THE FORBIDDEN FRUIT
OR THE TASTE FOR SODOMY IN RENAISSANCE ITALY

LAURA GIANNETTI RUGGIERO

In medieval and Renaissance Italian literary texts, the immoderate desire for food (la gola) is often associated and sometimes equated with the desire for male-male sex, labelled “sodomy” at the time. In medieval times the two sins, gluttony and lust and/or sodomy, were closely intertwined in the writings of the Fathers of the Church and unequivocally condemned by Saint Augustine in his Confessions, where they appear one after the other in the same discussion (S. Augustine, Confessions, book X, xxx-xxxii). Indeed, carnal pleasures for him include both lust, especially sodomy, and immoderate desire for food and drink. Even the pilgrim Dante—during his encounter with his friend Forese in Purgatory—supports this view in the condemnation of both the sin of gluttony, attributed to Forese Donati, and of licentious Florentine women who dared to show their breasts on the streets of Florence (Purg. 23:97-111).

Gluttony and lust in various forms—as the motive for comic play—are represented in Renaissance culture: in the Decameron, in some fifteenth-century short stories (novelle), in the mock-heroic poem Morgante by Luigi Pulci, and finally in the sixteenth-century burlesque poetry of Francesco Berni and his followers, the Accademia dei Vignaiuoli. In his De Honesta Voluptate, a collection of recipes and advice for good living, written in the

1With the term “sodomy” in this context I refer to male-male sex primarily as anal intercourse. The term is an umbrella that was used in Medieval and Renaissance periods to categorize all forms of homoerotic behaviour between men and between women, as well as anal and oral sex between men and women and/or sexual intercourse with animals. In sixteenth-century Italy to engage in male-male sodomy was not an exclusive practice; often it did not preclude sexual relations with women and was related to age (old-young) and a hierarchical (active-passive) structure. See Ruggiero, The Boundaries of Eros, chap. VI, for fourteenth- and fifteenth-century prosecution of sodomy in Venice and the chapter “Marriage, Love, Sex and Renaissance Civic Morality” for the age/hierarchical structure. See also Giannetti and Ruggiero, “Introduction.” For Florence see Michel Rocke, Forbidden Friendships and the essay “Gender and Sexual Culture.” A valuable analysis of the homoerotic sexual environment in sixteenth-century Italy and Siena is in Ian Frederick Moulton, “Introduction.”

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second half of fifteenth-century, the humanist Bartolomeo Sacchi known as Platina expresses what might be labelled a more balanced vision where moderation and wisdom take part in the “honest pleasure” of the flesh, in the enjoyment of food and sex (Platina, *On Right Pleasure and Good Health*, book I). In this work, Platina paid much attention to the idealistic principle of moderation derived from the Greek and Roman worlds.²

Still, for all the literary play and humanistic searching for a classical balance, the sinful tie of gluttony and lust did not disappear nor was it merely a literary *topos*: first, it was acknowledged by the Florentine communal statutes of 1322 that tellingly prohibit innkeepers from serving up culinary delights because they could attract men and boys and incite them to commit the unspeakable sin of sodomy (Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 159).³ A century later, in his sermons, Bernardino da Siena similarly condemned good food and wine as fomenters of carnal lust and especially of sodomy. During Cosimo the Elder’s regime Florentine Archbishop Antonino Pierozzi (later St Antoninus)—in his confessor’s manual—warned against sloth, excess food and drink as causes of sodomy.⁴ In the wake of several preachers’ admonitions, Florentine authorities at the end of the fifteenth-century began to regulate strictly the hours of operation for inns and taverns in order to avoid their becoming a meeting place for sodomites (Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 159). There seems to have been a widely shared vision at the time that saw the pleasures of eating and the pleasures of sex—particularly sodomy—as closely and dangerously related.

During the sixteenth-century, in the popular imagination of the various Lands of Cockcaigne, the enjoyment of capons, partridges and roasted meats went hand in hand with the enjoyment of sex.⁵ In Carnivalesque celebrations, where often the greasy pole (the tree of Cockcaigne) was at the center stage, the sausage was the symbol of sexual and gustatory pleasure.⁶

²See Montanari, *La fame e l’abbondanza*, for the distinction between the Roman ideal of moderation in food and the Celtic-Germanic ideal—later assumed by the Franks—of excess, (30-32).
³See also p. 305, n. 64 for the list of such foods: “tortelli, liverwort, spleen, roasted meats, ravioli, fish, meat in aspic, chicken or any kind of birth...”
⁴“imperoché come dice Idio per Ezechiele propheta, da ben mangiare e ben bere fu causata la ribalderia de Sodoma” Antonino di Firenze, *Opera*, fol. 65.
⁵Albala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance*, 181. This seminal book has been crucial in the writing of this article.
⁶Starting with the painting “Land of Cockcaigne” by Pieter Bruegel, the sausage was one of the most represented sexual symbols in European paintings from the sixteenth to the eighteenth-century.
In Pulci’s *Morgante* the minor-giant Margutte extolled his three vices—gluttony, sodomy and the play of dice—as a perverse parody of cardinal virtues? In Italian Renaissance comedies—set in times of recurrent famines and wars — the theme of gluttony joined up with that of hunger and starvation. If servants died of hunger in Ruzante’s comedies, in other texts the parasites were always on the lookout for sumptuous dinners and sodomitical pleasures.

