A CEMETERY *of their own*

by Judith Anne Testa

"It might make one in love with death, to think that one should be buried in so sweet a place …"
— Percy Bysshe Shelley

For visitors to Rome, a city famous throughout the world for its great art and architecture, a cemetery normally wouldn't be high on the list of places to visit. But this cemetery is unique. Known by various names during its 300-year history — the English Cemetery, the Protestant Cemetery, the Foreigners Cemetery, the Non-Catholic Cemetery — it's among the oldest burial grounds in continuous use anywhere in Europe, and it contains the graves of many notable people. But what really sets it apart from other cemeteries is its incomparable beauty.

The Non-Catholic Cemetery, as it's called today, commands a poetically perfect location, in the shadow of the Pyramid of Caius Cestius, itself an impressive Roman funerary monument of the first century B.C. Some 300 years after the construction of the pyramid, Emperor Aurelian (270-275 A.D.) had a new circuit of walls built around Rome, and he had the pyramid incorporated into that defensive system. Along with the pyramid, a portion of Aurelian's wall defines one boundary of the cemetery and connects the site with Rome's ancient past.

Although the roaring traffic of the busy Piazza di Porta San Paolo is just yards away, the enclosed cemetery is an oasis of quiet and repose. Small pathways meander among the monuments. Climbing vines, flowering plants, tall cypress trees, pines and oleander punctuate the carefully tended green lawns that separate the graves, which are close together in the oldest part of the site, farther apart in the newer portions. A few graves are elaborately adorned with sculpture; many others are simple flat stone tablets or standing slabs.

Modern visitors may wonder why Rome needs a cemetery reserved for non-Catholics. The short answer is that, today, it doesn't. In the not too distant past, however, this necessity existed due to the Catholic belief that there was no salvation outside the Catholic Church, and therefore the bodies of non-believers were not entitled to burial in the consecrated ground of Catholic cemeteries. Rome's Jewish community has always had its own burial ground, and until the rapid growth of Protestantism in the later 16th century, there had been no need in Rome for non-Catholic gentile burials. But once significant numbers of Protestants began appearing (and sometimes dying) in Rome, they had to be buried somewhere. In the time before refrigeration and rapid transport, repatriation of remains to the deceased person's native country was almost impossible. As a result, many Protestants were interred in a disreputable burial ground near the Muro Torto (Crooked Wall). A spot outside the northern portion of the city walls, it was intended for the corpses of criminals, prostitutes and "impenitents" considered unworthy of burial in a Catholic cemetery, even if they had been nominal Catholics. For those who didn't want such a nasty destination for their relative or friend, the only alternative was a discreet burial in a remote spot somewhere out in the campagna — what was then empty countryside that stretched for miles outside the walls of Rome.

Grave of Percy Bysshe Shelley

▲ **THE NON-CATHOLIC CEMETERY**
Nestled along an ancient Roman wall, it has served as a final resting place for Protestants, Greek Orthodox, Buddhists, Jews, agnostics and atheists alike for three centuries.

This situation changed in the early 1700s, when James Francis Edward Stuart — King James III, the Catholic "pretender" to the throne of England — went into exile and took refuge in Rome in 1718. Although a Catholic, James had numerous Protestants in his entourage,

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and Pope Clement XI perhaps felt benevolent toward Protestants dedicated to the goal of returning a Catholic king to the English throne. The pope decreed that Protestants who died in Rome could be buried on land near the Pyramid of Cestius. At that time, this spot was far outside the "abitato," or inhabited parts of Rome. It was an open area called the Meadows of the Roman People, where shepherds pastured their sheep and goats. By 1750, more than a dozen Protestants who had died in Rome were buried there, and this was the origin of what later was to become Rome's Non-Catholic Cemetery.

As the 18th Century continued, Rome became one of the most important destinations of The Grand Tour. Wealthy young English gentlemen would spend two, three or even four years traveling around Europe as a way of broadening their horizons by learning about art, architecture and culture. Inevitably, some of those young men died in Rome of illnesses or accidents, and since most were Protestants, it was natural for them to be buried in the same place that held the bodies of the Stuart king's Protestant courtiers.

