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1.

" FRIAR AND PRIEST "

by Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti

Despite his polysyllabic surname, this poet and writer (ca. 1445–1510) was the son of a Bolognese barber. He studied contract law (notaria) *at the University of Bologna, but then attached himself as secretary and writer to a leading member of the ruling Bentivoglio family, and subsequently had close contacts with the courts of Ferrara and Mantua.* Friar and Priest *(my summary title) comes from his collection of sixty-one tales (no. XII),* Le Porretane, *first printed at Bologna in 1483. Among his other works is a series of thirty-three short biographies in praise of women,* Gynevera de le clare donne, *obviously in imitation of Boccaccio's* De claris mulieribus.

Most revered gentlemen, we were a group of young men from Arezzo,[1] all wellborn and debonair, who used to go out sometimes into our countryside to enjoy its coolness and amuse ourselves at local festivals. Accordingly, in mid-August we left Arezzo for Monte San Savino, where they celebrate the feast of the Queen of

1. The supposed narrator of this tale is the Aretine, Cristoforo di Francuzzi.

Heaven and run a horse race, and after lunch the young men and damsels of that village and thereabouts dance in the beautiful square of the castle until nearly sunset. We brought with us one of our comrades, a priest about sixteen years of age, pleasant, virtuous, witty, and very comely, named Ser Francesco di Ludomero. Now, as this youth had such god-given beauty that all who beheld his face took him for a beautiful girl, we had a Florentine lady dress him up in a silk skirt, blouse, stockings, and headdress in the style of the ladies of Florence, so that, between his dress and his talking like a woman, he truly seemed to be a young lady come out of paradise. When he arrived with us, dressed in this fashion, at the place where they held the dancing, and made a charming curtsey to all the people of the company, he was immediately seated in a place of honor among the other women. And his beauty was so great, as you have heard, that the eyes of all the men and women at the fête were riveted on him as on a miraculous thing; and they could not get enough of gazing upon and contemplating his angelic visage, modest bearing, and noble manners. And several youths, being already in love with him, were vying to dance with him, all the more so since he danced in the Tuscan manner more gracefully than any woman there. Now in the square of this village there is a church where the Augustinian friars live. At that time the prior there was quite a gregarious fellow called Friar Puzzo, who had come to see the dancing. Whereupon seeing this comrade of ours so fair and comely, and believing him to be a woman, he immediately fell madly in love with him, for it seemed to him that never in his life had he seen a more beautiful thing in the world. And hearing that the young woman had come from Arezzo in the company of a group of young Aretines, one of whom he knew, the friar approached him and said: "Who is that young

Florentine woman dancing so gracefully?" And our friend replied: "Why do you ask this?" The friar said: "Because she is a very fair creature, and her manners please me greatly." Owing to the friar's question and his continual staring at the girl, our friend understood that he had lost his scapular [his head], and said: "She is one of our company; we brought her here from Arezzo to the festivities." When the friar asked if she was a relative of his, our comrade replied: "Enough, ask no more. If you want me to intercede for you with her, ask as if I were your son." The friar replied: "Thank you. But because I have always been very fond of you and have great faith in you, I shall speak to you as a true and close friend. The beauty of this young woman pleases me so much that I am all on fire with love for her, and all the more so since the habit I wear compels me to conceal this impetuous, consuming flame that is like a fiery furnace. So I know not what I should do, for on the one hand decency restrains me, but on the other the inescapable arrows of the son of Pluto[2] drive me to come to the aid of my own tortured heart and try my luck at this love that is so sweet and burns so brightly. Thus, goaded by so much power, which neither the mighty Samson nor the wise Solomon was able to resist, do not be scandalized, for God's sake, my dear brother, if I, a weak little friar, in no way comparable to those lofty men, confidentially reveal my lot to you. Help me; alas, I'm dying, I'm burning, I'm consumed by desire. With you as my go-between, I am eager that this young woman know of the great love I bear her; so if you would, since you have offered to help me, recommend me to her and take a letter to her for me. And I will be so grateful that I shall be your slave eternally."