In comedies, dialogues and especially poetry produced in fifteenth and sixteenth-century Italy the language started to register the idea that gluttony and sodomy were closely related to each other. The usage of the words *ghiotto* and *gliottone* as a noun and as an adjective to indicate a sodomite is present in works—to quote a few—by Lorenzo de’ Medici, Lorenzo di Filippo Strozzi, Pietro Aretino, Anton Francesco Grazzini, Francesco Maria Molza, Francesco Berni and others. To focus on comedy, the word *gliottone* (glutton) or simply *ghiotto* (gluttonous) was used to refer stereotypically to male characters portrayed as sodomites; a stereotype also often associated with pedants, parasites and young servants. Particularly interesting is the use Pietro Aretino made of these terms in his comedy *Il Marescalco*. There the pedant, with his typical learned ignorance and foolish use of Latin, is portrayed as the stereotypical sodomite who has a difficult relationship with a page who makes continuous fun of him. The language used by the pedant to insult the young page—probably his one-time

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8 Jean Toscan shows with several examples how widespread the usage was. See paragraph 237 “Le gourmand” 1: 410–412, and quotations listed in the Glossary under the voice *ghiotto*. Matteo Bandello (1485–1561) narrates a tale on “Porcellio romano” (presumably Nicolò Porcellio, humanist, historian and poet who lived in the fifteenth-century at the court of Francesco Sforza in Milan) using food metaphors to talk about Porcellio’s notorious passions of the flesh. According to Bandello, Porcellio loved “la carne del capretto molto più che altro cibo” and, at the moment of his final confession, justified his vice as the most natural thing: “Oh, oh, padre reverendo, voi non mi sapeste interrogare. Il trastullarmi con i fanciulli a me è più naturale che non è il mangiare e il ber a l’ uomo, e voi mi domandavate se io peccava contro natura. Andate, andate, messere, ché voi non sapete che cosa sia un buon boccone.” (emphasis mine) Bandello, *Novelle*, 149 and 155.

9 For instance, see the usage of this word and its variations in the comedy *Il ragazzò* by the Venetian writer Lodovico Dolce: II.1 p. 226 “Ah ghiotto, ribaldello”; II.3, p. 234 “ghiottarella”; IV.1, p. 266: “Ghiotto.”
sexual partner—includes the word ghiotto and its revealing variation of ghiottico (or glutton-ass). The last word is used frequently in the comedy as an insult to indicate someone eager to be sodomized. The more general term ghiotto recurs in its homoerotic associations in other texts such as dialogues and in contemporary burlesque poetry. The term ghiotto also appears at times in Florentine criminal records and is especially common in the depositions given by informers to the Ufficiali di Notte, the magistracy dedicated to the suppression of sodomy; the primary word used to refer to the young boys who prostituted themselves was ghioatti along with some other derogatory feminine names (Rocke, Forbidden Friendships, 107 and 288 n. 100). The extensive usage of the terms ghiotto and ghioattone in literary texts, in the judiciary system and in the everyday world takes part in and contributes to a set of cultural assumptions that view homoerotic practices as an immoderate desire in many ways equated to the immoderate desire for food. Jean Toscan offers a more precise genealogy for this usage of the word:

If these particular erotic practices or the part of the body where such practices take place may be called bocconi, it is normal to call ghiotto or ghioattone those who seek them. (Toscan, Le Carnaval du langage, 1: 411; my translation).

The negative conceptual link between gluttony and lust was not limited to law, literature, and everyday language; it also found support in the medical-dietetic genre that captured widespread interest from the mid-fifteenth-century on. Written mainly by physicians—although philosophers, poets and artists were also interested in laying out their own particular view of the ideal dietary regime and nutritional choices—these works were above all prescriptive and their general theoretical framework was Galenic. Even though it is clear that most of this prescriptive literature was not adopted in everyday practice, it is important to recognize that the dietary literature of the Renaissance—like prescriptive literature in general—should be regarded as an embodiment of a range of cultural ideals.11

Among the dominant dietetic theories of the early Renaissance, the concept of transference was especially important: it held that a peculiar quality of an animal or of its organs would be transferred to the person who ate it or them. For instance, if one ate a wolf’s liver, associated with

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10 See Five Comedies from the Italian Renaissance. 166, n. 139

11 For a discussion on food in literary texts of the Renaissance and the medical-dietetic literature, see Palma, “Of Courtesans, Knights.”
courage, one would become courageous; if one ate bull’s testicles, one would recover his lost virility (Albala, *Eating Right*, 79-80 and 169). According to Platina, the consumption of pork, the meat of an omnivorous and greedy animal, would lead to the transformation of one into a ravenous *ghiottone* unable to distinguish between good and bad food. Other authors recommended not eating goat—a “notoriously” lascivious animal—so as to maintain chastity (Albala, *Eating Right*, 80 and 149-50). Other texts, however—based on the same theory—suggested which food ought to be consumed for help with Venus’s work; this “aphrodisiac” literature became a very successful genre in itself. (Albala, *Eating Right*, 146-50 and 168). For instance, all foods that were seen as warming the body and the blood, from asparagus to artichokes, from cloves to pigeons and partridges, as well as all salty foods were considered aphrodisiacs (Albala, *Eating Right*, 147-8). Sometimes physicians also associated rare and expensive foods coming from far regions with illicit sex and “often explicitly connected perverse tastes in food with sexual license.” (Albala, *Eating Right*, 150). The transference theory would lose force by the second half of the sixteenth century, but it remained common to attribute somatic effects and symbolic meanings to different types of foods.

