CHAPTER 4

Boys will be boys: the *putto pissatore* in European Renaissance art

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There is a whole class of statues in marble and statuettes in bronze showing little boys relieving themselves: initially they were invented in Italian Renaissance art in Florence, and then featured in Germany, France and the Low Countries, adhering to the Italian concept.

If they're big and in marble or stone they are usually to be found outdoors as focal points in gardens or courtyards and are therefore connected with watering, following the ancient Eastern idea of Paradise being neatly divided by four great rivers. The play and sound of water itself is a valuable part of the effect of any garden. If you walk into a country house, and come across one of these little boys you might think "What's this? OK, well, boys will be boys". This example is typical and one of the most beautiful: [Fig. 1] we'll return to it below.

Fig. 1: Donatello, winged *putto pissatore*, with a fish over his shoulders, bronze, c. 1440, Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

However, these statues are not just casual, nor are they meant to be rude. This is one thing that's very important, for – as we have discussed in this conference with other aspects of "poo" in real life – there was great age-old prudery, particularly in Britain. In the Regency and Victorian periods and probably even into the 1930s, anything to do with the bodily functions was regarded as literally obscene: one couldn't discuss it, let alone present it. This was not the case in the Renaissance, when people began re-modelling themselves on the ancient pagan world and particularly Rome (because the Italian language was derived from Latin and the Roman Catholic liturgy was pronounced in it, so that many "top" people spoke or read it).

There was in Roman statuary an image called the *puer mingens*, a boy making water. [Fig. 2] This has been little studied on account of various self-appointed moral keepers holding it to be "naughty" or "rude". Indeed – when I was drafting this paper – I myself was guilty, for I wrote that the boys were "*mis*behaving" and the "*mis*", of course, was the subconscious result of these old prejudices. In fact, the images record the primal innocence of the actual acts, both front and back, so to speak, in childhood, when children are confronted with basic biology.

Fig. 2: Neapolitan, 20th century bronze copy of a Pompeian *puer mingens*.

The image was also combined with a metaphor of the fertility of nature, for the flow of urine could be regarded as being equivalent to that of seminal fluid, the male secretion emitted through the same little vessel under other – more "grown-up" – circumstances. The *putto pissatore* is therefore a good augury for the productivity of whatever garden or client is paying for it – productivity in having a thriving family and a successful career. The necessity of water in the garden to make plants, animals – and humans! – flourish closed this circle.

Leon Battista Alberti – the famous architectural theorist, historian and practitioner was aware of this. In his influential book *De re aedificatoria* [About building] he pronounced on the choice of works of art for "suburban" villas or what might today be better described as country farmhouses. There statuary should be less serious-minded than was appropriate in town. Rather condescendingly, he pronounced: "I do not disapprove of humorous statues for the garden" (in Latin – "*statuas ridiculas per hortos non reprobo*"). So, in this context Alberti is setting aside certain moral or societal limits. What could be more ridiculous, indeed, than – amongst a parade of austere male classical statues, maybe

gods, virtues, or historical figures, and a bevy of lightly clad female beauties – coming across a nude child relieving itself?

Alongside Alberti's permissive pronouncement, another rationale for the subject of the *putto pissatore* is its deliberately "shocking" appearance in one of the oldest and most celebrated illustrated books, the *Hypnerotomachia Polyphili* [The night-time erotic struggle of Polyphilus], printed in Venice in 1499. [Fig. 3] In one illustration of this lengthy tome (an expensive, "coffee-table book" of its day, designed as reading for high-minded humanists), a Graeco-Roman *tempietto* frames a pair of elegant, classical nymphs holding up a little boy.

Fig. 3: Venetian, 1499, Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Polyphili*, engraving entitled GELOIASTOS in Greek. Niche with maidens holding up a *putto pissatore*.

In this long "wet dream", Sleep and Love do battle and so here is an image of a *putto pissatore* shamelessly held aloft in midair by two genteel, fully clad, maidens, each balancing one of his feet on one of their hands, while holding above his waist the bottom of his tunic so that he doesn't wet himself. A 17th century English translator phrased it charmingly as, "He holds his little instrument with both his hands and continues pissing into hotte water, fresh coole water". When in the dreamlike story Polyfilus approached this niche, the infant "came alive" and playfully redirected his flow straight into the hero's face, much to the amusement of all concerned, as is emphasised by the Greek word *GELOIASTOS*, "laughable", incised above the engraving.

