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IULIA FARNESIA

Letters from a soul



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On the cover: detail "Rape of Proserpina" (1621-1622) Gian Lorenzo Bernini
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A little history

Giulia Farnese, known to most as Giulia *La Bella*, is a character that even today, almost five centuries after her death, arouses interest and fascination.

Giulia was born in Capodimonte in 1475 to Pierluigi Farnese and Giovannella Caetani, the youngest of three children.

For most of her youth she lived in the Rocca di Capodimonte, and received her education at the College of San Sisto in Rome.

Her father died in 1487 and, thus, the ambitious Giovannella continued to weave the plot of the life of the children for the better glory of the House of Farnese: Angelo, the firstborn, had already married Lella Orsini di Pitigliano; Gerolama had been given in marriage to a prominent Florentine (a certain Puccio Pucci).

Once the first two were settled, Giovannella was left with the future of her last two children, Alessandro and Giulia, and perhaps the meeting with Adriana De Mila, wife of the late Ludovico Orsini Migliorati, opened the doors to the craziest of plans.

Since their two husbands, both deceased, had stipulated a marriage contract years before that pledged their respective children, Giulia and Orsino, the two women intended to bring it to a successful conclusion.

Indeed, they thought they would go beyond the convenience of this union, and went as far imagining that Alessandro, the Farnese family's favorite, could ascend to the papal throne.

The crazy plan hatched by Caetani and De Mila envisaged two ingredients for its success: Giulia's beauty and the lasciviousness of Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia, De Mila's cousin.

And so it was that Giulia, educated to obedience and enamoured of her family, was married to Orsino Orsini (known as *Monoculus Orsinum*) and "sold" to the licentious Cardinal Borgia, who took her as a child and made her a woman.

The chronicles of the time often describe an unscrupulous Giulia, a shameless and brazen Giulia in the eyes of the people, who called her *Venere Papale* or even *Sponsa Christi*.

Orsino, a hapless boy with a face battered by acne and missing one eye from an early age after a hunting accident, ended up accepting this paradoxical situation thanks to the pressure from his mother. She, leveraging on his insecure character, also found a way to expand the Orsini family's estate; it often happened, in fact, that Borgia made "gifts" to Orsino so that the young man let his wife Giulia reside in Rome on a permanent basis and not with him at the Castle of Bassanello (currently Vasanello).

In 1493, at the age of only twenty-five and never having even been ordained a priest, the undisciplined Alessandro Farnese was appointed cardinal by Pope Borgia, and from there his ecclesiastical career was in continuous ascent, under the protection of the Spaniard, who had become Pope Alessandro VI the previous year.

Giulia gave birth to Laura, her only daughter, that the historians of the time maliciously insinuated was not Orsino's daughter, but the pontiff's.

There was never a lie so great.

The following year, when Giulia went to Capodimonte for the death of her brother Angelo, she hesitated in the face of the possibility of returning to Rome, and this indecision sent the jealous Rodrigo Borgia into a rage: in one of the fiery missives that the Pope wrote to Giulia threatening to excommunicate her, he denied the paternity of little Laura, and ordered her not to go to Bassanello otherwise she would return "*Impregnated*" (pregnant) "*by that orbo (transl. note one-eyed)*" (Orsino).

Giulia had become a woman, and was increasingly intolerant of the situation in which she was living, but she also respected the commitments made with her family, to facilitate the ecclesiastical career of her brother Alessandro.

So it was that, in 1498, the descent of the French through Italy to reach the Kingdom of Naples, which they claimed as theirs, gave Giulia the opportunity to take control of her life and leave the toxic court life, and all the duplicity. And it was at that point that Giulia, freeing herself from the

oppressive cloak that the family had put on her shoulders imposing choices on her that perhaps she would never have made, opened her wings to be reborn from her ashes like the Arab Phoenix. She could have easily clung to the skirts of another cardinal, she lacked neither the art nor the knowledge to do so, but free from family obligations she chose for herself the life she preferred. She returned to the Castle of Bassanello, with her small daughter Laura, and was reunited with her husband Orsino.

Far from the papal court, Giulia and Orsino discovered each other, and their souls tormented by the choices of others seemed to find redemption, even if ephemeral: Orsino went as far as bestowing on her the Castle and the fief of Carbognano, making her lady of that place without third party intermediaries, effectively giving her the dignity of *domina* {transl. note mistress or ruler} .

In the summer of 1500, the ill-fated *Monoculus* died when he was crushed by the collapse of the ceiling of the bedroom where he was sleeping: this tragic event too was read by the historians of the time, and by the usual prigs, as a sign that *La Bella* did not sleep with her husband, and that therefore there was no conjugal idyll.

More infamy for Giulia.

Pain upon pain.