Social symbolism was important as well: in the eyes of these dietetic writers, certain foods were appropriate only for certain classes. Peasants should eat rustic grains and preserved meat, while birds, fresh meats, fruit or seafood were suitable only for gentlemen and courtiers. As has been widely discussed, food was a significant factor in social evaluation and this was especially true in Italy during the Renaissance—with a strong social hierarchy and great differences between urban and rural cultures (Grieco, “Food and Social Classes”). Such distinctions were closely related to the desire by the upper classes to distinguish themselves through specific manners and behaviour and to a hierarchical vision of the world that saw it as one “great chain of being” that progressed upwards from the humblest of things to the most important. According to this conception as applied to food, plants and animals occupy a place on a hierarchical ladder—ordered according to the four elements—that has on the top mythological animals living in the highest element, fire (such as the phoenix), and at its base the

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humblest plants that grow directly in the soil (such as onions and garlic) (Grieco, “Food and Social Classes,” 307-12). The great chain of being was thought to connect all God’s creation in one design. Roots and legumes, being products of the soil, were the farthest from God and thus the only ones that peasants at the bottom of society could eat. Because fruit trees were closer to the sky with their branches, and so distanced themselves from the soil, the lowest of the four elements, fruit could be a food worthy of nobles.\textsuperscript{13} An interesting literary transposition of these assumptions can be read in a fifteenth-century short story by Sabadino degli Arienti. Unable to resist the succulent peaches that grow in the garden of his master, the peasant Zuco Padella is caught in the act of stealing them to satisfy his desire. After punishing him harshly, his master haughtily underlines the servant’s deeper crime warning him: “The next time stay away from the fruit of my peers and stick with yours: turnips, garlic, leeks, onions, and shallots along with sorghum bread.”\textsuperscript{14}

If peaches are exalted in this novella as a delicious and refined fruit, fit for a king, several physicians who wrote about dietetics in the sixteenth century condemned them harshly along with melons and strawberries. Following the concept of the “great chain of being”, it is clear that melons and strawberries were condemned at least in part because they grow directly on the soil, but the low opinion of peaches does not seem to fit. Curiously, while fruit in general was viewed as the noblest among the foods produced by plants, peaches themselves were often considered poisonous.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13} Michele Savonarola confirms this view reminding his Lord “la utilità e malizia del nutrimento de le cosse che nascono in terra.” \textit{Libreto de tute le cosse che se manzano}, I: 62-3.

\textsuperscript{14} “Un’altra volta lassa stare le fructe de li mei pari e mangia delle tue che sono le rape, gli agli, porri, cepolle e le scalogne col pan di sorgo.” The novella is quoted in Montanari, \textit{La fame e l’abbondanza}, 108-109. For a modern critical edition see \textit{Le Porretane} ed. by Bruno Basile.

In many of these texts, peaches are included among aphrodisiac foods more fit for gluttonous courtiers, such as eels, oysters, salmon, asparagus and artichokes (Albala, *Eating Right*, 206). Melons shared this unhappy company and enjoyed a yet more negative fame in widely circulated folk tales that warned that even kings and popes had passed away after eating pantagruelic dinners based on melons. In fact, in the works of physicians and dieticians, virtually nothing was considered more dangerous for one’s health than eating peaches and melons because of their ability to putrefy in the stomach and thus create venomous humours. Only the most courageous doctors were willing to allow their charges to eat peaches or melons—if one could not resist the temptation—but then only at the beginning of the meal so as to have a chance to avoid the putrefaction problem. The condemnation of melons was so widespread that a physician from Bologna, Pietro Nati, felt the need to defend the fruit in a small treatise he wrote about the more general topic of health during times of plague. Nati observed that melons were no longer poisonous—as they were in Galen’s time—and that they were regularly consumed at courtier’s tables.

Nati’s study is interesting because it shows how practice and dietary precepts did not always coincide: melons, peaches, and other types of fruit were, in fact, enjoyed during meals and receptions offered at gentlemen’s houses. Yet, for others, like the Venetian nobleman Luigi Cornaro, the medical taboo was apparently followed. After having been ill as a young man, he decided to test for himself if foods that tasted good were equally

16*Libro de tutte le cose*, 75-76. The same prescription against melons is repeated in different treatises from Platina to the much later Lodovico Bertaldi: “I meloni, quando sono maturi a sufficienza e che hanno tutte le qualita, che gli convengono, sono tanto desiderati da molti Prencipi, e altri Signori grandi, che molti sono morti, per il superfluo d’essi, come riferisce il Durando [i.e. Castor Durante] ch’Albino imperatore tanto avido di mangiarne, come ancor delle persiche, che in una sera mangiò dieci meloni d’Ostia e cento persiche. Paulo Secondo Pontefice, morì d’apoplessia, havendo nella cena mangiato due gran meloni. Dicono Federico terzo, Henrico settimo e Alberto secondo imperatorii esser morti per l’uso d’essi.” *Regole della sanità e natura decibi di Ugo Benzo Senese*, fol. 422.

