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Roman Jokes
and the Renaissance Prince,
1455-1528

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Louis XIV, France’s Roi Soleil, is reputed to have made only one joke in his life, and a poor joke at that.¹ There seems, in more modern times, to be no essential connection between absolute power and a sense of humor, and yet as late as the early seventeenth century in Europe we can trace a tradition of the laughing Ideal Prince which originated in Imperial Rome. In this paper I propose to trace this tradition in outline, and then to focus on four Renaissance works belonging to it, which have much to tell us about Renaissance concepts of the ideal ruler.

I. From Suetonius to the Fifteenth Century

Suetonius tells quite a few jokes made by and about Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Vespasian and Domitian, and of these he gives most space to the humor of Augustus. He was not the first to do so; Quintilian had already included, in his passage expanding Cicero’s rhetorical theory of jokes,² nine witty sayings by, or directed against, Augustus. One of these, which seemed more memorable to the Renaissance than it does to us, and which may be the first recorded

² Institutio oratoria VI. 3.
elephant joke, has Augustus saying to a timid man holding out a petition to him: “noli, tanquam assem elephanto des” (59; Suetonius has “quasi elephanto stipem,” Aug. 53).

Suetonius tells only two such jokes made by Augustus, but emphasizes his wit and his fondness for proverbs, Old Comedy, and jesting in general, especially at banquets: “nullo denique genere hilaritatis abstinuit” (98). Late Antiquity seems to have embroidered on this tradition, if we may judge by Macrobius, whose Saturnalia, well known and much imitated in the Renaissance, contain eight chapters which constitute what we would call an anthology of jokes (II. 1-7; VII. 3). Nearly all of these are attributed to real people, and although Symmachus twice stresses the pre-eminence of Cicero as a wit (II. 2 and 3), the anthology contains only 23 of Cicero’s jokes versus 29 by, or against, Augustus. The later editor who gave titles to the chapters entitled II. 4 De jocis Augusti in alios, et aliorum rursus in ipsum, and he is indeed portrayed as that rather unlikely ideal, the absolute ruler who can take jokes at his own expense.

One of these is particularly interesting, for several reasons. Macrobius presumably found it in Valerius Maximus, who reports (IX. 14 Ext. 3) that Antiochus, when in Sicily, noticed a young man who looked remarkably like him. He was astonished at this resemblance, “cum pater suus in eam prouinciam numquam accessisset, ‘at meus,’ inquit ‘Romam accessit.’” Macrobius (II. 4. 19) transfers this joke to Augustus, who asks the young man who resembles him: “Dic mihi, adulescens, fuit aliquando mater tua Romae?” and receives the answer No, “sed pater meus saepe.” The speaker here emphasizes Augustus’s good humor: “Soleo in Augusto magis mirari quos pertulit iocos quam ipse quos protulit, quia maior est patientiae quam facundiae laus, maxime cum aequanimiter aliqua etiam iocis mordaciora pertulerit.” In the form given it by Macrobius, this joke has been the most enduring of all Classical witticisms, recurring in every century from the fourteenth to the twentieth and quoted by such diverse authors as Erasmus, Beaumarchais and Freud, and Macrobius’s attribution of it to Augustus remains constant from Petrarch in 1345 to Guazzo in 1574.

The Middle Ages seem to have lost sight of this tradition of the humorous ruler. There are no jokes in Einhard’s Life of Charlemagne, despite the fact that Einhard apparently knew Suetonius. Nor is there any humor in Joinville’s Vie de Saint Louis. The serious moral purpose of the Christian King, defender of the Faith and scourge of the pagans, apparently precluded any light relief. But the Renaissance, which unearthed so much of Roman life and letters, naturally resurrected the Roman joke, and not surprisingly this must be credited,
along with so much else, to Petrarch. In his Rerum memorandarum libri of 1343-5, an obvious imitation of Valerius Maximus, he includes two subjects which Valerius had not treated: “De facetiis ac salibus illustrium,” and “De mordacibus iocis.” This separate category of mean or cutting witticisms he owes to Macrobius, who found it in Plutarch (Quaest. conv. II. 1 and VII. 8).