2. Cupid was the son of Venus and Vulcan, not of Pluto.

This friend of ours, hearing such talk from the prior, was secretly enchanted by the prospect of the amusement that would come of it, and replied: "Sir, I shall do it. Write a little letter now, for we are about to leave, and I shall bring you a reply. And let me tell you that this young woman knows very well how to write and read." Rejoicing over this offer, the friar left the festivities without delay, and produced a note that went like this:

"I feel obliged to heaven, beautiful young lady, whom I love more dearly than anything else in the world, only because it has made me worthy of seeing your beauties, which are more heavenly than human, and which delight me as much as anything I ever saw in this world or believe exists in heaven. Neither you nor anyone else in the world should be at all surprised if, despite the fact that I am a friar and a monk, I am burning in the fire of my lofty love for you; for from the moment I saw you appear among the other fair ladies at the dance, it seemed to me that I saw a second sun rise from your beautiful face, blotting out the first, full of such sweetness and blessedness that my spirit was suddenly filled with tenderness and my heart and soul were flooded with thoughts of you, so that now, to the delight of my heart, I never cease to think of you and your noble virtues. And for the consolation of my amorous soul I have written you this affectionate little letter, a token of the fervent, heartfelt love that I bear you, in the firm hope that it will be graciously received, thanks to the kindness visible in your generous bearing. And if this is so, I fervently pray you to be content to be loved by me, who have elected you to be queen of my heart. For if you should do the contrary, you alone would be the cause of my imminent death, which I am sure (since you are human and not made of stone) would pain you always, although you may deem me to be a lover unworthy of your lofty value. So, dear young lady, since I cannot withstand the

amorous arrows, for God's sake, don't disdain my infinite love. I conjure you to give me a favorable reply, which I await with surpassing desire; and to you, whence all my health and happiness proceed, I give myself, and pray that the supreme God shall always keep you safe and make you take pity on me."

When he had written this letter and sealed it with gold filaments, he gave it to the young man, saying: "Most greatly do I commend my suit to your prudence." And the young man, taking the letter, said that he would do all he could, and returning to the festivities and finding us, his comrades, he gave us an entertaining account of the friar's falling in love, to the delight of us all. So we quickly got our damsel away from the fête, in order to carry on with our amusement, and accompanied her with appropriate decorum to the house of a dear friend of ours. And when we got there and told the young priest about our prank and showed him the love letter, he was extraordinarily delighted by it and said: "This shall be the drollest thing we've ever done. But what do we do now?" And we replied, laughing: "We must answer the letter, telling him that you are not the sort of young woman to fall in love but that you do not altogether dislike being loved by him, so that he won't despair of your love. Indeed, by giving him a little hope, for our own great pleasure, we shall make him wear a garland of the god Cupid over his scapular." And thus, after much talk and plenty of laughter, we composed the reply and the young priest wrote it out in his own hand, and it read as follows:

"My dear sir,
If it were not that my age and position as a woman prevent me from reprimanding you, a man worthy of reverence both for his years and

for his virtue, I should be most aggrieved, admonishing you that it is neither seemly nor praiseworthy for a man of your quality to fall in love and tempt decent young women away from those things that they should hold more dear than their own lives. But since it is fitting that I emulate the courteous tenor of the letter I have received from you, I shall take the whole matter in good part, forewarning you, however, that I am not, as you may believe, one of those flighty girls. It is true that one should hold dear the favor of men of virtue like yourself, because some good may always come of it, no matter how little intelligence and worth or even beauty I might possess, though you deem my beauty heavenly, and surely immoderate love deceives you in this. But however it may be, if from me alone your health and happiness proceed, I am very content to be loved by you, and I am, in accord with your choice, queen of your heart, though always saving my honor and integrity, which I commend to you above all things, and may merciful God protect you from all evil, and guide both you and me in the path of virtue forever."

Having written this reply, our friend brought it to the friar, who took and read and reread it with endless joy, kissing it a thousand times, not knowing what to do, and asking our friend if he believed that he could hope for mercy from his lady love. And answering yes and no, according to what the friar asked, but endeavoring to persuade him to persevere in this love, at last our friend said to him: "My lord prior, without wasting words, since I am your friend and believe it to be a work of mercy to help those who languish in the flames of love, whenever you wish, I am ready to bring her along with my companions to dine with you, and will find a way for us to leave her alone with you."

