THE "BURATTO" OF THE BARGELLO MUSEUM

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Figure 1: Buratto face

No one may come forward to touch the shield if he hasn't first been acknowledged by or introduced as a Knight by the Judges. The adventurers who enter the field with a new livery shall run first, in the order they arrived. Those who break the lances against the brow from the eyelashes up shall have three hits; from the eyebrows to the mouth, two hits; from the mouth to the chin, one hit. ... Those who hit the throat shall lose a point, and those who hit from the throat down shall lose the prize. Those who touch the canvas with their lance before it breaks, or the ground in front, or after breaking the lance, shall lose the prize. ... The defenders (Ethiopian Knights) have the power to decide who among them shall compete against the adventurers, and the defenders may call over some companions. ... There shall be no appeals to the Judges' decisions.

Thus spoke the three Ethiopian knights.[1]

The *Buratto*[2] is a wooden sculpture of a Black Moorish figure used as a prop, or target, during the ceremonies to mark the wedding in 1575 of the Tuscan Grand Duke Francesco I and his second wife, the Venetian Bianca Cappello (fig. 1).[3] The wedding's main event was an elaborate theatrical production of *Sbarra,* or Jousting tournament, in Palazzo Pitti in Florence, during which the Grand Duke and two other Medici played the part of Persian knights, who, learning of the marriage of Francesco to Bianca, had arrived in Florence to pay homage. As returning champions or "*mantenitori,*" their duty was to defend the supremacy of their ladies against the knights from across the world. What does the presence a black Moorish figure during a theatrical joust, where Persians were the champions, and Ethiopians set the rules, reveal about the cultural politics of the early modern Tuscan court culture?

The Grand Duke commissioned Rafaelle Gualterotti, the Florentine writer, poet, and courtier, who shared Francesco I's interest in esoterica—and who would also be in charge of the wedding ceremonies for two future Tuscan Grand Dukes, Ferdianand I and Cosimo II—to develop a program lasting several days, during which an entourage of ambassadors and guests were lavishly hosted

[1] Rafaelle Gualterotti, *Feste nelle nozze del Serenissimo Don Francesco Medici Gran Duca di Toscana et della Serenissima sua consorta la Sig . Bianca Cappello,* "The Three Slaves of Cupid to All the Knights of the World" (Florence, 1579), 56-57. I thank Marella Feltrin-Morris for the elegant translation of the original text by Gualterotti.

[2] "Il Buratto per le nozze di Francesco I de' Medici," The Bargello, inventory no. 18 SL.

[3] The wooden sculpture was not part of the prestigious Grand ducal arms collection displayed in the Uffizi, and was not mentioned in any archival inventory. It was viewed as a theatrical prop, yet it was conserved in the Bargello for its historical value. For a conservation history of the object see: Mario Scalini, "Il Saracino del Museo Nazionale Del Bargello e Altre Testimonianze," in *Il Saracino e gli spettacoli savallereschi nella Toscana Granducale* (Firenze: edizioni SPES, 1987), 73-131.

Figure 2: Buratto Santa Croce, close-up

and entertained. The elaborate program was published ahead of the event, thus building anticipation. Nine etchings (in diverse colors) were produced of the decorations, floats, and apparatuses to be installed in the courtyard of Palazzo Pitti, as well as the description and rules for the Saracen Joust to be held in Piazza Santa Croce that would conclude the wedding program. In its original form, the *Buratto*, or joust target for the *Giostra del Saracino* , was a legless black dummy mounted on a pole.[4] The competing knights had to hit either the shield or the face of the Buratto with their masts.[5] The rules (quoted above) of the *Giostra del Saracino* were read out by three "enslaved" Ethiopian Knights, played by three members of the Tuscan aristocracy who appeared at the end of the procession of floats representing mythological, geographical, and fantastic scenes built especially for the wedding feast and displayed in the Palazzo Pitti courtyard. The three Tuscans appearing as Ethiopian knights invited all the other knights to the challenge in the Piazza Santa Croce. There is a rare documentary image of the placement of the *Buratto* during the Piazza Santa Croce spectacle: the last image of Gualterotti's volume (fig. 2). It illustrates the *Buratto* in its most primitive version, prior to subsequent transformation in later years. It shows a legless figure wearing a turban mounted on a post in the bottom right part of the picture.