Furthermore, the Renaissance image was not limited to sculpture but features on several pictorial "birth-trays" (*desco da parto*). In the event of a successful delivery this would be brought, heaped with luscious fresh fruit, to the newly delivered mother, as a comfort and reward after the struggle of childbirth – especially in the case of a boy-child (*maschio*) – and this emphasis on the "stronger sex" still survives in Italy today, with – to us – its incredibly male-chauvinist society. There was normally a classical scene on the front, often a battle concerning the forcible abduction of a bride – Helen of Troy among several other heroines of myth and history – with full attendant armies, but –

anachronistically – often bearing the coats of arms of the two families that were marrying, a fact which makes them important documents for historians. On the back there are often little boys or *putti*, sometimes peeing or nearly so, but in this painting a blue-eyed blonde boy is holding a child's windmill and is looking very philosophical. [Fig. 4]

Fig. 4: Florentine 15th century, Bartolommeo di Fruosino, *putto pissatore* seated on a rock with a toy windmill; painted wooden childbirth-tray, reverse, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

In another tray two little boys are getting up to a wonderful game. [Fig. 5] They are holding up seed-heads of the poppy, a flower which symbolises fertility because of the vast number of tiny seeds that it holds. One boy is proffering a head, while the other is carefully bathing it with his own water – giving it yet more life. Their gold and silver streams give a flow of fertility and good fortune: thus were natural phenomena interlocked in the contemporary mind.

As with so many other fields of sculptural endeavour in the early Renaissance, it is Donatello who invented the *putto pissatore* in three dimensions: but his compatriot, Nanni di Banco, a colleague of his youth, had already chosen the subject of a simple, "polite" *putto* to represent the whole art of figure-sculpture in an important context, the exterior of Or San Michele, Guildhall of Florence. [Fig. 6] Beneath a set of four historical

Fig. 5: Florentine 15th century, Apollonio di Giovanni, nude *putti pissatori* peeing into poppy-heads (= fertility), painted wooden childbirth-tray, reverse, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, N.C.

Fig. 6: Florentine early15th century, Nanni di Banco, sculptor at work, carving a nude *putto* in a block of marble. Or San Michele, Guildhall of Florence, niche of the Quattro Santi Coronati.

statues of an architect, stone masons and a sculptor from the past, Nanni depicted them hard at work in a relief: on the right the sculptor is hewing out a *putto* from a block of marble with a small pickaxe. This proves that in Donatello's earliest days, around 1400-1410, the subject was already beginning to make its mark and was turning up everywhere. Their inspiration came directly from the ancient world, partly because artists could copy *putto*-figures from Roman sarcophagi that were still lying around, near at hand, in Tuscany itself, in Pisa, Lucca and other ex-classical towns.

Fig. 7: Florentine late 15th century, Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Birth of the Virgin*, fresco, detail, part of a plaster frieze of joyful *putti* round her grand room. Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

Friezes of *putti* cast or modelled in plaster [*stucco*] running round rooms in houses are recorded among Donatello's earliest works and were still in fashion later in the century [Fig. 7] when, for instance, Domenico Ghirlandaio endowed the – imaginary and far from humble – house where the Virgin Mary was born with the greatest frieze, standing out physically in white, against a "Madonna-blue" background.

The attractive subject also lent itself to treatment in bronze, whose tensile strength permits the weight of a figure to stand on just its two feet safely and in an open pose, such as that of the boy making water. As soon as people acquired the technology, they would cast the bronze hollow to save valuable metal, for the copper in its alloy was mined as far abroad as Hungary and was imported overland via Germany, or by sea via the ports of the Low Countries, and so was precious. Such a structure was conducive to piping water from inside through various orifices, sometimes controlled by metal taps on the outside.

Turning now to Donatello's prototype *putto*, which is only 5 inches (12.7cm) high, a nice little ornament for a desktop: he is standing on a tortoise, with its feet spread out in four directions and the lower shell touching the surface on which it stood. [Fig. 8] So, maybe it served as a paperweight, to keep parchment flat, a natural material that notoriously curls up and flies away once you've stopped holding it open. It is the sort of useful plaything which could have stood on the desk of a Medici and provided a talking-point, for its unusual iconography would immediately have recalled to the humanist of the day the old Latin tag "Hasten slowly" [*festina lente*].

Next in order is a *putto***,** 15¾ inches (40 cm) high, in the Victoria and Albert Museum. [Fig. 9] The boy is also balancing on the back of a tortoise or turtle (as has become easier to recognise since recent conservation). But he also holds a fish across his shoulders, possibly intended as a dolphin, the mouth of which has been drilled out to spurt water – or even wine. It was only recently that it has been generally accepted as actually by Donatello, though I proposed this years ago (1991).

Fig. 8: Florentine mid-15th century, Donatello & Michelozzo, A *putto* on a tortoise, representing the Latin tag "Hasten slowly" [*festina lente*], partially gilt bronze paperweight, private collection.