Laura had now reached marriageable age, and Giulia, making use of the acquaintances developed in the years spent at the papal court, stipulated a marriage contract for her daughter with the powerful family of Nicola Franciotti Della Rovere, favorite nephew of Pope Giulio II.

Satisfied with that excellent union, she retired to Carbognano, and it was there that Giulia found her true self.

It was at that point that the metamorphosis of this person took shape: from *femina* contended by the cravings of shameless men, she took the first step and transformed herself into *Mater* with the birth of her daughter Laura, and later terminated her existence as *Domina*. Her second husband, Giovanni Capece Bozzuto, a man she wanted and married for love, will never be the lord of the Castle of Carbognano, but instead will become the husband of "her ladyship", of the *domina*.

Giulia administered her assets with expertise and made the meager economy of that part of Tusciana flourish with the firm pulse of a capable man. And with that she was entrusted with a much more important task: that of protecting and giving a real, autonomous future to the women who served her, not a transition from the shadow of a father to that of a husband.

Guide to the main characters

It often happens, when you commence the first pages of a novel, that you cannot get your head around the countless characters, and you lose the enjoyment of reading.

In this story, where we delve into the meanders of Renaissance society, it may be difficult for the reader to make head or tail of the many names and kinships that link one character to another.

So I took the liberty of drawing up this small guide to the main characters who, in addition to the protagonist, have a more or less important part in the events narrated.

It can be read or consulted at will as you begin to read this story.

Orsino Orsini Migliorati, aka Monocolus (1473-1500): only child of Ludovico Orsini Migliorati lord of Bassanello (Vasanello – Viterbo in Italy) and Adriana de Mila, and first husband of Giulia Farnese.

Giovanni Maria Capece Bozzuto (?-1517): Neapolitan nobleman, married Giulia (widow of Orsino Orsini) in 1506; the two met in 1496, on the occasion of the arrival of Sancha of Aragon in Rome.

Adriana de Mila (1434-1502): daughter of Perot de Mila, son of Catalina Borgia, sister of Pope Callisto III and sister-in-law of Jofré, father of Rodrigo Borgia (later Pope Alessandro VI), and therefore his second cousin. Wife of Ludovico Orsini, lord of Bassanello (Vasanello – VT) and mother of Orsino Orsini.

Giovannella Caetani (1440-?): mother of Giulia Farnese and her three brothers (Alessandro, Angelo and Geronima), daughter of Onorato Caetani and descendant of Pope Bonifacio VIII.

Angelo Farnese (1465-1494): eldest son of Pierluigi Farnese and Giovannella Caetani; Giulia's brother, lord of Canino and Montalto, married to Lella Orsini.

Alessandro Farnese (1468-1549): Giulia Farnese's brother. In 1534 he ascended to the papal throne with the name of Pope Paolo III until his death. In 1540, he authorized the foundation of the Society of Jesus upon the proposal of Ignatius of Loyola and in 1545 he convened the Council of Trent.

Gerolama Farnese (1464-1504): daughter of Pierluigi Farnese and Giulia's sister. She married Puccio Pucci, with whom she had a daughter, Isabella. Widowed in 1494, in 1495 she married Count Giuliano dell'Anguillara. She was murdered by her stepson.

Isabella of Anguillara (1497-1564): daughter of Giuliano dell'Anguillara and Gerolama Farnese (sister of Giulia Farnese); after the murder of her

mother she was raised by Giulia. In 1518, she married Galeazzo Farnese of the Latera branch.

Laura Orsini (1492-1530): only daughter of Giulia Farnese and her husband Orsino Orsini. Married to Nicola Franciotti della Rovere, to whom she bore three children: Giulio, Elena and Lavinia.

Lella Orsini (?-1494): daughter of Niccolò, Count of Pitigliano, married Angelo Farnese in 1488; at his death, she withdrew to the cloistered life in the Florentine monastery of the Murate.

Lucrezia Borgia (1480-1519): illegitimate third daughter of Pope Alessandro VI (born Rodrigo Borgia) and Vannozza Cattanei. Wife of Giovanni Sforza, Alfonso d'Aragona, and Alfonso d'Este.

Cesare Borgia (1475-1507): son of Rodrigo Borgia (Pope Alessandro VI) and Vannozza Cattanei, he was bishop, archbishop and cardinal-deacon. In 1493, he obtained dispensation from his vows, and in 1498 he was appointed Duke of Valentinois by the King of France.

Camilla Lucrezia Borgia (1502-1573): natural daughter of Cesare Borgia and probably of Drusilla, lady-in-waiting to Lucrezia Borgia, legitimized in 1509.

She took her vows and in 1545 became abbess of the convent of San Bernardino in Ferrara.

Pietro Bembo (1470-1547): Italian cardinal, writer, grammarian, poet and humanist.