17“Oltre a questo narrando essi le proprietà loro, li biasimano come nocivi al corpo et allo stomaco, perciò diceva Galeno che e sono freddi, humidì, facilmente corutibili, e che mangiandone dispongo lo stomaco al vomito, le quali cose nel vero non si possono già dire de Poponi nostri, conciosia che per esperienza si vegga, mangiarsi nelle tavole de gentil’huomini in gran quantità e continuare le settimane e i mesi interi senza passare mai un giorno che e’ non ne mangino. “Breve discorso intorno alla natura del popone,” 2.
good for his health, as was often claimed in popular lore. Through practice he was convinced that the popular lore was false and the medical taboo right: he decided that he liked fruit and cold wine but that they, despite their pleasant taste, were not at all good for his health:

While doing this [test] I found out that that claim was false, because I liked very much rough and very cold wine as well as melons and other fruit... 18

Still if Luigi Cornaro's experiments confirmed his decision to live a restrained life renouncing peaches and melons, those succulent fruits attracted many others and drew attention to themselves from the frontispieces of many sumptuous cookbooks—such as that by Christopharo da Messisbugo—where courtiers are shown in the act of offering them to their princes (Albala, *Eating Right*, 13). In Messisbugo’s book there is no mention of any physician’s negative advice; melons and peaches appear at different moments during banquets, often together with other types of food deemed dangerous.19 As Jean Louis Flandrin has demonstrated, around the end of the sixteenth-century dietetics and cookbooks took different paths: it was the beginning of the so-called “liberation of the gourmet” and the enjoyment of good cooking (Flandrin, “From Dietetics to Gastronomy”) This separation, however, progressed slowly and texts that moralistically rejected certain foods not only because they were bad for the health but also because they were identified with the corrupt habits of the court continued to proliferate.20

Medical-dietetic literature of the sixteenth-century was closely attuned to and contributed to the process that, in Norbert Elias’s vision, has been labelled the “civilization of taste.” (Albala, *Eating Right*, 217-218). As

18 “Però mi posì diligentissimamente à voler conoscere i cibi, che fossero a mio proposito, e prima deliberai di farne sperienza, se quelli che al gusto piacevanò, mi giovassero, ò pur mi fossero di nocimento, per conoscere se quel proverbio, che io havea già tenuto per vero, e che verissimo universalmente si crede che sia, anzi è il fondamento di tutti i sensuali, che seguono i loro appetiti, era in fatto vero, che dice che quello che sa buono, notrisce e giova. Il che facendo ritrovai che era falso, perché a me il vin brusco e freddissimo sapea bono, e così i meloni e gl’altri frutti.” *De la vita sobria*, c. 8.
19 Messisbugo, “Banchetti, composizioni di vivande et apparecchio generale.”
20 See for instance the works by the Calvinist expatriate Guglielmo Grataroli where courts are chastised as the place where sloth, gluttony and perverse taste rule. Albala, *Eating Right*, 26.
noted, the diffusion of books on dietetics where the prevalent attitude was moralistic was relatively recent in that century. In works written earlier only a few foods were openly condemned; restrictions hinged on moderation. The natural attraction for certain foods and their good taste were seen as guiding principles. With its pleasant taste, fruit in moderation could even be seen as therapeutic in this context. One possible explanation for the changing attitude of sixteenth-century writers with respect to melons, peaches and other fruits is that conceptions of body, pleasure, and food changed along the lines suggested by Elias. Foods that had qualities that were similar to humours deemed positive were nutritious and foods that were different were restricted to correcting humoral imbalances. For sixteenth-century authors, however, there is a shift to repression of instincts as a key factor in dietary decisions—hunger and good taste are no longer a positive signs of the body’s humoral or other needs, but rather potential temptations in a moral battle waged over controlling the desires of the body and its appetites. One should eat what is good for health, not what tastes good, as Cornaro already affirmed. Food could be used as a medicine to correct imbalances, but this was no longer to be controlled by desire and taste but by doctors and experts in health both physical and spiritual. Certain foods, delicious and now tempting, could now lead inevitably to physical and mental illnesses, sexual perversion, even death. Along with fruit this list of suspect foods included all those that like sweets, fat meats or sausages were portrayed in carnivalesque representations where they symbolized gustatory and sexual license and lower-class tastes (Albala, Eating Right, 180-181). It is important to remember, however, that these foods were regularly served during upper class banquets, appeared in cookbooks, and were consumed by people in their everyday meals.

British travelers in Italy often remarked on the richness and abundance of Italian fruit at meals even as they referred to the dangers of eating too much fruit. William Cecil received from his son’s tutor, before his leaving for Italy, the following warning:

It is to be feared that Mr. Thomas shall not bear the great heats of that country, and being given also to eat much fruit, may soon fall into sickness, as he did in France by that occasion (Olsen, “Poisoned Figs,” 236)

William Thomas, one of the first English historians of Italy, actually admitted to having been converted to eating fruit after living in Italy, renouncing the heavy meat-based diet of his native country (Olsen, “Poisoned Figs,” 240). Melons also particularly attracted him, but he warned his readers to abstain from eating them during the summer when
they were ripe and full of juice. He even observed ambiguously that their sweetness is so attractive that no one can resist it and some even eat so many that they die as a result (Olsen, "Poisoned Figs," 247) Did William Thomas know the medical proscriptions? His words and those of other British travelers in sixteenth-century Italy stress the conflict between the prohibition of such “dangerous” foods and the everyday experience of living and eating in Italy.

