Humour in *Il libro del cortegiano**

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After having prescribed in the first book of *Il libro del cortegiano* that the courtier include among his accomplishments a mastery of elegant and effective language, in Book 2 Castiglione focusses on the need to display an appropriate use of verbal wit in order to arouse laughter. The courtier must “con una certa dolcezza recrear gli animi degli auditori e con motti piacevoli e facezie e discretamente indurgli a festa e riso” (2.41.182), or, in other words, according to a further statement in the text, he is required to employ a “parlar piacevole per indurre riso e festa con gentil modo” (2.42.182). What emerges from the characters’ theoretical pronouncements that are subtly woven into the conversations being narrated and from the multitude of examples that are cited during the course of the lengthy discussion, is a comprehensive and profound treatment of humour.¹ It has not always been recognized as such, however. Toffanin had dismissed Castiglione’s discussion of humour as being relatively unimportant and fundamentally non-philosophical (134), but modern readers, rightly discounting his assessment, have studied it closely, often from the point of view of the sources to which the various ideas can be traced, and also with the aim of determining the role that this substantial section of the text on humour plays in the context of the treatise as a whole.

Numerous editors of the text, beginning with Cian, as well as authors of essays, like Valmaggi, Morreale and Floriani, have identified the classical sources that Castiglione used in formulating his views on humour. They have singled out his debt to Cicero for the notion of the decorum needed and the rhetoric involved in order to achieve joke-telling that is both suited to the audience and effectively delivered (2.43, 50, 68, 83, 89; cf. *De oratore* 2.56, 59). They have found the phenomenology of humour also to be clearly of Ciceronean origin, and especially the distinction between the more elaborate tale and the briefer types of *facetiae* (2.43) — the twofold classification of *dicacitas* and *cavillatio* (*De oratore* 2.54) to which Castiglione added a third category, that of the burla or practical joke (2.48), derived from the vernacular tradition. Generally acknowledged as being traceable to Aristotle (*On Parts of Animals* 3.10.673a), instead, is the idea that laughter is a distinguishing feature of the human species, which has a natural need for recreation. In Castiglione’s words, “l’omo . . . è un animal risibile” whose “animo . . . da natura è tirato al piacere ed appetisce il riposo e ’l recrearsi” (2.45: 187). Castiglione also advocates the Aristotelian insistence on moderation (cf. *Ethics* 4.8.1128a-b), when he recommends that the

courtier avoid the type or frequency of jesting which would turn him into a buffoon (2.36, 50). On the inevitable question of what exactly constitutes humour, he highlights the ever present element of the incongruous — that he terms “una certa deformità” (2.46.188) — another obvious classical tenet shared by Aristotle (*Poetics* 5.1449a), Cicero (2.58, 236), and Quintilian (*Institutio oratoria* 6.3.8). It has been noted by Floriani (139-140), for example, however, that, rather than having necessarily appropriated all the ideas directly from the original sources, Castiglione probably relied in part on Giovanni Pontano’s *De Sermone* (published in 1509), a treatise that played a major mediating role in transmitting many of these rhetorical and ethical concepts to sixteenth-century writers.

In addition to shedding light on the sources, critics in the 1970s analyzed the overall effect of the inclusion of this humorous material in the body of *Il libro del cortegiano*. According to Grudin, it allows Castiglione to add a “realistic perspective” (202) to the work and to satirize the more unpleasant aspects of the era. For Trafton it suggests observations on human nature and human affairs (291) and for Shapiro the realistic dimension reflects life for the courtier, but in a reversed mirror-like fashion (51-52), since the characters contravene their own rules and utter witticisms that actually broach what are declared to be taboo subjects. Guidi detects a veritable socio-political ideology in the text in so far as, rather than providing serious social criticism, it tends to reconfirm the existing hierarchical order and the author’s own aristocratic stance. The jests involving the ridicule and mistreatment of members of the lower classes are good cases in point, as is the selection of the commoner Bibbiena, instead of a nobleman, to lead the whole discussion. In recent studies, Falvo has stressed the social value of humour for Castiglione, whose characters laugh, in essence, in order to mitigate aggression. And, finally, Finucci has demonstrated that a comic bond unites the courtiers in gentle and decorous laughter that veils the underlying aggression, not infrequently directed against women.

