

THE ITALIAN ACADEMY, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

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“Resistance to Neo-Platonic innovations and deviant intellectuals

in the circle of Lorenzo de’ Medici: the case of Luigi Pulci”

Pre-paper for the seminar

Wednesday, February 19, 2025

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

1. [Introduction](#)
2. [Context](#)
3. [Preview](#)

Introduction:

My research project for the Spring 2025 at the Italian Academy focuses on the Florentine poet Luigi Pulci (Florence, 1432-Padua, 1484). Pulci was a protégé of Lucrezia Tornabuoni (Florence, 1427-Florence, 1482), the mother of Lorenzo De Medici (Florence, 1449-Careggi, 1492), who was “signore” of Florence for 23 years, from 1469 to 1492. Pulci was also an intimate friend and collaborator of the Magnificent himself, who included him within his “brigata” (a group of writers and artists with literary interests in common) and often sent him to diplomatic missions across Italy (Pisa, Norcia, Foligno, Camerino, Napoli,

Roma, and Monte Rotondo). In the field of Italian literature, Luigi Pulci is best known for his *Morgante*, an epic and chivalric romance in 28 *cantari* (cantos) that he wrote in Florence at Lucrezia Tornabuoni's behest over more than twenty years, between 1461 and 1482. Despite being so integrated within the Medici entourage, Luigi Pulci was a maverick and a deviant figure within the cultural, political, literary, religious, and philosophical mainstream of that time. He wrote this mock-epic in which he broke with the traditional epic genre and deployed the tool of irony to convey unconventional ideas on religion and morality. He was tried for his homosexuality and received the labels of heretic and non-believer because he was alleged to indulge in irreverent magical practices. Because of his deviance both from the Neo-Platonic and from the Catholic mainstream, he was viciously attacked first by Marsilio Ficino, the founder of the "Platonic Academy", and by Girolamo Savonarola later, becoming an outcast in Florentine culture. In light of his irregular and anti-canonical features, and after Lorenzo's full "conversion" to Marsilio Ficino's Neo-Platonism in the early 1470s, in his later years Pulci was progressively (although never completely) distanced by the Medicis. After having spent most of his career as a "compagnuzzo" to Lorenzo De Medici and a "servo" to Lucrezia Tornabuoni, starting from 1472 he joined the entourage of the *condottiero* Roberto Da Sanseverino (1418-Calliano, 1487), under whose patronage he spent most of his late years up to his death in the fall of 1482.

From a literary point of view, *Il Morgante* inaugurated the genre of chivalric epic in early modern Italy. Pulci appears to be the first known writer who designed a single-authored long poem in octaves, commissioned by an incumbent ruling household for encomiastic reasons and distributed through the printing industry. The genre of Carolingian epic had started in France in the 9th century CE and had enjoyed a great success among the

popular audience across Medieval Europe. Famous examples were the *chansons de gestes* in France (the most famous being the anonymous “Song of Roland”) and the *cantari* in Florence, the oral adaptations that were performed in Piazza San Martino for popular entertainment. Pulci’s epic built on that long-established tradition and turned it into a complex, whimsical, and rather unique poem, which offers an interesting and unprecedented mix of tragedy and comedy, reality and fiction, tearful episodes and tongue-in-cheek tone, past mythical settings and direct references to contemporary Florence. The poem was intended at the same time to entertain the broad popular audience and to praise the Medici household who commissioned it, by suggesting their genealogy with Carlo Magno after his alleged legendary visit to Florence in 774 CE. Pulci’s epic laid the foundation for his followers in this literary tradition (Matteo Maria Boiardo, Ludovico Ariosto, and Torquato Tasso), whose poems (*L’Innamoramento de Orlando/Orlando innamorato*, *Orlando furioso*, and *Gerusalemme liberate/Jersualem Delivered*) became the most influential examples in what appears to be Italy’s most iconic and bestselling genre after Dante’s Comedy, Italian chivalric epic.

