesco Doni an old man, Lombardo, marries a beautiful young woman and “after taking many lattovari and using several unguents” tries to make love to her, but to no avail. Desperate, he tried standing naked on the balcony, singing the Magnificat in the hopes that as in church everything would stand up at the sound of that sacred song.

At the same time as Renaissance comedy was encountering widespread success, along with its humorous treatment of erotic topics, 15th- and 16th-century humanist writing about old age, love and desire offered a decidedly less humorous and less hopeful perspective on elderly men and cures for their impotence. It is interesting to note that humanist writing often makes reference to the same sexual themes treated in comedies, but adopted an entirely different approach to the problem, relying strictly on ancient texts and the theory of the four humors in their assessment of geriatric impotence. The main explanation found in humanist treatises regarding old men’s sexual dysfunction is based on Galenic theory and the astrological claim that a different planet and humor dominate the body at different ages. Thus old men were under the control of Saturn, they were cold and dry, lacking in strength and unable to function sexually. Following this line of thought, Marsilio Ficino, in his De vita libri tres (published in 1489), recommended that saturnine people “avoid the Venereal act, which takes away most of the life even of people who are young.” Since elderly men already lacked inner warmth and moisture, they should certainly not engage in sexual intercourse as they would risk losing their entire remaining vital humors. Ludovico Guicciardini in L’ore di recreazione (1565) and Cardinal Gabriele Paleotto (1524–1597) in his highly moralistic Libro del bene della vecchiezza (1597), also supported the Galenic notion that the diminution of excess heat in old age finally freed men from the tyranny of the senses and “all unrestrained impulses.”

Despite this respectable pedigree, such conclusions were certainly not attributed by dramatists to characters of old lovers. In direct opposition to Ficino and contemporary conduct literature, Messer Ambrogio in Giovan Maria Cecchi’s Assiuelo (written and staged in 1549) described himself as someone who
had “fire inside” while old Filippo in La stiava (also by Cecchi, 1550) both echoed Petrarchan concepts and contradicted humoral theory by affirming that he fell in love because he possessed the two crucial elements: “kindness of heart and warmth of blood.”

In Olivetta by Cornelio Lanci (1587), a dialogue between two patriarchs, Lippo and Lando, centered on the hot–cold dichotomy between young women and old men. Lando warned his friend that old men, similar to old wood, cannot make a good fire, while women catch fire immediately.

Teodoro, in Donato Giannotti’s Il vecchio amoroso (written c. 1533–1536) also contradicted Ficinian theory by boasting that he was sixty and happily enamored of the young slave Diamante. Similarly, the 70-year-old Messer Riccardo in Il commodo by Antonio Landi (1566) patently ignored all medical dictates regarding sex in old age when he proclaimed: “[…] regarding this other thing I always did what I wanted to do.”

In Il Saltuzza by Andrea Calmo (1551), old Melindo undertakes a long monologue that playfully mixes Venetian dialect and macaronic Latin to explain that doctors were wrong when they affirmed that old men like himself lacked the virtues of “diritiva, premitiva, sustentativa” [becoming erect, penetrating and enduring].

In sharp contrast to humanistic literature based on Galenic theory, comedies reveal that old patriarchs, even though they were supposed to be cold and dry, had “fire inside” and might fall in love, even if they were unable to live up to the desires that they still strongly felt.

The humanist image of old age as a period of life almost free of carnal desires was also contradicted by a significant body of medical knowledge of the time that recognized the existence of sexual desire in the elderly and the troubles it caused. The Veronese physician Gabriele Zerbi, in his Gerontoconia (1484), acknowledged the power of sex “because of the great delight it produces,” and admitted how difficult it was for old men to “curb the use of it.”

