

## Grade Level

Social Studies 10: Ancient Medieval History: *Prologue to the Present*

## Learning Centre Topic & Theme

**Topic:** Unit 5: *The Middle Ages: Collapse and Recovery*; Outcome 7: Students should be able to describe the cultural diffusion which characterized the Medieval period; Outcome 8: Students should be able to identify the ideals espoused during the Middle Ages

**Theme:** Medieval Humour

## Learning Centre Objectives

Learners will study various facets and perspectives on everyday life in the high Middle Ages through the lens of jokes from Poggio Bracciolini's *Facetiae*. By analyzing what people were making jokes about or generally found humorous in this period, as well as considering the effectiveness of the joke today, learners will be able to better characterize the culture of the Middle Ages and be able to better relate to the people who lived in this period.

## Materials Required

- Handouts or digital distribution of the jokes
- Paper and writing implement or digital workspace

## Procedure

- Begin by giving some context on the documents that we will be analyzing. Introduce Bracciolini by explaining that he lived from 1380-1459 and was a scholar in the employ of the papacy.
- Provide further context by giving Bracciolini's rationale for creating a collection of jokes: "it is proper, and almost a matter of necessity commended by philosophers, that our mind, weighed down by a variety of cares and anxieties, should now and then enjoy relaxation from its constant labour, and be incited to cheerfulness and mirth by some humorous recreation."
- Distribute a joke to small groups of learners. Have the learners read the joke amongst themselves and answer a selection of key questions (*to extend this activity you could distribute a selection of jokes for a longer presentation and discussion period*)
  - What does this joke tell us about life in the Middle Ages?
  - Why would this joke be funny? Is it still funny today?
  - Would/could the joke be funny/funnier today if we made minor changes that preserve the intention of the joke? (Replace characters/change the setting/etc.)
- Lead a class discussion about how learners answered these questions. Explore concepts like: Did everyone find the joke funny (or not funny) for the same reason? Are you able to relate to the situation in the joke? What does this joke tell us about the interactions and experiences that characterize the Middle Ages?
- Have learners share any changes that they would make to the joke (if any) such that it would be better received by a modern audience, while still preserving the intention of the joke (if the intention of the joke can be determined).

## **Extensions**

As expressed above, this exercise specifically may be extended by introducing more jokes from the *Facetiae*. The premise and content objective of this activity could be extended by introducing other unconventional forms of art/expression from the Medieval period which could be considered analogous to modern forms of popular media or social interactions. For example, some historians believe that the margin art in texts from the Medieval period may have been designed with humour in mind – for example, knights fighting snails is a common motif believed to be intentionally humorous in its absurdity; learners could engage in activities which connect this concept to modern representations such as cartoons or memes. The general themes of this activity could be extended to, in my opinion, any period or culture for which relevant or applicable documents may be retrieved.

## **Appendix**

### **Materials (Selection of jokes from the Facetiae)**

One of our fellow citizens, a very witty man, was labouring under a painful and lengthy illness, was attended by a Friar who came to comfort him, and, among other words of solace, told him that God thus especially chastens those he loves, and inflicts his visitations upon them. “No wonder then,” retorted the sick man, “that God has so few friends; if that is the way he favours them, he ought to have still less.”

A Florentine I was acquainted with was under the necessity of buying a horse in Rome, and bargained with the dealer, who asked him twenty-five gold ducats, too high a price; he offered to pay fifteen ducats cash, and to owe the rest; to which the dealer agreed. On the following day, when asked for the balance, the buyer refused, saying, “We must keep our agreement: it was settled between us that I was to be your debtor; I should be so no longer if I were to pay you.”

The Abbot of Septimo, a very fat and corpulent man, on his way to Florence one evening, enquired of a peasant he met, “Do you think I shall be able to enter the gate?” Of course, he thus meant to ask whether he was likely to reach the city before the closing of the gates. But the country-man, rallying his stoutness, replied, “To be sure, you will; a cartload of hay gets through, why should not you?”

An inhabitant of Perugia was going along the streets, wrapped in thought and melancholy, and, being met by someone who enquired the motive of his concern, replied that he owed money which he could not pay. The man responded, “Leave that anxiety to your creditor.”

### **Materials (Reflection Questions)**

- Does this joke tell us anything about life in the Middle Ages?
- Why do you think this joke might have been considered funny? Is it funny?
- Could the joke be funny if we made minor changes that preserve the intention of the joke? (Replace characters/change the setting/etc.) Or, is it inherently unfunny or otherwise problematic?

*(Sample handouts are shown on the final page of this document)*

### **Sources**

Government of New Brunswick, C. (2020, January 8). Curriculum Development (Anglophone Sector) Social Studies 10 Retrieved from [https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/departments/education/k12/content/anglophone\\_sector/curriculum\\_anglophone.html](https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/departments/education/k12/content/anglophone_sector/curriculum_anglophone.html)

Medievalists.net. (2018, August 24). Medieval Jokes. Retrieved from <https://www.medievalists.net/2013/08/medieval-jokes/>

Schultz, C. (2013, October 14). Why Were Medieval Knights Always Fighting Snails? Retrieved from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/why-were-medieval-knights-always-fighting-snails-1728888/>

### **Facetiae**

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