Nevertheless, Luigi Pulci is a far less known figure as opposed to his followers in the epic genre and has been a largely marginalized voice both within the field of Italian literature studies and in the context of Renaissance studies. Among literary historians, Pulci has often received scant scholarly attention, being compressed between two eras of established masterpieces – with Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio on one side and the Renaissance and Baroque eras on the other. Unlike these great writers, critics have largely neglected Pulci’s *Morgante*, devoting much more attention to his followers Boiardo, Ariosto, and Tasso. The latest monographs available in English and in Italian date all

between four and two decades ago.¹ Scholars in Renaissance Studies across the disciplines have often focused on other Florentine figures, such as Lucrezia Tornabuoni, the Neo-Platonic thinker Marsilio Ficino, the writer Angelo Poliziano, the artist Sandro Botticelli, and so on and so forth. In terms of popular culture and contemporary reception, Pulci does not appear even in the extremely popular tv-series “The Medici: Master of Florence”, which came out in 2019 (now available on Netflix) and was intended to provide the general audience with a broad narrative of early modern Florence. In my opinion, Luigi Pulci has received scant scholarly attention because he was a problematic figure, both in his literary works and in his personal life. In his literary self-portrait *La Frottola* he wrote: “I’ ho mal quando i’ rido” (“I am suffering when I laugh”), suggesting that his irony is a sad one. While his audience is laughing Pulci is in pain, because he knows that they laugh exactly because of his otherness and non-normativity within the social and cultural context.

Only in recent years, Luigi Pulci has started arousing a specific scholarly interest, and some collaborative efforts have been made to improve our understanding of his works. In particular, a collective bilingual volume was published in 2017,² and in 2018 the first international conference ever on this author was organized in Modena, where one of the three earliest printed editions known of “Il Morgante” is preserved. The title of the conference was *Luigi Pulci, la Firenze laurenziana e il ‘Morgante’* and I was honored to

¹ Constance Jordan, *Pulci’s Morgante. Poetry and History in Fifteenth Century Florence* (Washington D.C., The Folger Shakespeare Library, London-Toronto, Associated University Presses, 1986); Mark Davie, *Half-serious rhymes: the narrative poetry of Luigi Pulci* (Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 1998); and Alessandro Polcri, *Luigi Pulci e la chimera. Studi sull’allegoria nel Morgante* (Firenze, Società editrice fiorentina, 2010).

² *Luigi Pulci in Renaissance Florence and Beyond. New Perspectives on His Poetry and Influence*, edited by James Coleman and Andrea Moudarres, Turnhout, Brepols, 2017.

contribute with a paper.³ Finally, in the course of 2022 I had the pleasure to organize, in teamwork with an international steering committee, the first complete *Lettura del Morgante*, a close reading canto by canto in which 28 international scholars convened in three academic venues to examine one canto each of Pulci's epic. In this semester at the Academy, I am completing the editing and publication of the proceedings of these global conferences in teamwork with three colleagues of mine (Maria Cristina Cabani, Luca Degl'Innocenti, Franca Strologo). My colleagues and I hope that this book (Florence, Olschki, 2025, 2 vols.) will provide a means to re-discover this often neglected and complex epic.

To stress the importance of Luigi Pulci suffice it to say that he was greatly admired by some remarkable authors in global literatures and among later artists. For instance, Miguel De Cervantes quoted the main protagonist of his poem (the giant "Morgante") at the very beginning of his *Quijote* ("Decía mucho bien del **gigante Morgante**, porque, con ser de aquella generación gigantea, que todos son soberbios y descomedidos, él solo era afable y bien criado", I, 1). Voltaire praised him in the preface to his *La Pucelle*, a satirical poem that is largely indebted with *Il Morgante*. Lord Byron translated the first canto of the poem in 1820 mimicking the Pulcean octaves in English, and took inspiration from this Italian metric in his *Don Juan*. In a previous version of his "Evgenij Onegin", the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin explicitly addressed the "Muse of Pulci" as a model for his writing ("О Муза Пульчи и Парини | На мой неблаго<да>рный труд | Взгляни с улы<бкою> о Муза").

³ The proceedings of this historic conference were later published into a volume: *Luigi Pulci, la Firenze laurenziana e il Morgante*, conference proceedings (Modena, Accademia Nazionale di Scienze Lettere e Arti, 18-19 January 2018), edited by Licia Beggi Miani and Maria Cristina Cabani, Modena, Accademia Nazionale di Scienze Lettere e Arti, 2019.

