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*Joking Matters:
Politics and Dissimulation in
Castiglione's Book of the Courtier**

by JOANN CAVALLO

A gentleman is never unintentionally insulting.

—Oscar Wilde

The *Book of the Courtier* outwardly portrays an aura of cordial solidarity as courtiers gathered in Urbino from various regions of Italy attempt to describe the ideal courtier; recently, however, critics have uncovered tensions on various fronts which threaten to expose deep rifts under the elegant courtly veneer. While these “counter” readings have focused primarily on the courtier’s relation to the prince and to other courtiers, this essay aims to explore conflicts that arise from the different regional and political affiliations of the group. In particular, I argue that the largely ignored section on joke-telling teaches courtiers how to give vent to their animosity under the cover of humor and dissimulation.

The Book of the Courtier depicts a group of courtiers from various regions of Italy gathered at Guidobaldo da Montefeltro’s court in Urbino in 1507. In the course of four evenings of conversation they attempt to create with words the portrait of the ideal courtier. The text outwardly portrays an aura of cordial solidarity; recently, however, critics have uncovered tensions on various fronts which threaten to disrupt the game and to expose deep rifts under the elegant courtly veneer. These “counter” readings have focused primarily on the courtier’s relation to the prince and to other courtiers: while the book ostensibly teaches one how to win the favor of the prince and the admiration of one’s peers, Castiglione characterizes the former as a despot blinded by poor judgment and the latter as envious rivals ever ready to undermine and attack one’s efforts.¹ Given the different regional origins and affiliations of Castiglione’s courtiers, one might also expect to find tensions and conflicts owing to the animosity among the peninsula’s various political powers. That the topic of regional rivalry has not received critical attention suggests the

*I would like to thank my student Ariella Lang who, in addition to supplying the opening quote, contributed to the interpretation of the jokes in 2.52, 2.53, and 2.54. I would also like to thank my colleague Teodolinda Barolini for suggesting Castiglione’s allusions to Petrarch (in 2.44), Dante (in 2.52), and Boccaccio (in 2.54).

¹See, for example, Rebhorn, Javitch, Trafton, and Greene. In his essay, Greene writes: “We can follow the progress of the game in terms of the potentially threatening or divisive issues it raises, in terms of the doubts it flirts with, the embarrassments it skirts, the social and political and moral abysses it almost stumbles into, the dark underside of the authorized truth it sometimes seems about to reveal” (8).

care with which Castiglione has presented a sense of unity within multiplicity. Nevertheless, in keeping with the book's healthy dose of realism, Castiglione does find an outlet for the airing of regional disputes. This paper explores how regional rivalries surface in the section on joke-telling (2.43-93).² Here, under the cover of humor, courtiers take jabs at one another that reflect the political tensions among the peninsula's various regions.

The *Courtier's* section on joke-telling has generally received scant attention, and has often been dismissed as of little importance and not well integrated with the rest of the work.³ J. R. Woodhouse has been kinder to this section than most, arguing that Castiglione's aim was to achieve a sense of *italianità* which he would have found in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. As Vitore Branca has pointed out, however, Boccaccio's mercantile novel was also sensitive to regional animosity, especially that between Venice and Florence: "Venice, resounding with trade, suspicious and jealous of the Florentines, is sketched through a veil of scornful animosity with its customary 'escutcheon' of corruption, disloyalty, and garrulous frivolity, which was well known in Tuscan business circles and surely confirmed by Boccaccio's friends from Romagna" (41). Yet, since all ten of Boccaccio's storytellers were Florentine, regional disputes were not apt to develop within the frame story. Castiglione pushes further the sense of Italy's economic and political fragmentation through a conflict among his joke-tellers themselves. The conflict concerns principally the Venetian Pietro Bembo (1470-1547) and the Florentine Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena (1470-1520), both of whom were noted writers and statesmen of the time.

Bibbiena's first joke sets the stage in various ways. To Federico Fregoso's stated intention to rest in Bibbiena's words "as if under some most pleasant and shady tree alongside the soft murmur of a flowing spring,"⁴ Bibbiena replies: "If I showed you my head, you would see what shade could be expected from the leaves of my tree. As for listening to the murmur of that flowering spring, this perhaps you will do: for I was once turned into a spring, not by any of the ancient gods, but by our friend fra Mariano, and never since have I lacked water!"⁵

²All citations to Castiglione, unless otherwise noted, refer to the 1998 edition edited by Barberis. All translations of this work are from the 1959 edition by Singleton. Citations refer to book and section numbers.

³See, however, Finucci, who uses selected jokes which target women to explore how femininity is represented in the text.

⁴Castiglione, 2.44: "come sotto qualche amenissimo ed ombroso albero al mormorar suave d'un vivo fonte."

⁵Ibid.: "S'io vi mostro il capo, vederete che ombra si po aspettar dalle foglie del mio albero. Di sentire il mormorio di quel fonte vivo forse vi verrà fatto, perch'io fui già converso in

First of all, by turning Federico's compliment of his skill into a reference to his baldness and a reminder of a practical joke played on him, Bibbiena humbly makes himself the butt of his first joke. This self-deprecation reverses an earlier remark in which Bibbiena went out of his way to praise himself, for which he was duly taken to task by Cesare Gonzaga.⁶ It also paves the way for jokes that criticize or ridicule others. Second, Bibbiena is playfully echoing Petrarch's poetic description of his metamorphosis into both a tree and a fountain in *canzone* 23. The comic playwright provides a funny rewriting of the Florentine poet: while Petrarch was a "green laurel that loses no leaf for all the cold season,"⁷ Bibbiena is instead entirely leafless; while the god of Love and his Lady are behind the metamorphoses of the poet, Bibbiena specifies that he was transformed into a fountain not by a god at all but rather by a buffoon. Bibbiena thus reveals himself an expert manipulator of words, moving from metaphorical (Federico) to literal, and from lyrical (Petrarch) to farcical.

Bibbiena begins his exposition by treating jokes as a form of recreation, a release from worldly concerns through laughter: "whatever moves to laughter restores the spirit, gives pleasure, and for the moment keeps one from remembering those vexing troubles of which our life is full."⁸ At the same time, Bibbiena acknowledges that humor can be used to comment on contemporary society rather than merely escape from it: "the same sources from which laughable witticisms are derived provide us with serious phrases for praising or censuring, sometimes in the same words."⁹ Indeed, Bibbiena

un fonte, non d'alcuno degli antichi dèi, ma dal nostro fra Mariano, e da indi in qua mai non m'è mancata l'acqua."