Alessandro Trajano Petronio, doctor of Pope Gregorio XIII in his treatise Del viver delli Romani et del conservar la sanità (1592), advised men over 63 years of age that sex should be avoided because semen emission would weaken the body. But if one was “forced by nature” or by the desire to have children to engage in intercourse, he recommended at first a surprisingly humble soup of bread and raw egg whites, and then went on to suggest a series of more elaborate traditional remedies, including pigeon cooked in red wine, sparrow meat, aphrodisiacal mushrooms and the “confetto called diasatyrion.”

In his introduction on the causes of impotence, Giovanni Marinelli, author of Le medicine pertinenti alle infermità delle donne (1574), expressed a certain compassion with regard to age-induced impotence suffered by “those who cannot exercise sex with women and know very well what it means.”

Yet even authors such as the speziale [pharmacist] Matteo Palmieri, in his De vita civile (written 1438–1439, published 1529), who condemned lust in general but denounced the desires of old men as being particularly “abominable and ugly,” nonetheless had to admit that it could pose no small problem for the elderly.
Conclusion

Dramatists and authors of novelle and other literary forms took full advantage of the comic possibility offered by the character of the amorous old fool, and often used such figures to explore contemporary views about sexuality in general and geriatric sexuality in particular. What was then the “social and cultural script” to be found in comedies that mocked but at the same time empathized with the elderly characters in love? As I have argued elsewhere in more detail, comedies were an imaginative terrain where traditional age stereotypes and gender definitions were playfully discussed. The characters of old lovers were certainly an important part of that imaginative arena. Comedies elaborated on at least three competing sets of problems concerning old men and sex in 16th-century society: the age disparity in arranged upper-class marriages that often saw old men married to much younger wives; the necessity of proving virility and manhood in such marriages by producing offspring; and lastly the difficult relationship between the old and the young, especially in gerontocratic societies such as Venice and Florence.

This contrast was often dramatized in Italian comedies that ended with the final triumph of the young, allowing at least in the imaginary world of the comedy the overturning of “the more normal subordination of young males to older male patriarchs.” A significant number of plays portray young male characters temporarily dressed as women and successfully passing as such, a ploy that openly alluded to life offstage where youths were regularly kept in a submissive and thus “feminine” social position. Significantly, however, the shedding of the female dress at the end of the comedy was invariably preceded by a scene of phallic revelation that served to reassure the audience that the cross-dressed character had evolved into an adult male. In several comedies, phallic revelations even spill over into phallic celebrations where young, well-equipped men reverse (at least at the sexual level) the normally dominant position of their elders. Certainly the young phallus celebrated in these comedies served primarily to exclude any residual femininity in cross-dressed characters and provided an eloquent theatrical metaphor for the contrast between young and old men, and for their respective sexual prowess and sexual weakness.

While, in some cases, the shaming and ritual humiliation of lustful old men bring them back to a more socially appropriate role (as in Machiavelli’s Clizia), in others the lovelorn patriarchs remain blissfully unaware that they have been made a fool, but no matter what the end result may have been, the scripting of old fools in love was quite distant from the image that prescriptive humanist literature depicted and society demanded. In comedies most of the characters never managed to carry out their erotic plans, being thwarted by an alliance against them that included servants, young men and women, all of whom were usually subjugated to patriarchal power. Often old men were punished with charivari-like pranks until they regained both
their senses and their virtù, whereby traditional patriarchal reason and sexual order were reassuringly restored. To soften the bitter medicine of their failure in love, old fools are occasionally redeemed by the sentimental discovery that the object of their affection is actually a long-lost daughter. At other times an elderly swain finally sees the light and graciously steps aside in favor of his son, virtually always a sympathetic character who finds himself in amorous competition with not just the older generation, but his own father. Such is the genre of comedy, where almost every character is given a role in the final happy end, with the return of harmony and the triumph of youth and love. In comedy’s complex rendering of amorous old men it is thus possible to read a critique of the contemporary humanistic view of senescence as a period of self-control and saviezza (wisdom) that certainly did not correspond with reality. In contrast to the normative humanist ideal of the savvy patriarch who has relinquished erotic desires, both comedy and medical lore recognize that masculine old age was hardly chaste. Not only was this stage of life portrayed as being subject to passions and desires, but it was also seen as attempting (somewhat pathetically) to recover the pleasures of youth with invigorating foods, stimulating lotions, and the most potent remedy of all: the legendary satirión.

