From Poggio to Caxton: Early Translations of Some of Poggio's Latin *Facetiae*

The seven facetiae by Poggio Bracciolini, or Poggio the Florentine, are a peculiar presence in the vernacular versions of the fables of Aesop which began with the compilation assembled by Heinrich Steinhöwel and translated by him into German. This very successful collection was published c. 1476 in Ulm and was subsequently translated and published in French, English (from the French, by William Caxton), Dutch, Low-German, and Czech. Steinhöwel's compilation was expressly intended to be instructive and moralising, and the wisdom expressed in the Aesopian fables offered ample material for this purpose. But the *Facetiae* are not moralising or edifying at all. Poggio purported to record his collection of jokes and anecdotes in order to demonstrate that Latin was flexible enough to be written as a living language. He made a point of explaining that his facetiae were stories (and 'lies') swapped by the apostolic secretaries in the antechambers of the papal Curia, and it adds to their comedic effect to imagine the anecdotes emanating from the mouths of these highly educated, well-travelled, worldly men, presumably delivered deadpan and with the appropriate accents. For unlike the mostly animal population of the fables of Aesop and his followers, Poggio's stories are about humans from all walks of life and living in many parts of the Western world, speaking different languages, their words all rendered in Latin. Merchants, knights, travellers, husbands, clerics, princes of the Church, and women—young and old—are generally the protagonists in the brief farces, in which dialogue and situations develop and change with dynamic speed, unlike the more static interactions between the subjects of the Aesopian fables. The facetiae were—deservedly—considered anti-clerical, bawdy, and obscene, but were no less popular for that.

When Steinhöwel concluded his fable book with seven of Poggio's stories, he selected them from the collection of 273 facetiae which their author had consolidated in the mid-1450s. By the middle of the 1470s these were at the height of their dissemination in print in Latin. Steinhöwel was the first to translate a few. What led him to this selection is puzzling. He added a lengthy apology for the inclusion of the bawdiest in his selection ('De adulescentula quae virum de parvo priapo accusavit', about the groom who places proof of his manhood on the dinner table, to the admiration of the guests), but justified its

Texts In Transit Ii

David Baud

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