⁶Bibbiena had earlier said: "La grazia e 'l volto bellissimo penso per certo che in me sia e perciò interviene che tante donne, quante sapete, ardeno dell'amor mio; ma della forma del corpo sto io alquanto dubbioso, e massimamente per queste mie gambe, che in vero non mi paiono così atte com'io vorrei; del busto e del resto contentomi pur assai bene" (Now this grace and beauty of countenance I do believe that I have myself, wherefore it happens that so many ladies, as you know, are ardently in love with me; but, as to the beauty of my person, I am rather doubtful, and especially as to these legs of mine which in truth do not seem as well disposed as I could wish; as to my chest and the rest, I am quite well enough satisfied) (1.19). A few chapters later, Cesare Gonzaga points the finger at "nostro messer Bernardo, il quale per troppo voglia d'esser tenuto bell'omo, ha contraffatto alle leggi del nostro gioco, domandando e non contradicendo" (our messer Bernardo who, in his excessive desire to be thought handsome, has violated the laws of our game by asking instead of gainsaying) (1.23).

⁷Petrarch, 23.38-39: "Un lauro verde / che per fredda stagion foglia non perde."

⁸Castiglione, 2.45: "Tutto quello adunque che move il riso esilara l'animo e dà piacere, nè lascia che in quel punto l'omo si ricordi delle noiose molestie, delle quali la vita nostra è piena."

⁹Ibid., 2.47: "Dai lochi donde si cavano motti da ridere, si posson medesimamente cavare sentenzie gravi per laudare e per biasimare, e talor con le medesime parole."

defines joke-telling as “il far ridere mordendo” (stinging with humor),¹⁰ and he loses no time in using jokes as a form of political censure. His first joke criticizes former popes Alexander VI (for his violence) and Nicholas V (for his overall lack of merit [2.48]). The criticism of Alexander VI would have been especially appreciated, given the fact that the pope’s son Cesare Borgia had led a brutal military campaign for the papacy in the Romagna region, becoming Duke of Urbino and ousting Guidobaldo and the Duchess Elisabetta despite the family’s previous loyalty to the papacy.

Bibbiena first shows how jokes can be used to praise others in a story about the building of the ducal palace in Urbino. In the joke, Federico da Montefeltro wonders what to do with the enormous amount of dirt that has been excavated to create the foundation. A foolish abbot suggests digging a second huge hole in which to place it (2.51). While the courtiers can laugh at the dull-witted abbot, they are also presented with a portrait of the former Duke of Urbino personally involved in laying the foundations for the very palace in which they are now holding their discussion.¹¹

Bibbiena remarks that it was Guidobaldo himself who told this joke regarding his father, and most of the early jokes are also said to have been originally told by others either present or connected to the group.¹² This creates a sense of solidarity in the group, identifying them as fellow joke-tellers and separating them from the censored butt of the jokes. Moreover, the political edge in some of these early jokes creates the impression of a shared respect for the Urbino court and a shared contempt for its enemies.

The mood is disrupted immediately after this tribute to Urbino’s former duke when Pietro Bembo suggests to Bibbiena: “And why don’t you tell the one about your friend the Florentine commander . . . ?”¹³ Bembo’s interruption fractures the unity of the group by introducing identification according to regional affiliation rather than by class or courtly culture. Furthermore, Bembo’s remark, while presented as an invitation to Bibbiena, was actually

¹⁰Ibid., 2.46.

¹¹Ibid., 2.51: “Il duca Federico ragionava di ciò che si dovesse far di così gran quantità di terreno, come s’era cavata per far i fondamenti di questo palazzo, che tuttavia si lavorava” (Duke Federico was discussing what should be done with the great mass of earth which had been excavated for the foundations of this palace, which he was then building). Castiglione had opened the entire work with a tribute to Federico da Montefeltro’s grand palace which, more than any of the city’s natural resources, turned Urbino into a revival of the golden age.

¹²These early jokes are attributed to Antonio Agnello (who, although not present, is referred to in an inclusive manner as a compatriot of the Duchess), Cesare Gonzaga (“Cesare nostro”), “one of our friends” (un de’ nostri), Gasparo Pallavicino, and “one of our doctors” (un dottor de’ nostri).

¹³Castiglione, 2.52: “E perchè non dite voi quella del vostro commissario fiorentino . . . ?”

an opening for Bembo's own telling of the joke. The joke is situated during a war waged by Naples and the Papacy against Florence in 1478, and it regards a Florentine commander besieged in Castellina (located between Florence and Siena) by Alfonso of Aragon. Upset at finding that Alfonso's troops were using poisoned crossbow missiles, the commander writes to him that if war was to be waged so barbarously, he would begin putting medicine in his cannon shot.¹⁴

By condemning poisoned arrows as "barbarous" (*crudele*), the Florentine commander seems to have a naive or soft view of war in which he does not expect the enemy to threaten his men with death. Moreover, Bembo's joke, which is set at a time before technical improvements made artillery definitively more effective than crossbows, implies that the Florentines' cannons were no match against the Neapolitans' arrows. The group of courtiers would have had to acknowledge that this had indeed been the case, since Castellina eventually fell to Alfonso's troops. As Machiavelli writes in his account of the battle: "the enemy army pressed Castellina so that the inhabitants, despairing of help, surrendered after they had withstood the siege for forty days" (8.12). Bembo thus not only belittles a character which he had introduced to Bibbiena as "your Florentine commander," but he recalls an unfortunate event in Florence's military past in order to debase the Florentines for naiveté and inefficiency in the art of warfare.¹⁵

The joke's reference to the leader of the Neapolitan troops, moreover, inevitably calls to mind the unmentioned captain of the allied papal troops — Federico da Montefeltro. Machiavelli, in fact, describes the two working in concert on their way to Castellina:

When the two armies — under Alfonso, eldest son of Ferdinand and duke of Calabria, and in the command of Federico, count of Urbino — entered Chianti by way of the Siense, who were hostile to the Florentines, they seized Radda and many other fortified towns and plundered the whole region; then they went to camp at Castellina. (8.12)

Thus Duke Guidobaldo's father, just celebrated by Bibbiena as a builder of palaces, is now recalled indirectly by Bembo as a military leader in a war against the Florentines.

¹⁴Ibid.: "Se la guerra s'aveva da far così crudele, esso ancor farebbe porre il medicame in su le pallotte dell'artiglieria."

¹⁵After Lorenzo humbled himself personally before King Ferrante and offered large sums of money, the king agreed to cease hostilities, but Alfonso of Aragon and his army retained control of Siena until the Turks seized Otranto in 1480, requiring him to return to his father's kingdom. Machiavelli has Pope Sixtus subsequently tell the Florentine ambassadors that "the war had been eliminated more by the kindness of others than by their own merits" (8.21).