Works Cited

Manuscripts and Early Printed Sources (pre-1900)


Pisanelli, Baldassare, *Trattato della natura de’ cibi et del bere del Sig. Baldassare Pisanelli, Medico Bolognese. Nel quale non solo tutte le virtù, & i vitiij di quelli minutamente si palesano ma anco i rimedij per correggere i loro difetti …. Carmagnola: Bellone, 1589.


Targioni Tozzetti, Ottaviano, *Dizionario Botanico Italiano che comprende i nomi volgari italiani specialmente toscani e vernacoli delle piante raccolti da diversi autori e dalla gente di campagna col corrispondente latino botanico compilato dal dottore Ottaviano Targioni Tozzetti*. Florence: a spese dell’editore, 1858.
**Secondary Sources and Modern Editions**


Bourke, Molly, “Vincenzo Gonzaga and the Body Politic: Impotence and Virility at Court.”


Notes

1. I am deeply grateful to Sara Matthews-Grieco for inviting me to collaborate on the volume and for providing invaluable comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this essay.


3. In early modern Europe the idea persisted (based on Greek medicine) that erection was due to warm air or spirits. Regarding the circulation and diffusion in Europe of this notion see Angus Mc Laren, Impotence: A Cultural History (Chicago, 2007), 39. Ken Albala explains the vision of fava beans as windy and therefore an aphrodisiacal food: “Yet, more surprisingly, beans inflate not just the stomach but the whole body. This creates a kind of artificial aid to sex, an early modern Viagra, if you will.” Ken Albala, Beans: A History (Oxford/New York, 2007), 58.

4. Because of its shape the root was called in ancient Greek archis-eto (from which orchid) which means “testicle.”


6. See Li vani amori del Signor Gio. Francesco Loredano (Venice, 1588), IV, ii, c. 91r.; Fortunio Comedia Nuova di M. Vicenzo Giusti da Udine (Venice, 1593), i, ix, c.19r. and Fabritia Comedia di M. Ludovico Dolce (Venice, 1549), where the servant Turchetto buys “pignocato” and “marzapani” for his master (II, viii, c. 22r.). A lattovaro/lettovaro (and/or lattovaro) may contain different components and usually has cheese as one of the main ingredients. The medicinal term lattovaro in literature well before the 16th century. For instance see Giovanni Boccaccio, Decameron, VII, 3.


9. “mi serrai in camera; e da me, bevvi due bicchieri di malvagia, e mangiai un poco di ranciata e due barbe di gengiovo e non so che confezioni.” Donato Giannotti, Il vecchio amoroso, IV, i, 53. The term confezione/confetione/confettione in general refers to a medicinal preserve. Old Collofonio in Il travaglia takes note of the money he spent after he fell in love and includes in his list “soldi 3 e piccoli 2” for marzipani [a sweet pastry] and hair-washing session: Andrea Calmo, Il Travaglia. Comedia di Messer Andrea Calmo, nuovamente venuta in luce, molto piacevole ed a varie lingue adornata, sotto bellissima invenzione. Al modo che la fu presentata dal detto autore nella città di Viuenza, ed. Piermario Vescovo (Padua, 1994), II, 16, 139. Il travaglia was first published in 1556.