Grave of John Keats

Angel of Grief, grave of Evelyn Story, wife of sculptor William Wetmore Story

Grave of Gregory Corso

Grave of Antonio Gramsci

Throughout the later 1700s and into the 1800s, the cemetery continued to be expanded, with papal approval, although also with certain limitations. As long as the popes ruled Rome, Protestants were not permitted to erect crosses over their gravestones, nor could they place inscriptions on the graves that asserted or implied salvation or eternal life for the deceased. The "no salvation outside the Catholic Church" rule remained in effect until 1870, when the new Kingdom of Italy wrested Rome from papal control. The secular government decreed religious freedom for all and ended official discrimination against non-Catholics.

Despite the preponderance of British nationals among the burials — so many that the site was sometimes called the English Cemetery — there are people of many different nationalities buried there, and despite the frequent use of the name Protestant Cemetery, by no means are all the graves of Protestants. There are also members of the various Orthodox churches, Buddhists, a few Jews and the occasional agnostic or atheist. And despite the current name — Non-Catholic Cemetery — there are some Catholic graves, usually those of close relatives or spouses of non-Catholics already interred there. With freedom of worship and burial assured after 1870, there are also graves of a number of native Italian Protestants.

By far the most famous graves in the cemetery are those of the great English Romantic poets John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley, both of whom died in Italy. When Keats expired of tuberculosis in Rome in 1821, he was buried in the Non-Catholic Cemetery in a grave that he'd stipulated was not to be identified with his name, but instead inscribed with the poignant words: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water." Unable to endure the idea of consigning Keats to such complete anonymity, his faithful friend Joseph Severn, who had nursed the poet through his final illness, expanded the inscription to read: "This Grave contains all that was mortal, of a Young English Poet, who on his Death Bed, in the Bitterness of his heart, at the Malicious Power of his enemies, desired these words to be Engraven on his Tomb Stone: Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Water." Keats' simple gravestone was erected in 1823, designed by Severn and the sculptor Joseph Gott.

In 1861, four decades after Keats' death, Severn returned to Rome as British Consul, and in the 1870s some admirers of Keats erected a memorial plaque near the poet's still-anonymous grave. It displays a profile portrait of the poet along with an inscription, the first letter of each of its five lines forming the name Keats. The group also renewed Keats' grave, raising the headstone, recutting the inscription and planting hedges and rosebushes around the burial place. On Feb. 21, 1876, the 55th anniversary of the poet's death, the renovated site was inaugurated by a group of English and American admirers of Keats, but Severn, who was 81 years old, declined to attend, believing he would be too emotionally overwhelmed if he were present. When Severn died in 1879 he was buried in a different part of the cemetery, far from Keats' grave, which caused such an uproar among poetry lovers that a campaign began to transfer his body to Keats' side. Three years later this was done, and now the two friends rest just a few feet from one another, their grave markers nearly identical.

In July of 1822, less than two years after Keats' death, Shelley drowned in a sailboat accident during a storm on the Bay of La Spezia. When his body washed ashore a week later, it was initially buried, then dug up, cremated on the same beach, and his ashes interred in the Non-Catholic Cemetery, all thanks to the efforts of Edward Trelawny. Initially, Shelley's remains had been placed in a newer part of the cemetery, but Trelawny, a wealthy, ambitious adventurer who barely knew Shelley (they'd met just five months before the poet's death), forcefully insisted on having the poet's ashes moved to a more prominent place in the older part of the cemetery, at the foot of one of the towers in the Aurelian wall. The inscription gives the poet's name and his birth and death dates, followed by the words "cor cordium' (heart of hearts) and lines from Shakespeare's "The Tempest": "Nothing of him that doth fade/ But doth suffer a sea-change/Into something rich and strange." Appropriate words for a man who died by drowning. And speaking of hearts, Trelawny, who was addicted to telling tall tales, insisted that Shelley's heart had not burnt, but that he'd retrieved it intact after the cremation fire and given it to Shelley's widow, Mary. Shelley's heart (or whatever it was) finally received a decent burial in 1889, almost 70 years after Shelley's death.