In addition, Pulci's epic sparked a great interest also in twentieth-century Italian authors and artists such as Luigi Pirandello, Alberto Savinio, and Giorgio Manganelli. These modernist intellectuals devoted great attention to this poem, published more than 4 centuries before their time, and they used its whimsical style as a benchmark for their literary experimentations. By adopting a trans-historical approach, in the past years I have written on the broad influence that Pulci's early-modern epic exerted onto these Avant-garde artists and writers, and I argued that "Il Morgante" was an asset in inspiring these inter-lingual and multi-medial authors to develop their experimental innovative poetics.

For my project at the Italian Academy, I decided to place Luigi Pulci and his works at the center of the picture rather than at its supposed margins. The result is a book project, titled *Luigi Pulci's Last Epic: Poetry, Magic and Religion in Early-Modern Florence*, which aims to reassess this long-forgotten author, by interpreting his works in the light of the current theoretical debate and of the most recent discoveries in archival and literary sources of the 15th-century. As a literary historian and critic, in my work I use the epistemological tools of textual analysis and literary exegesis to investigate this often forgotten protagonist of Italian literature and to better understand his multifaceted *Morgante*. At the same time, I also seek to establish an interdisciplinary dialogue with related epistemic fields in Renaissance studies (book history, history, art history, history of philosophy, history of religion) to try to explore how the Renaissance era was not just the cradle of Neo-Platonic innovations and Humanistic thought but also a home for resistances and deviances to this mainstream. My project aims to better situate this complex figure and his often-neglected literary works within the broader context of late fifteenth-century Florence, the so-called "laurentian age". My argument is that Pulci's *oeuvre* is crucial in helping us delineate a

more nuanced and articulated image of a well-known and long-studied period like Medicean Florence. In my opinion, the study of *Il Morgante* and its complex relationships with the cultural, political, philosophical, and religious context of its time can help us understand how early modernity was far from being simplistically the pacified age of rebirth as it was rehearsed by foundational but currently historicized frameworks (see at least Burckhardt).

In the following second part of my pre-paper, I am going to provide some further details and information on Luigi Pulci, his *Morgante*, and the historical context of late-Quattrocento Florence, as a background for the in-depth analysis on Luigi Pulci's late works that I will conduct in my seminar on Wednesday, February 19, 2025.

Context:

Luigi Pulci was born in Florence on August 15, 1432 from Iacopo di Francesco and Brigida De Bardi. The Pulcis were an ancient noble Florentine family who was in decline at that time because of some previous unpaid debts. In 1439, a few years after Luigi's birth, his father was appointed "podestà" of Colle Val d'Elsa, and in 1450 he was designated captain of the "Montagna Pistoiese", but he could not obtain this position because of the unpaid debts with the municipality. Current evidence suggests that we have only one image of Luigi Pulci during his lifetime. It can be seen in the fresco "Resurrection of the son of Theophilus" by Filippino Lippi, that is dated between 1482 and 1485 and is preserved within the Brancacci Chapel in the church of Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence (**figures 1-3**). Not only Luigi, but also his brothers Luca and Bernardo embarked on a literary career, so the Pulcis represent a rather unique example in literary history of an entire "family of poets". The eldest son, Luca, born a few months before Luigi, was by profession first a banker and

then an employee of the Florentine Mint, but he also wrote the “Pistole”, a collection of letters in tercets inspired by Ovid’s *Heroides*, and the “Driadeo”, a poem in octaves. His younger brother, Bernardo, born in 1438, also took up the profession of banker, married Antonia Tanini, and eventually became an administrator at the Florentine “Studio”. He authored a conspicuous literary output, which included a *canzoniere*, the “Bucoliche” (vulgarization in tercets of Virgilian eclogues), and a sacred play, the “Representation of Barlaam and Josafat”. Finally, Antonia Tanini, wife of Bernard and sister-in-law of Luigi, wrote religious plays and sacred dramas in the vernacular, and is today known as one of the first women in Italian literature to publish her texts in print (I have written on this remarkable figure elsewhere).