10. “Séleno” is the word used for garden celery. See the entry “séleno” in Giuseppe Boerio, Dizionario del dialetto veneziano (Venice, 1867), 642. Many thanks to Karen Reed and William Eamon who helped me to identify the name of the plant. Garden celery and thistles in Li vani amori, IV, iv,
c. 91r; pine nuts and pistachios in *Ruchetta Comedia del Signor Cavaliere Cornelio Lanci* (Florence, 1584), III, i, c. 46r. Truffles and artichokes are the choice for old Gostanzo in Alessandro Piccolomini’s *Alessandro*, ed. Florindo Cerreta (Siena, 1966), II, iii, 162. Gostanzo is also planning to eat “macaroni” an aromatic plant with a taste similar to the asparagus not to be confused with “maccheroni.” *Alessandro* was written in 1544.


12 Tracanna: “Ci vole altro a pari vostri. Buone confettoni, buoni Caponi, starne, Fagiani, Moscati, Vini …. See *Fortunato*, I, ix, c. 19r. Wines are considered good for different reasons, but sweet/ potent wines convey strength.


15 *La singolar dottrina di M. Domenico Romoli soprannominato Panunto, dell’ufficio dello scalo, de i condimenti di tutte le vivande, le stagioni che si convergono a tutti gli animali, uccelli, e pesci, banchetti di ogni tempo* … (Venice, 1593). The fourth book, dedicated to exemplary menus, opens with advice for the first day of Lent (March 10, 1546) when the goal was to suppress the senses and lust: the antipasto includes figs, walnuts, a lettuce salad and different types of fish. Lettuce was considered by all food treatises and health manuals as the anti-lust food *per excellence*.

16 Baldassar Pisanelli, *Trattato della natura de’ cibi et del bere del Sig. Baldassare Pisanelli*, Medico Bolognese. Nel quale non solo tutte le virtù, & i vizi di quelli minutamente si palesano; ma anco i rimedij per correggere i loro difetti … … (Carmagnola, 1589).

17 As Ken Albala explains, “In Renaissance physiology, sexual appetite is directly linked to nutrition. Production of sperm is merely the last step of the entire digestive process, and it is generated directly from an[ ]excess of nutritive material remaining after the body has been nourished.” Ken Albala, *Eating Right in Renaissance Italy* (California, 2002), 144. See the entire discussion at 143–54.


20 “Per ungermi. Che l’ha tanta virtù, che farebbe rizzare un morto.” Cornelio Lanci, *Ruchetta*, III, i, c. 46r. Rubs to help in impotence were already known in medieval medicine. See for example the recipe contained in the *herbarium* manuscript Aushburn 731 in the Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana in Florence (c. 1450): “Prendi un luccio ed estraigli la mascella inferiore: pestala bene e passala inietto. Con la composizione così ottenuta ungiti il pene, dopo averlo prima lavato con vino bianco in cui siano state bollite delle rose.” Quoted in Salvatore Pezzella, *Gli erbari. I primi libri di medicina (le virtù curative delle piante)* (Perugia, 1993), 139.


24 For an informative and entertaining treatment of what early modern European and New World pharmacopoeia had to promote sexual vigor in aging men, see Valeria Finucci “There’s the Rub: Searching for Sexual Remedies in the New World,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38.3 (Fall 2008), 523–57. For a cultural history of masculinity and the male physical body that “historicizes and redifines” the pre-modern phallus, see the groundbreaking book by Patricia Simons, *The Sex of Men in Premodern Europe: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
Cuckoldry, Impotence and Adultery in Europe (15th–17th century)


27 “Nature endows everything with the form which is also the essence, and thus the form reveals the essence.” Jane Bennett, The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics (Princeton, NJ, 2001), 34–5.


30 A beautiful image of the testiculus vulpis plant is held in the Biblioteca Mediceo-Laurenziana in Florence: Ms. Cod. Aushb. 731 at c. 78r. The image is reproduced in Salvatore Pezzella, Gli Erbari.137. See also the entry “Sanctorreggia” in Pezzella, Gli Erbari, 58: “La Sanctorreggia è calda et seccha. Questa herba mangiata con pepe et con mele, meravigliosamente connuove la luxuria.” Florence, Biblioteca Marucelliana, MS. C/168: della virtù della sanctorreggia,” f. 23 r.