Hearing this welcome offer, the friar joyfully threw his arms around our friend's neck, saying to him: "You really must be my

God." And when the prior even offered him his heart, our friend said: "Well, we should serve our friends liberally. Tell me what I must do to bring her to you." And the friar replied: "Come along tomorrow, and go into the church and pretend to go around looking at the church and its paintings, and quickly come into my room, where I shall have ordered a meal to be served and some beautiful veils and money to be given to the young woman." Then leaving him and having been instructed as to what he should do, our friend returned and reported everything to us, which amused us vastly, and an hour seemed a thousand years to us before we could get on with our prank. And the next day, the meal awaiting us, we all went (for there were eight of us young Aretines) and our priest was of course dressed as a woman. And when we arrived at the church we looked at it and gazed at its paintings, and then entered the friar's chamber. He was waiting for us beside himself with joy; and when he saw us, he welcomed us graciously and had a fine, elegant meal served to us.

When we had eaten, one by one we slipped out of the room, leaving the young woman alone with the friar. And he, seeing that we had departed, very softly closed the door of the room, saying: "Lovely young lady, these veils are for you. And if they are not beautiful enough to be worthy of your noble charms, forgive me, for I gladly give them to you along with my soul, as I told you in my letter," and he tried to kiss her. And the young priest, finding himself alone and thus assaulted, not wanting to be kissed, began to say, as we had instructed him (and he was a very clever actor): "O, woe is me! Where have I been left, where have I been led? What an evil day when I came into the world! Alas! Poor me! Is this the way women are seduced? Has my brother-in-law left me here so that I might be disgraced?" And the friar, thinking to calm

her, kept saying: "My soul, do not be sad. Console yourself, if you wish me to live. Don't be afraid, you are in good hands. Look, take this money here, or anything else you want." And when the friar sought to take the young man's hand and touch his breast, which the young man did not want, he said, continuing his lament: "Woe is me! Sir, keep your hands to yourself. If my mother or brothers knew of this, I would be dead. Am I thus to lose my honor, which I so warmly commended to you when I replied to your letter?" Then the friar began to say: "What is this I hear, dear young lady, sweet hope of my amorous soul? You are not among wolves nor in a dark forest among wild beasts, but in a safe and pleasant place, near to me, who love you more than my life. What would you say to someone who hated you, if you make your delicate glance and angelic face so harsh to one who loves you immeasurably? Surely you complain without reason, on account of your ungrateful heart. Although your looks are charming, to compensate for your glorious beauty you are lacking in mercy for the love I bear you and shall bear you for as long as I live." And saying these words, he opened his arms to embrace him; and the young priest, drawing back, said piteously: "Sir, for the love of God, let me be, for I hold my honor too dear, as you also should, if you truly loved me. For if you will not rein in this lascivious desire of yours, I would rather be in a forest among wild beasts and be devoured than be here and lose my honor, for which I sweetly pray you to have a care, if you wish to be loved by me." And as the friar continued to beg the damsel to satisfy his love, and the young priest continued to refuse, the friar became all inflamed with desire. And unable to change his mind with prayers, gifts, and extravagant promises, he seized him and threw him on the bed. Now the young priest, finding himself on his back and thinking it was time to reveal his identity, sud-

denly changed his faked Florentine accent and spoke in the accent of Arezzo, saying: "My dear sir, don't overexert yourself, for I am more of a man than you are." Amazed and wanting an immediate explanation, the friar put out his hand and felt that the "young lady" was a very well-endowed young man. But seeing how handsome he was, feeling all aflame with desire, and determined to satisfy his unruly appetite, he said: "Very well! I like you no less as a man than as a woman." Then the young priest, rather alarmed by this, quickly pushed his feet against the friar's shameless breast, knocking him backward, and jumped off the bed, saying: "Friar, go hang yourself! O unbridled lust, o unruly friar's appetite, how worthy you are of eternal disgrace! Who would ever have believed that under that holy habit of yours, glory of the Christian religion, you had been led to such wickedness? Who would have believed that you, a teacher and preceptor in a monastery, would not only not repent your original desire, but that you actually tried to taste the abominable sin for which Sodom and Gomorrah were miraculously burned to ashes? O diabolical spirit, o profane heart, how could you bear to violate your holy vocation? How is it that the heavens do not move to punish your sacrilege so as to make you an image of suffering and an example of pain to other evil and villainous friars? But certainly, as soon as I am able, I shall make known this stinking appetite of yours, to your shame and detriment."

The rest of us were hanging about near the chamber of the mocked friar, and hearing the priest dressed as a woman speaking angrily, we rushed laughing into the room and said: "What is this? Sir prior, what's wrong with you?" All full of shame, he replied: "Since you have duped me, I pray you for the love of God to say nothing, and if there is anything you want from me, just ask for it."