Although twenty-nine years had passed, the war of 1478 was anything but forgotten history to the courtiers Castiglione depicts gathered in Urbino in 1507. The outbreak of this war followed the failure to remove Lorenzo de' Medici from power through an assassination attempt (his brother was killed while Lorenzo escaped) orchestrated by the Pazzi family with the approval of Pope Sixtus IV. The outbreak of this war followed a failed attempt to assassinate Lorenzo de' Medici (his brother was killed while Lorenzo escaped) orchestrated by the Pazzi family with the approval of Pope Sixtus IV. After recounting the Pazzi conspiracy in detail — including the pope's involvement in it — Machiavelli notes unequivocally that the attack on Florence by the pope and Neapolitan king was a direct result of the failed coup:

But since the change of state did not occur in Florence as the pope and the king desired, they decided that what they had not been able to do by conspiracy they would do by war. With the greatest speed, both put their men together to attack the state of Florence, while proclaiming that they wanted nothing other from the city than that it should rid itself of Lorenzo de' Medici, whom alone, of all the Florentines, they held for an enemy. (8.10)

The pope trying to oust Lorenzo de' Medici was none other than Francesco della Rovere, uncle to Francesco Maria della Rovere, next in line as the future Duke of Urbino. Francesco Maria is not only present at the discussion, but it was he who requested to hear about the art of joke-telling (2.42). Thus, in a single joke, Bembo has managed not only to openly poke fun at the Florentine military, but also, in a more insidious way, to turn Bibbiena's implicit ideological solidarity with the Montefeltro family into a reminder of Florence's unhappy relations with the father and the uncle of Urbino's current and future dukes.

Although Bibbiena laughs in response, he threatens to retaliate with a host of jokes about the Venetians: "Messer Pietro, if you do not hold your tongue, I will tell all the things (and they are not few) that I have myself seen and heard of your dear Venetians, especially when they try to ride horseback."¹⁶ Bibbiena's reference to "your dear Venetians" (*vostrì Veneziani*) retains the divisive identification by region initiated by Bembo. His claim that his anti-Venetian jokes are based on personal experience and contemporary accounts implicitly discredits Bembo's unverifiable anecdote regarding an event from three decades earlier. Moreover, although Bibbiena does not refer specifically to warfare, his jab at the Venetians' inability to use horses is an indirect comment on Venice's limited success in battles on the Italian

¹⁶ Castiglione, 2.52: "Messer Pietro, se voi non state cheto, io diro' tutte quelle che io stesso ho vedute e udite de' vostri veneziani che non son poche, e massimamente quando voglion fare il cavalcatore."

mainland. Venice had, in fact, been seeking to expand inland over the course of the previous century; and although they had enlarged their territory to some extent, their unbridled ambitions had been regularly checked by their neighbors. All things considered, however, Bibbiena shows restraint by keeping to allusion rather than devising a full-fledged joke.

Bembo agrees to hold his tongue, yet at the same time he signals that he knows of two other wonderful stories (“due altre bellissime”) about the Florentines. Bibbiena attempts to forestall Bembo by suggesting that they must really be about the Sienese; and before Bembo can contradict him, he continues with a joke about an unlettered Sienese who makes a blunder during a town council meeting because he does not know the meaning of the term “il prelibato” (the aforesaid).¹⁷ Bembo refuses to let the matter drop, however, and upon the conclusion of Bibbiena’s joke he states emphatically: “I am speaking of the Florentines, not of the Sienese.”¹⁸ At the urging of Emilia Pia, Bembo tells a joke which recalls another of Florence’s military ventures, this time its attempt to recapture Pisa. Bembo’s opening line sets the tone for the rest of the joke: “When the Florentines were waging war against the Pisans . . .”¹⁹ After having thus put the Florentines in the role of attackers and aggressors, Bembo then moves the story from the battlefield to a town council meeting in which the Florentines are trying to invent new ways to raise more revenues. The “punch line” occurs when two solutions are offered by an elderly and, presumably, wise, citizen: doubling the number of gates at the walls of Florence to increase the tax revenues from incoming goods and minting money non-stop in Prato and Pistoia.

Bibbiena’s previous joke, which put into doubt the qualifications of a Sienese Council member, is benign compared to Bembo’s account of a Florentine council meeting. The joke, which concerns Florence’s financial difficulties as a result of the war against Pisa, picks up thematically where Bembo’s first joke left off. The loss of Pisa dates back to the invasion of Charles VIII in 1494. Florence’s ruler Piero de’ Medici (son of Lorenzo) initially sided with Naples and refused to grant the French army passage through Tuscany. Naples, at this time, had recently come under the rule of Alfonso of Aragon upon the death of his father. Yet Alfonso, portrayed as so successful against the Florentines in Bembo’s earlier joke, fled at the approach of Charles’s troops, and the realm of Naples, left in the hands of his son Ferrantino, fell easily to the French. Piero de’ Medici, finding himself alone against

¹⁷The joke supports the designation of Siena by Commynes (French diplomat and Medici spy) as “the worst governed city in Italy” (cited in Litvinoff, 90).

¹⁸Castiglione, 2.52: “Io parlo de’ Fiorentini e non de’ Sanesi.”

¹⁹Ibid.: “Quando i signori fiorentini faceano la guerra contra’ Pisani . . .”

the French who were already on Tuscan soil, made inordinate concessions to them which included the fortress of Pisa. The Florentines, infuriated at Piero for first offending Charles VIII and then handing over to him their most cherished possessions, banished him and instituted a republic.

Thirteen years later, at the fictional time of the conversations at Urbino, Florence's war to regain Pisa was still going strong. To offset the financial crisis created by the war, the city did devise new forms of direct and indirect taxation and had taken to minting large amounts of new money, the two practices referred to in the joke. But Bembo's sting goes deeper. The first solution proposed by the Florentine council member, to double the number of gates, contains the admission that "we get no revenue greater than what comes from the customs levied at the gates of Florence."²⁰ This statement implies both that Florence is heavily dependent on imports, including, presumably, goods coming from Venetian merchants, and that the city already places an excessively high tax on those goods. The second solution, that Prato and Pistoia should mint money day and night, contains the equally damaging admission that the city of Florence already does so. Thus, not only does the Florentine speaker show a careless attitude toward the allied cities of Prato and Pistoia, but he unwittingly reveals and condones his own city's irresponsible fiscal policies. When he concludes that the latter course "is the quicker and less costly,"²¹ he gives a final picture of Florentine narrow-mindedness, indifference, and egotism. To realize the full impact of Bembo's joke about Florence's dire economic straits due to the war against Pisa, we just need remember that the republic of Venice was not a bemused bystander in all of this but rather an active supporter of Pisa against Florence.²² Bembo, moreover, could have sworn to the veracity of his story this time, since the corruption and short-sightedness of the Florentine political system was bemoaned by the Florentines themselves. Bembo could have also pointed to no less vehement criticisms of Florence in a text as authoritative as Dante's *Divine Comedy*.²³

As the courtiers laugh at Bembo's story, the mischievous Emilia Pia, who had earlier encouraged Bembo to pursue his regional antagonism, now

²⁰Ibid.: "non avemo le più vive intrate che le gabelle delle porte di Firenze."