Petrarch follows Valerius’s division of anecdotes into Romana and Externa, and adds a third section: Moderna, referring not necessarily to living persons but at least to those who lived fairly recently. Although his two sections are essentially a joke anthology in the symposium tradition exemplified by Plutarch and Macrobius, he is also familiar with the rhetorical tradition which, beginning with Cicero and much expanded by Quintilian, attempted to classify rhetorically the humor suitable for the orator. In his very brief introductory remarks he refers to Cicero’s classification of the genus as facetae, sales, or apothemata (sic), to the separate category of scomma (Plutarch’s word) which contains hidden contumelia, and to the distinction in the De oratore between cavillatio and dicacitas. He then launches directly into his first section, “De facetiis ac salibus illustrium.”

Of the famous people included in Petrarch’s two sections, Cicero this time is credited with 21 jokes made by him or against him, and Augustus with 18. But Augustus far outweighs the other rulers quoted, who include Philip of Macedon, Antigonus, Vespasian, Tiberius, Domitian, Nero, Mithridates and Azzo d’Este. The rulers in their turn outweigh the other famous people, among them Diogenes, Virgil, several Romans, Pope Boniface VIII and Dante. None of the romana or externa jokes is original; some of the moderna may be.

Renaissance humanists had, in Macrobius and Petrarch, two easily accessible examples of joke collections which stressed the wit and affability of the ideal ruler. In these collections the personality of the joker is important, while in the rhetorical tradition deriving from Cicero the rhetorical technique used in the joke is more significant that the personality of the joker. In the fifteenth century Italy produced two immensely popular and influential books of jokes, belonging to these two separate traditions. Poggio’s Facetiae, in Latin, were composed about 1438 but not published until the 1470s, and are brief witty anecdotes whose attribution is not usually essential. The Motti e facezie del Piovano Arlotto, first published before 1478, recount the witty and wise sayings, and sometimes the practical jokes, of a real country priest.
II. Real laughing princes: Alfonso and Cosimo

We might expect to find a number of Renaissance kings and princes portrayed as witty rulers, but this is not the case. Only a few princes seem to have been so depicted, and one of them stands out above the others very much as Augustus stands out above the other Roman Emperors: Alfonso the Magnanimous (1396-1458), ruler of Aragon, Catalonia and Valencia (1416) and of the Kingdom of Naples (1442). His reputation, until long after the fifteenth century, as the ideal ruler and modern equivalent of Augustus, probably owes less to his actual character than to his humanist biographer Antonio Beccadelli, usually known as Panormita. His De dictis et factis Alphonsi regis Aragonum, composed about 1455 and published in 1485, is an unstructured collection of brief anecdotes portraying Alfonso as wise, prudent, devout, merciful, generous, learned — and witty. By no means a biography in the modern sense, the book provides historical and political information only in passing, so that its readers must have been sufficiently familiar with the story of Alfonso’s life to know immediately what is meant by “bellum Neapolitanum,” “Cum Calaci- cium obsideret Alphonsus,” and scores of other such references. The emphasis is also more on things said than on things done, although specific actions which redound to Alfonso’s credit are mentioned.

If this work can be assigned to a literary genre, it must be to the collection of sententiae. Alfonso’s dicta, if by no means always witty, are usually pithy and sometimes memorable. He was, says the Proeo- nium to Book II, “sermone admodum iucundus, breuis & elegans, uenustus & clarus,” and some of his motti have the satisfying brevity of proverbs: “Diem illam in qua nihil legeret se perdidisse dicebat” (II.16, misnumbered 19); “Adulatores autem lupis haud absimiles dicebat esse” (III. 17); “Foenus nihil aliud sibi uideri, quam animae funus dicebat” (III. 34). The punning touch in this last is fairly frequent.