We said we would do so gladly. But the moment we got outside the church, we would have split a gut if we had kept this joke a secret; so we told it openly to everyone in the village. And when it got out, to his great disgrace and shame the friar was immediately expelled from the monastery. And bursting with laughter and delight we returned to Arezzo, leaving a pleasant memory in Monte San Savino on account of the prank that we and the young priest had played. He is still living today—an excellent priest, witty, and a perfect chorister.

2.

A Ritual Cleansing: *Friar and Priest*

There is a good deal of unreality in the framework and setting of this jocular tale. Putting it in the vicinity of Florence, Arienti wants to turn to account the Florentine reputation for wit and sophistication. But he actually makes neighboring Arezzo his point of departure, a lesser city under Florentine rule, and has his eight young bloods go out from there to a religious festival in the village of Monte San Savino, an old fortress on the way to Siena. This is the sort of burg which was often derided by members of the urbane bourgeoisie of cities such as Florence, Bologna, and Milan. Revealingly, however, country people as such are not at all introduced into the narrative. Though a caricature, friar Puzzo is a type of cleric who could have been found in any major Italian city. In effect, Arienti clears his stage and gentrifies his countryside, so as to make it more acceptable to his readers and to highlight the trickery of his young Aretines, all of whom hail from an upper-class urban background. Yet the air of superiority in their approach to Monte San Savino is plainly evident: "we were a group of young men from Arezzo, all wellborn (*gentili*) and debonair, who used to go out sometimes into our countryside to enjoy its coolness and amuse ourselves at local festivals." On this occasion, they go out with a beautiful sixteen-year old priest, intending to play a trick on the country bumpkins. Arienti, then, is offering us a subtle mixture of idealization (fictional gentrification) and verifiable historical attitudes.

In Arezzo, the beautiful priest would have been recognized everywhere; not so, however, in the Aretine backcountry, where, though welcome, the party of eight would have been looked upon as strangers or even, if they affected a Florentine accent, as foreigners. The reverse was also true: men and women who came from outside a city, even if from just beyond its great walls, were legally considered foreigners (*forenses*) inside the city. This broaches another feature of the story's framework: a half-concealed, near ethnic element. Since in Tuscany and other parts of upper Italy, most of the countryside (*contado*) was owned by the rich urban nobility and bourgeoisie, and partly also by the Church, rural towns and villages had perforce to receive their urban visitors with good grace, as these were necessarily associated with the class of mighty absentee landlords. But the reverse was not the case: no Tuscan or other North Italian city would have offered an honorable reception to eight rustics from a neighboring hamlet. Accordingly, we should imagine the arrival of the young Aretines in Monte San Savino as they would have been imagined by Arienti's audience: an arrival that was a vestigial, symbolic, or ritualized invasion, however graceful, with some degree of strutting and acting, especially as one of them at least, the young priest, pretends by his accent to be from Florence. This added importance and authority to their arrival.

If we are to understand the essential business of *Friar and Priest*, we must fix its setting and circumstances, as in the preceding comments. For Arienti has a given audience in mind and he is aiming his tale at their particular attitudes. Who were his most likely readers?

Born in Bologna about 1445, the son of a prosperous barber who was also a follower and client of the Bentivoglio faction,

Arienti managed to study the rudiments of law (*notaria*) at the University of Bologna and was matriculated in the guild of attorneys (*notai*), but seems never to have practiced. Instead, following his father's lead, he became a servitor to the Bentivoglio—Bologna's *de facto* ruling family in the later fifteenth century—and for twenty years (1471–1491) worked as a private secretary to the count Andrea Bentivoglio. Driven by persisting financial need and a yearning for recognition, he entered into contact with other important personalities, including duke Ercole d'Este of Ferrara, to whom in fact he dedicated, in 1478, the sixty-one tales of *Le Porretane*, where our account of friar Puzzo first appeared. As an audience and narrative setting for *Le Porretane*, Arienti imagines a small group listeners at the baths of Porretta in the Apennine Mountains near Bologna. Here, he pretends, over the space of five days in 1475, the group retailed the sixty-one (mainly comic) stories. His own vital milieu in Bologna included lawyers and other *literati*, but especially the courtly Bentivoglio and their satellites. Hence his auditors and readers were the city's fashionable people: the well-educated (some of whom were poets and prose writers), friends and relatives of the Bentivoglio, who were always in search of amusement, probably certain priests, as well as others of a similar sort from abroad, such as correspondents of his at Ferrara, Mantua, and Milan. This audience thrived on gossip and needed no introduction to lubricious clerics, anti-clericalism, town-and-country relations, male homosexuality, and the ritualized love language of the day. For these are the matters at the heart of Arienti's tale.