32 The recipe is reproduced in: Jo Wheeler with the assistance of Katy Temple, Renaissance Secrets: Recipes & Formulas (London, 2009), 90–91. The manuscript "Questo libro e' di Stephano di maestro Romolo Roselli, speziali all'insegnia di S.to Francesco in sul canto del gilio et di Franc.o et Vinc.o suo figlioli. ... cominciato con il nome di Dio alli X di Agosto, il di' di S.to Lorenzo 1593 a Firenze,” is held in Biblioteca Zayas, Seville, MS C-IV-15 [Private collection of Rodrigo de Zayas in Seville] and published in Stefano Francesco Di Romolo Rosselli, Mes secrets: a Florence au temps des Médicis, 1593: pilisserie, parfumerie, médecine, ed. Rodrigo de Zayas (Paris, 1996). The two manuscripts in Florence precede this one. Thanks are due here to Jo Wheeler who provided me with the correct source for the recipe and information about Rosselli’s manuscripts. On Stefano Rosselli and his apothecary shop in Florence see also Making and Marketing Medicine, eds. James Shaw and Evelyn Welch, 304–7.

33 For an example of the use of morselletti, see the essay by Molly Bourne in this volume, “Vincenzo Gonzaga and the Body Politic: Impotence and Virility at Court,” chapter 2.

34 Rosselli Stephano, Zibaldone di diversi segreti, Biblioteca Marucelliana MS C.145. “Morselleti da eccitar Venere cap. LXXV.” The term “astrolologia” probably was a corruption of “aristolochia” an herb with curative properties. See the voice “aristolochia” in Dizionario Botanico Italiano che comprende i nomi volgari italiani specialmente toscani e vernacoli delle piante raccolti da diversi autori e della gente di campagna col corrispondente latino botanico compilato dal dottore Ottaviano Targioni Tozzetti (Florence, 1858, 2nd ed.), 24. The term “carpobalsamo” indicates the fruit/semen of the plant called “Balsamo.” See the voice “Omobalsamo ossia balsamo della Mecka,” in Luigi Castiglioni, Storia delle piante forastiere. Le piu importanti nell’uso medico, ed economico, ed. Luigi Saibene (Milan, 2008), 359–66.

35 “I Testicoli delle Volpi sono quelle radici bulbose, chiamate volgarmente Satirij, detti cosi, perché credono alcuni, che fussero state ritrovate, e poi usate dal Satiri, acciò se glacendesse più la libidine, mentre seguivano le Ninfe per la selva. Alcuni poi più sensatamente dicono, chiamarsi queste radici Satirij, perché fanno erigere la verga virile, e tale erezzione da Greci è chiamata Satyrasin.” Teatro farmaceutico dogmatico e spagirico di Tuctoapio Targioni Tozzetti (Venice, 1588), 89. The work was first published in Venice in 1681.

36 Raymond Waddington explains that in the sixteenth century there was “a false etymology deriving satire from satyr.” Thus it was commonly held that the literary genre of satire came from the satyr plays, while the word satire derives from the Latin adjective sатиру [stil]. The wrong identification was corrected in the 17th century in the work of Isaac Casaubon, De Satyrum Graecarum Poeti & Romanorum Satira (1605); see Raymond Waddington, Areteino’s Satyr. Sexuality, Satir, and Self-Projection in Sixteenth-Century Literature and Art (Toronto, 2004), 94–9. According to Carlo Battisti and Giovanni Alessio, Dizionario Etimologico Italiano (Florence, 1968) the words “satirico,” “satirico” and “satio” indicate respectively: 1) a tonic drink based on the root of
libido, which is also a kind of orchid called *giglio di prato* 3) a lascivious person. Salvatore Battaglia, *Grande Dizionario della lingua italiana* (Turin, 1961)– indicates for *satirione* 1 an orchid plant with attributed aphrodisiacal properties, 2) a poisonous mushroom (*phallus impudicus* today called *Satyrion*). A beautiful image of the *phallus impudicus* mushroom—also called *fungus priapeius*—appears in the *acquerello* series by Uslise Aldovrandi housed at the University of Bologna, AMS Historica, *Collezione digitale di opere storiche.*