Panormita’s glorification of Alfonso clearly presents him as the modern equivalent of Augustus, stressing his magnanimity, hatred of treachery and of flatterers, and the association between giving and taking jokes: “Alphonsus cum esset admodum facetus & urbanus,

3 I quote the Basel edition of 1538. I am puzzled to note that a recent historian (Alan Ryder, The Kingdom of Naples under Alfonso the Magnificent (Oxford 1976)) apparently accepts the stories told by Panormita as factual (see esp. the notes on pp. 27-28). Vespasiano da Bisticci (Vita di Alfonso Re di Napoli) gives a picture similar to Panormita’s of Alfonso’s Christian piety and nobility of character, but includes no witty sayings, and in any case can Panormita’s often punning Latin be a faithful translation of Alfonso’s Castilian or Catalan?
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mirari tamen magis licuit, quo animo quaque moderatione ipse aliorum sales pertulerit, quam quomodo ipse iocos protulerit” (IV. 27) — an obvious recollection of Macrobius’s admiration for Augustus. Not many of Alfonso’s jokes are hilarious by modern standards, though a few may cause a smile: when Jacopo Alamanni offered him a gold statue of St. John for quingentorum aureorum precium, Alfonso enquired how the disciple could be worth more than the master (I. 56); he feared that a knight constantly asking him for favors would end by asking for his wife (II. 40); he stated that the quietest marriage would be between a blind wife and a deaf husband (III. 7); or that one definition of crazy men was those who went looking for a lost wife (IV. 8). These are in a minority; most of the dicta are simply sententiae in the Classical wisdom tradition.

Before the end of the fifteenth century, there is one more candidate for the rôle of ideal witty ruler: Cosimo de’ Medici. Unfortunately we know nothing about the composition of the joke collection which contains his best-known motti. This work, usually known as the Bel libretto or the Detti piacevoli, has been attributed to Poliziano, on insufficient grounds. 4 Dated by Wesselski about 1478, the collection is probably a mixture of anecdotes, proverbs and riddles from very different sources. The real people to whom motti are attributed include Piovano Arlotto, King Alfonso, and many characters in the milieu of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Oddly, however, while 18 jokes or pithy saying are attributed to or directed against Lorenzo, 37 are attached to his grandfather Cosimo, founder of the Medici dynasty and called by the Florentines Cosimo pater patriae.

Cosimo was not a ruler in the same sense as Alfonso of Aragon; where Alfonso ruled over seven kingdoms, Cosimo remained a private citizen who just happened to hold the reins of Florence in his hands. But he was often glorified, in his lifetime and especially in Lorenzo’s lifetime, by poets and humanists in very “kingly” terms, and I wonder if the author or compiler of this section of the Bel libretto was not consciously presenting Cosimo as the rival of Alfonso. We see him epigrammatically condemning gambling (2) and stupidity (4 and 16), recommending to an archbishop that he live honorably (129), preventing a brawl (135), exhorting a papal messenger by means of a story (139), stating that, for the great, one enemy is too many, and 100 friends too few (140), threatening his enemies with a reversal of the situation (162), demonstrating his scrupulous honesty as a banker

4 There is only one edition: Angelo Poliziano’s Tagebuch (1477-1479), edited by Albert Wesselski (Jena 1929), who bases the attribution to Poliziano on very slender evidence. The original manuscript has disappeared.
(173) and his ability to forgive injuries (178), and showing generosity to a poor but wise man (264).