First the anticlerical strain. The removal of the papacy to the Southern French city of Avignon in the early fourteenth century, and the infamous Great Schism, with its late spectacle of three

contending popes during the years 1409 to 1415, had opened the way to increasing misconduct on the part of the clergy, especially in Italy. And the periodic return of plagues and epidemics in the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, while producing occasional frenzies of piety, had also disrupted episcopal administration and the cure of souls. There was a marked growth in clerical delinquency, turning more and more of the laity, in the cities most of all, against the bands of so-called copulating, gluttonous, mendacious, thieving priests and friars. Their misdeeds fill contemporary reports and stories. Consequently, Friar Puzzo [Friar "Stink" in the Tuscan tongue], as victim or reprobate, fits into a strong current of anticlerical polemic. Whether purely imagined or partly real, he is the type of the carnal, pushy, pleasure-loving, hypocritical, fifteenth-century cleric, and the head of his convent to boot. But he is no coarse lout, or not merely this; he speaks the language of gentlemen. Unknown to most modern readers, though at once obvious to his contemporary audience, Arienti has packed the tale with the ritualized love language of the age, an idiom which belonged firstly to the usage of educated, ambitious, or courtly men; and the friar handles this idiom with ease.

Entering Monte San Savino as a girl "come out of Paradise" is the sixteen-year-old priest, Ser Francesco di Ludomero, that is, Mr. Frank Pure-Games-and-Sport (in keeping with the Latinate pun on his patronymic, Ludomero). He is accorded "a place of honor among the other women," and is so "miraculous" a beauty, that "the eyes of all men and women" turn his way, "gazing upon and contemplating his angelic visage, modest bearing (*onesti portamenti*), and noble manners." The gazing eyes seem insatiable and men fall immediately in love with "her." These are the very words and properties applied or ascribed to the beloved lady of

amatory verse, ranging from Guido Cavalcanti's generation in the late thirteenth century to Pietro Bembo in the early sixteenth century, although there were, inevitably, shifts in themes and accents. What is more, Friar Puzzo appears to slide quite naturally into the idiom. Ignorant or silly he may be, as when he calls Cupid the son of Pluto, god of the underworld, when all literate men knew that he was the offspring of Venus and Vulcan. Nonetheless, he invokes poetry's language of the burning lover: "I am all on fire with love for her," culminating with the exclamations, "Help me; alas, I'm dying, I'm burning, I'm consumed." The irony is that having summoned the son of the god of the underworld, he may be acting out his true future condition in the fires of hell. In any case, the parodic masterpiece in the amatory idiom is the letter to his beloved. The opening sentence catches the fifteenth century's elevated (male) way of praising the loved one:

> *I feel obliged to heaven, beautiful young lady, whom I love more dearly than anything else in the world, only because it has made me worthy of seeing your beauties, which are more heavenly than human, and which delight me as much as anything I ever saw in this world or believe exists in heaven.*

Although this is a sacrilegious affirmation, in issuing from the mouth of the prior of an Augustinian convent, it strikes us as ridiculous because of the unfolding prank and the man's office. At a Renaissance court, in the study or setting of a great urban mansion (*palazzo*), or better, in the love poetry of the Bentivoglio circle of Bologna, such amatory expression—if a little less impious—was not only typical and common but also necessary, if it was to

fulfill the expectations of love, genre, and milieu. Hence the flicker of mockery and derision in the letter's exordium is a satiric assault on the friar, not on its own ritual language. In the 1470s, for example, Matteo Maria Boiardo refers to his loved one, in his verse, as that "heavenly beauty about which I reason," and elsewhere, "O heavenly whiteness [the lady], not understood by human eyes and human deliberation," and again in another poem, "nor even by thinking can one reach her beauty, because Heaven hides it from human intelligence."

