ACCORDING to CASTIGLIONE, using Bernardo Bibbiena as his mouthpiece in *Il Cortegiano*, the capacity for laughter is an essential trait of human nature, “something so peculiarly ours that to define man, we are wont to say that he is a risible animal” (2.45).1 Exactly what provokes laughter, however, is not the same in all times and places. Today, for example, we may be more inclined to censure Castiglione and Bibbiena than to laugh with them when they joke about the “ugly and disagreeable wife” of a gentleman who, “being asked how he was, replied: ‘You can just imagine, when *Furiarum maxima juxta me cubat*’” (2.61).2 To appreciate this witty remark, a knowledge of Latin is essential: one needs to know that the italicized phrase means “the greatest of the Furies sleeps beside me.” Yet simply knowing Latin will be of no avail if one lacks a thorough familiarity with classical literature. Much of Castiglione’s initial audience (not to mention Bibbiena’s) presumably knew it well enough to recognize a pun on Virgil’s “*Furiarum maxima iuxta accubat*” (*Aeneid* 6.605–06)—“reclining hard by, the greatest of the Furies.” Today, the joke falls flat, for even readers of *Explorations in Renaissance Culture*, with doctorates in History, English, Comparative Literature, or Art History, seldom possess the requisite learning. In our culture, moreover, to mock a woman for her ugliness is doubly inappropriate; the jokester stands accused not only of gender bias but also of displaying a contemptible insensitivity to the physically disadvantaged.

Equally odious by our standards, though less sophisticated than
Castiglione's erudite anecdote, is one attributed to Angelo Poliziano, the eminent Tuscan poet, scholar, and tutor of Lorenzo de' Medici's children. Poliziano is thought to have composed—or if not composed, then collected and assembled—a group of 413 witty anecdotes and proverbs during his stay in the Medici household (1477–79). Preserved in the so-called Bel libretto, most of these pleasantries are of the type known as facezie, which are generally brief and generally conclude with a punch line that carries the point of the joke. The one in question features a wag known as “Santi che non ride,” so named because he could never make himself laugh” (Wesselski 22: 34). By Castiglione’s definition, Santi’s humorlessness would qualify him as somewhat less than human, but the occasion arrived when Santi was finally provoked to laughter while visiting his betrothed for the first time. Seeing how ugly she was, “he began to laugh; whereupon she responded, ‘Oh, you laugh?’ To which he replied: ‘Oh, who the devil wouldn’t laugh to see such a bloody shitface ['cacasangue di viso'] as yours!’” (Wesselski 22: 34). Santi’s mocking quip employs the term cacasangue—literally, “bloody shit”—a vulgarism that still appears in modern Italian dictionaries with a primary meaning of “diarrhea” or “dysentery.” But the word can also be used as an exclamation indicating marvel, stupor, or irritation, as it is in Machiavelli’s comedy La Mandragola (3.4: “Cacasangue!”). Art historians may be familiar with it as an imprecation in an anecdote told about Donatello’s statue of the prophet Zuccone, a work so renowned for its realism that the sculptor commanded it to speak: “Favella, favella,” Donatello is supposed to have cried while carving it, “che ti venga il cacasangue!” (Vasari 3 [Testo]: 209). No less repugnant than Poliziano’s jest (though lacking the quaint parolaccia) is an apocryphal story concerning Zeuxis, the semi-legendary Greek painter of the fifth century B.C. According to Carel van Mander in his Schilder-Boeck (1604), the “indispensable handbook for Dutch artists” (Blankert 35), Zeuxis died choking of laughter while painting the portrait of a wrinkled, funny-looking old woman. Here we balk again at humor that is objectionable on three separate counts. Like Castiglione’s tale of the gentleman (gintilomo) who puns on Virgil at his wife’s expense (no gentleman, he!), this one also combines sexism with “lookism,” adding “ageism” as further insult to