38 Particularly fashionable were artistic engravings representing episodes of pagan mythology in morality prints and emblem books, such as Andrea Alciato’s *Diverse Imprese* (1551) where *Lussuria* is symbolized by the goat-legged satyr. See Sara Matthews-Grieco, “Satyr and Sausages,” p. 31. Small bronze satyrs were kept in private spaces such as a scholar’s study: especially famous were the couple of *Satyr and Satyress* made by Padua bronze artist Andrea Briosco (c. 1470–1532). See Jeremy Warren, “Bronzes,” in *At Home in Renaissance Italy,* eds. Marta Ajmar-Wollheim and Flora Dennis (London, 2006), 294–306 at 303–4. Pietro Aretino even commissioned a number of portrait medals of himself tellingly with a satyr image on the reverse “announcing his intertwined sexuality and identity as a satirist.” Raymond Waddington, *Aretino’s Satyr,* “Introduction,” xix. The satyr scenes became a classic in Italian and English pastoral plays towards the end of the 16th century. See Meredith Kennedy Ray, “La caustitá conquistata: The Function of the Satyr in Pastoral Drama,” in *Romance Languages Annual* 9 (1998): 312–21, on the role of the satyr in the most important pastoral plays of the period. The satyr’s episodes are particularly interesting in two works by female writers: Isabella Andreini’s *Mirtilla* (1588) and Valeria Miani’s *Amarosa speranza* (1604). Julie D. Campbell explains how “Andreini takes liberties with the traditional theatergram” (i.e. of the satyr); see Julie D. Campbell, “Introduction,” in *Isabella Andreini La Mirtilla: A Pastoral,* translated with an Introduction by Julie D. Campbell (Tempe, AZ, 2002), xix. See also Maria Galli Stampino, “Pastoral Constraints, Textual and Dramatic Strategies: Isabella Andreini’s *La Mirtilla* and Torquato Tasso’s *Aminta,*” in *Italian Culture* 22 (2004): 1–20. In the later *Amarosa speranza* by Miani the nymph takes revenge on the satyr: see Katie Rees, “Female-Authored Drama in Early Modern Padua,” *Italian Studies* 63.1 (Spring 2008): 41–61, especially 50–51. Virginia Cox notes that “Miani’s emphasis on the satyr’s advanced age brings her version close, as well, to the classic comedic stereotype of the humiliation of the *senex* who presumes to fall in love.” Virginia Cox, *The Prodigious Muse: Women’s Writing in Counter-Reformation Italy* (Baltimore, 2011), 113. On the satyr *topos* in Renaissance art and culture, see also: Lynn Frier Kaufmann, *The Noble Savage: Satyrs and Satyr Families in Renaissance Art* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1984); Julia Seiriznai, *La syrinx au bucher. Pas et les satyres a la renaissance et a l’age baroque* (Geneva, 2005).


40 “Questa presente conserva, ò condito che ne vogliam dire, ho io molte v

41 “Usasi per le cose veneree la radice più alta, e piena, perche la più bassa, la quale è grinza, dicono che fa contrario effetto.” *La fabrice de gli spetiali,* c. 17.

42 “Chi ben considera tutte le cose che entranza in questa presente composizione, di necessità potrà conoscere ella dovre operata tutto quello che dice Mesué. Et quantunque alcuna cosa vi sia, che con fattica si possa riformare, e conservare: non di meno è da credere per fermo che componendola si possa vedere di mirabil effetti.” “Discorso del Borgarucci nel secondo Diasattrione” in *La fabrice de gli spetiali,* c. 28.