In his youth, Luigi Pulci worked in the household of the merchant Francesco di Matteo Castellani, who had a large library of books in vernacular, in Latin, and on metrics. We have evidence from Castellani’s records that Pulci borrowed some of these books, so it is plausible that this family supported his early forays into poetry. Around 1461, Pulci left the Castellanis and started to be part of the Medici household and to attend their *palazzo* in Via Larga as a protégé of Lucrezia Tornabuoni, mother of the Magnificent. Tornabuoni was a patroness of writers and artists as well as an author herself, since she wrote sacred dramas and religious narratives, like Antonia Tanini, Luigi’s sister-in-law. In those years, Tornabuoni was promoting a production in the vernacular in line with the values and ideals of the Florentine oligarchy, and Pulci soon became a protagonist of this cultural production. It was probably in 1461 that Pulci began the composition of the Carolingian epic *Il Morgante*, that Tornabuoni commissioned to him with the aim to perpetuate the legend of

Charlemagne as the founder of Florence, and exalting the Medicis as the ideal successors of the Christian emperor.

In 1461, when Pulci started collaborating with the Medici household, the young heir Lorenzo was only twelve years old, while Luigi was twenty-nine. Despite their age distance, from the very beginning the two forged an intense relationship of friendship and camaraderie, which lasted, across multiple vicissitudes, throughout their lives. A great testimony to this important companionship are forty-nine letters from Luigi to Lorenzo that are preserved in several autograph manuscripts kept mostly in Florentine libraries and one at the “The Morgan Library” here in New York City. The letters from Pulci to Lorenzo range from 1465 to 1484 and constitute the vast majority of the Pulcean letters currently known (fifty-four in all), while only one letter from the “signore” of Florence to his friend is preserved. This intense correspondence has only recently come under detailed scrutiny, and in June 2024 it was held at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa the first international conference on this epistolary. The title of the conference was *Le lettere di Luigi Pulci. Letteratura, storia e società nella Firenze del Quattrocento*, and in my contribution I argued how these letters are fundamental to frame and understand the relationship between the poet and his patron under many aspects, historical, sociological, cultural, and literary.

Nevertheless, the friendship between Lorenzo and Luigi was not exclusive, since it is well documented that the former established professional and personal relationships with many thinkers, writers, and artists. In fact, in those same years, the Magnificent formed his “brigata” of young men, to which he welcomed both poets – such as Bartolomeo Scala, Matteo Franco, and Benedetto Dei – and “canterini” (singing actors and improvisers) – such as Antonio di Guido, Baccio Ugolini, Bernardo Bellincioni, and Filippo Lapaccini. It is well

known that Lorenzo himself, with his son Piero, Angelo Poliziano, and Marsilio Ficino, developed a literary production, often in the form of poetic singing accompanied with musical instruments. This group of friends shared among them not only the polished and sophisticated poetry of the Humanistic tradition, but also comic and realistic texts, characterized by obscene language and lascivious themes such as the ones by Burchiello. This licentious “brigata” constituted a constant poetic stimulus for its members, and both Luigi Pulci and Lorenzo de’ Medici pursued their common poetic apprenticeship in that youthful and light-hearted environment.

Pulci’s affiliation to the Laurentian “brigata” occurred at the same time as his composition of “Il Morgante”, and exerted a decisive impact on the development of his whimsical ironic style. The first part of the poem is a mock-heroic chivalric epic that tells in a light-hearted and humorous style the erratic adventures of the paladin Orlando and his friend Morgante, a fierce giant that he converts to Christianity and then elects as his faithful squire. The epic offers many major specimens of Pulci’s ironic and irreverent style. This is evident for example in the famous episode of Margutte, cantos 18-19: Margutte is a half giant who meets the giant Morgante during his journeys and becomes his squire. As Pulci, also Margutte defies clear-cut definitions: he describes himself as the son of a Greek nun and of a Muslim priest, thus challenging from the very beginning cultural and religious binaries. When Morgante asks him what his religious beliefs are, Margutte replies with his own personal credo. This creed explicitly makes fun both of the Christian theology and of the Neo-Platonic beliefs fostered by Marsilio Ficino: Margutte states that his trinity is not the theological one but a gastronomic one, made up of butter, beer, and must; he re-elaborates the sacrament of Eucharist and the dogma of Resurrection in a blasphemous way

by stating that in order to achieve eternal life is crucial to drink good wine; he rewrites the prayer *Our Father* by stating that the first principle is not God but a “fegatello” (a “liver stew”), which does not need to be necessarily Trinitarian but can also be either single or double; the three cardinal virtues are not faith, hope, and charity but gluttony, dice, and arse. In another quotation, faith is described by Margutte as “solletico” (“tickling”), thus as something which humankind does not feel as the same and which – if it is felt – produces a laugh and nothing serious.