²¹Ibid.: "è più breve e ancor de minor spesa."

²²When Venice, the Emperor Maximilian, Milan, Spain, and the Pope created the League of Venice for mutual defense against Charles VIII, Florence was more interested in regaining Pisa than in ousting the French and therefore refused to join. As a result, the League members supported Pisan liberty. For Venetian assistance to Pisa, see Guicciardini, 117-18.

²³Written after Dante's political exile from Florence, the *Comedy* presents the city as a den of corruption and decadence. See in particular *Inferno* 6 (Ciaccio), *Inferno* 15 (Brunetto Latini), and *Paradiso* 15 (Cacciaguida).

pushes Bibbiena to take revenge for such a direct offense: "Messer Bernardo, will you allow messer Pietro to ridicule the Florentines in this manner without taking your revenge?"²⁴ Joke-telling has now been turned into a warfare of words. Bibbiena, however, is extremely civil, and he refuses to engage in a proliferation of insults. While acknowledging that the story did indeed offend him, he shifts the blame to Emilia Pia for having requested it in the first place: "I will forgive him this affront, for if he has displeased me in ridiculing the Florentines, he has pleased me in obeying you, which I too would always do."²⁵ Bibbiena thereby refrains from making good on his aforementioned threat to Bembo to ridicule the Venetians and he appears to be uninterested in seeking revenge for this second affront to the Florentines. Of course, the early reader would have known that in 1509, just two years after these fictional conversations of Urbino, Florence would recapture Pisa, while Venice would lose all her mainland holdings in a war against the combined forces of the League of Cambrai (in which Florence was allied with the Pope, France, Spain, and the Holy Roman Empire). But Castiglione uses more than the ironies of history to resolve this politically explosive issue.

Cesare Gonzaga of Mantua (1475-1512) steps in to relate the next joke which, tellingly, is set in Venice. The joke involves a Brescian visitor to the city during the feast of the Assumption who, upon seeing a trombone for the first time, mistakenly thinks that the instrument goes down the musician's throat as he plays. The point of contrast has been diverted from the conflicts between Florence and its enemy states to a harmless encounter between a country bumpkin and the opulent Venice, that is, from region versus region to countryside versus city. Cesare has also shifted the focus from the arena of war to a religious celebration of human transcendence. At the same time, however, the joke provides the occasion for Cesare to remark on "how much merchandise (. . .), how much silverware, spices, cloth, and fabrics"²⁶ were displayed by the city. This list of goods is an indication of the city's mercantile success. Cesare's overall description of the wealth and lavish entertainment of the Venetians is in stark contrast to the dire economic circumstances of the Florentines just outlined by Bembo. In addition, the designation of the wide-eyed traveler as a Brescian may have served as a reminder that Brescia was one of the cities that had effectively come under Venetian control in the course of Venice's mainland expansion the previous century. Thus, although

²⁴Castiglione, 2.53: "Comportarete voi, messer Bernardo, che messer Pietro burli così i Fiorentini senza farne vendetta?"

²⁵Ibid.: "Io gli perdono questa ingiuria, perchè s'egli m'ha fatto dispiacere in burlar i Fiorentini, hammi compiaciuto in obedir voi, il che io ancor farei sempre."

²⁶Ibid.: "quante mercanzie e quanti argenti, speziarie, panni e drappi."

Cesare seems to want to deflect tensions by diverting the focus away from the Florentine-Venetian rivalry, his flattering allusions to Venetian mercantile and military success, as well as to the splendor of its ritual celebrations, mark his intervention as a discretely pro-Venetian move.

At the same time, Cesare's reference to Venetian opulence could be read in a negative way as well. The Venetians do not appear to realize that this holy day (*solenità*) is meant to commemorate the Ascension of Christ. Rather, they have fashioned it into a statement of their mercantile supremacy at sea and they act out a ritualized wedding between their city, referred to here as *la Signoria*, and the Mediterranean Sea: "then the Signory went forth with great pomp to wed the sea in the *Bucentaur*, with so many handsomely dressed gentlemen on board, so much music and singing, that it seemed a paradise."²⁷ While on this particular holy day *paradise* should refer to Christ's new dwelling place, here it is used mundanely to indicate the effects of the musical spectacle and pomp of the Venetians. Thus Cesare could have, with little effort, defended his joke in Florentine company as having been told at the expense of the Venetians. The point here is that the joke, on the surface an attempt to deflect the regional rivalry and reconcile the group, could have also been read as a veiled continuation of the rivalry in support of either Venice *or* Florence. Cesare's joke has introduced an element of ambiguity and dissimulation that had not been used thus far in the openly hostile exchange between Bembo and Bibbiena. The lesson will not be lost on Bibbiena and his fellow Florentine Giuliano de' Medici, who will now turn to dissimulation as a technique which will allow them to play out the regional hostilities introduced by Bembo.

Without responding to Cesare directly, Bibbiena resumes his exposition by turning to the subject of affectation which he says, while usually annoying, can be taken to an extreme which makes it the subject of laughter (2.54). His listeners might now be expecting Bibbiena to capitalize on the implications of Cesare's joke and attribute this vice to the ostentatious Venetians, yet he discretely avoids all regional markers, first noting the pretension of greatness, valor, and nobility in "some persons," and then turning to the subject of affectation in women. The joke which Bibbiena selects as an example could not be any further from economic or military affairs, or from the world of men for that matter, since it concerns the preoccupation of an unidentified woman over Judgment Day. The woman worries about appearing naked before the tribunal of Christ, saying: "I cannot endure the distress I feel at the thought that my body will have to be seen naked along with the

²⁷Ibid.: "poi la Signoria con gran pompa esser uscita a sposar il mare in Bucentoro, sopra il quale erano tanti gentilomini ben vestiti, tanti suoni e canti, che pareva un paradiso."

rest."²⁸ Although the story is ostensibly aimed at a woman's affectation, Bibbiena puts Cesare's prior description of the Venetian paradise in a less scintillating light by reminding the courtiers that they will appear before God naked, that is, without their material wealth and outer trappings.

