Festive Humanism:
The Case of Luscinius

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The Roman Emperor Augustus, we are told, was once astonished to see a young man very similar to him in appearance. To follow the shortest and most effective version of the story: Augustus asked the young man "Was your mother ever in Rome?" The young man immediately replied, "No, but my father was, often." The literary origin of this joke is the *Saturnalia* of Macrobius (Book II ch. 4), whose fifth-century intellectuals sit around the dinner table discussing a wide variety of topics, including the techniques of wit and humor. Another author of late antiquity, Valerius Maximus, tells a somewhat different version of the story (Book IX, ch. 14), with the same punch-line. It is a remarkable story, for a number of reasons. It is considerably more laughable than many of what the Romans called *facetiae*; it provides the ideal illustration of Cicero's recommended technique of witty riposte; and to my knowledge it is the only joke which can be found in every century from the fourteenth to the twentieth. Petrarch revived it for the Renaissance, where it was used by the author of the *Mensa philosophica* and by Pauli, Erasmus, Bonaventure Des Périers, Guazzo in his *Civil Conversation*, Thomas Wilson in his *Rhetoric*, Pedro Mexía and Luigi Alamanni; at some point before the nineteenth century it migrates to Central Europe and becomes attached to the Emperor Franz Joseph; and Freud used it in Chapter 2 of *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*.
However, satisfying though this joke is, it is also misleading. We know that many Renaissance humanists, most famously Erasmus and Thomas More, set great store by festivitas or urbanitas, which in their case seems to mean something like "a joking approach to life." The words festivus, urbanus and facetus, for these humanists, are not just epithets for jokes, but essential attributes of the ideal humanist. Thomas More immortalized this attitude to life by making a joke on the scaffold moments before his execution. Large numbers of humanists recommend wit, humor and joking, in life in general as well as at the banqueting table; an interesting and little-known example can be found in the De sermone of Pontano, which is almost entirely devoted to defining and illustrating different types of jokes. Pontano uses a broad range of terms and even invents one (facetudo). The most commonly recurring one is urbanitas, but he uses festivitas a number of times, as the opposite of severitas (I.5), as a synonym for urbanitas (I.12 and III.2), and for risus (VI.2). Many humanists both famous and unknown compiled anthologies of facetiae, facezie e motti, Schwänke, Joyeux devis, or Tales and Quicke Answeres. The appeal of "Was Your Mother Ever in Rome?" might lead us to infer that all humanist facetiae are brief, witty, and provoke immediate laughter; this is very far from the case.

In fact, each one of the joke collections known to me, that is to say those produced between the mid-fourteenth and the mid-sixteenth century, is quite different from all the others. Some are biographical: Panormita's on Alfonso of Aragon, or the anonymous collection about Arlotto the priest; some use mostly Classical sources, some mostly contemporary, some a wild mixture of sources. Some are heavily moralizing, some often obscene (including Pontano's). Leonardo da Vinci included facezie in his notebooks, Erasmus published a brief colloquy which is a mini-joke collection (Convivium fabulosum). And most of them include a considerable amount of material which by my standards is not funny, whether it be straightforward biography, fables, moral sermons, riddles, or wise sayings. We must thus beware of too hastily assigning a meaning to festivitas. Erasmus and More had a sense of humor