An earlier interpretation too, proposed by John S. White in 1959, had highlighted the psychological value, rather than the more usual rhetorical and ethical aspects of Castiglione’s theory of humour. However, in a less rigorously historical manner, White had somewhat rashly linked Castiglione’s ideas on humour to the modern theories of Spencer, Bain and Freud on the biological discharge of energy, the outlet for inhibitions, and sublimation of aggression (44-45). White erred undoubtedly in trying to make Castiglione a precursor of modern theorists when, in actual fact, the author of *Il libro del cortegiano* was reviving classical precepts. For example, the phrase describing the effects of laughter, that “par che ci voglia far scoppiare, tanto che, per forza che vi mettiamo, non è possibile tenerlo” (2.45.188), actually echoes a passage in Cicero (2.58, 235), as Valmaggi (77) had pointed out (and Toffanin [134] had repeated) and derives perhaps, one might add, from Aristotle who had observed that laughter cannot be suppressed (*Ethics* 7.7.1150b).

What is to be discussed in this paper is a related but somewhat neglected as-

pect of Castiglione's psychological treatment of the theme of humour, namely his comment, even if a seemingly more marginal one, on laughter seen as a remedy for the difficulties inevitably encountered in human life. This concept, even if it has earlier classical and mediaeval roots of a diversified nature (partly medical and partly philosophical), is one which is connected to and in keeping with contemporary Renaissance thought. In the key passage providing a formulation of the idea the character Bibbiena states that, just as the ancient philosophers sought entertainment ("*spettaculi*" and "*conviti*") to relax their minds, that had been tired out in lofty discourse and divine thoughts, so all human beings (and he mentions peasants, sailors, the religious and even prisoners awaiting execution) "*vanno cercando qualche rimedio e medicina per recrearsi. Tutto quello adunque che move il riso esilara l'animo e dà piacere, né lascia che in quel punto l'omo si ricordi delle noiose molestie, delle quali la vita nostra è piena*" [emphasis mine] (2.45.187-88).

That the statement itself warrants special focus may be supported by the fact that it is part of the highly condensed theory which makes up chapter 45 of Book 2. It appears, moreover, at a significant point in the discussion, after Federico Fregoso has expounded on the two types of *facetiae*, and just as Bibbiena is about to begin what amounts to the heart of the discussion in response to Emilia Pio's request that the courtiers leave aside joking and get to the theoretical explanation of how witticisms are to be used and what constitutes them ("*come l'abbiamo ad usare e donde si cavino,*" 186). In fact, by indicating his readiness to proceed without postponing the discussion as he had wished to do at first, and uttering a typical expression of modesty, Bibbiena provides a veritable exordium to what ensues, that is a discourse on "*che cosa sia questo riso, e dove stia, ed in che modo talor occupi le vene*" (188).

The introductory comment on the therapeutic efficacy of laughter, to allow man to forget life's "molestie" (or 'troubles'), was highlighted by White in his study (44) but mainly in order to compare it to modern theories of humour. Grudin too had cited it, but had interpreted it as Castiglione's response to the social evils depicted in the jokes (203). There is evidence, on the other hand, that the concept has wider implications, and that it is not to be restricted to Castiglione's theory of humour or to his attempts at social realism, because it actually reflects the author's philosophical views on life and man. The phrase in Castiglione's text may appear to recall a similar, but not identical remark by Pontano, who stated that man, whose corporal and spiritual life is full of hardship and troubles, naturally seeks recreation (1.6.7: "*Principio, quod hominum vitam corporis tum animi laborum plena est ac molestiarum; iccirco post labores cessatio quaeritur; in qua recreetur animus, atque inter molestias iocus. Natura enim duce, ad requietem trahimur ac voluptatem*"; cf. 3.4.2; 3.9.1). However, here and elsewhere, Pontano, following Aristotle (*Politics* 8.3.1337b), speaks repeatedly of the need for recreation after labour rather than of the intrinsic sadness of life. There are thirty occurrences for the former idea as opposed to

three for the latter, according to my calculations. On the other hand, Castiglione's statement on the need for laughter to alleviate life's woes would appear to posit a function for this human activity based on a more reflective view of man's existence, as further examination of the text should demonstrate.