Gualterotti's text ends with the following description of the scene at the Piazza Santa Croce where the wedding party, guests, ladies, and Tuscan nobles as Knights of the World all assembled:

It was a sweet and festive entertainment. And the defenders (Ethiopian Knights) appeared in the following fashion: first the trumpeters, then the players of Moorish instruments, followed by a second, and behind him Cupid, who led the defenders in chains. The defenders looked like three Moor slaves, but they were Signor Federigo Savorniano, Signor Count Germanico Savorniano, Signor Count Luigi Porto, and the second was Signor Alessandro Lignani Their clothes were luxurious, their shields beautiful, and the Knights valiant, so that the feast was quite lavish, and impressive in many respects, as this image seems to convey.[6]

What is the meaning of the Black Moorish dummy used as a target in a theatrical show whose rules were set by Black Ethiopian "enslaved" knights, and whose protagonists were three Persian Knights?_While the Saracen Joust goes back to medieval times, this sixteenth-century enactment featuring oriental figures in a European setting has to be understood against the geopolitical backdrop subsequent to the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453. Geopolitically, Persia had emerged as a potential ally of Western Christian states including Rome, Spain, and the Holy Roman Empire, against the Ottomans. Christian rulers, including the Pope, sent emissaries to the Persian monarch in an attempt to create a military alliance to attack the Ottomans on their Eastern and Western borders. On the literary front, the historical realignment undertaken by Renaissance humanists, exemplified by translations of Xenophone's *Cyropedia,* or the Education of Cyrus, had led Persia to be viewed as a monarchy with a noble imperial past worthy of emulation by Western princes.

[4] Joust of the Saracen is a medieval martial ritual game still practiced in Arezzo as historical reenactment. When Arezzo requested protection from USESCO in 2013 of the traditional game as "Intangible Cultural Heritage," it was deemed unacceptable based on the fact its reenactment was offensive to the black and Muslim immigrant resident population of Tuscany.

[5] There were various versions of the *Saracino* game for which the sculpture was modified in subsequent eras. The present condition of the sculpture is a version used in a game of *Quintane*, using a statue furnished with legs and feet.

[6] Gualterotti, 1579.

Figure 2a: Buratto Santa Croce

Westerners interpreted the Safavid Shahs' adoption of Shiism as the official religion of state in Persia as a sympathetic move to the Christian nations against the barbarian Sunni Turks.[7] Although the Medici's identification with the Persians and Persian monarchy dates back to the time of Cosimo the Elder, well before they were considered potential allies against the Turks, nonetheless the appearance of the Grand Duke as a Persian knight at his own wedding celebration was particularly strategic: his bride was from Venice, a city state at war with the Ottomans at the time. Turks as enemies were mentioned and referenced numerous times during the festival program.

As to the presence of blacks in the spectacles, it should be noted that by the end of sixteenth century, the thriving African slave trade meant that Florence was working through, morally and theologically, the presence of black and Moorish slaves in the city. The assimilation of black figures into Medici theater was, however, not as straightforward as in the case of Persians, who were cast as friends, or Turks, posited as enemies. As Kate Lowe has shown, while the majority of black Africans in Renaissance Europe were slaves, there were also other representations of blacks, as ambassadors, Christians, and diplomats.[8]

The appearance of black figures at the wedding festivities was not limited to the subservient mode of a fixed prop, object, or (abject) enemy. In fact, if placed in their historical and textual context, black figures—although embo-

[7] Margaret Myserve, *Empires of Islam in Renaissance Historical Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2008).