Well aware of Shelley's fame, Trelawny purchased a spot right next to Shelley's, to make sure his own name would be forever linked with that of the poet. Trelawny's plot stood empty and its grave-marker blank for almost 60 years, until Trelawny's death in 1881 at age 88. After some difficulties (his last mistress had failed to file the proper forms with the Italian authorities), Trelawny's ashes were brought to Rome and buried next to those of Shelley, and his long-blank gravestone given an inscription from one of Shelley's poems. Thus poetry's ultimate groupie had his fondest wish fulfilled.

Other than Keats and Shelley, there are few widely famous people interred in the Non-Catholic Cemetery, although readers may — depending on their interests — recognize some of their names. As an art historian, I noted the graves of John Addington Symonds (d. 1893), the English author of an influential book, "The Renaissance in Italy," and German-born Gisela Richter, a 20th-century authority on classical Greek art. A few film buffs might recognize the name of Belinda Lee, a now-forgotten English starlet of the 1950s who died in 1961 in a car crash. Her well-publicized affair with the married Prince Filippo Orsini caused such a huge scandal in Rome that Pope Pius XII removed Orsini from his honorary position in the Vatican and further declared that no member of the noble Orsini family would ever again be allowed to set foot in the Vatican. Belinda's place in the cemetery was arranged through her lover at the time of her death, Italian film-maker Gualtiero Iacopetti, who would soon become famous for one film: "Mondo Cane" (It's a Dog's Life), the big shocker of 1962. He's also buried in the cemetery, as are several generations of the Greek Orthodox Bulgari family, famous for luxury jewelry; the Italian Jewish physicist Bruno Pontecorvo and his co-religionist, actor Arnoldo Foà; the Beat poet Gregory Corso, an Italian-American Catholic; and Antonio Gramsci, founder of the Italian communist party. Gramsci owes his unlikely burial place to the efforts of his wife, who apparently didn't share his atheism. Visitors sometimes leave red flowers on Gramsci's grave.

In addition to the physical beauties of the site, there is another factor that moves the visitors who come to the Non-Catholic Cemetery: the poignant sight of the graves of so many foreigners buried so far from their native lands.

▼ TRAVEL TIPS ▼

WHERE IS IT LOCATED?

When you locate the Pyramid of Caius Cestius, you've found the cemetery, which is just behind it. The inconspicuous entrance is at number 4, on a little street called via Caio Cestio.

HOW DO WE GET THERE?

The No. 3 tram and numerous buses run along via Marmorata and viale Aventino, both of which end at the Piazza di Porta San Paolo, where the Pyramid of Caius Cestius is your landmark.

WHAT SHOULD WE LOOK FOR?

That depends on your interests. Poetry lovers will want to view the graves of the two great Romantic poets, Keats and Shelley. If your interests are political, you can enjoy the irony that Antonio Gramsci, founder of the Italian communist party and undoubtedly an atheist, is buried here. From the newer part of the cemetery you have a fine view of the Pyramid of Caius Cestius, unbothered by noise and traffic. Or you can simply enjoy wandering about in a lovely setting. There's a new visitors center in the cemetery that includes a gift shop and — miracolo! — a bathroom.

FURTHER READING

For those with a deeper interest in this site, I recommend Nicholas Stanley-Price's excellent book: "The Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome. Its History, Its People and Its Survival for 300 Years." The book, which contains far more information than it was possible for me to include in this article, is available at the cemetery gift shop, which also has postcards of the most interesting graves.

ALL ARE WELCOME TO ATTEND!

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WHAT'S *so funny?*

by Judith Anne Testa

Italian Renaissance humor is a huge subject. It can be found in novels, essays, treatises, dialogues, joke books, etiquette books, poems and plays of the period, as well as in works of visual art. It encompasses cerebral wit and verbal ingenuity based on erudition as well as silly tricks, elaborate pranks, coarse jokes and obscene raillery. There are snappy one-liners and long, involved stories. Some Renaissance humor is just as funny today as it was centuries ago, while other types no longer strike us as particularly amusing, and some — such as the merciless mockery of cripples and deformed people — we would find offensive. What scholar Paul Barolsky refers to as the "pervasive priapean impulses" of Renaissance humor means that a large portion of it is about sex.