The places of the novel



The return home

The boat had just left the shores of the island, pitching. With its regal pace it seemed to bruise the motionless surface of the body of water, leaving behind, as it passed, ripples like liquid shivers that spread and then dissolved.

The harsh November air crept between the layers of the heavy robes making Giulia shiver, the hood lowered over the pale face. Everything seemed so unreal to her, everything so incredible that it was like a dream, a nightmare really, but in her heart she was happy to have at least been able to fulfill her beloved husband's last wish, and take his mortal remains to the beloved island. The *tramontana* wind that was lashing the waters of the lake furiously the day before, when she had arrived from Carbognano with her husband's coffin, seemed to have miraculously calmed.

* * *

Giovanni Capece Bozzuto had died a few days beforehand and Giulia, in execution and out of respect for the wishes of her beloved, had immediately sent a messenger to her brother, Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, with the request to be able to bury Giovanni on the Isola Bisentina, in the family sacarium. But Alessandro's reply had not arrived: perhaps, Giulia thought, her brother was too busy weaving the deep plot around the papal throne to respond to such a silly question.

So that morning, the *domina* of the Castle of Carbognano had quickly organized the departure for Capodimonte to transport her husband's coffin to his last abode.

Onofria and Berna, sitting opposite her in the carriage, hadn't said a word since they left. The elderly nurse and the young handmaid were watching their lady as she looked out at the passing countryside from the small

narrow window of the passenger compartment: only the *domina's* regular breathing broke the perfect silence of those moments.

It was already dark when they arrived in Capodimonte, in front of the fortress that overlooked the lake. And while for Onofria it was a return home, for Berna it was the first time she was hearing the lake roar with the *tramontana*. The girl shivered clutching her shawl and, as soon as she got out of the carriage in the courtyard of the fortress, sought shelter under the portico that ran along the square perimeter of the *cavedio*¹. Onofria lifted her nose to the sky, and inhaled deeply.

Giulia, resolute, gave quick instructions to the men who had carried her husband's coffin.

"Put him in one of the rooms on the ground floor and watch over him all night."

She caressed the coffin with her gloved hand before heading up the stairs.

Onofria and Berna went behind her, as if following a script already written.

In the morning, while preparations for the journey were underway in the rooms of the Rocca di Carbognano, the faithful Onofria had gone down to the stables and had sent a vanguard to the Rocca di Capodimonte, urging the men to be quick, very quick.

When the horses arrived in the palace courtyard they were frothing with fatigue, finally free of the weight of the men. The servants at the fortress thus learned of the *domina's* arrival and the cold rooms began to fill with noises, with life: flames crackled in the fireplaces, and clean sheets were laid out in the beds that the lady and her handmaids would occupy.

The faithful nurse had given orders to prepare the room that Giulia occupied as a girl, in that palace where she had been born and raised.

The old woman was well aware that Giulia, as the lady of the fortress, should have stayed in the patronal chamber where her parents had lived for years. But Onofria knew all too well that her *Iulia* was touched deep down by the bereavement that had struck her in recent days, and she did not want the ghosts of her past life to keep her awake any more than she would have been in any case.

She smiled when he saw her lady head unhesitatingly towards her room, stop briefly on the threshold and then enter and close the door behind her.

* * *

Giulia found herself in her childhood room, the one whose windows looked out towards her beloved Bisentina.

So many memories...

She took off her cloak, resting it on the bed, and with slow steps went to the window from which only the deep darkness of the night could be seen: it was as if she were looking out on her soul, laid bare and whipped by the icy wind.

She remained like that for a few moments, her gaze lost in space, before sitting down at the toilette and letting out a long sigh.

Onofria knocked gently on the door and, hearing no answer, looked inside. Seeing *Iulia* sitting there, with an almost bewildered air, she went softly towards her.

"Madonna *Iulia*, shall I help you prepare for the night?" she whispered to her.

Only then did the woman turn around and nod, looking at the elderly nurse. Usually now, that task was entrusted to Berna, but Onofria wanted to be close to her lady, on that evening full of emotions and memories.

"Onofria, I thought this day would never come, but instead here we are... I am a widow again..."

Giulia's eyes became veiled with tears: all her life she had rarely been able to show the emotions that filled her breast, but that evening, in that place, she could not stop herself.

Those walls that had seen her come into the world and grow up conveyed conflicting sensations to her, of love and repulsion: she felt lost without her beloved Giovanni. Tomorrow would be another day, but that evening the emotions overwhelmed her in waves, relentlessly.

"To be sitting here, in this room, in this place, without all the people who have been part of my life, my brothers and sisters, my mother and father, all absent, truly seems unreal."

Onofria's able hands had started to fumble with the braids and pins that held Giulia's hair in place. That touch took her back to her youth, to the carefree hours spent having her hair styled by the patient nurse, to the flirtatious chatter, and to the naivety of her soul which still did not know the intrigues and compromises that this vile world requires.