[8] Kate Lowe, "Representing Africa: Ambassadors and Princes from West Africa to Renaissance Italy and Portugal 1402–1608," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 6, issue 7 (2007) 101-128.

Figure 3: Persian float

Figure 4: Two Little Ethiopians

died by Tuscans—were major players during three key moments of the festival: at the entry of the Grand Duke Francesco, serving as attendants of the Persian Knight; at the entry of the floats of Europe and Africa; and at the entry of the three Ethiopian Knights, the last of the procession to enter Palazzo Pitti before the games commenced.

The texts and images of Gualterotti given below were informed by contemporary typologies of Orientals (Ethiopian, Arab, Moorish, Persian, and Turk), as shown in the portraits of illustrious men in Uffizi portrait galley. Filippo Pigafetta[9] describes them as showing a composite picture of black and Moorish figures during the wedding festival of Francesco I (figs. 3-4).

"Two Little Ethiopian"
Attendees to the Persian Knights

The entry of the three Persian Knights on a magnificent throne, escorted into the lavishly decorated courtyard of Palazzo Pitti, is described thus:

From underneath a curtain that shielded the entrance to a cave, two men emerged dressed in Persian fashion, along with two little Ethiopians. Their outfits were magnificent and sumptuous, the outer layer made of carnation satin and the inner layer of yellow sarcenet. After walking over to two huts that had been gracefully placed under the stage boxes on each side of the courtyard, they brought out two remarkably large elephants led by the two Persians, and restrained and spurred on by the two little Ethiopians who were sitting over the elephants' large heads. … Three Knights—the Grand Duke of Tuscany (who, therefore, was in the middle), the Most Distinguished Signor Don Pietro, and Signor Mario Sforza, respectively. These three Knights, under the name of Persians, had come to defend the Barrier, as will be explained later on. When this beautiful and proud parade was over, there appeared, pulled by the abovementioned elephants, not so much a carriage as an enormous throne made with Persian pomp by a Tuscan mind. … the three Persian defenders sat on luxurious, regal seats. … This enormous carriage rolled on four wheels, the rear ones depicting the Sun and the Moon, which symbolized the passing of time, and the front ones almost like a starry sky, thanks to the many lights that hung from them without moving in spite of the movement of the wheels. This feature resembled a beautiful and joyful miracle, and the magnificence and splendor that this bright, regal, terrestrial ship displayed as it moved around called to mind the triumph of glory. But one could also argue that it was created as a symbol of eternity and fame.[10]

Attended by black servants, the three foreigners embodying terrestrial and divine majesty made their appearance in a manner recalling the journey of the Magi, who, "having heard—and are led by fixed stars to Palazzo Pittito pay homage and tribute!" This elaborate scene can be linked to a specific early modern Florentine transformation of the story of the Magi, which, as Richard Trexler and Rab Hathfeild have shown, served to legitimize the Medici as the de facto rulers of Florence, beginning with the reign of Cosimo the Elder.[11] In Gozzoli's Journey of the Magi in the Medici Chapel, and in the yearly reenactments of the story in Florence during cavalcades, the Medici appear as the Magi, or kings. By associating themselves with magic and monarchy in reenactments of the biblical event, they sought to legitimate their authority.[12] The special feature of the Florentine depiction and reenactment of the story of the Three Kings is its resistance to the European-wide convention of a Black Magus. By the 1440s black kings were becoming a convention in Northern European Magi art, and one of the Magi is nearly always represented as black. By the sixteenth century, the convention of the Black Magus was the norm in every significant artistic school except Florence. While black figures do appear in Florentine Magi artwork and theatrical productions, they are always attendants, not sovereigns or Magi.[13]