Most of these contain neatly-turned phrases which are not comic, but some are genuinely witty. Cosimo prefers the family house at Cafaggiolo to the one at Fiesole, because from the former everything to be seen is Medici property (3); when a peasant eating with him refuses wild pears with the remark "We feed them to the pigs" Cosimo retorts: "We don't; take them away" (45); when an extravagant friend asks to borrow money for a house he is building, Cosimo agrees with the proviso "keep me for the plastering" (serbami all'intonacare, 46); when told by some Siensese that on a certain occasion the Florentines had lost their wits, Cosimo retorts that that isn't possible (156); he claims that there is more point to crying out before you are hurt, than afterwards (192), and that it's a good sign if no one is aware that a man has been holding office (200).

Two of Cosimo's retorts were famous, and occur in many other collections. Rinaldo degli Albizzi, in exile from Florence, sent a message to Cosimo: "The hen is sitting on her eggs," to which Cosimo replied that it's hard for her to do that outside the nest (137). And when Cosimo himself was going into exile (in 1433) he said to Palla Strozzi: Hodie mihi, cras tibi (a prophecy fulfilled a year later). Like Alfonso, and Augustus before him, Cosimo is every inch the wise general as well as the good governor. One of his pithy retorts implicitly recalls Augustus, and another does so explicitly. When a Pistoian soldier boasts that he didn't flee from a battle, showing as proof the wounds on his face, Cosimo comments: "The man who wounded you must not have been fleeing either." This recalls the man with a scar on his forehead boasting to Augustus of his military prowess (Macrobius, Saturnalia II. 4.7); Augustus's comment is: "At tu cum fugies numquam post te respexeris." And à propos of one remark of Cosimo's the author explicitly recalls Augustus: "Cosmo di qualche huomo pronto et accorto soleva dire che egli haveva il cervello in danari contanti. E motto di Augusto: Ingenium habet ut Seneca" (268).

III. Alfonso from 1485 to 1646

Both Alfonso and Cosimo were seen, in their time and later, as powerful rulers; Alfonso over many kingdoms, Cosimo over enormous wealth and one of the most important city-states in Italy. There seems to be no reason why Alfonso rather than Cosimo should have caught the imagination of later fifteenth and sixteenth-century humanist writers and readers, but he clearly did. Motti by Alfonso can be found in the Arlotto collection already mentioned, in the roughly contem-
porary *Facezie e motti* attributed to Niccolò Angèli dal Bucine,⁵ in Gioviano Pontano’s *De sermone* of 1509,⁶ in Cortesi’s *De cardinalatu* (of which more in a moment), in Adrian Barlandus’s *Iocorum veterum ac recentium duae centuriae* (Louvain, 1524), and in Castiglione’s *Libro del Cortegiano* (1528). The 1538 edition of Erasmus’s *Apophthegmata* contains 17 sayings by Alfonso towards the end of Book VIII (706-09). The 1550 Tübingen edition (and others) of Heinrich Bebel’s *Facetiae* includes selected jokes from Poggio, and assorted sayings of Alfonso, St. Bernard, Cardinal Giuliano, Bernardino of Siena, Isocrates, and the Emperors Sigismund, Rudolph, Frederick and Albert. But the title of this volume says only “his [Poggio’s *Facetiae*] additae sunt & Alphonsi regis arragonum,” without naming the others.

Perhaps the most striking evidence of Alfonso’s popularity is the work published in Venice in 1557 by Lodovico Domenichi (compiler of the century’s most popular Italian joke collection), called *Historia di Messer Lodovico Domenichi, di detti, e fatti degni di memoria di diversi principi, e huomini privati antichi, et moderni*. Of the twelve books of this work the first two are a careful translation of Panormita’s *De dictis et factis*. . . . Domenichi’s other ten books are a grab-bag of anecdotes about famous people, often tragic or depressing, many of which are taken from Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini’s commentary on Panormita’s work. There are more anecdotes about Alfonso, especially in Book XI, which includes a number of jokes taken from Pontano, some of which concern Alfonso. Well into the seventeenth century, the *De dictis* was still being re-edited as a model of princely conduct,⁷ as it had already been for the scholiast Jacob Spiegel, whose commentary (in the 1538 edition) on I. 9 includes the phrase: “Attende, quisquis es ò rex imitator Alphonsinae uirtutis . . .” (p. 24).