Making our friends, or perhaps people we don't like all that much, the butt of jokes and pranks is still a common form of humor, and people in the Renaissance must have enjoyed it, since there are so many stories about such things. Artists, who are most often ingenious and creative types, were especially good at pranking people. Back in the late 1200s, according to a popular tale, the great painter Giotto, when he was still a young apprentice, played a trick on his teacher, Cimabue, by painting a fly on the nose of Jesus in one of Cimabue's unfinished paintings. The older artist, totally fooled, tried to chase the fly away. The story illustrates a point: that Giotto's painting style was far more realistic than that of any earlier artist. In the late 1400s Leonardo da Vinci, a notorious prankster, spent weeks patiently taming a large lizard. He then dipped the poor thing in quicksilver, so it trembled as it moved, attached a horn and beard, then loosed his creation on his freaked-out friends. A less amusing side of Leonardo's sense of humor are his drawings of deformed people. Although today they make viewers uncomfortable, they were most likely meant to be laughed at.

Mantegna, ceiling, Camera degli Sposi, Ducal Palace, Mantua

Examples of humor in Italian literature and poetry of the Renaissance are so numerous and of so many different types that it's possible to offer only a few brief examples. Another problem is that written humor often fails to survive the journey from one language, or one era, to another. A "gioco di parole" (pun) that had Renaissance Italians in stitches will fall flat or be incomprehensible when presented in English. And a joke that was a real knee-slapper in the Renaissance may not strike anyone as funny today, or — like Leonardo's caricatures — may seem offensive.

The master of one of the most popu-

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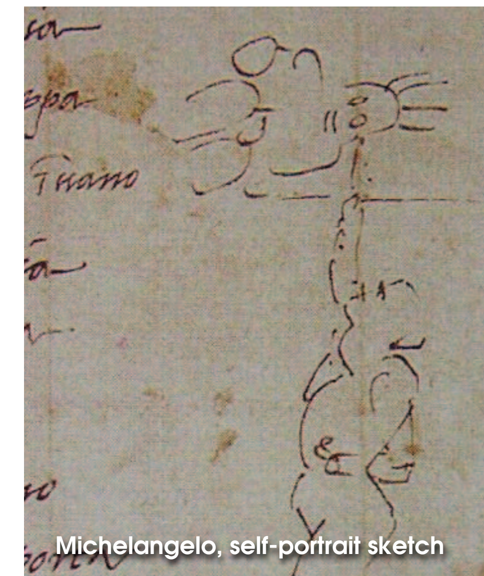

Michelangelo, self-portrait sketch

▲ RENAISSANCE HUMOR

Alternately witty and coarse, modern and dated, erudite and downright cruel, there was plenty of it to go around.

Botticelli, "Venus and Mars"

Parmegianino, detail of "Cupid Carving His Bow"

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lar forms of Renaissance humor, the "facetiae" — humorous or facetious stories — was Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459). He claims he wrote his "Liber Facetiarium" to refresh his own spirit and says that most of the stories come from the "Bugiale," or Lie Factory. That was a clerical old boys' club, a group of men affiliated with the papal court who would get together regularly in a Vatican back room to engage in banter and tell each other the latest jokes, witticisms, news and gossip. Although part of this group, Poggio wasn't a priest — he had a mistress and 14 illegitimate children. At age 56, he dumped his mistress, married a girl of 18 and fathered six more children. He justified this move in one of his dialogues, "On Marriage in Old Age," written in 1436. His stories seem tame today, but he depicts a society rife with carnal desires, religious skepticism, blasphemy and cynicism. All wives are assumed to be unfaithful, all husbands either wastrels or cuckolds, or both. The confessional is a trap ruinous to the virtue of women and pretty boys and a happy hunting ground for lustful priests. Convents and monasteries could pass as brothels. Most people, especially those of the lower classes, are hopelessly stupid and credulous. The only worthwhile people are those, like the members of the Lie Factory, who are capable of cleverness. Here are some examples of Poggio's humor:

"The worst men in the world live in Rome, and worse than the others are the priests, and the worst of the priests they make cardinals, and the worst of all the cardinals is made Pope."

"A certain tutor to a young man ended by eating and drinking away all his salary plus the wealth of his pupil. When an accounting was asked of him, and the magistrate bade him produce the ledger with his incomings and outgoings, the tutor pointed to his mouth and his arse, and said he had no other record of his incomings and outgoings than those."