Friar Puzzo's letter goes on to utilize other locutions that are also lifted from the stock of the same amatory lexicon: thus his "lofty" love, her face as a second sun which obscures the real one, the happy blessedness (*beatitudine*) of her face, her "noble virtues," the "consolation of my amorous soul," the "magnanimity of your generous look," "a lover unworthy of your lofty value," "don't disdain my infinite love," "you whence all my health and happiness proceed," and "God . . . make you take pity on me." This elevated and courtly language is carried over even into the friar's exchange with the young go-between: "Most greatly do I commend my suit to your prudence."

In the fifteenth-century setting, these are the words of a gentleman in the mouth of a near lout, but obviously an educated lout who has done some reading and knows his way around. After all, he is the prior of his convent, a post which ordinarily required certain social and administrative skills and a good, late-medieval, Latinate education. For all his rascality, the prior is a man of parts and is well-acquainted, we may remember, with one of the well-born Aretines.

But what shall we say of the young men from Arezzo and their ravishing friend, the priest? As would-be fifteenth-century readers

and listeners, we are clearly meant to sympathize and even identify with them. For they are rather like us, in the Bentivoglio circle or at the court of Ferrara: nobly born, endowed with landed or other income, proud, carefree, fond of throwing their/our weight around, and thirsting for amusement. And if, along the way, they/we can expose and chastise a vile scoundrel, so much the better. In some respects, they are also thoroughly indulgent: they cultivate the friendship and encourage the transvestite antics of a young priest as beautiful as heaven itself, a maiden in everything but his private parts.

The literary and social ambiguities of the story converge here, in the priest, since this character both makes the story and is the occasion for the bringing forth of a revealing set of fifteenth-century attitudes. The appropriate questions bring these forth. Had Ser Francesco taken final holy vows and was he tonsured? At age sixteen, could he really be old enough to be charged with the care of souls? Not normally in canon law, but dispensations were procurable by means of money and the right contacts, just as they were for boys of illegitimate birth, who otherwise were debarred from entry into the priesthood. So, did Ser Francesco have influential patrons in high ecclesiastical place? Why was he able to travel and dally about with a company of worldly-minded pleasure seekers? And on the occasion of a country fête to honor the Queen of Heaven, what about the action of dressing him up as a dazzling maiden and taking him out to where he would seem the most queenly and heavenly creature ever seen?

I am not suggesting that the author's fifteenth-century audience consciously raised these questions. Something, however, in their implied attitudes does. For in their sympathy with the Aretines, and by their pleasure in the anecdote, they themselves connived

with the laxity of the Italian Renaissance Church. Men from their social class tended to occupy the positions of command within it, as demonstrated, for instance, by the sale and purchase of cardinalships and curial dignities. Thus, Friar Puzzo and the bewitching Ser Francesco, the one as well as the other, belong not only to the moral and social world of the company of Aretines but also—it is one and the same world—to that of our 1470s upper-class readers. Friar and priest, therefore, may be realistic figments ("factions") of Arienti's imagination, but their makings—i.e., their constituent parts and settings—were already in the mental world of Arienti's readers. This audience and their ilk had made the likes of Puzzo and the priest possible in real life.

Late in the tale, just as Ser Francesco concludes his scolding of the friar, there is a hint of the sometime keen rivalry between the secular and regular clergy (priests vs. monks and friars): "How is it," asks Ser Francesco, "that the heavens do not move to punish your sacrilege so as to make you an image of suffering and an example of pain to the other evil and villainous friars?" What *did* contemporaries make of this indictment, coming from one who had taken the rather scabrous charade far enough to be pushed onto a bed, to have his genitals felt, and suddenly to fear that he might be sodomized? Both at the beginning and end of the tale, we are told that Ser Francesco—"virtuous" at the start and still "an excellent priest" many years later—was a good man. It is strongly implied that he is heterosexual and that he even perhaps truly kept his clerical vows of celibacy. Against these claims, however, there is the tale's luminous imagery: Ser Francesco's stunning beauty as a young woman and his egregious feminine bearing. In effect, Friar Puzzo's lechery is constructed and conjured up by this means. There is thus a striking ambivalence at the focus of

the tale. And this unstable feature reflects fifteenth-century upper-class (male) attitudes toward homosexuality. In the ambiguity at the heart of this well-turned tale, we touch an aspect of literary expression that was already present in everyday attitudes, and hence in the social and mental structures of the age. Despite the prominence and glamour of the Italian humanist movement, with its overriding emphasis on the study of classical history and literature, there was certainly no popular sympathy around for the common Roman view, in the time of Martial, that all men were bisexual.