Alfonso and Cosimo were not the only contemporary rulers to be held up as examples, but Alfonso in particular does seem to have been the model for idealized portraits of other rulers. The pattern appears to have been set by Piccolomini’s commentary on the *De dictis*, easily accessible in the Basel edition of 1538.⁸ This commentary is entitled *Aeneae Episcopi Senesis in libros Alphonsi Regis . . . Commentarius*, so that it can presumably be dated between 1450, when

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⁵ *Facezie e motti dei secoli XV e XVI, codice inedito Magliabechiano* (G. Romagnoli, Bologna 1874).

⁶ Ed. S. Lupi and A. Risicato (Thesaurus Mundi, Lugano 1954).

⁷ *Speculum boni principis Alphonsus rex Aragoniae. Hoc est, dicta et facta Alphonsi regis Aragoniae . . . Ex Aeneae Sylvii commentaris . . .* (Elzevir, Amsterdam 1646).

⁸ I do not know whether this commentary was already in the 1485 edition, which is often mentioned but which I have never seen.
Piccolomini was named Bishop of Siena by Nicolas V, and 1458 when he became Pope Pius II.

The most common kind of "commentary" used by Piccolomini is the comparison between Alfonso’s *sententia* as reported by Panormita, and a similar one uttered by a well-known person. Of these people quoted most are modern, and famous: the Emperors Sigismund, Frederick and Rudolph, and assorted humanists and politicians. Thus for instance Alfonso’s comparison of flatterers to wolves (III. 17) is matched by Sigismund saying that he hated flatterers like the plague. In a few cases the matching *sententia* quoted by Piccolomini became more famous than the original; Alfonso was once asked whether he owed more to arms or to letters, and replied that from books he had learned about arms (IV. 19). Piccolomini recounts (247-48) Emperor Sigismund’s comment that it is foolish to prefer arms to letters; he can make a thousand knights in one day, but could not make one doctor in a thousand years, an aphorism repeated in many sixteenth-century joke collections.

Attempts were made to set up various kings and princes as rivals to Alfonso in wisdom. Perhaps the most surprising candidate is Louis XII of France; to the 1585 Wittenberg edition of the *De dictis* is appended a brief *Lu多ici XII. Galliae Regis scite et facete dicta*,\(^9\) consisting of 49 *sententiae* with marginal comments modelled on those of the *De dictis*, some using Greek as well as Latin (Misericordier & νεμεσητικως). Not one of these *sententiae* is likely to cause a smile; we are now much closer in time to the Louis XIV who made one joke in his life. The wisdom of Augustus lives on, but not, apparently, his humor.

**IV. Imaginary laughing princes: the Cardinal and the Courtier**

Alfonso and Cosimo, Emperor Sigismund and Louis XII were all real people, even if we need not take too seriously the literary portraits of them penned by their admirers. But the same Renaissance humanists who loved to idealize real princes also enjoyed delineating the imaginary Ideal Prince. Indeed, rather than regard Panormita’s "biography" of Alfonso and Guillaume Budé’s *Institution du Prince* as belonging to two separate genres, we should probably classify them both as "Mirror-of-Princes" literature. I should like to discuss here two sixteenth-century "mirrors-of-princes," one very well known, the other virtually unknown.

The latter is a work by Paolo Cortesi, published once only in 1610,\(^9\) My Harvard colleague Donald Stone very kindly obtained for me a photocopy of this appended section, and of the Cortesi passage discussed below.
called *De cardinalatu*.\(^\text{10}\) Cortesi was a well-known Roman humanist, and one of the most aggressive of the die-hard Ciceronians who refused to write a Latin word unless it could be found in Cicero. The *De cardinalatu* is a detailed manual in three books on how the ideal cardinal should think, speak, act and furnish his house.\(^\text{11}\) Most modern readers will be surprised to see that the chapter "De sermones" (II. 9) contains a section on the *Facetie et Ioci* considered suitable for this cardinal.