There follows a less straightforward and taller example in which the boy is peeing while he's walking along and blowing at a child's toy windmill (early 20th century papers record its missing stem and sails). I found it on a winter's day in a dark country house in Cumbria many years ago. It was then black in colour, but I saw on the rubbed high points, not a bronze colour, but actual gold leaf. [Fig.10] When it turned out to be a wonderful, gilded artefact, I persuaded the Victoria and Albert Museum to have it cleaned and then – as a *quid pro quo* – to exhibit it on loan for a couple of years (with a view to an eventual purchase, which never – alas – took place and it passed instead to the Metropolitan Museum, New York). This boy also spouts water or wine from his mouth to make the windmill turn. Far too expensive for the ordinary bourgeois person, this is obviously a toy for the "seriously rich".

Such images rapidly became universal and acceptable ornaments in the domestic context: for example on a *lavabo* from a Renaissance palace in Florence. [Fig. 12] Hewn out of grey sandstone, on its flanks and above the basin below, two little boys function via brass taps, actually peeing directly into the basin. Like a good clean child, as in the Polifilo illustration, [Fig. 3] each is emitting real pure water, and holding his raiment neatly aside.

Fig. 9: Florentine early 15th century, Donatello, a winged *putto pissatore*, balancing on the back of a tortoise, with fish over his shoulders, bronze, Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

Fig. 10: Florentine mid-15th century, Donatello studio, a winged *spiritello pissatore*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

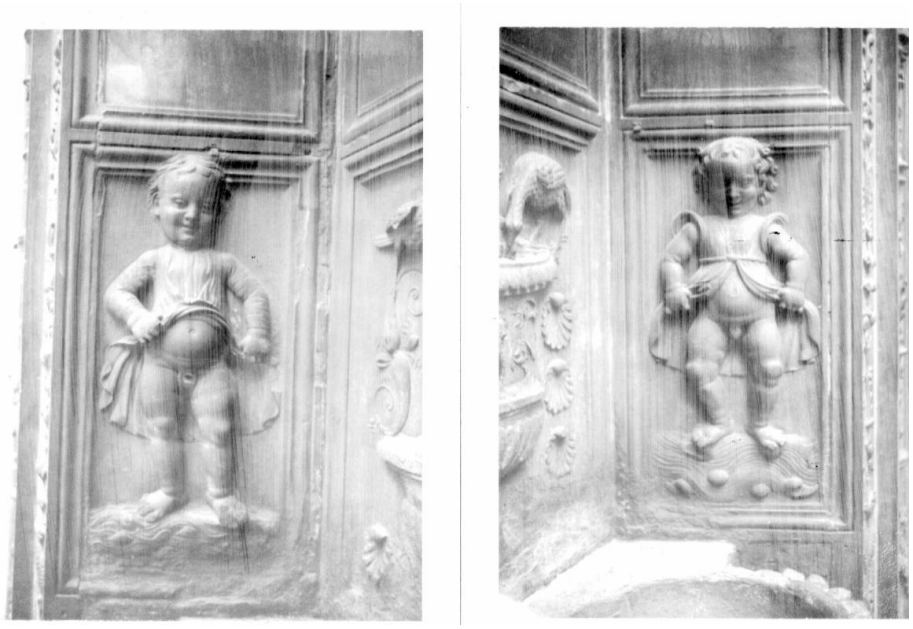

Fig. 12: Florentine late 15th century, Benedetto da Rovezzano, lavabo with joyful standing *putti pissatori*, from a private house in Florence, Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

More surprisingly, the *putto* was also allowed to range over water points on hallowed ground, for instance in the sacristy of Florence Cathedral – right within the mother church of the city – where the priests would wash their hands before and after the Holy Mass: "Cleanliness is next to godliness". [Fig.13] Elsewhere, Donatello's assistant Michelozzo carved a beautiful small marble where the boy has actually got a long robe on, almost like a choir boy. He then pulled his garment up, showing that he again is pierced for the flow of water. [Fig. 11]

A century later even Michelangelo contributed to the triumphal progress, with such a boy in a pen sketch, and then as a detail in a stippled presentation drawing. [Figs. 14-15] His admirers of the following generation followed suit: Pierino da Vinci in Orvieto and Rosso Fiorentino further afield in 1545, with his fictive marble reliefs round the coloured frescoes inside the Palace of Fontainebleau. [Fig. 17]

Fig. 13: Florentine early 15th century, Buggiano, lavabo with a pair of *putti pissatori* seated and tapped for water, marble, Sacristy, Florence Cathedral.

Fig. 11: Florentine early 15th century, Circle of Michelozzo, *putto pissatore*, marble, Musée Jacquemart-Andre, Paris, Cat. no. 863.

Fig. 14: Florentine mid-16th century, Michelangelo, *putto* peeing into a basin held by another boy, pen and ink preparatory sketch.