The joke may be aimed at Venetian affectation in a more specific way as well. Bibbiena does not specify that the woman is Venetian, yet since he had earlier advised the courtiers to seek a model of humor in the *Decameron* (2.49), he may now be relying on them to supply via Boccaccio the Venetian identification that he so cautiously avoids in the joke. The courtiers might remember that in *Decameron* 4.2, a friar whose lewd actions earned him a bad reputation in Imola moves to Venice, referred to as "the receptacle of every kind of trash" (d'ogni bruttura ricevitrice). There he encounters Madam Lisetta da Ca Quirino, the wife of a wealthy Venetian merchant who was away in Flanders on business. Not only is she described as "vain and simple" (bamba e sciocca), but Boccaccio tells us that such characteristics reveal her as truly *viniziana* since Venetians are "all feather-brained" (tutti bergoli). Like the woman in Bibbiena's joke, Boccaccio's Madam Lisetta is excessively concerned with Paradise. In this case it is because she anticipates the affects of her beauty in that new setting, as she asks the friar: "How many women do you see whose charms are such as mine, who would be fair in Paradise?"²⁹ As a result of her vanity and her confusion between earthly and divine standards, she is duped into having sex with the corrupt friar whom she believes is the angel Gabriel.

Yet even if the courtiers were to interpret Bibbiena's joke as an implicit condemnation of Venetian ostentation, it still does little to counter Bembo's open mockery of Florence. It is therefore telling that just as Bibbiena is beginning a new joke, Giuliano de' Medici (1479-1516) interrupts by saying that, whatever Bibbiena's joke may be, it cannot be more excellent or "subtle" (sottile) than the one he heard told by "a fellow Tuscan of ours" (un nostro toscano).³⁰ Given that Giuliano's announcement of his joke continues the division along regional lines, one may suspect that he interrupted Bibbiena at this precise moment in order to counter Bembo's insults to the Florentines which Bibbiena apparently intended to let pass unavenged. Giuliano, in fact, had ample reason to be offended by Bembo's jokes. His father Lorenzo il Magnifico had been the object of the Neapolitan and papal attack on Floren-

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.54: "io non posso tollerar l'affanno che sento, pensando che il mio ancor abbia ad esser veduto ignudo."

²⁹ Boccaccio, 4.2: "Quante ce ne vedete voi, le cui bellezze sien fatte come le mie, che sarei bella nel Paradiso?"

³⁰ Castiglione, 2.55.

tine territory in 1478, and his uncle, whose name he bore, was killed in the attempt on his father's life that preceded the war. Bembo's second joke regarding the Florentine Republic would have been equally injurious, since not only was it Giuliano's brother Piero who had relinquished Pisa to the French, but Giuliano himself had been expelled from Florence along with Piero as a result and was still living in exile twelve years later. Moreover, Giuliano would have certainly considered Bembo's sly reminders of past hostility between the Medici and both Duke Guidobaldo's father and Francesco Maria's uncle out of place, given the fact that he had been an honored guest at the court of Urbino since his exile.

In Giuliano's joke, a merchant from the Tuscan city of Lucca, while in Poland, wants to buy sables from a group of Muscovites. There is a war going on between the King of Poland and the Duke of Muscovy, and thus a meeting is arranged with the Muscovites at the Polish border. A wide frozen river divides the two parties, and it is so cold that when the Muscovites yell their prices to the Lucchese, their words are frozen in mid-air. The Poles set a bonfire which melts the Muscovites' words which after an hour reach the ears of the Lucchese. No business is transacted, however, since by this time the Muscovites have departed and, in any event, the Lucchese merchant finds the prices too high.

There are several features that allow us to see this story as Giuliano's revenge. First of all, the joke is about a Tuscan, not from Florence this time but from Lucca. This not only avoids a too obvious allusion to the Florence-Venice dispute, but it enlarges Tuscany beyond the warring cities of Florence and Pisa. The reference to the Lucchese merchant as a "fellow Tuscan of ours" implies a common identity and solidarity between Florence and other Tuscan cities.

The war referred to in the story is conveniently far removed from the Italian peninsula. It is the lengthy war between Muscovy and Poland as a consequence of the Muscovite policy of expansion under Ivan the Great, grand prince of Moscow from 1462 to 1505. The subject of the story, however, is not war but trade. The war means nothing more to the Lucchese merchant than increased difficulty in communicating with his potential suppliers, and although it leads to fear and suspicion on the part of the Muscovites, it does not prevent the Poles from assisting the communication and potential trade between the Muscovites and the Lucchese, first by accompanying the Lucchese to the meeting place and then by building the bonfire which melts the frozen words. By showing a case in which cooperation in the interest of trade takes precedence over national sentiment, Giuliano recognizes a separation between the political ambitions of rulers and the practical needs of merchants and other citizens.

Both the shift from the Italian peninsula to Muscovy and from military to mercantile encounters have specific implications for Venice. If in Cesare's story Venice had been symbolically wedded to the Mediterranean Sea, Giuliano's fellow Tuscan is seeking out new trading opportunities in the other principal commercial world that was comprised by Europe in the fifteenth century: the Baltic-North Sea. This area was important for supplying both necessities and luxuries, including fur such as sable, especially along its great rivers. Although Venice had considerable contacts at the ports of the North Sea dating from medieval times, they did not dominate trade from this Northern market. Their principal rival was Genoa, but given the animosity between Florence and Genoa, it was hardly likely that Giuliano de' Medici would have privileged a Genoese in his story.³¹ The dealings of the Lucchese merchant signal that the way to trade was accessible to all, and the fact that this merchant travels on his own and is not supported or protected by a military force separates the Tuscan style from that of Venice. The point may be that, like their fellow Tuscan in the joke, the Florentines did not need the outlet to the sea provided by Pisa because they had the initiative and independence to explore even distant land routes. Giuliano refrains from being too openly boastful, however, since, although we may assume that the Lucchese conducted trade with the Poles, he does not bring home the Muscovites' sable.

The most striking feature of the story are the words that are frozen in mid-air and then melted.³² By alerting the reader to the fact that responses can be delayed for a variety of reasons before reaching their destination, Castiglione thus prepares us for Bibbiena's delayed response to Bembo (2.56). Bibbiena picks up with the story that he had planned to tell when he was interrupted by Giuliano. Although it may have appeared to Giuliano that Bibbiena had renounced revenge, this joke shows that he was indeed ready to strike his own blow against the Venetians. He begins by agreeing that his story is not as subtle ("sottile") as that of Giuliano, while claiming that it is good ("bella") nevertheless. By using the same adjective as Giuliano to describe his joke, Bibbiena simultaneously commends the wit of his fellow Florentine and suggests a link between the two jokes. He then repeats that this story had been told to him by "[that] friend you [. . .] heard me speak of before" (quello amico del qual v'ho detto), referred to before Giuliano's

³¹Sapori notes: "Poland, which had been visited by Italian merchants since the thirteenth century, experienced a veritable invasion of Genoese, followed by citizens of Lucca, Bologna, Florence, and Venice"; see 86-9.

