

The Taming of the Pooch

By Isabella Sforza del Nero Lando (1555)

Englished by Anne Cook Bacon (1589)

I. *Collinosa Bianca*

WHEN THE COACHMAN opened her carriage door, Bianca was ready. She took two quick breaths and exhaled slowly. Fans on both sides of the red carpet craned their necks for a glimpse of her. She counted to twelve before making a move. Slowly, she stretched out one hand. Her well-trained chauffeur reached up, took her by the fingertips, and helped her down. Bianca Miniola Ramusio di Baptista descended from the carriage like an angel from heaven, taking care not to snag her yellow silk stockings, nor to let the elevated soles beneath her feet cause her to stumble upon the stone walk.

Head high, elbows back. Shoulder-length blond hair, artfully curled, with a braided up-do by Donna Marie Fischetto. Figure-cinching silk gown by Donilo Donati, powder blue, low-cut with a white partlet front and back, and virago sleeves. Her eyes, lode-stars. Her earrings, diamond chandeliers. Her smile, a rifle-shot to the heart. Joining her now, at her side, was her seventy-year-old father. As she took his arm, the crowd applauded. Someone in the throng called out, “I love you, Bianca! I want you to have my baby!” Another fellow shouted, “No, mine first!”

Bianca, seventeen, had it all. Looks, style, money, adoring fans. She intended for this to be her night. And what Bianca wanted, Bianca usually got.

Theater people, writers, and celebrities from Venice to Florence had converged on Padua for the city’s premier cultural event—the Hercules Awards ceremony, held annu-

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ally at the Ragione Palace and sponsored by the Accademia degli Infiammati. As a leading patron of the arts, Signore Baptista Ramusio with his wrinkled countenance and mane of shaggy white hair and frivolous beard was a familiar figure at the event, a fixture of the Paduan theater. But tonight all eyes were riveted upon his teenaged daughter. The Academy had nominated Bianca to receive a Hercules for her supporting role as Erotima the courtesan in Hortensio Lando's smash hit, *A Comedy of Erros*.

Hortensio's script—a modern adaptation of *The Menaechmi*, by Plautus—featured a double set of identical twins who were separated when young, one member of each pair having been lost or misplaced in infancy. The two Androphallus brothers were performed by Preslio, the company's biggest star; while the two bondservants, named Dromio, were played by the brothers Colloredo. Hilarity ensues when the long-lost twins of Syracuse disembark in Epidamnus. Supporting roles included five female parts, for boy-actors: Adriana, an elderly abbess; Goody Dromio and Lady Androphallus (wives to Dromio and Androphallus of Epidamnus); Lucrezia, a randy housemaid; and Erotima, a high-rolling courtesan. On a lark, Baptista's younger daughter—who had all the right attributes and did not mind showing them—auditioned for the courtesan's role. Baptista stayed out of it, but he was not displeased when Bianca was chosen for the part—he was, after all, the patron of the company—nor was he surprised when his daughter went on to receive appreciative notice in the popular press.

Having been given a role in Hortensio's comedy, Bianca when playing Erotima did not wish to be mistaken for just another cross-dressed boy, like other ventriloquized “women” on the Italian stage. She dressed for the part like an actual courtesan of Venice, fully exposing her young breasts to the view, without so much as a lace partisan between the eyes of the audience and her lovely bosom. Reviewers agreed that it was not just the two Dromios, or

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the two Androphalluses, that had made *Erros* a smash hit. Some credit was owing also to Bianca's twin girls, a perfect set of pink plumpers. Moreover, Bianca had spoken her lines as clearly, as seductively, as any boy-actor could have done. Even her father was impressed.

Looking distinguished in his black suit and mop of white hair, Signore Baptista extended an elbow to Bianca for their walk up the red carpet into the Ragione. Hundreds of people had crowded the square, with dozens more looking down from the arched walk of the upper portico. "Merda," said the old man, through smiling teeth. From years of working with playwrights and directors who sought his favors or money, Baptista had perfected the art of saying "Merda" with a warm smile—so that the applicant understood him to mean, "Merda! I love it! I love the concept! Let's do lunch!"—when what he really meant was, "Merda! Your concept sucks. Eat my shorts, and die." Baptista's aesthetic judgment deferred always to good money sense. His personal preference was for tales of bawdry, and tough-guy Senecan fare; or he slept. And yet, he had a soft spot for stories of wise patriarchs with desirable daughters who honored their father above their own buffoonish husbands or suitors. Also, blood. Lots of blood. Nothing brought in the box receipts like a tragedy of blood.