Practice and theory seem to diverge profoundly, then, in this period. The insistence on prohibition and the on-going attempt to build a dietetic ideal must be seen as being as significant in many ways as its rejection in everyday life. It has been hypothesized that the stronger the prohibition of these foods was at the time—as strange food, as food fit only for courtiers, as dangerous and illicit food—the stronger became the desire to break the taboo. Peaches and melons came originally from Persia and from the Middle East, lands of fabled beauty, abundance and corrupt customs, lands often associated in popular belief with sodomy; thus their fruits could be seen as a sort of suspicious food right from their origins. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that the taboo against these fruits grew in close conjunction with a growing market for such food, the fashion of having fruit trees and gardens in Renaissance villas and a general higher level of consumption.

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Literature, however, might suggest a deeper and more compelling reason yet for aversion to these fruits in the Renaissance and also help to explain the strange disjunction between practice and theory. For while dietetic literature saw a great enemy in forbidden fruits, especially melons and peaches, contemporary literature used those and other food images to represent and celebrate the forbidden fruits of Renaissance sexuality, illicit sex and

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21 Rosenberger, "Arab Cuisine and Its Contributions to European Culture": “Arab princes ordered fruit brought to Baghdad from afar: melons packed in ice and shipped in lead containers, along with prized Damascus grapes and plums. The Middle East was apparently the original home of a number of species known to the Greeks and Romans. The Arabs played the important role of improving these species and making them known over a wide area. These include the apricot [...] and the peach, which was soon acclimatized in Iran. What information we have about the diffusion of citrus fruit is unreliable. The melon known since antiquity, was joined by the watermelon, which came from India. Both were widely cultivated as sweet, refreshing treats.” 219.

22 Flandrin, “Introduction: The Early Modern Period.”
especially sodomy. The so-called paradoxical encomium was the preferred poetic form used by Francesco Berni and his followers. In it, the praise of an everyday simple object, food, or even an unpleasant illness—such as syphilis—wittily played with and drew upon erotic or obscene metaphors. The erotic poetry of Francesco Berni, Giovanni Mauro, Anton Francesco Grazzini, Agnolo Firenzuola, Giovanni Della Casa, Annibal Caro, and a much wider circle of their followers, the Accademia dei Vignaiuoli, delighted especially in playing with the interchangeability of those forbidden fruits and the bodily parts they represented and then in the way this metaphorical interchangeability could be used to describe the pleasures of sodomy.

The Accademia dei Vignaiuoli originated in 1532 from a group of humanists and poets earlier gathered in the Accademia Romana that was first founded by Pomponio Leto in the fifteenth-century. Francesco Berni and the poets that took part in the Accademia dei Vignaiuoli, from Agnolo Firenzuola to Giovanni Della Casa and Annibal Caro—to cite only the most noted—were all accomplished humanists who knew Latin and the classics and who wrote classical poems, comedies, and novelle in imitation of Boccaccio’s Decameron. An invitation to a ludic style of life that will be attached to the Accademia dei Vignaiuoli is anticipated in a letter written by Francesco Berni to Francesco Bini in 1529:

We must live until we die, despite those who don’t like it, but the important thing is to live happily, as I invite you to do, by attending those banquets which are taking place in Rome, and by writing as little as you can; because this is the victory, which conquers the world (Frantz, Festum Voluptatis, 26).

23 On sixteenth-century Italian erotic poetry see: Marzo, Studi sulla poesia erotica del Cinquecento and Longhi, Lusus. Il capitolo burlesco nel Cinquecento, especially chapter II: “La cucina di Parnaso.” On Francesco Berni and his works see Francesco Berni, ed. Nigro.


Another letter—mocking classical letters of dedication—written by Berni to Francesco Bini in 1534, could be read as the perfect poetic manifesto of the group; in it Berni salutes all his friends and wishes that they enjoy in many senses their gardens and a good harvest:

and above all the others to the very good natured Mr. Molza, to Mr. Giovanni Della Casa, and to all the Divine Academy. May God grant you his blessing in giving you a large Priapus for your garden, with a pitchfork as long as a beam between your legs and a big scythe in your hand and that you will be bothered neither by frost, fog, worms or foul winds, and that you might have beans and peas in their pods and peaches and carrots all year round, as I desire for my own small and failing garden here which I take care of and keep up as much as I can.26

It appears that the poets of Berni’s circle amused themselves in banquets both poetic and real, both culinary and sexual, in which we may presume, peaches and melons were consumed despite medical warnings and legal proscriptions.

In their poems dedicated to the forbidden fruits there also appears to be a conscious playing with the pedantic side of their own avocations as humanists. On the one hand Berni and his followers could not resist the classical touch, the reference to ancient Roman or Greek literature that showed their learning and wit; but, in a way similar to what we find in the “erudite” comedy tradition based on classical models, humanist writers could at the same time mock the comic side of the would-be humanist/pedant who could not say anything without basing it on a classical text and because of this, often spouted much that was laughable nonsense to the common sense of the day. Much like such pedants in Renaissance comedies, the fifteenth and sixteenth-century corpus of medical-dietetic literature was also heavily based on ancient auctoritas, especially Galen and Hippocrates, authors whose opinions, no matter how contrary to contemporary practice or simple everyday understanding, were