A Cardinal is a Prince of the Church, in some senses a ruler and in others a courtier, and Cortesi, like Castiglione a few years later, has Cicero’s ideal orator firmly in mind. This is particularly clear in the joke section, which consists of an anthology of 26 anecdotes told by famous people, preceded by a very brief introduction. Here (LXXXV\(^{\text{v}}\)) he explains why jokes are relevant: "nihil est. n. tam humanae naturae cognatum / quam aspersus dicendi urbanitati sal / nihilque tam proprium hominis / quam facetiarium dicacitate delectari." *Urbanitas* and *festivitas* can dispel sadness, anger and hate, he claims, and force even the unwilling to laugh.

Like Panormita’s, Cortesi’s anthology has comments in the margin, possibly the contribution of Cortesi’s friend Raffaele Maffei.\(^\text{12}\) But whereas the *De dictis* comments qualified Alfonso’s state of mind while saying or doing (*Facetè, Iustè, Prudenter*), those in the *De cardinalatu* note the speaker, and also the rhetorical category exemplified by the joke, which is usually stressed in the text as well. Thus the first one, a well-known anecdote about Dante taken from Petrarch, is labelled *Ex inopinato* (the text uses Cicero’s *praeter expectationem*); the second, telling how Francesco Gonzaga, asked by a miserly wealthy man to suggest an unusual subject for a painting in his house, replied: "liberalitatem," is *ex admonitione*, and so on. A majority of these categories are variants on denying, accusing or reproaching, so that the modern reader receives some curious impressions about the general tone of conversation in the Curia.

Jokes are told by one Emperor, three Popes (plus the secretary of

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\(^{10}\) As far as I know, the only copy of this work in the U.S. is in the Houghton Library at Harvard.


\(^{12}\) Weil-Garris and D’Amico, p. 68, note 75.
Julius II), two kings, one of whom is Alfonso, and Cosimo and Lorenzo de' Medici. About half of the jokes are known from other sources, but quite a number may well be personal recollections of Cortesi's. As will be the case with Castiglione, there is nothing especially "courtly" about this humor; Cortesi re-tells, for instance, the very popular story of the obese traveller arriving at the city gate. When asked why "ante manticam gestaret / ita in ea urbe fieri oportere dixit / in qua tanta esset hominum multitudo furax." Ex re criminione ex corporis uitio ad animi uitium, says the marginal note.

There is no indication here that the ideal cardinal should specifically imitate Augustus, who is not mentioned, or Alfonso or Cosimo, who are. Cortesi is thinking rather of the ideal orator portrayed by Cicero, whose skill in humor, and especially in the cut-and-thrust exchanges of the courtroom, seem to be better adapted to the sixteenth-century cardinal than Alfonso's measured sententiae. Perhaps because of this imitation of Cicero, Cortesi's jokes are much more humorous than most of those in the De dictis and the Bel libretto. They are all, in fact, recognizably comic, owing little or nothing to the wisdom tradition which partially inspired the two earlier authors.

Specialists have long known that the passage on joking in Castiglione's Libro del Cortegiano (II. 42-93) is very closely based on Cicero's De oratore (II. 54-71). Most readers, however, are certainly not aware of this, and are still less aware of the tradition of the laughing ruler outlined in this article. The Cicero-Augustus-Alfonso-Cosimo filiation helps to explain the size and importance of the joke section in the Cortegiano, and allows us to further evaluate both its links with the past and its originality.