³²Interestingly, Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* also tells of sounds which are frozen and then melted. By contrast, these sounds stem from a battle which took place the previous winter and take Pantagruel and his companions quite by surprise (4.55-56).

interruption as “that friend of ours who never lets us want for jokes” (quello amico nostro che non ce ne lascia mancare). By attributing the upcoming invented story (or “bella bugia”) to an unidentified friend, Bibbiena can both claim and deny authorship. Moreover, his reference to the unidentified source of the joke as “nostro” creates an ambiguity between the original “nostro” of the group of courtiers gathered at Urbino and the newly formed *nostro* of the Florentine clan.

In the joke, a gentleman (*gentilomo*) is playing a game of chess in front of the King of Portugal. His opponent is a monkey brought from a land recently discovered by Portuguese sailors. When the monkey checkmates the gentleman, the latter, in a fit of rage, hurls the king piece at the poor animal, hitting him in the head. The monkey seems to complain to the King, and is reluctant to accept the gentleman’s challenge to another game. After repeated solicitation, the monkey agrees, but this time he devises a scheme to avoid being hit with another chess piece. At the same moment that he checkmates his opponent, he reaches under his opponent’s elbow, grabs his taffeta cushion, and uses it as a shield against any future blows.

Bibbiena’s first strike against Bembo in this joke is political. If Giuliano de’ Medici had countered Cesare Gonzaga’s allusions to Venice’s dominance in the Mediterranean by depicting a Tuscan presence in the Baltic-North Sea, Bibbiena now recalls an event that signifies the end of Venetian supremacy in trade with India. Until the early sixteenth century, Venice had provided Europe with Indian spices and other commodities which it purchased from Arab middlemen in Alexandria and the Black Sea ports. Bibbiena’s mention of “the country or world recently discovered by the Portuguese sailors” (paese o mondo novamente trovato dai marinari portoghesi) is an allusion to the Portuguese discovery of the Cape route at the end of the fifteenth century, which enabled them to sail around Africa and directly to India. When Bibbiena notes that the sailors brought back not only the monkey but “various animals and other things (varii animali e d’altre cose), the vagueness of the phrase allows the reader to imagine any of the products that the Portuguese were now able to import directly from India. If earlier Bembo had poked his finger in Florence’s sorest spot (its inability to recapture Pisa with its maritime port) and Cesare had recalled Venice’s material riches gained from trade, Bibbiena retaliates by calling to mind the specific circumstances which spelled the end of Venice’s monopoly on the Indian spice trade.³³ Castiglione, moreover, uses his early reader’s knowledge of subsequent history to add metaphorical spice to Bibbiena’s joke. Within just two years of these conversations, Portugal would defeat combined Egyptian

³³ See Guicciardini, 177-79 and 202-03.

and Indian fleets (in the battle of Diu) in the Indian Ocean, thus assuring its control of the rich spice trade and making inevitable Venetian decline.

But Bibbiena's joke is about more than Venice's loss of mercantile power. The joke involves both an inward and outward mirroring of courtly society. The setting, which describes a gentleman, presumably a courtier, at play with a king as onlooker, is a reflection of the gathering at Urbino in which various courtiers play a game under the authorial gaze of Emilia Pia and the Duchess. That same society is mirrored within the joke by the game of chess, with its king, queen, bishops, knights, horses, and pawns. There is, moreover, a correspondence between the game of chess in the joke and the game of forming the perfect courtier in Castiglione's book. Both games not only hold up for view an image of courtly society, they also bring out the characteristics, whether negative or positive, of the players. Bibbiena's players use objects while Castiglione's courtiers use words, but Cesare's joke about the Muscovites and the frozen river has already shown how solid and tangible words can be.

Looking more closely at those players, we can glimpse a certain resemblance between Bembo and the gentleman of the joke. Their excessively competitive spirit and aggressive tendencies lead them to neglect courtliness and to unfairly injure their opponent. Moreover, the reference to the gentleman's taffeta cushion not only suggests a particular penchant for lustrous silk fabric, but may serve to hint at his Venetian affiliation given that Venice was at that time one of the leading importers and producers of fine silk fabrics in Europe.³⁴

Continuing the analogy, Bibbiena can be likened to the monkey. Both are victims of an aggressive attack which takes place in the presence of a figure of authority. Neither the complacent King of Portugal nor the imprudent Emilia Pia show any inclination to come to the aid of the victim, who must use his own wit to keep from further harm. Although both appear in the guise of comical and uncomely creatures (we recall that Bibbiena began his exposition by poking fun at his appearance), they manage to get the upper hand through intelligence, resourcefulness, self-control, and discretion. The monkey and Bibbiena are even linked by their *sprezzatura*, Castiglione's term for a studied nonchalance. It is "without revealing what it was about" (*senza mostrar che fosse suo fatto*) that the monkey quietly (*chetamente*) reaches over and pulls the cushion out from under his opponent's elbow before the latter can realize what is happening. Likewise, Bibbiena appears not to have given further consideration to Bembo's insults during the very time that he is transforming himself from victim to victor.

³⁴ Jardine, 18-19, 56-57.

The mirroring extends beyond the two players to the figure of the king. It is significant that the gentleman hits the monkey precisely with the king piece. Bibbiena's humor is at its most *mordente* (stinging) in his depiction of this scene: the gentleman "took [hold of] the king [which] was very big . . ." (prese in mano il re, che era assai grande), while the monkey, after the blow, "seemed to be demanding justice of the King for the wrong that had been done it" (parea che domandasse ragione al Re del torto che le era fatto). Although the reader can easily distinguish between the chess piece and the Portuguese sovereign through the use of lower and upper case letters, the courtiers that Castiglione imagines gathered around Bibbiena, upon hearing these words spoken, could have appreciated the humor caused by the fact that the same term *il re* ("king") referred to both. If only for an instant, Castiglione suggests the hilariously incongruent picture of the courtier, in a fit of rage, bopping the monkey on the head with a corpulent Portuguese king. On a more serious note, the fact that the weapon used to hurt the monkey was the same as the figure of authority observing the game suggests that the king is indirectly responsible for allowing such discourteous and abusive behavior to take place. While the King of Portugal sits by passively as his courtier strikes an apparently defenseless animal, Emilia Pia, delegated by the Duchess as the arbiter, actually encourages a potentially explosive situation by allowing Bembo to deride the Florentines. One could say that Bembo inflicted his blow to Bibbiena using the symbolic king piece, Emilia Pia, as the instrument.

Immediately following the conclusion of this joke, Bibbiena gives the following advice: "the Courtier must take care not to appear malicious and spiteful, and not to utter witticisms and *arguzie* solely to annoy and hurt; because such men often suffer deservedly in all their person for the sins of their tongue."³⁵ Although this statement ostensibly refers to the next category of jokes (the *detto* or *sentenzia*), it can serve as the point of the lesson just demonstrated. Pietro Bembo's two jokes against the Florentines made him seem indeed malicious and spiteful, and deserving perhaps of the blow that the gentleman chess player unfairly gave the monkey. On the other hand, Bibbiena's revenge was so clever and subtle that it would have aroused admiration and not animosity from those who happened to grasp it. Moreover, it was done in response to an insult, and thus, according to Bibbiena himself, was the best kind of joke not only because it is well-motivated but also because it requires the spontaneity and quick wit of the joke-teller.