As a producer, Baptista had no time for scripts with obvious literary merit. He always said, and seemed to be correct, that you can never underestimate the lowest common denominator in a theater audience. In the year previous, he had bankrolled two plays—Benedetto Varchi's touching comedy, *Two Very Gentle Men of Verona* and Antonio Molino's *Titus Andronicus: A Musical Extravaganza*. Varchi's play had a smaller gross but enjoyed better net earnings. Molino for the staging of his gory neo-Senecan romp had demanded big-production dance numbers, plus costly props—weapons and butcher knives, wax hands, wax heads, and a hoist—that bit into profits. The laundry

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bill alone, for weekly cleaning of blood-stained togas, was horrific. And yet no play in memory—not Varchi’s *Gentle Men*, not even *Titus*—had packed the house like *A Comedy of Erros*. Baptista had earned enough from *Erros* to refurbish Villa Marsango, his property north of Padua, where he intended to retire.

Like his daughter, Signore Baptista was to receive some personal recognition that night: he been selected for a “Lifetime Achievement Award,” as they called it. The prize-disposition did not please him. “They’re just counting the days till I drop, those people,” he said. Nor did the old man care for any event where the rich and famous gathered to stroke one another’s ego. He disliked these annual affairs in particular, where theater people glad-handed him from every side. An Academy award for Best Play would write *finis* to his record as a founding patriarch of northern Italy’s theatrical Renaissance. But a “Lifetime Achievement Award” felt like a push.

The carriages lining up at the curb pulled forward one at a time to disgorge their celebrities. Bianca made her way inside, on her father’s arm. As she walked up the red carpet, grown men and teenagers continued to call out her name. “Bianca!” “Erotima!” “Bianca!” All the men of the Veneto region seemed to want her. The women just wanted to *be* her. “Bianca!” “Over here!” “Bianca!” The teenaged star turned this way and that, smiling to the crowd. She felt the energy. She felt the love.

Inside the Ragione, an usher led Bianca and her father upstairs into the Great Hall, where tables were set for the banquet that preceded the awards ceremony. The noise of the crowd now gave way to the lilt of familiar theater tunes, scored by Nino Rota and performed by the famed Domenico Venier Ensemble, over the buzz of cocktail chatter and the clink of crystal wine glasses.

A large table had been reserved for the *Comedy of Erros* party—Signore Baptista (producer), Hortensio Lando

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(author-director), and the full cast, each with a spouse or guest. Baptista greeted those already seated, but did not yet take his assigned place at the head of the table. He excused himself to go back outside and wait for his elder daughter. When the carriage had come to pick them up, Caterina was not yet dressed and ready to go—a typical stunt from stubborn Kate. But it was not entirely her fault. The delay was partly because Bianca, in a dressing-room mishap, had spilled hot orange candle wax, quite a bit of it, upon her elder sister’s new silk dress.

When ushered to her table, Bianca chose a position from which she could see and be seen by everyone who came through the main entrance. To her right sat Luci Speroni, a nervous redhead with heart-shaped lips who dressed as if for Sunday School. To her left sat Lady Gonzaga (Horatio’s patroness), a bleached blonde whose swatches of cut-and-slash white leather were artfully arranged to cover the essentials. Competing with *Erros* for “Best Play” were Andrea Calmo’s gritty romance, *Pericles, the Errant King of Tyre*, performed by the Lord Cardinal’s Men; Cinthio’s *Antonio and Cleopatra*, by the Duke of Ferrara’s Men; and Leon Sommi’s *The Betrothal*, a musical comedy produced and performed by Mantua’s Università Israelitica, with innovative stage machinery designed by Sullam and Shalit. Six Mantuan Jews, one of whom was doubtless the playwright, sat on a bench at the back of the hall. They sat without speaking but not without being noticed. Dressed in red pointed hats and red scarves (compulsory garb in the Veneto), the Jewish guests looked conspicuously out of place here in Padua’s Ragione Palace, among so many well-dressed Christian celebrities.

“Think we’ll win Best Play?” asked Bianca, as a conversation opener.

“Oh, I think you will,” said Luci, with her usual perky enthusiasm. [...]

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