Cicero's rhetorical classification of the jokes necessary for the orator was based on a bipartite division between cavillatio (humor infused throughout a speech) and dicacitas (one-liners), and between humor in re and in verbo. Castiglione, like others before him, conflates these divisions, as though cavillatio were identical to humor in re, and dicacitas to humor in verbo. His two categories are festività or urbanità (comic narration), and detti or arguzie (one-liners). He added a third category, burle (practical jokes), which Cicero would not have approved.

Under in verbo Cicero had nine categories (as against 25 in re): ambiguity, the unexpected, puns (παρονομασία), quoting poetry, taking figurative expressions literally, allegory, one-word metaphors, antiphrasis, and a certain kind of antithesis. Castiglione will use all these, as well as Cicero's in re categories, in his second and largest section, on humor in un detto solo. Under narrazione, the first section, he has only three categories, which I have seen nowhere else, and which
are all illustrated by non-Ciceronian jokes. The first is "il recitar con bona grazia alcuni diffetti d'altri" — that is, mocking the stupidity of others; the second is "certe affezioni estreme," illustrated by the lady who wept every time she thought of the Last Judgment, because on that day everyone would see her naked; and "una grande e ben composta bugia," a well-developed lie, exemplified by the story of the frozen words.

Comic anecdotes are obviously less important to Castiglione than one-liners. In the longest passage of his joke section, he follows Cicero's categories, often word for word in the same order, but uses to illustrate them a mixture of Ciceronian and contemporary jokes. For instance, under "taking someone's words in the same sense and throwing them back at him" (II. 60; Cicero's "ex eo . . . in eum ipsum aliquid, qui laecessivit, infligitur," II. 63) he first re-tells Cicero's example, of Catulus (= "little dog") asked by Philippus "What are you barking at?" and replying "Because I see a thief:" Castiglione omits the names, so that the joke is not as comic as it was in Cicero (II. 54). He then gives a modern example we have seen in Cortesi: the obese traveller asked why he's carrying his luggage in front of him.

Some of Castiglione's jokes have not been found elsewhere, which is certainly interesting — and unusual; but both by his rhetorical categorization of humor and by the illustrations he gives, he demonstrates his debt to the humorous-prince tradition. Like Cortesi he places each joke carefully into a rhetorical category, and like Panormita and the author of the Bel libretto he is concerned to portray an ideal courtier (who could equally well be a prince) who is both wise and witty.

V. Conclusion

From our point of view the four main works discussed here stand in chronological order of interest. Panormita's De dictis borders on hagiography; real wit is rare, and so much concentrated wisdom is indigestible. The Bel libretto contains more genuine jokes, but still too many sententiae for modern taste. The De cardinalatu is already astonishingly "modern": its jokes are nearly all witty, even if some of them must have seemed funnier to readers who knew the people mentioned than they do to us. And Castiglione's jokes are all witty, by our standards; the ones taken from Cicero, the ones about Alfonso and Cosimo, and the ones Castiglione discovered for himself. Not surprisingly, the two imaginary princes are more genuinely humorous than the two real ones.
All four of these works are members of the same literary family, but they belong to two different branches of it. Alfonso and Cosimo are the descendants of Suetonius’s emperors, whose humor is an integral part of the image of *humanitas* they wish to project. The enormous popularity of Alfonso’s jokes demonstrates that the Renaissance put, if anything, more stress on the necessity of humor than Antiquity had done. The cardinal and the courtier, while telling many of the same jokes, are descendants of the rhetorical tradition, and for them as for Cicero’s orator humor is an important persuasive technique. Cortesi’s statement that the cardinal’s humor will dispel sadness and anger (in his colleagues? in the Pope?) is not essentially different from Cicero’s description of the effects of the orator’s humor on the judge (*De or. II. 58*).

The subject of Renaissance *urbanitas* has been seldom discussed in detail, and would well repay further study. By the time we get to Louis XIV, the *urbanus* (*honnête homme*) no longer laughs; but he did laugh, from the fourteenth through the sixteenth century, and he liked to read about, and write about, real or ideal princes who also had a sense of humor.

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