³⁵ Castiglione, 2.57: "devesi guardare il cortegiano di non parer maligno e velenoso, e dir motti ed arguzie solamente per far dispetto e dar nel core; perché tali omini spesso per difetto della lingua meritamente hanno castigo in tutto 'l corpo."

Bibbiena's subsequent jokes against the Sienese (presumably the two which he had in mind when he countered Bembo's mention of two good jokes against the Florentines in 2.52) involve, in fact, retaliations for unprovoked and malicious insults. The first joke is metaphorically placed in the context of warfare when Bibbiena notes the pleasure derived from turning the sense of another man's jibe against him and thus wounding him with his own arms.³⁶ In the joke, when the humanist-adventurer Galeotto da Narni arrives in Siena and asks the location of the inn, a Sienese makes a rude remark about his obesity instead, saying, "Other men carry their valise behind but this man carries his in front."³⁷ The traveler immediately responds by saying, "So one does in a land of thieves."³⁸ The Sienese are thus not only depicted as characteristically rude to non-locals (even to men of learning such as Da Narni), but are also labelled as thieves. The second joke directly pits a Sienese against a Florentine (2.68). Bibbiena prefaces the joke by openly noting the animosity between the two groups: "for the most part, as you know, they are enemies."³⁹ He thus acknowledges the audience's awareness of the peninsula's various regional rivalries, and prepares them for a display of that animosity within the confines of the joke. During a banquet in Ferrara attended by many ladies, a Sienese tells a Florentine that his city's recent alliance with the emperor will result in benefits to Siena to the detriment of Florence: "We have married Siena to the Emperor, and have given Florence to him as a dowry."⁴⁰ The Florentine quickly responds in retaliation: "Siena will first be possessed ('possessed' in the French sense, but he used the Italian word); then in good time the dowry will be discussed,"⁴¹ thus suggesting that Siena would be "deflowered" by the emperor without any of the positive results expected by the city. As the listeners could have expected from a joke told by Bibbiena, the Florentine in the story gets the last laugh. Moreover, beyond the thrust of the joke, one could note that it was the Sienese who (like Bembo) disturbed a festive scene in a courtly city (like Urbino) by expressing regional hostility, and the Florentine who (like Bibbiena) responded to the attack with a stinging rejoinder. Bibbiena goes on to consider the joke to be inappropriate, not because of its political nature, but because of the unseemliness of its sexual innuendos in the presence of ladies.

³⁶Ibid., 2.60: "pungendolo con le sue proprie arme."

³⁷Ibid.: "Gli altri portano le bolge dietro, e costui le porta davanti."

³⁸Ibid.: "Così si fa in terra de' ladri."

³⁹Castiglione, 2.68: "per lo più, come sapete, sono nemici"; my translation.

⁴⁰Ibid.: "Noi abbiám maritato Siena allo Imperatore ed avemogli dato Fiorenza in dota."

⁴¹Ibid.: "Siena sarà prima cavalcata (alla franzese, ma disse il vocabulo italiano); poi la dote si litigherà a bell'aggio."

Yet Bibbiena himself did not hesitate to tell the joke in the presence of ladies. While this sudden focus on women may be preparing us for the “questione della donna” which will be the subject of book 3, it also serves to divert attention from the political focus of the joke.

Continuing his exposition of joke-telling, Bibbiena describes various functions and techniques that could easily refer back to his revenge on Bembo. First, he reiterates the use of jokes as a potent form of social criticism: “It is also good when by a retort we reprehend something without seeming to mean to do so.”⁴² Bibbiena especially values jokes that use dissimulation, which is, as he explains, “when one thing is said and another is tacitly understood.”⁴³ This relies on the ability to convey a second meaning beyond the literal one, of using “a word in which there is a hidden meaning different from the one we seem to intend.”⁴⁴ In this way, there is the advantage of being able to deny the intentionality of the reprimand. As an example, Bibbiena recalls a joke he told earlier (2.76) about the Spanish court in which a certain Alonso implied that a noble woman was a prostitute, saying: “although what Alonso said to signora Boadilla does touch a little on chastity, it does not displease me, because it is done in an offhand way and is so veiled that it can be understood on the face of it, so that he could have dissimulated and claimed he did not mean it in that way.”⁴⁵

Would Bibbiena’s fellow courtiers have understood the political and personal underpinnings of his jokes?⁴⁶ Bibbiena concludes the joke of the spiteful chess player by drawing attention to the resourceful monkey: “Now

⁴²Ibid., 2.71: “È ancor bello, quando con una risposta l’omo riprende quello che par che riprendere non voglia.”

⁴³Ibid., 2.72: “quando si dice una cosa e tacitamente se ne intende un’altra.”

⁴⁴Ibid., 2.81: “una parola, nella quale è una nascosta significazione lontana da quello che par che dir si voglia.”

⁴⁵Ibid., 2.93: “quello che disse Alonso alla signora Boadiglia, avvenga che tocchi un poco la onestà, non mi dispiace, perché è tirato assai lontano ed è tanto occulto che si po intendere semplicemente, di modo che esso potea dissimularlo ed affermare non l’aver detto a quel fine.”

⁴⁶Many of Bibbiena’s other jokes, in fact, have political implications. The Medici are depicted in a positive light in chapters 2.65 (Cosimo’s answer to the exiled Palla de’ Strozzi), 2.70 (Lorenzo il Magnifico’s answer to a “boring buffoon” and a “stupid fellow”), and 2.78 (Cosimo’s “friendly admonition”). See also 2.61 (incontinence of the clergy), 2.62 (papal benefices), 2.63 (Duke Guidobaldo during a military campaign; the Spanish Inquisition), 2.64 (a Genoese spendthrift), 2.66 (praise of two Italian fighters by the Great Captain Don Consalvo Fernandez di Cordoba; French King Louis XII; Djem Othman, brother to the Grand Turk, while prisoner in Rome), 2.71 (Marquis Federico Gonzaga of Mantua; at-yrant), 2.72 (against the Cardinal of Pavia), 2.73 (magnanimity of King Alfonso I of Aragon), 2.74 (warfare), 2.75 (Duke Guidobaldo against Pope Alexander VI and Cesare Borgia), 2.75 (Marquis Federico Gonzaga of Mantua), 2.76 (Spanish court), 2.77 (corrupt cardinals), 2.77

you see how wise, wary, and discreet that monkey was.”⁴⁷ While after most other jokes Castiglione merely notes the general laughter, here he depicts Cesare Gonzaga agreeing with Bibbiena that the monkey was indeed a great authority and suggesting that “the Republic of Indian Monkeys” had sent it to Portugal to win fame.⁴⁸ Given that it was precisely Cesare who had earlier introduced the technique of dissimulation with his joke about the Brescian in Venice, the Mantuan courtier may very well have commended the monkey at this point in order to show he both grasped and appreciated the astuteness and efficiency of Bibbiena’s revenge.