"My child, this is life, meetings and farewells, arrivals and departures, in which the only certain appointment is death."

"And my brother Alessandro, then, who did not even deign to respond to my letter... as if I really needed his permission to have my husband buried on the Bisentina... "

The buttons slipped out of the buttonholes one by one, under the knowing old hands of Onofria: how many times had she made that gesture...

"Don't be upset, *Iulia*, your brother will be busy with his commitments, he must certainly not have had time to read your letter..."

The dress slipped to the ground, and the woman stiffened instantly. That sudden change in temperature made her gasp, and she quickly got into the cold nightgown that the old woman was handing her.

"It may be as you say, Onofria, but in any case I'm starting to be tired of all these formalisms, of all these pretences behind which abysmal voids are hidden."

A gust of wind stronger than the others hit the shutters making them vibrate alarmingly. Giulia froze, and then resumed the thread of what she was saying, squeezing the nurse's hand gently between hers.

"Only you remain, Onofria, of the old days. Just you and a horde of memories that are crowding my mind. Let's hope that this *tramontana* eases tomorrow."

And as she said that, she slipped under the blankets where Onofria had put a bedwarmer full of embers. The warm sheets wrapped her in a welcoming and comforting embrace, into which she abandoned herself.

Giulia delighted in the care that her nurse had been devoting to her for a lifetime. Tucking the blankets around her, the woman remembered her as a child inside those same walls and, smiling, withdrew in silence.

* * *

Onofria would gladly have let Berna accompany Giulia to the Bisentina, too many memories bound her to that place, but her ladyship was adamant: she wanted both women to go with her to give the last farewell to her beloved Giovanni.

The local fishermen had made two boats available to her ladyship: the coffin and the two men who would then be carrying it on their shoulders would travel in one, the three women would be in the other.

Clutching the plank where she sat with her nails, Berna was trembling from the cold and the unstable equilibrium she felt she was in: it was the first time she had left the mainland to venture out on a body of water. She looked at her lady, standing up straight at the bow as she watched the island come nearer with each stroke of the oar. The man in command of the boat, his face baked by the sun despite the cold season, sank the wooden shaft into the waters with force, cleaving them with splashes of icy water.

A thousand memories thronged the widow's mind: she thought back to the times she had found refuge on the island, when the motions of her soul were too powerful to control, she thought back to the past and the wreck it had made of the wills and desires of others.

She thought of Giovanni and the respect he had always had for her. She reflected on herself and her path and, absorbed by these thoughts, did not realize that the boat had arrived between the two majestic *farnie*² which marked the landing place on the island.

After securing the oars on board, the fisherman who had brought them to the island leapt onto the short walkway where they had docked, making the small boat dance alarmingly.

Berna sank her nails even further into the wooden plank as the man put out his dry calloused hand to Giulia, helping her to get off, followed by Onofria and Berna.

The *domina* took a few steps towards the depths of the island and caught a glimpse of Berna clawing the arm of the poor man and regaining the mainland, shaken by the crossing. Berna was still clinging to Onofria to

walk the last few meters of the jetty, when the other boat arrived with a rustling of water.

A sound of ropes being thrown onto the wood of the jetty made Giulia turn, arousing her from who knows what thoughts: the coffin had been tied with ropes to hoist it onto the dock. Instinctively she raised one hand in the direction of the men of Carbognano, as if asking to respect her husband, but immediately lowered it.

The fisherman who had ferried the women joined the other men too, and all together they lifted the wooden coffin and rested it on their shoulders.

Pushing Berna's hands away, Onofria went to them and with a single gesture placed a black velvet cloth on the coffin, arranging it with her frozen fingers as the biting morning breeze made it move a little.

The funeral procession set off on the grass covered with dew, which quickly soaked the black robes the three women were wearing. The green of the thick vegetation had not yet paled at the first rigors of the cold season, and a few colorful corollas were resisting courageously among the neat hedges. As if going to meet the small funeral procession, the walls of the cloister came closer at every step, ready to defend the monastery and the church from earthly temptations, symbolic bulwark against evil.

Giulia knew that that wall represented a border between her family and their guests and the Friars Minor: when the Farnese were staying on the island, the friars were not permitted to leave the confines of the convent except for religious needs. A group of friars was waiting for them just outside the wall that day, to officiate the sad event.

Inside the church the aspersion cried tears of holy water onto the velvet that was wrapped around the coffin, as it was lowered into the open mouth of one of the minor altars located along the left side. The friars, chanting with deep voices, prayed for the soul of the deceased.

After that, the sepulchral stone was made to slide and close the jaws that had received Giovanni's body.

The sound of the stone meeting the floor bounced between the consecrated walls like a crazed moth.

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