"A young scholar, asked by one who wished to ridicule him whether his skin was as fair as his hair, replied: 'Sir, ask your daughter.'"

"A witty man, being asked what was the safest kind of ship, replied, 'The one that arrives in port.'"

Along with much high-minded, classically-inspired poetry, Lorenzo de' Medici (1449-92) also wrote humorously bawdy lyrics full of sexual double entendres, intended to be sung as Carnival songs (Fra Noi, October 2013), and satires that make fun of the same classic models that inspired his serious verse. His long, unfinished poem "I beoni" (The Drunkards), a catalog of Florence's most notorious drunks, is written in a coarse Tuscan dialect, but the poet uses the same rhyme scheme as Dante's revered "Divine Comedy." In "I beoni" Lorenzo portrays the painter Botticelli as both a heavy drinker and a glutton. Lorenzo notes the artist's chubbiness, as well as his tendency to drink too much, saying he returns from dinner parties "a botte pieno" (a full barrel) — in Italian that's a play on the artist's nickname, Botticelli, which means "little barrels." Ho hum. When a joke has to be explained, it loses most of its impact.

The 1500s, the era of the High Renaissance that produced some of Italy's most glorious works of art, also produced some of its raunchiest works of humor. The undisputed king of such material was Pietro Aretino (1492-1556), a well-known literary figure, libertine, blackmailer and man-about-town who could rightly be called a career pornographer. Much of what he wrote is fairly funny, but it isn't fit to be quoted even briefly here. A reading today of his XXX-rated "Sonetti lussuriosi" (Lustful Sonnets) is more likely to cause smirks than outright laughter. The poems were written to accompany Giulio Romano's sexually explicit series of drawings, engraved by Marcantonio Raimondi under the title "I seidici modi" (The Sixteen [sexual] Positions). This sonnet-print combo caused such outrage that Pope Clement VII had the originals burned, and everybody involved had to temporarily flee Rome.

Aretino never tired of writing about prostitutes, and sometimes he can be quite clever. In his "Dialogues," a prostitute named Nanna watches some sexual frolics in a convent, and she describes the perfect backside of one young nun as a "culiseo" — a pun combining "culo" (ass) and "colosseo" (Colosseum). A late 16th-century Neapolitan writer named Giambattista Basile also enjoyed combining sex with works of art. He wrote a story involving a scheme to test whether a particular girl disguised as a man is actually male or female. Basile, employing language worthy of Freud, wonders whether the individual in question is the Circus Maximus or the Column of Trajan.

Artists, as noted above, are especially creative spirits who sometimes injected humor into their works, often (one suspects) without consulting the patron. Paolo Uccello (1397-1475) engaged in what might be called "perspective humor." His first version of a fresco in a Florence cathedral that shows the mercenary general John Hawkwood on horseback, portrayed the horse from below, in such a way that the animal's gigantic genitals dominated the image. The outraged patrons refused to pay Uccello until he repainted the horse from a less suggestive angle. In the same artist's "Battle of San Romano" — a series of three large paintings — we see horses, armored knights and their weapons falling to the ground precisely along the lines of the perspective grid. Even though the San Romano paintings have serious military and political content, they also have the humorous charm of a peculiar puppet show in which the victims die from an overdose of perspective.

An even more accomplished master of perspective illusion is Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506), a major northern Italian artist active for many years at the court of Mantua. The most renowned example of Mantegna's wit occurs in a room in Mantua's Ducal Palace. The artist painted architecture and curtains that seem to be extensions of the room itself, but the most extraordinary perspective joke is on the ceiling, which appears to have a hole in it and be open to

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the sky. A large potted plant, extended out precariously on a stick, hovers over the spectators below, threatening at any moment to tip over. Smiling women look down, and some playful little cherubs cavort about, including a squalling one who has gotten his head caught in the balustrade and another who regards whatever is happening below with single-minded fascination. A document from 1474 indicates the room was originally a bedroom, a place where the family line might be perpetuated, hence its traditional name: Camera degli sposi, or room of the newlyweds. The joke, of course, is that the noble newlyweds occupying this bedroom would be observed in their bed by the entire ducal family (painted on the walls) as well as by smirking servants, laughing ladies, cherubs, a tipsy plant and a peacock, all peering down on them from above.