At the time of the book’s publication, Bembo was the only one of the four joke-tellers treated here who was still alive, and one may wonder whether he would have taken offense at Castiglione’s negative depiction of him in this section. If so, Castiglione could have taken the same course available to the Spaniard Alonso in Bibbiena’s joke (2.76) by dissimulating and claiming that he did not mean it in that way. We know that Castiglione had sent Bembo an earlier version of the manuscript for comments, but it may not have contained the full development of the battle of words between the Venetian and the Florentine. Extant manuscripts, in fact, now referred to in the critical edition as the *seconda redazione* (“second draft”), contain a much tamer version in which Bembo does not tell his second anti-Florentine joke.⁴⁹ In any event, if the historical Bembo were to protest his depiction in book 2, Castiglione could have pointed to book 4 where it is Bembo who shows how to transcend active duties and worldly ambition in order to reach a contemplative Neoplatonic state of true happiness. Thus, just as Bibbiena corrected his inappropriate self-praise in book 1 to be the consummate courtier and joke-teller in book 2, Bembo will overcome his undo aggressivity of book 2 in order to deliver the crowning speech of book 4. Castiglione’s courtiers are not depicted as perfect; rather, they are portrayed in the active process of improving themselves.

Castiglione’s tribute to Bibbiena in book 2 does not come as a surprise, given the close friendship between the two courtiers. Castiglione, in letters to his mother dating from before Bibbiena had been made a cardinal, refers to

(Florentine Council), 2.78 (court of Spain; against Cardinal of Pavia), 2.79 (corruption of the clergy), 2.80 (Captain Peralta), 2.81 (Francesco Maria della Rovere), and 2.82 (corruption over benefices; King Alfonso I of Aragon).

⁴⁷Ibid., 2.61: “Or vedete se questa simia era savia, avveduta e prudente.”

⁴⁸Ibid.: “Questa è forza, — disse, — che tra l’altre simie fosse dottore, e di molta autorità; e penso che la Republica delle simie indiane la mandasse in Portogallo per acquistar riputazione in paese incognito.”

⁴⁹See *La seconda redazione*, 139-43. The first draft which circulated among Castiglione’s friends in 1518 is not extant.

his friend as *our* Bernardo (“Bernardo nostro”). At the time, Bibbiena was trying to arrange a marriage between Castiglione and a young girl of the Medici family. On the day of Bibbiena’s nomination to the Cardinalate, he writes to Castiglione as well as to his own brother (Rome, 23 September 1513).⁵⁰ At the same time, Castiglione’s intentions may reach beyond the personal to the political. Bibbiena’s victory on behalf of the Florentines would have extended implicitly to the Medici family to whom both Bibbiena and Castiglione were tied. Bibbiena was a loyal Medici supporter who had, in fact, followed the family into exile in 1494 and, after Piero’s death in 1503, served Cardinal Giovanni de’ Medici as secretary. He was instrumental in the return of Giuliano to Florence in 1512, and in the election of Giovanni as Pope Leo X the following year, and he remained a close friend and adviser to the Medici pope until his death in 1520. At the time of the revision and publication of the *Courtier*, it happened that Castiglione found himself the papal nuncio in Spain of another Medici pope, Clement VII (1523-1534).

As I have argued, the *Courtier*’s section on joke-telling, deemed by a number of critics as uninteresting and indeed unrelated to the rest of the work, takes on both suspense and political significance through the playing out of regional rivalries. As much as Castiglione would like his characters to transcend the temporal framework of contemporary society, he also acknowledges that they are well entrenched in the political and economic vicissitudes of their time and that their relationships with each other are not free from the fervid local patriotism which divided state from state. Bembo’s all too obvious regional digs make the reader aware of a potentially negative use of jokes to vent such hostilities. Ironically, it is thanks to Bembo’s breach of etiquette that Bibbiena can reveal himself to be a witty joke-teller and an ideal courtier. Through his masterful use of word-play, Bibbiena shows how jokes can be a viable outlet for aggressivity and how one can checkmate his opponent while playing by the rules of the game.

This section also allows Castiglione to offer a practical demonstration of the benefits of dissimulation in courtly politics. Before the courtiers began to adopt dissimulation in their joke-telling, personal and regional hostilities are either expressed too openly (Bembo) or repressed completely (Bibbiena). While the former mode threatened to break up the carefully cultivated sense

⁵⁰Although Castiglione’s relation to Bembo appears to have been cordial enough, there is only one extant letter between the two. I do not mean to imply, however, that the political tensions played out in this section reflect a permanently hostile relationship between Bembo and either Castiglione, Bibbiena, or the Medici. Bembo later had occasion to solicit Bibbiena’s help in Rome when the latter was a cardinal serving the Medicean Pope Leo X. Bembo became papal secretary to Leo, but he was not raised to the cardinalate until 1539 by the Farnese Pope Paul III.

of harmony at the Urbino court, the latter prohibited one from stating one's own views or defending oneself from attack. Cesare Gonzaga first introduces dissimulation with a joke that lends itself to a pro-Venetian, pro-Florentine, or simply neutral reading. Given the courtier's vulnerability in a wholly unpredictable and constantly changing system of alliances, the multiple readings of such a joke would allow Cesare to claim whichever stance served him at any particular moment. Giuliano de' Medici and Bibbiena both then use dissimulation to wage a counterattack. Shifting the conflict to a battleground located "in-between the lines" allows them to express their views which otherwise would have been silenced due to the requisites of polite society. Dissimulation, then, is presented not as a means of falsifying, but rather as a mode of speech replete with hidden meanings which allow one to speak one's truth. When Bibbiena later includes dissimulation as an element of joke-telling (2.72), thus giving a theoretical stamp of approval to the practice he demonstrated earlier, he is explicitly calling attention to an essential courtly "virtue" whose usefulness goes beyond joke-telling to pervade all forms of social interaction.⁵¹ Castiglione, no less than Machiavelli, modifies the traditional notion of virtues to reflect the realities of his time. Yet whereas Machiavelli told his ambitious prince that he could secure and maintain a state by adopting the characteristics of the lion and the fox, Castiglione shows his vulnerable courtiers that they can defend themselves and sometimes win acclaim by following the precedent of Bibbiena's monkey.

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⁵¹Dissimulation was later codified as the *modus operandi* of the courtier. See Torquato Accetto's treatise *Della dissimulazione onesta*.

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