In fact, in reading the treatise with some care, it may be noticed that the observation on laughter recalls similar ideas that are advanced at other points in the text. It is akin to Castiglione's appreciation of music which, as it is said in Book 2, relieves the "travagliosi pensieri e gravi *molestie* di che la vita nostra è piena" (2.14.139) and which in a chapter in the first book devoted to the subject (1.47) was called a "*medicina d'animi infermi*" (99) and a "grandissimo refrigerio" "d'ogni fatica e *molestia* umana" (101), offering relief for persons in all walks of life, including sailors and prisoners — categories listed in the praise of laughter too [emphasis here and below is mine]. On the subject of Neoplatonic love in Book 4, physical love is depicted as causing "molestia" and "miserie" (4.52.429) — problems that can be alleviated through spiritual love which brings instead "vero riposo nelle fatiche, certo rimedio nelle miserie, *medicina* saluberrima nelle infirmità" (4.69.450). The contrast between the effects of the two types of love corresponds to the differing remarks on women made in the preceding book which has Frigio denounce Eve as the cause of "tutte le miserie e calamità, che oggidì al mondo si sentono" (3.19.283) and Cesare Gonzaga defend women for their ability to relieve "miserie" and "tristezze" (3.51.328). These views on music and love actually echo those of Ficino who, in a letter to Antonio Canisio, wrote that music is a medicine that can expel "molestiae" from the soul and body (1.681) and, in *De amore* (6.9), spoke of melancholy persons seeking relief from "molestia" by pursuing music and love (2.342).

For the idea of consolatory laughter itself, it is again Ficino who may furnish an immediate source, whereas a passage in Paolo Cortesi's *De cardinalatu* (1510) regarding urbane jokes that can dispel *tristitia*, *severitas*, and *diuturna odia* (f. 85v), cited by Bowen (217) in connection with Castiglione, would seem to be less pertinent.² The concept dates back in all likelihood to the pseudo-Hippocratic tradition, and more precisely to the novelesque epistolary correspondence of Hippocrates on the subject of Democritus, who proposed laughter as a remedy for the world's folly. It had continued to circulate and was particularly widespread in mediaeval times, for example at the School of Salerno, which taught in the first aphorism of its *Regimen sanitatis* that one of the only three doctors needed is, in addition to rest (or recreation) and moderate diet, a "*mens laeta*" or happy mind (18). This concept of the therapeutic power of laughter was revived in the Renaissance, often in connection with the belief in the influence of the mind over the body, as has been pointed out.³ An early and influential proponent of the idea was none other than Ficino who, in an epistle, exhorted the addressees Bernardo Canisio *et al.* to live joyously ("*Vivite laeti*") and he urged this, he declared, not so much in his capacity as a priest as in that of a doctor ("*Haec autem non tam ut sacerdos amici mando vobis, quam ut medicus*")

(1.605). This advice from Ficino was not neglected in the Renaissance; it was cited by Laurent Joubert, the author of a medical treatise on laughter entitled *Traité du ris*, which included in an appendix Hippocrates's letter about Democritus and which had considerable influence on Rabelais, and by Robert Burton, in a section of his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (2.2.6.4) devoted to a cure for melancholy which was to be sought in mirth and merry company. It is certainly conceivable that Ficino's views, that were to be cited later by French and English writers, would have been known to Castiglione too.

Another text from Ficino's corpus may also offer a pertinent reference point for *Il libro del cortegiano*, namely, his 1488 Latin version of Iamblichus, the fourth-century Neoplatonic philosopher whose work on the mysteries of Egypt is usually acknowledged as the source for the perhaps originally Aristotelian concept of comic catharsis.⁴ In actual fact the idea of therapeutic laughter is less explicit in the original Greek work which in section 1.11 refers only to *comedy's* ability to act as a *remedy* to cure the soul. In a modern French translation it reads as follows: "C'est pourquoi, à contempler dans la comédie et la tragédie les passions d'autrui, nous stabilisons les nôtres, les modérons et les purifions . . . Et c'est pourquoi Héraclite les appelle à juste titre des 'remèdes', comme remédiant aux dangers . . ." (61-62).⁵ Ficino's text, actually a paraphrase rather than a faithful translation into Latin, stresses instead that it is *laughter* that acts as a *medicine*: "Insunt nobis perturbationum principia quaedam, quae si violentius a principio & subito cohibentur, tandem acriores erumpunt instar flammae compressae risusque cohibiti sunt, ergo remissius corrigenda. Heraclitus sacrificia medicamenta nominat quia purgent animam a morbis . . ." (2.276-77).⁶ He thus brings together the terms "risus" and "medicina," just as Castiglione does. A comparison of the passage in question to Pontano's text, instead, demonstrates that, although recreation is stressed in the latter, there is no explicit statement regarding laughter's function as a medicine. For this concept, consequently, the Ficinian sources, of partly philosophical and partly medical derivation, would seem to be the most relevant.