Botticelli's painting, "Venus and Mars," is one of the most charming and witty versions of a popular Renaissance theme. The artist presents the goddess of love and the god of war reclining out of doors, surrounded by playful baby satyrs. Some scholars have emphasized classical, moral and astrological interpretations of the work, and others have suggested it symbolizes the triumph of love over war. But such explanations ignore the playful sexuality and erotic innuendo of the work. One scholar claims that Venus has triumphed by "putting Mars to sleep," vanquishing him "by the power of her beauty." Really? The nudity and exhausted slumber of Mars suggest he's been vanquished by something more than mere beauty.

Botticelli has isolated his couple by showing them lying around out in the bushes somewhere, and he has surrounded Mars with satyrs — known for their sexual appetites. Both offer none too subtle clues about what has just happened here. The utter relaxation of Mars' body evokes not only sleep but the pleasurable lassitude that follows sexual relations. Mars doesn't even hear the trumpet one of the satyrs is blowing directly into his ear! The position of Mars' right hand, with his index finger curled across his thigh is also suggestive of sexual exhaustion, as is his useless lance the little satyrs are playing with. Furthermore, Venus is hardly demure — her wide-awake gaze is one of conquest, and her softly draped gown suggests her sensuous body beneath. In short, Botticelli has depicted the mighty god of war utterly worn out by the energetic love-making of Venus.

Michelangelo, who had a sardonic sense of humor, was capable of mocking his own serious work. While painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling (1508-12) he sent his friend Giovanni da Pistoia a sonnet he'd composed about his discomforts and difficulties with that project. The sonnet is accompanied by a sketch of himself. He's not shown painting one of those monumental and noble figures that cover the ceiling, but a shapeless schmoo with big circles for eyes and four spiky hairs sticking out of its head. In his "Last Judgment," painted on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel around 1540, he portrayed himself as a flayed skin, implying that he was reduced to that condition by the scurrilous insinuations of Pietro Aretino, who had suggested that the nudity of the figures in the fresco was somehow related to the artist's passion for beautiful boys.

Sometimes Renaissance humor can become a bit sadistic, as in Parmigianino's, "Cupid Carving His Bow." In the background one little cherub twists the arm of another, who reacts with pain, while his tormentor aims a snarky smile at us. The work illustrates a traditional theme: Cupid is the god of love, and the presence of pain would undoubtedly have brought to mind for a 16th-century viewer the idea that love often involves suffering, an image found in countless sonnets. The similarity of the words "amore" (love) and "amaro" (bitter) was also a contemporary commonplace. With great originality, Parmigianino carries this a step further: One putto is scorching the hand of the other by holding it against Cupid's leg. Touch the god of love at your peril, the artist warns us — he's literally burning-hot.

Architecture isn't often used as a vehicle for humor, but in the hands of the clever Giulio Romano, buildings can also make jokes about themselves. In Giulio's design for the facade facing the courtyard of the Palazzo del Te in Mantua, the triglyphs (small panels incised with three vertical lines) appear to be falling out of the frieze. If this were actually happening, the facade would crumble.

Inside, in the Hall of the Giants, Giulio's illusionistic paintings and architecture blend together in an amazing stew of chaos and collapse. The entire room — walls, ceiling and all — seems to be tumbling down on the viewer as the mythic giants are crushed by thunderbolts hurled by Jupiter from Mount Olympus. In the Room of Cupid and Psyche, Giulio's frescos combine elegant, sensuous images with coarse, comic details. In the vault of the room, near the ceiling, Giulio depicts a nude female figure pouring water from a pitcher as if onto the spectators below. Next to her is a favorite comical Renaissance image, a "putto pisciatore" (urinating child), who is also watering the viewers. Many of the frescoes in the same room, illustrating the erotic legend of Cupid and Psyche, contain images of enthusiastically copulating gods and goddesses. They no doubt reflect the favorite pastime of Mantua's libertine duke, Federigo Gonzaga, who was the model for the lecherous duke in Verdi's "Rigoletto." The paintings must have given the duke and his guests many hours of enjoyment, and they're still good for a laugh today.

Giulio Romano, "Fall of the Giants," Palazzo del Te, Mantua

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