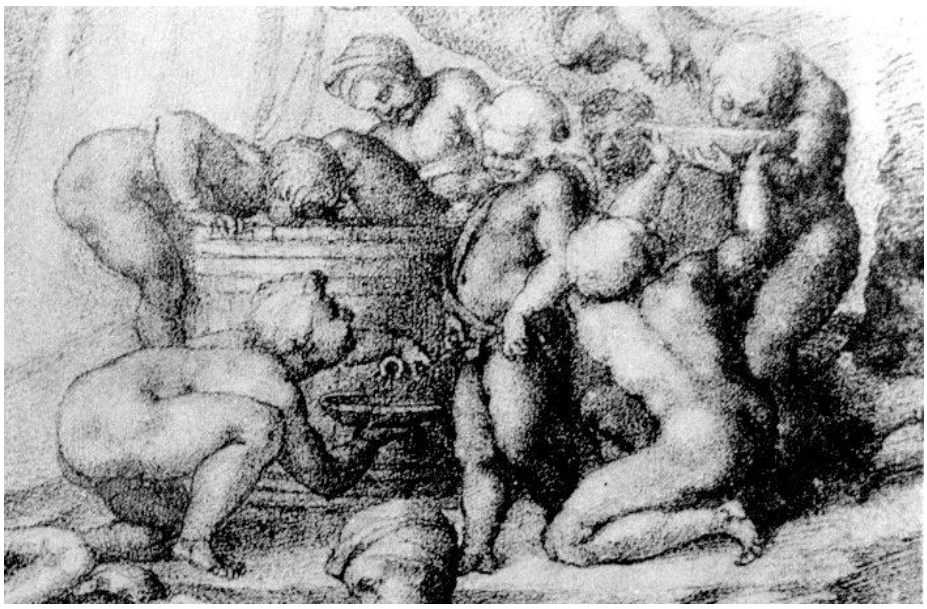

Fig. 15: Florentine mid-16th century, Michelangelo, *putto* peeing into a basin held by another boy, a presentation drawing for Tommaso Cavalieri, in stippled crayon.

Fig. 16: Pierino da Vinci, standing *putto pissatore* holding a mask as a fountain spout, marble, Museo Civico, Orvieto.

Fig. 17: Rosso Fiorentino, standing *putto pissatore*, stucco, Galerie Henri IV, Fontainebleau.

Postscript – The long afterlife abroad of the *putto pissatore* – a précis

To draw the story of this image to a close – half a century later and in a northern clime – we come to the most famous statuette of them all, known locally, and now universally, as the *Manneken Pis* and recognised as a symbol of Belgium. [Fig. 18] Far from being merely a vulgar, modern tourist attraction, as one might conclude from the subject and the myriad models in brass or stone sold as souvenirs at the local boutiques, the original statuette – albeit frequently replaced in up-dated styles after deterioration or vandalism – has been on display at the corner of Rue de l'Etuve near the marketplace of Brussels since 1452 (if not 1377). Its proper name is the "Fountain of Little Julian", so-called after a poor lost child, who – after a long, nerve-racking hunt – was discovered there relieving himself in a complete panic.

Fig. 18: Flemish early 17th century, Jerome Duquesnoy, the *Manneken-Pis*, Civic Museum, Brussels.

In 1619 the city magistrates called upon Jerôme Duquesnoy the Elder (c. 1570-1641/42, brother of the more celebrated François, who populated Baroque Rome with his fetching depictions of plump and intelligent *putti* in various roles) to re-carve it in stone. An early replacement, cast in bronze in 1630, is still preserved in the civic museum, while a period engraving depicts his location atop a column, enabling the fresh water that he is providing to cascade into the wooden buckets of the local housemaids below. His garments have been hung neatly on the wall behind like trophies. [Fig. 19]

Fig. 19: Flemish 18th century, The *Manneken-Pis* in situ in Brussels, engraving.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Sad to say, while the image of the *putto pissatore* endures through to the twentieth century, so too does the prudery. In the Open-Air Sculpture Museum that runs alongside the Seine in central Paris there once stood a very fine bronze statue made by the surrealist sculptor Jean-Robert Ipoustéguy. Entitled *Hydrorrhage* [a substantial flooding of water, presumably punning on "haemorrhage"], it consisted of a strangely distorted military howitzer with several barrels. Crouched within the wrap-around armoured shield of the gun was a featureless soldier. The powerfully distinguishing aspect of the piece when I first saw it was that the soldier was pissing up the barrel of the gun, as a fountain jet of water that fell into a surrounding pool. Later visits showed that the urinary flow had been switched off and the basin was dry, and on my latest visit I could not find the piece at all. I assume that it has been removed, in order not to offend and shock public opinion (which, of course, would have been the artist's intention, seeing that it was a protest against war).

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Fig. 20: *Hydrorrhage* (1975) – Jean-Robert Ipoustéguy – Musée de la Sculpture en Plein Air, Paris.

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