26“e sopra gli altri al da benissimo Signor Molza, a M. Giovanni della Casa, e a tutta quella divina Academia. Così vi dia Dio grazia di avere un priapone grande per il vostro orto, con una fuscina trabale fra gambe e una falciazza in mano: e che non vi s’acostisi mai ne brinata, ne nebbia, ne bruchi, ne vento pestilente: e habbiate fave e bacelli, e pesche e carote tutto l’anno: si come desidero d’ havere io nel mio horticciuolo fallito qua giu, che attendo pure a raffazzonarlo quanto posso...” Lettere facete, xii, 46-48. I have slightly modified the translation by Frantz. A Priapus was a phallic boundary marker used in ancient Rome to demarcate and protect property.
tirelessly repeated by one Renaissance author after the other. Making fun of such humanistic texts condemning fruits such as peaches and melons which were sternly warned against in this classical tradition, then, offered another opportunity to mock playfully some of the more extreme characteristics of their own humanist pretensions and at the same time cleverly extol sodomy – both were, in a witty way that was irresistible to Berni and his fellow word-smiths, formally forbidden fruits which, in the everyday world, were enjoyed by those in the know. The law and the Church condemned sodomy, represented here by peaches and melons, while peaches and melons in their own right were forbidden by the classical dietetic and medical texts reiterated by humanist authors. What better way for the berneschi poets to playfully extol sodomy—the forbidden sin of the Renaissance—than to praise peaches and melons, the forbidden fruits of the Renaissance?

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Francesco Berni soon became the most important member of the Accademia de’ Vignaiuoli and his leadership was recognized by the other poets, as is clear in the beginning lines of Francesco Maria Molza Capitolo de’ fichi:

“Di lodare il mellone avea pensato
quando Febo sorrisi e Non fia vero
che ’l fico disse resti abbandonato.
Però, se di seguir brami il sentiero,
che ’l Bernia corse col cantar suo pria,
drizzar quivi lo ’ingegno or fia mestiero.”

I thought to praise the melon, / when Febus smiled and said: / “It should not be the case that the fig will be neglected” / However, if you wish to follow the path / That Berni ran up with his early poetry / It is necessary to stiffen your wit here and now. (my translation)

In the following years, several authors followed the path laid out by Berni and contemporary editors produced numerous collections of this pun-full erotic poetry, a regular ghiottoneria of fruit, sex and sodomy. To understand this literature it is helpful to search for “euphemistic substitu-

27Molza, “Capitolo de’ Fichi”, vv. 1-6, p. 43.
28For a list of the most important sixteenth-century collections of erotic and burlesque poems, see Marzo, Studi sulla poesia erotica, 7 n. 2.
tions”—as Jean Toscan did in his pioneering and exhaustive study of Italian Renaissance erotic language—but also crucially to put this literature in its cultural and historical context. The fascination with descriptions of fruit in erotic poetry certainly warrants a closer examination for its rich nuances. For the extensive use of images of forbidden fruits in erotic poetry was not an accident; it is clear that Berni and his followers and imitators were well aware of dietetic proscriptions that labelled certain types of fruit dangerous for one’s health and at the same time extremely desirable. In a neat parallel, the same was true for sodomy: it was desired, forbidden, and frequently practiced.

Berni's famous Capitolo delle pèshe, written in 1522, turns on one of the more popular uses of peaches in this genre, the metaphor based on the similar shape and look of a peach and a youth's bottom. In other poems the rounded shape of melons or apples were used in the same way.29 The Capitolo delle pèshe rejected completely the contemporary medical opinions that held that peaches corrupted the stomach.30

Son le pèshe apritive e cordiali,  
saporite, gentil, restorative,  
come le cose c' hanno gli speziali.” (Berni, Rime, p. 50, vv. 43-45)

Peaches are aperitifs and cordials [in the original sense of drinks that aide the stomach in eating and digesting] / Tasty, delicate and restorative / Just like the products of the apothecary. (my translation)

29See for instance the “Capitolo di Andrea Lori in lode delle mele.” Interestingly in this poem sodomy is understood as male-male at first but also as male-female sexual practice and the medical authorities of the past are called into question: “[...] Ma 'l tempo, ch'ogni cosa al suo fin traggie/ Ha mostro al mondo il valor delle mele,/ Ond ogn'huomo poi n'ha posto per le piagge./ le donne al primo steron su'l crudele./ Dicendo lor pastocchie sopra il Fico;/ Poi ancor esse han calato le vele/ E si son risolute a qualche amico./ De le mele, ch'el le han dietro al lor frutto, / Dar, per non fare il loro giardin mendico./ Onde si scorge hoggi il melo per tutto/ Usarsi, e fino a certi trasandati,/ Che vanno spesso in barca per l'asciutto./ Leggi in Galeno, in Hippocrate, e in tanti/ Altri, che fur dottor di medecina,/ Perchè di questo io non vo dir più innanzi.”