The legal codes of all Italian cities carried harsh statutory penalties against male homosexuality, ranging from heavy fines, exile, prison sentences, and the pillory, to bloody whipping, branding, mutilation, and death by fire. There were moments of extreme severity, such as at Venice and Genoa in the fifteenth century; and fearing the biblical examples of Sodom and Gomorrah, governments occasionally encouraged fierce verbal campaigns against the unspeakable sin of sodomy. Now and then, therefore, convicted sodomites were put to death, but this was more likely to be the fate of those condemned for violent homosexual rape; and older men were apt to be more harshly punished than "passive" (female-like) boys and young catamites. Yet in practice, for all their savage laws against "unnatural" sexual activity, most urban governments verged on toleration: they tended to impose fines, to deal out relatively light prison sentences, and to serve warnings; or they simply failed to prosecute. Moreover, to have influential contacts in high office might also save a man, but such means were not altogether reliable.

How can we explain the obvious ambivalence, dithering, or conflict in upper-class attitudes towards male homosexuality? The answer is, in part, that contemporaries had the sense, however

obscure, that sodomy was in some fashion connected with the demands of demography, honor, and family social structure, all of which delayed marriage for males and rigorously removed all middle- and upper-class women from sex outside of marriage. In these circumstances, young men of "good family" turned to female servants, female household slaves, prostitutes, and other men. Consequently, in the course of the fourteenth century, many cities relaxed or eliminated their toughest laws against prostitution; and in the fifteenth century, as a matter of candid policy, Lucca, for one, permitted prostitutes to move freely throughout the city, in order to help wean men away from homosexual practice and to prepare them for marriage. There could be no franker acknowledgement, however circuitous, of the links between social structures and male sexuality.

Early Renaissance Italy seems not to have recognized homosexuality in women. This official blindness issued, I suspect, from views which accompanied the dominant social and property relations. Given the subordinate, "passive," "flighty," and "inferior" nature of women, as enunciated in governing doctrine, their sexuality was taken seriously—i.e., seen as potentially menacing—only when it came into contact with men.

Though the foregoing observations may seem a digression, they help us to understand the ambiguous figure of our beautiful, sixteen-year old priest, and really therefore to understand the tale itself. The author's narrative posture fully indulges Ser Francesco, who is a point of dalliance and who provides a pleasant *frisson* even for his Aretine companions. Insofar as he truly has something of the girl or young lady about him, he would appear to be a passive, submissive, and less harmful being. His foil is Friar Puzzo, for whom the whole allotment of abuse and censure in the

tale is reserved. Two men in holy orders: one a near boy, a priest, a virtuous beauty; the other an older man, a friar, an unseemly lecher, a likely sodomite. But these two flourish in the mind of an invisible third party: upper-class society (Arienti's intended reading and listening audience) looks on with delight, playing imaginatively with roles and *personae* rooted in everyday strains and stresses. In their dramatic opposition, the friar serves to cleanse the adolescent priest, to lead us away from the scent of his bisexuality. But more importantly for this analysis, the two represent the genial bifurcation of a conflicted historical attitude: all the admiration and indulgence for the one is paid for by the odious other, Friar "Stinker." If we read the tale outside its historical setting, we may appreciate its invention, verve, and ironic contrasts; but we shall miss the living ingredient, the force and timeliness, in the oppositions between angelic priest and sordid friar. These oppositions were lodged in uncertain, divided, and even guilty attitudes toward male homosexuals. Biblical and statutory sanction, as well as the veiled threat to the "loftiness" of the conjugal family, called for the harshest reprisals against homosexuals. And yet, was it not true that death by fire was too brutal a penalty? That in view of the restrictions on the sexuality of "honorable" women, prostitution naturally surfaced? Therefore, that other "excrescences" might also surface? And so, was some degree of lenience not in order? It was easy to scourge older men in holy orders (though the friar, let us remember, was normally heterosexual). But what to do about good-looking young men and boys who turned to homosexual practice? Kill them? No, not normally. Terrorize them? Yes, well, maybe, or from time to time.

In the fifteenth-century setting, and more specifically, among the assembled company listening to *Le Porretane*, the exposure

and dismissal of Friar Puzzo is tantamount to a ritual of symbolic cleansing. The "ethnic" invasion by a company of upper-class (urban) outsiders is seen to have been fully justified: they purge an attractive rural community of its hidden corrupter. This is literature as class celebration, though in a slyly devious mode.

FOUR