44 For examples of such arguments in legal cases in 16th-century Venice see: Joanne M. Ferraro, *Marriage Wars in Late Renaissance Venice* (New York: 2001), ch. 3, “Bedtime Stories.”

45 Ken Albala summarizes the types of food that were commonly held to be aphrodisiacs in medical and culinary treatises of the time: heating foods “which helps the circulation of blood and eventually the production and delivery of sperm” (examples: leeks, garlic, oysters, chickpeas, turnips, trifles, cloves, almonds, partridges), anything salty, “windy foods that cause flatulence” (carrots, parsnips, arugula), etc. Ken Albala, *Eating Right,* 146–50.
54

“Tramoguare i recipe creduti da lui poter resuscitare i morti.” Ibid. at 875. (Angelo Beolco)

55

“Che giovano a me le sue medicine e che resusciti i morti, se non fa risuscitar
le sue membra che
ciole se non risuscitare li morti, non si vede che non si ricorrono al recito: e se
con me si ricorrono al recito, si ricorrono semplicemente

56

“Se il non poter usare con donna, viene da poco desiderio e da non sentire stimolo della carne, egli
è di bisogno confortare il corpo e l’animo con allegrezza, diletto, esercitio temperato e simili cose
di poi mangiare vivande, che facciano grasso, e che sono facili ad essere digerite bron di gallina.”
Giovanni Marinello, Le Medicine, at c. 23r.

57

“Circa il seme del bulbo vi è grande lite perche non essendo stata descritta da
Antichi la sua
effigie, si può affermare niente di certo, tanto più che ora non usiamo mangiare altri bulbi,
che le cipolle, li porri, le scalogne.” A lettovaro based on these bulbs is warm and windy, increases
the strength for coitum and it is good to old men who are married. See Antidotario Romano Latino
Volgar, tradotto da Ippolito Ceccarelli, e con melle (honey) spumato l’accompagnano meschiando

di ciascuno, distinti in tre libri (Venice, 1620), 120–21.
“I biorosi e volenterosi, sperando nel pevere, nei fratelli, nei cari e in certi latovarii calidi che vengono di Francia, ne fanno maggiori scarpacciate che i contadini de' luva; e inghiottendo l'ostrighe senza masticarle, vorrebbe pur far miracoli. A così fatte cene puoi tu mancare quasi senza clemenza.” Pietro Aretino, Ragionamento-Dialogo, ed. Carla Forno (Milan, 1988), 319.

“né per tartufi, né per carciofi, né per lattovari poté mai drizzare il palo, e se pur l'alzava un poco, tosto ricadeva giusto.” Ibid., 261.

“Un vecchio Lombardo per disperazione intuona il Magnificat, giudicandolo buon rimedio per la sua impotenza.” Novella viii in Tutte le Novelle, Lo Stufuiolo Commeda e La Mula e La Chiave Dicerie di Antonfrancesco Doni (Milan, 1863), 22-3.

“… Voi dovete sapere” disse il vecchio “ch'io ho provato tutti i modi e usato tutte le vie che costui si levi in piedi (accennando dove bisognava) e si cavi la berretta, facendo honore a me e alla sua sposa; e non v'è stato ordine. Ho ultimamente veduto a' vesprì della mia parrocchia, quando si tocca i tasti dell'organo, e che si canta il Magnificat che ognuno si rizza; onde io voleva provare questo rimedio ancora (poiché non m'erano giovani gli altri) per vedere se costui si voleva rizzare con questo mezzo.” Ibid.

This topic has been studied in details by Anthony Ellis, Old Age, Masculinity, and Early Modern Drama. Comic Elders on the Italian and Shakespearean Stage (Burlington, VT, 2009), especially at 70-72 and 133-5.

Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark, eds. Marsilio Ficino Three Books on Life: A Critical Edition and Translation with Introduction and Notes (Tempe: AZ, 1998, 1st ed. 1989), See II, viii, “The Diet, Mode of Life, and Medicine of the Elderly”: “Those who have already completed their forty-ninth year and are nearing their fiftieth, should reflect that young people are signified by Venus, while old people are signified by Saturn, and that according to astronomers these stars are the most hostile of all to each other. Therefore those saturnine people should avoid the Venereal act, which takes away most of the life even of people who are young. For she takes no thought for things already born, but for those about to be born, and even dries up the green plants as soon as they have produced seed” (189). The idea was that sex in the aged was dangerous because it used up their (declining) heat and moisture, and damaged moist organs such as the brain and the eyes; see Ken Albala, Eating Right, 144-5.


Ricciardo: “Horamai io ho presso che i miei settanta, e sempre mi son fatto beffe di riguardarmi e aerarmi interviene el medesimo che succede delle legne di quercia vecchia che si logorano, e se consumano a poco, a poco, facendo un fuoco tanto stentato, che non ne gode la pigliarà per tre o quattro giorni ogni mattina e sera inanzi pasto, né credo che si possa trovar a un poco, né per tartufi, né per carcioffi, né per lattovari poté mai drizzare il palo, e se pur l'alzava un poco, tosto ricadeva giusto.” Ibid., 261.© Laura Giannetti (2014)

© Ashgate Publishing Ltd
© Laura Giannetti (2014)

“Che cosa sia il non poter usare carnalmente con donna, coloro il sanno troppo bene, ché il provano, ò ne lo hanno provato.” “Le cagioni, i segni e la cura di quegli che sono debili, e impotenti al generare” in Giovanni Marinello, Le medicine, c. 19c.

“La lussuria in ogni età è brutta ma ne’ vecchi quanto più può è scellerata, abominevole e bruttissima,” in Della vita civile Trattato di Matteo Palmieri cittadino fiorentino (Milan; 1825), II, 127.

Introduction in Laura Giannetti, Lelia’s Kiss: Imagining Gender, Sex and Marriage in Italian Renaissance Comedy (Toronto, 2009), 10.

The most famous example is perhaps the young Lucretia married to Messer Nicia in Mandragola; see also Oretta married to old Messer Ambrogio in Assiuolo by Giovan Maria Cecchi. Examples of unsuccessful attempts to marry young daughters to old men are present in comedies such as Ingannati, Il ragazzo, La sporta: see Laura Giannetti, Lelia’s Kiss, 217.

The theme is developed by Anthony Ellis in Old Age, Masculinity and Early Modern Drama chapters 3 and 4, with the study of a group of comedies (written and staged in Florence and Venice) where the generational and political conflict between the foolish old men in love and their young sons or other young males is particularly relevant. Linda Carroll, in a series of fundamental studies dedicated to gender and drama in Venice at the beginning of the 16th century, has shown how masculine and patriarchal power at that time was in a position of weakness and difficulty [Linda Carroll, “Who’s on top? Gender as Societal Power Configuration in Italian Renaissance Painting and Drama,” The Sixteenth Century Journal 20 (1989): 531–58.] In a more recent study on the social identity of Venetians she uses the figure of the mask Pantaloon to signify the decline of Venice in this period. “Pantaloon is comical, even farcical, an image of the lecherous old age given over to its still-youthful appetites. That image of age is very different from an image of the wise elder judiciously husbanding the resources of his state. Buttock-baring youths flirting with dominant foreign powers, libidinous old men who never quite grew up. These are the icons of Venice in its decline.” See Linda Carroll, “Money, Age, and Marriage in Venice: A Brief Biocultural History,” in Politics and Culture, Issue 1 (2010). http://www.politicsandculture.org/2010/04/29/money-age-and-marriage-in-venice-a-brief-biocultural-history/.

Laura Giannetti, Lelia’s Kiss, 144.

Laura Giannetti, Lelia’s Kiss, 142–52.