What explains this Florentine resistance to the depiction of a Black Magus? Trexler and Kaplan offer two explanations. While the legends asserting Prester John as a descendent of the original Magi had accustomed Europeans to the idea of Black monarchical sovereignty, they also greatly inflated the alleged power and wealth of Ethiopian monarchs, turning them into fantastic imaginary figures. In contrast, the flesh and blood black Ethiopians who came to Florence at the invitation of Pope Eugenius did not live up to the legend. The Pope had written to "*Presbitero Johanni Regi ac Imperatori Ethiopie Illustri*," requesting that he send a competent prelate, as well as a delegation to attend the 1437 Council of Florence. The delegation that arrived was disappointingly in the extreme.[14] As a contemporary Florentine remarked, the Ethiopians were "dry" and "awkward." They subverted the fantasy figure of the Black Magus. Secondly, as the Medici were instrumental in developing the cult of the Magi in Florence, seeking to identify with them, any idea of a Black Magus was excluded.

Float of Europe and Africa

At the wedding festivities a series of floats, knights from other nations—Europe, Africa, and Ethiopia—followed the appearance of the Grand Duke and two other Medici dressed as Persians. The float of Europe and Africa was made of a

very large and resplendent Mother-of-Pearl, which clearly showed it has been the glory of the most profound ocean. It shone of its own light as well as from the reflection of other lights, because it was made of silver, and in its pure white bosom it held two Maidens and two Knights. [It arrived] gently floating over the sea waters … pulled by two mermen and pushed and held by many Nymphs, Sea Goddesses and Gods.[15]

The scene was meant to represent Europe and Africa inviting the respective figures to measure themselves against the three Persian Knights. The Knights of Europe and Africa were impersonated by Don Giovanni Montalvo and Silvio Piccolomini. The former wore dark Moorish armor, the latter white armor over a Spanish-style outfit. Piccolomini was entitled Fortunate African Knight, while Montalvo played the Wretched Roman Knight.[16] Europe and Africa stood

[9] In 1597 Filippo Pigafetta described a typology of "oriental" illustrious men depicted in the Gallery of the Uffizi: "These are followed by the Orientals, that is the two Kings of Abassia, which we call Ethiopia. Then the Mohammedan Saracens, who are also called *Hagarenes*, *Àrabes* and *Alarbes* by the Spaniards and the Moors, from two Mauretanias—one *Mauretania Caesariensis* and the other *Mauretania Tingitana*, from the two cities (of Caesarea) and Tingis—and then the Agem Shahs, who are called Persians. And then the three Sultans of Egypt, and then Timur Khan Tartar, the tamer of the Turks, and then the Patiscia of the Turks, among whom is the Rossa (Roxana) the wife of Soleiman, and a Pasha, and an Agha, and all together fourteen Turks." Translation of the text of Filippo Pigafetta to Ferdinand I, 17 July 1597, in Paola Barocchi and Giovanna Gaeta Bertela, *Collezionismo Mediceo*, vol. I. (Florence, 2002), 518.

[10] Gualterotti, 1579.

[11] Richard C. Trexler, *Journey of the Magi: Meanings in History of a Christian Story* (Princeton University Press: 1999); Rab Hatfield, "The Compagna de' Magi," *Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Ins.*, vol. 33 (1970), 107-130.

[12] Trexler, 93.

[13] From 1470 onwards, the adoption of one African Magus/King in magi art is the norm in every significant school of artists in Western Europe, except Florence. In the latter, the black figure remains a black *attendant* to the white magi. See: Paul Kaplan, *The Rise of Black Magus in Western Art* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), 117.

[14] Trexler, 104-107. See also Kaplan, "The Black Magus/King ca. 1450-1500," in *The Rise of the Black Magus*.

[15] Gualterotti, 1579.

together surrounded by a seashell facing the "challenge" of Persia.

