



Joke 57: The elegant reply of the Florentine poet Dante Facetia LVII: Responsio elegans dantis poete florentini

Text Information

Author | Poggio Bracciolini

Language | Latin

Period | 15th Century

Genre | Humor

Source | Bracciolini, *Scripta in editione Basilensi anno 1538 collata*

Collection | *Facetiae*: Jokes from the Italian Renaissance

URL | sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/bracciolini_joke_57/

Translation and introduction by Robin Wahlsten Böckerman.

Introduction to the Text

Gian Francesco Poggio Bracciolini (commonly referred to as simply Poggio Bracciolini) was born in Terranuova (Tuscany) in 1380. He died in Florence in 1459 at the age of seventy-nine. During his long life this early and important humanist had an equally long career at the Papal curia. In the service of a sequence of popes he lived in Rome, travelled with the papal court all across Italy and the rest of Europe.

Poggio produced a wide range of writing during his career (his collected works span four substantial volumes). He often worked in the dialogue form or wrote speeches, but he also wrote history. He was an avid book hunter and a skilled scribe.

Through his texts we also meet a very polemical man, who seems to get into fights with many of his contemporaries, the most famous of which is his conflict with another of the humanist greats, Lorenzo Valla. The collections of jokes and stories known today as the *Facetiae*, but which Poggio himself preferred to refer to as *Conversations* (*Confabulationes*), certainly contains a polemical edge. While Poggio's invectives are violently polemical and often personal, his *Facetiae* are more mildly polemical in the satirical tradition. The *Facetiae* as it is preserved consists of 273 jokes/stories ranging from just a few lines to a page in length. The collection also has an introduction and a type of conclusion. The short selection presented here contains a few rowdy jokes that poke fun at crude people and priests or monks, and another few stories with witty remarks from historical or contemporary characters. For readers interested in the obscene elements in the *Facetiae*, Poggio's work can be compared to Beccadelli's *The Hermaphrodite*, which offers another contemporary source of obscenity, but one based on very clear ancient models (among others Catullus). The selection shows that Poggio seems to have put his main focus on witticism when writing the stories; whether rude tales or short adventures of cooks, soldiers or even the famous Dante, the punchline seems almost always to be some sort of turn of phrase or wry observation (although this might not always be completely obvious to a modern reader).

This is one of three jokes where Dante Alighieri plays the part of the witty hero of Poggio's story.

Introduction to the Source

The *Facetiae* seems to have had immediate success. The collection as we now know it was composed between 1452-53, but Poggio had by then been working on versions of it (some of which had been in circulation) from as early as 1438. Over fifty manuscripts containing the text are preserved to this day. The *Facetiae* was also printed early and repeatedly, first appearing in this form around 1470. Another testimony to the popularity of the text is the fact that Poggio's jokes or 'conversations' were translated to several other languages, either the entire collection (to Italian and French at the end of the fifteenth century) or individual stories, which were mixed into the different Aesop collections circulating during this period. Herein lies somewhat of an irony, since Poggio himself in the introduction to the *Facetiae* seems to indicate that the object of writing them is to write stories in Latin that are usually told in the vernacular languages.



About this Edition

The translation is based on the text as it appears in the Basel 1538 edition of Poggio's collected work available on Google Books, with a slight update to punctuation and orthography (for instance, ij is represented as ii). No emendations or other corrections have been made by the translator. Older versions of the text contain a few variants and some obvious errors, but in general the tradition seems quite stable (see, for example, an early print from 1471; or the fifteenth-century manuscript in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Latin 8770A).

Further Reading

Kallendorf, Craig. "Poggio Bracciolini" in *Oxford Bibliographies*. DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780195399301-0095.

- *Craig Kallendorf's article in Oxford Bibliographies is a good starting point for researching Poggio. The article contains information about relevant editions, translations, and research.*

Pittaluga, Stefano, ed. *Facéties = Confabulationes: Édition bilingue*. Translated by Etienne Wolff. Bibliothèque italienne. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2005.

- *The most recent critical edition of the Facetiae.*

Beccadelli, Antonio. *The Hermaphrodite*. Edited and translated by Holt Parke, I Tatti Renaissance Library 42, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

- *Another example of obscene elements in Renaissance Latin (also contains letters exchanged between Beccadelli and Bracciolini).*

Gordon, Phyllis W. G., ed. *Two Renaissance Book Hunters: The Letters of Poggius Bracciolini to Nicolaus de Niccolis*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1974.

- *This letter exchange shows the scholarly side of Poggio.*

Bracciolini, Poggio. *The Facetiae of Giovanni Francesco Poggio Bracciolini*. Translated by Bernhardt J. Hurwood. New York: Award Books, 1968.

- *This is apparently an earlier translation of the Facetiae (I was not, however, able to consult this book for the present translation).*



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Facetia LVII

Dantes Alligerius, poeta noster Florentinus, aliquamdiu sustentatus est Veronae opibus Canis veteris Principis de la Scala, admodum liberalis. Erat autem et alter pene Canem Florentinus, ignobilis, indoctus, imprudens, nulli rei praeterquam ad iocum risumque aptus, cuius ineptiae, ne dicam facetiae, Canem perpulerant ad se ditandum. Cum illum veluti belluam insulsam, Dantes, vir doctissimus, sapiens ac modestus, ut aequum erat, contemneret: 'Quid est' inquit ille, 'quod tu, cum habearis sapiens ac doctissimus, tamen pauper es et egenus, ego autem stultus et ignarus divitiis praesto?' Tum Dantes: 'Quando ego reperiam dominum,' inquit, 'mei similem et meis moribus conformem, sicuti tu tuis, et ipse similiter me ditabit.' Gravis sapiensque responsio! Semper enim domini eorum consuetudine qui sibi sunt similes delectantur.

Joke 57

Our Florentine poet Dante Alighieri dwelled for a while in Verona, sustained by the older Cangrande della Scala, a very noble ruler. However, there was also another Florentine at Cangrande's, an ignoble, unlearned, and ignorant man, not fit for anything excepts for jokes and laughter. His fooleries (I will not call them jokes!) had made Cangrande enrich him. When Dante, who is most learned, wise, and modest, showed contempt for this inelegant beast of a man, which was just, he said: "How is it that you, who think yourself wise and very learned, still is poor and destitute, while I, who is stupid and ignorant, am very rich?" To which Dante replied: "When I have found a lord who is like me and my manners, just as you have, then he will reward me in a similar manner." A deep and wise answer! For the lords always find pleasure in the habits of those who are like themselves.