30It is interesting to note that Berni actually quotes the triad of medical auctoritas of the past saying that “Dioscoride, Plinio e Teofrasto/ non hanno scritto delle pèshe bene/ perché non ne facevano troppo guasto.” “X. Capitolo delle pèshe (avanti l'agosto 1522),” pp. 49-51 in Berni, Rime. This excellent edition by Danilo Romei explains all the erotic metaphors in the poems.
If the learned literature recommended eating peaches before the meal as noted earlier, Berni humorously recommends enjoying them all the time, but especially after dinner. The sexual metaphor is clear:

O frutto sopra gli altri benedetto,
buono inanzi, nel mezzo e dietro pasto;
ma inanzi buono e di dietro perfetto!” (Berni, Rime, p. 49, vv. 10-12)

Oh fruit most blessed / Good before the meal, in the middle and behind / But especially good in front and perfect from behind! (my translation)

Dietary theories are used by the berneschi poets as a perfect pretext to insist on the healthy quality of fruit – and sodomy – as in the following verses by Ercole Bentivoglio:

Le frutte dal formaggio accompagnate
son men nocive, anzi salubri e buone
al gusto e a lo stomaco più grate:
massime i fichi e le pere e l melon
et le pèche, che si piaccion a i preti
che le soglion usar d’ ogni stagione.32

Fruit that comes with cheese / Is not bad, actually it is healthy and good / Quite pleasing to the stomach and to the taste / Especially figs, pears and melons / And peaches which priests most love / And normally use in every season. (my translation)

Melons also had their advocates: the poet Anton Francesco Grazzini praised their virtues as leading one on to the good path of sodomy:

O popon degni d’ ogni monarchia
io mi ti volto con divote ciglia,
acciò mi scorga per la buona via.33

Melon worthy of every kingdom / I look upon you with devotion / So that I’ll find the good path. (my translation)

31 For instance see Michele Savonarola’s advice regarding melons: “Voleno esser manzati in anti pasto, il perchè manzati dopo pasto fano il cibo del stomaco lubricare. Generano vento e cuossi fanno venire la colica,” Savonarola, Libroto de tute le cose, 75. Savonarola’s opinion, that melons should be eaten before the meal, is repeated several times by various sixteenth and seventeenth-century authors, for instance Bertaldo, Regole della sanità e natura de’ cibi di Ugo Benzo Senese.

32 See “Del Formaggio al lettore buon compagno.”

33 Quoted in Toscan, Le Carnaval du langage, 1:511.
The poet Antonio Mario Negrisoli happily declared that “the melon excites all desires,” nourishes the stomach, refreshes the liver, and is Ganymede’s favourite food.\footnote{34}{“Così ’l Poppone ogn’altra voglia invesca./ Non si trova huom si vil fra l’altr genti,/ ch’avendone uno, e la bacchetta in mano, / non si stimi uno Augusto incontinenti. [...] Ma avertite Signor, ch’io solo intendo / de bianchi e sodi, e ch’han fra poche frondi/ fermo rampollo, al resto io non attendo./ E meno ai spalancati, e a i mal rotondi,/ che son di largo humor, ch’entro lor serra/ la stagion mia, e d’odor tristo fecondi./ Con gran virtù il Poppone ogn’huom afferra/ lo stomaco nudrisse, e lo conforta,/ e il fegato rin fresca, e ’l ventre sferra./ Alternando il boccon sempre la scorta/ d’un bicchiere di buen vino ei se ne chiede,/ e di due spesso a chi ha la mente accorta [...] Più di questo alcun cibo già non piace/ l’affermò Ganimede, e’l vero è questo/ nettar, ch’ad ogni gusto si conface/ come gloria e honor di tutto il resto.” Negrisoli Ferrarese, “Capitolo delle laudi del Poppone al Signor Giuseppe Malatesta.”}

The metaphorical use of peaches and melons can be found early in Italian literature, especially in the canti carnascialeschi. In particular, Lorenzo de’ Medici in his “Canzona degli innestatori,”—a poem dedicated to the act of grafting plants, including peaches—plays with lengthily descriptions of different types of sexual contact between males as well as between males and females.\footnote{35}{See v. 46: “puossi ogni pianta, e pèsche anche innestare.” De’Medici, “IV. Canzona degli innestatori,” in Trionfi e canti carnascialeschi.}

The anonymous “Canzona delle pèsche” while recognizing that most people prefer to use peaches after the meal (“l’usa dreto”) concludes with a general exhortation to enjoy peaches at any time:

\begin{quote}
Alcun l’usa al pasto avanti,
ma di noi innanzi e ’ndreto;
quell sol piace agli’ignoranti,
là più parte l’usa dreto:
ognun l’usi e stiesi cheto,
’nanzi o dreto o dove vuole.\footnote{36}{“XLIV. Canzona delle pèsche” in Trionfi e canti carnascialeschi, vv-15-20.}
\end{quote}

Some enjoy it [the peach] before the meal / But we like it before and after; / Rude people only enjoy it before / Most use it after / Just let everybody use it and keep quiet / Before or after or wherever they prefer. (my translation)

The group of poems written by Berni and the Vignaiuoli that extol the virtues of peaches and melons are clearly associated with the idea of sodomy in the sense of male-male sexual practice, but this fact does not demonstrate that male sodomy was seen by them as an exclusive sexual practice or category per se in the modern sense. Other poems—in the same group—exalt...
sex with women speaking in the praise of the figs or simply laud the phal-
lus, represented with different images of fruit or vegetables. The poems on
peaches and melons nonetheless capture the readers’ attention for the priv-
ileged place given to the passive side of sodomy, usually considered the least
honourable, because of its association with the female sex.