The title of the knight representing Europe, the Wretched Roman, evokes the classical East-West confrontation between Persian and Roman Empires, when Africa and the Mediterranean "seashell," connecting it to Rome, was "*nostrum*" and aligned with Rome against the Eastern menace. Here Africa is endowed with sovereignty, in the figure of the Fortunate African, but only in a classical guise, reminiscent of a Carthage subdued by Rome.

The last float to enter before the game of *Sbarra* carried Cupid bringing three "enslaved" Ethiopian Knights in chains. The Jousting Tournament in Santa Croce (following the games at Palazzo Pitti), during which the Knights fight to win their freedom, is also illustrated. The rules of the games have already been described; the personages were magnificently dressed, even if enslaved—by love. The protagonists were entreatied to win their freedom in a chivalrous tournament. Above all, however, they were allowed to speak.

The Three Slaves of Cupid to all the Knights in the World.

When Cupid, God of Love, learned about the blissful wedding of the Most Serene Signor Don Francesco de' Medici Grand Duke of Tuscany and the Most Serene Signora Bianca Cappello, true and unique daughter of the Most Serene Republic of Venice, he insisted on visiting the city. And knowing that many Knights and Dames would attend, in order to capture the most noble hearts, he brought along three black Knights from Ethiopia who have been condemned to follow him in chains at all times as his slaves, until they have gained their Ladies' favor. This fate came upon them because they were haughty and despised the authority of such a powerful master. These Knights think that there is no nobler way to gain their Ladies' favor, and their own freedom, than with arms. Therefore, they have decided to issue this announcement, in which they inform all of you most noble and bold Knights, that on Sunday, the 11th of October, they have been allowed by their master to be led to Piazza Santa Croce and into a pavilion, where they will take part in a Saracen joust in order to prove, by breaking two lances for each Knight, that their Ladies surpass, in beauty, grace and worth, every woman alive today. And those who decide to challenge this statement will only have to hit with their lance one of the three shields above the entrance to the pavilion, and Cupid will at once unchain one of the three Knights, who will proceed to fight to defend what was stated above.[17]

This is a rhetorically and visually striking image. Black Ethiopian figures appearing as virtuous knights are nonetheless in chains. This is because they have been disobedient and irreverent. As virtuous warriors, however, they issue a challenge that may secure their freedom. Seen in the context of sixteenth-century Black Magus/King iconography—a fact that discloses the presence of African slaves in Florence—it could be argued that the drama being enacted was an expedient and theatrical way of disguising the moral and theological dilemma of slavery.

The *Buratto* became part of the Bragello collection in 1865, one of the earliest museums of the newly formed Italian state, and as such anxious to gather traditional and especially heroic artifacts. The inclusion of the statue in the Bargello collection of weapons and armor was, however, a fortunate accident. Never part of the prestigious collection of Medici armor in the Uffizi gallery, the wooden sculpture was initially included in the Bargello collection for the cultural and iconographic value of its shield. The black figure was considered a mere prop, devoid of any cultural value.

Nevertheless, as Mario Scalini observes in his 1987 book on the *Buratto* restoration project, its preservation at the Bargello marks a new historiographical approach to museum collecting that considers objects not so much as static historical documents, but as items to be prized for their production, use, cultural context, and transformation down the ages.[18] The interest of the *Buratto*, for example, lies in the fact that the original puppet for Francesco's wedding wore a turban, had no legs and rotated on a post. It was only during the eighteenth century that legs, feet, and a helmet were added. As an early black Moorish prop, used for entertainment purposes in the Medici theatre of the world, the *Buratto*, the progenitor of the "Blackamoor" brings to light a composite picture of black figures at the court of Francesco I, where blacks could be sovereigns (the Africa and Europe floats), attendants to royal Persians ("the two little Ethiopians"), or virtuous but enslaved knights battling for their freedom.

[16] Gualterotti, 1579.

[17] Gualterotti, 1579.

[18] Mario Scalini, *Armature All'eroica Dei Negroli* (Firenze: Museo Nazionale del Bargello), 1987.