

# Now Silvio Berlusconi crosses the Vatican

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They are a matching set of mummies, rather simpatico in the Italian way of things, if only a halt could be called to all this operatic bickering.

Mr. and Mrs. Silvio Berlusconi have been at it – publicly – for a good two years now, in a Telelatino serial drama that's hit all the high and low notes of sex, money, corruption, vanity, power, politics and now – perhaps most threatening to the prime minister's Teflon career – a showdown with the Vatican.

He has been facelifted and hair-transplanted to the point of physical mutation, although apparently without need of below-the-belt enhancement, his non-Viagra virility an issue that has elicited heated specific denials from top aides. She, still a beauty at 50-plus, really had no need of Botox lip pillowing and other premature cosmetic tweakings that have disfigured a Raphaelite countenance.

There must be, in their 19th year of marriage, some vestige of connubial love with this duelling couple: He acting like a man of wounded dignity, trying too hard to burnish his macho credentials with a bevy of nymphets and what Italians call the *veline* – young girls with no talent beyond their not-always-God-given assets who have a tendency to skyrocket from cheesy TV gigs to cabinet portfolios; she stating that a reconciliation would be considered if her lecherous Lothario of a spouse sought counselling for sex addiction.

It's a pity that even satyric Italians are now subscribing to the psychopathologizing of lust, when every act outside the alleged norm is deemed worthy of intervention *treatment* by the Dr. Phils of the world.

At 72, it's unlikely – or at least irrelevant – that the randy Berlusconi is suffering from a between-the-ears syndrome reaching down to his phallus. More simply, he's a horny old man whose wealth and power allow for the easy procurement of nubile and ambitious women. A bit rich for the wife, Veronica Lario – who turned Berlusconi's head when she was a young actress appearing nude on stage and stole him from his first spouse, producing three children before they tied the knot, he 20 years older – to now complain about his wandering eye and penchant for age-inappropriate extramarital dalliances.

But Lario, taking a page (literally) from Princess Diana's book, has secured the sympathies of carefully selected journalists and issued a wronged woman's cri de coeur via a revised biography, *Veronica's Way*, released last week to less reader interest than might have been anticipated, the Italian public already satiated with knowledge of the Berlusconi marriage in endless dispatches from the popular press.

None of it seems to have unduly damaged Berlusconi's popularity with an electorate that last year voted him in to a third term, Italy's longest serving post-war prime minister: Not the relationship with an 18-year-old aspiring actress from Naples who calls Berlusconi *papa* and admits enjoying her new-found notoriety; not the audiotapes of the PM apparently having a couple of overnight couplings with a high-class call girl purportedly put up to the honey-pot tryst by a Bari entrepreneur facing corruption charges; not the bacchanalia-suggestive photos of topless babes basking around the pool at Berlusconi's Sardinian villa; not the television presenter bimbos he promoted as ministers in his government and candidates in the recent European parliamentary elections; and not the allegations of crime and corruption that have long hung over billionaire Berlusconi's media and real estate empire, a cruise ship crooner who became one of the wealthiest men in Europe.

Italian men are envious, Italian women not so censorious, apart from those on the literati left (and it's always about right versus left in this country, where the leftists – including unreconstructed Communists – are confounded by their inability to draw lethal blood from so apparently ripe a target). His approval rating is at 50 per cent, slipping only by five points since April.

Berlusconi has launched lawsuits left and right, but mostly left, while unleashing his own media posse. Besides papers, he controls about 90 per cent of Italy's TV stations.

Yet suddenly the latter-day Medici is in a genuine spot of trouble. He is, unwisely, at knives drawn with the Vatican in a country where no politician has ever prospered by tangling with the Curia.

The Vatican has been tolerant of Berlusconi's outrageous conduct. Oddly, it's not in the business of personal moralizing, at least not for dignitaries. Most important, Berlusconi is an ally on issues close to the Pope's heart, particularly upcoming euthanasia law reform.

But in a tit-for-tat episode of smearing, a newspaper owned by Berlusconi's brother recently teed off on the editor of *Avvenire*, a pre-eminent Catholic paper that does the bidding of the Italian Episcopal Conference and has been vigorously critical of the PM.

That editor, Dino Boffo, was accused of hypocrisy for scrutinizing Berlusconi's private life while hiding his own alleged (and denied)

homosexuality. Turns out that, years back, Boffo had been fined in a plea bargain for making harassing calls to the wife of a man in whom he was purportedly interested.

Boffo admits the fine, though insisting someone else had used his cellphone to make those calls. Even prosecutors have denied the gay angle. But on Thursday Boffo resigned his position, claiming the Church doesn't need this controversy, which he called "media butchery."

There is much Machiavellian scheming afoot, with an apparent internal tug of power between the Pope and the bishops over the cultivating of relationships between the Vatican and Italy's political establishment. Italianate hands might be preparing to stick a shiv in the premier's ribs over being drawn into public scandal. For all his political cunning, Berlusconi is a rube compared to the machinations of the Vatican. Antagonizing that cabal is fatal.

The plot thickens, as they say.

Libido in limbo, a chastened "I'm no saint" Berlusconi may find running back into Veronica's vise-grip arms a small penance to pay for his political soul. She, atoned and avenged, would probably have him.

And they could live happily nip-and-tuck ever after.

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