In sixteenth-century Italy sodomy was held to be a mortal sin and a
crime against nature, God, and society and as such was regularly deemed
worthy of capital punishment. Nonetheless, it was widely practiced and
ideally organized in a patriarchal and hierarchical fashion that mirrored the
rest of society. In theory as well as in everyday reality, young adult males
were supposed to take the dominant active role, sexually and socially – they
sought out the peaches and melons – while younger youths in their early
teens took the passive role – offering peaches and melons. In literature the
same model was regularly presented even as it was often mocked in the
humanistic student-teacher/pedant relationships in Renaissance comedies.
It is interesting to note, however, that even this passive-active hierarchy is
turned on its head by the irreverent Berni when he concludes his poem on
peaches by arguing that, “the most fortunate is he/ who can give or take
peaches.” Is this merely a playful reversal or a suggestive indication that
the active/passive age hierarchy that was clearly the ideal for Renaissance
male/male sexual relations was more flexible than it appears and that some
males both desired peaches and offered them, perhaps Berni himself?

If it is true that sexuality is a “discourse”—in a Foucauldian sense—that

37“Io ho sempre avuto fantasia,/ per quanto possi un indovino apporre,/ che sopra
gli altri avventurato sia/ colui che può le pèsche dare e tòrre.” “Capitolo delle
pèsche,” vv.73-76.
38“in fact his poem was so taken as an expression of his true preference sexually
that he was charged by his enemies with being a sodomite.” Frantz, Festum
Voluptatis, 30. The Dialogo contra i poeti written by Francesco Berni in 1525
explores, among other topics, the connections between poets and sexuality. He
starts by telling Orpheus story’s (from the Metamorphoses) charging him first
with the “bella inventione,” and then has the interlocutor Sanga list a group of
poets famous for their preference for young boys (vv. 206-209). Toward the end
of the dialogue Sanga refers to some of the most famous capitoli written by Berni
including the Capitolo delle pèsche. Asked by the interlocutor Marco whether he
was a poet or not because he wrote poems such as Le anguille, Le pesche and La
primiera, Berni responds that he did not consider himself a poet because of those
works and he did not make enemies just for writing them. If he had made en-
emies it was because he did not concede them homoerotic favors (“Anzi più tosto
credo esser voluto male da qualcuno che arà voluto, verbigrazia, ch’i’ gli dia le
pèsehe, che sapete piacciono a molti, e non gliel’arò potuto dare così presto, e va
interacts with contemporary social and cultural practices and discourses, we cannot consider the discursive choices made by Berni and the other poets to be merely accidental. Writing their *erotica ghiottoneria*, the Vignaiuoli and their imitators mocked the cultural humanistic milieu in which they lived and, at the same time, the popular belief that saw humanism and sodomitical pleasures as strictly connected.\(^39\) Italian literary criticism has recently recognized the centrality of the erotic and homoerotic component in Renaissance poetry and literature in general. It is now considered a topic worthy of analysis in its own right, not as an occasional mere diversion from more "serious" issues.\(^40\) The forbidden fruits of the Renaissance represent often-conflicting beliefs, values and desires expressed by contemporary medical and dietary theory, literature, and everyday practice. Yet, at the same time, they served nicely as a series of Renaissance metaphors that were invested with a rich and playful array of meanings by poets like Berni and his followers. For them, the image of fruits such as peaches and melons was a privileged site to extol sodomy, play with the imagination, and give sodomy a more everyday common sense. As Berni concluded, "but everybody likes the good morsels,"\(^41\) that is, the *buoni bocconi* that *ghiotti* and *ghiottoni* certainly enjoyed.

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discorrendo." (*Dialogo contra i poeti*, 212). Can we assume from this literary statement that Berni was a sodomite? Or was it just—like the poems—a literary game to make fun of humanistic circles? Or could it have been a self-defence against sodomy prosecution or perhaps instead a covert admission of his sexual preference? The answer lies in further research on Berni and his circle.

\(^39\)See for instance the following verses from the "Capitolo Primo della fava" by a poet of the *Accademia dei Vignaiuoli*, Giovanni Mauro: "Ma d'onde vien, ch'ogni poeta canta/ Più tosto i lauri i pampani e le spiche,/ Che questa gloriosa e nobil pianta!/ Come piene veggiam le carte antiche,/ De le picciole mente, e de Priapi,/ Ch'eran così a quella etade amiche/ Così dovremmo noi da mille capi/ Questo frutto cantar, ch' orna le mense/ Di Duchi, Regi, Imperatori e Papi,/ Ognun' ne mangia, e non è chi ci pense,/ Et in scriver le pesche, e gli martelli/ Son le voglie de' poeti intense,/ I quali dovriano di fave e di baccelli/ Non d'edere, o di lauri ornar la testa/ Alla barba di Cesari e Marcelli." vv. 31-45. For a modern edition see Marzo, *Note sulla poesia erotica*, 73-84.

\(^40\)See for instance, Marzo, "La lingua come distintivo di genere" and the collection *Queer Italia: Same-Sex Desire in Italian Literature and Film*.

\(^41\)"ma, perché ad ogniun piace i buoni bocconi" Berni, "Capitolo delle pèscie" v. 29.
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**Works Cited**


Antonino di Firenze (Antonino Pierozzi or St. Antoninus). *Opera di Santo Antonino arcivescovo fiorentino utilissima e necessaria alla instruzione delli sacerdoti e di qualunque devota persona la quale desidera saper vivere christianamente e confessarsi bene della suoi peccati. Con una breve instruzione per li sacerdoti curati*. Vinegia: 1542.