The years 1470s marked for Pulci a turning point both in his life and in his literary career. In 1469, his brother Luca bankrupted and was convicted to be incarcerated at the “Stinche” prison in Florence, where he died prematurely on April 29, 1470. As siblings, Luigi and Bernardo were also found guilty of Luca’s unpaid debts to the municipality and so were excluded from all public offices and banished from Florence. Luigi became a cloth merchant and engaged in various trades in Umbria and Marche to support the needs of the family. Beginning in 1471, with Lorenzo’s help, Pulci returned to Florence, and in 1472 he started belonging to the entourage of the *condottiero* Roberto da Sanseverino, for whom he carried out diplomatic missions to Milan, Verona, Venice, and northern Italy. Starting from 1473 the Medicis adhered more and more closely to the aesthetic and philosophy of Neoplatonism and let Marsilio Ficino become a hegemonic figure in Florentine culture. Not coincidentally, evidence suggests that it was in that very year that Lorenzo interrupted his comic writing to begin his Neo-Platonic “Comento” to his own sonnets.

Within this new moralized, Neo-Platonic, and Humanistic trend in Renaissance Florence, Pulci’s comic and irreverent style began to appear problematic in the eyes of the same Medicean establishment that had promoted it in the 1460s. In addition, between 1473

and 1475, Pulci's irreverent disbelief reached a climax with the writing of his three sonnets "of religious parody". Written to mock the discourses of the Platonic Academy and the religious hierarchies, they ended up sounding like a blasphemous parody of the most sacred dogmas of the Catholic faith. Pulci had always promoted his reputation as a non-believer and had scattered across his texts continuous self-declarations about his own heterodoxy, but these statements began appearing problematic at a moment in which Lorenzo was fully embracing the Ficinian "pia philosophia", completely antithetical to atheistic and materialist ideas. Moreover, Pulci's alignment with this new course of the "laurentian age" was made complicated also by two convictions for sodomy and homosexual acts that he received on December 16, 1473 and June 2, 1474. Another aspect of his lifestyle that became particularly controversial in those years was his dedication to magical practices. It is well documented that, in the 1460s, Pulci participated in magical rites, especially in the house of the Neroni, a noble Florentine family later fallen into disgrace. He conducted these magical activities probably with Lorenzo's approval, since he also had cultivated an interest in this field. However, this syncretism between magic and official religion became unacceptable in the years of Lorenzo's "conversion" to Ficinian theology. Pulci's deviant heterodoxy started arousing great scandal and he was viciously attacked by Marsilio Ficino and by the Medicean poet Matteo Franco. With the latter Pulci engaged in an aggressive poetical "tenzone" made up of 83 sonnets in which the irony and playfulness intrinsic to this mocking genre do not attenuate the intensity and gravity of the accusations.

In the aftermath of these major changes in Florentine culture and in his life, in his late years Pulci inaugurated a new phase in his literary production and pioneered an innovative style. In my project, I argue that his purpose for this shift was to redeem his work and

himself, and to better align with the new course of the laurentian age, without completely rejecting his own identity. The following works comprise this new phase of his literary career: the five *cantari* added to the first part of the poem between 1478 and 1482 (“Il Morgante” cantos 24-28); the “Confession” in terza rima, written in 1484; the new chivalric epic in octave “Ciriffo Calvaneo”, written in the 1480s.

Preview:

In my seminar on Wednesday, I will analyze the late Pulcean production (between 1478 and 1484) to investigate how he re-negotiated his style and re-fashioned his profile in response to the major changes in Florence’s history and to Lorenzo’s new cultural and political agenda. In particular, my presentation will discuss the following topics:

1. Florence’s political and social context after the “Pazzi conspiracy” (26 April 1478)
2. the stylistic, linguistic, and thematic innovations of Pulci’s second literary phase
3. the philological issues in the passage from the ‘first’ to the ‘second’ *Morgante*
4. the polemical attacks by Pulci against Marsilio Ficino and Girolamo Savonarola
5. Dante’s model in Pulci’s late writing
6. Pulci’s *Confessione*

Fig. 1





Fig. 2



Fig. 3