The same is true for the idea of the sadness of life which, found only incidentally in Pontano, as noted, dominates instead both Castiglione's and Ficino's views of man and the world. Ficino had depicted the human condition as being a melancholy one, as he described man's subjection to "perpetua inquietudo" and "anxietas" (*Theologia platonica* 14.7: 1.345 and 347; cf. *De mente*) and mankind as being caught in time, and yet filled with longing to be eternal and God-like. *Il libro del cortegiano* postulates a similar vision, in that for Castiglione too it would seem that man is caught between two poles — the earthly and the heavenly. He aspires to immortality, to supreme beatitude or true rest in God, as it is said in connection with divine love (4.68), and yet is confined to time. In fact a melancholy tone pervades many parts of the text, most notably the prefatory letter and other introductory sections that constitute the frame. They stress the themes of time and death and bear a strong elegiac message⁷ which is inherent in

a number of the discussions on specific topics too; for example, the use of language which is subject to change and the adaptation of behaviour to the various stages in the life of the ideal courtier as he ages during the course of the discussion on four successive evenings. Thus the note of sadness which forms part of the theory of humour reflects the overall nature of the treatise which is presented as a commemorative and consolatory work designed to preserve the memory of things past. In the words of Asor Rosa, *Il libro del cortegiano* "non è un libro ludico, è un libro disperato" (11). This characterization is based on other features, relating to the gap between the ideal proposed in the text and the far-removed real which forms its context; nonetheless it is a most fitting description.

It is applicable to the narrative fiction of the treatise as well, for, clearly, the lives of the lords of Urbino, Guidobaldo and Elisabetta, buffeted as they are by the blows of fortune, are far from happy. Moreover, the way in which the narrative laughter functions within the text (it occurs, it will be noticed, with proportionately greatest frequency in the discussion on women and least often when politics is dealt with) may indicate, as others like Falvo and Finucci have shown, that, in specific instances, it serves to mitigate some underlying aggression (even towards women), and generally to release the tension among the courtiers. This is true as well of the laughter of the narratees referred to in the embedded telling of jokes (e.g. in 2.61, the bishop, upon hearing the friar's witty justification for his misconduct, is said to have laughed unrestrainedly with the result that his anger subsided and the punishment he imposed was less severe). Certainly in the context of the treatise as a whole, replete as the work is with much learned discussion on weighty topics, and framed by the melancholy reflections of the authorial narrator, the inclusion of witticisms throughout has the effect of alleviating the general tone for the reader, and often of masking the very seriousness of the ideological substance. Such a format indicates a consistent adherence on Castiglione's part to the idea of therapeutic humour not only in theoretical terms but also in the actual practical structuring of the work itself.

Thus, one may conclude that the statement regarding the therapeutic and consolatory need for laughter as a medicine for the soul and as an indispensable aid for living is one which deserves attention equal to that usually accorded to Castiglione's other observations on humour. It shows that Castiglione views humour not merely in the social context of courtly life (that is, humour seen as an appropriate kind of amusement), since the personal psychological benefits to be derived from such experiences by the individual, as he states and as the treatise as a whole bears out, are to be considered from the wider perspective of his fundamental vision of life.

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NOTES

* A briefer version of this paper was read at the meeting of the American Association of

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- 1 Luisa Mulas has called it "una piccola grammatica e retorica del 'ridicolo'" (105).
- 2 I am indebted to Ian Martin for checking Cortesi's text.
- 3 Antonioli 159-60, 276-78, 356-60; Pigeaud 451-54, 474-77. I wish to thank Massimo Ciavolella for drawing the latter study to my attention.
- 4 On comic catharsis, see Plebe 238 and Santarcangeli 32-33.
- 5 I am grateful to Vito R. Giustiniani for having verified the terminology used in this passage in the original Greek.
- 6 A more correct printing of the entire passage in Ficino's text is to be found in the 1503 edition of Iamblichus (8).
- 7 For an elegiac interpretation of the treatise see Rebhorn's chapter and my essays listed in the bibliography.

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