

Facetious Culture and Civility in Context: Negotiating and Staging Social Norms in Early Modern Europe

Section Organizers:

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Section language:

French and English

Call for Papers:

This panel invites contributions that examine facetious literature and, more broadly, facetious culture in early modern Europe (16th-17th centuries) as a distinctive literary and cultural perspective on social life in times of crisis and uncertainty.

Facetious narratives – short and witty - circulated widely across early modern Europe, particularly within courtly and urban milieus. Far from being marginal or merely recreational, they constitute a specific mode of engaging with social reality. Through humour, anecdote, and narrative brevity, facetious texts foreground situations of interaction marked by ambiguity, misinterpretation, and strategic positioning. They offer not a stable representation of social order, but a dynamic and often unstable vision of how it is experienced in practice.

The early modern period, characterised by profound political, religious, and social transformations, generated enduring forms of crisis and uncertainty that affected everyday interactions. In this context, facetious culture provides a particularly revealing lens. By staging borderline situations, testing expectations, and exposing failures of communication, facetious narratives make visible the fragility of social norms and the difficulty of applying them in concrete situations. This perspective allows for a renewed understanding of civility. Rather than approaching it solely through prescriptive texts, facetious literature shows how norms are enacted, negotiated, and adjusted in practice according to context, interlocutor, and degree of tolerance.

This panel proposes to place facetious literature at the centre of a broader reflection on civility in times of crisis. It aims to show how humour participates in the ongoing reconfiguration of social norms, not by opposing them, but by making them visible, flexible, and workable in practice.

We welcome interdisciplinary approaches from literary studies, history, linguistics, cultural studies, anthropology, and related fields. Possible topics include (but are not limited to):

- The relationship between facetious narratives and conduct literature
- The staging of norms: from prescription to practice



- Facetious narratives as spaces of experimentation with social norms
- Civility as performance: context, adaptation, and social competence
- The implicit regulation of behaviour through laughter and ridicule
- Tensions within civility: politeness, excess, and controlled transgression

Associated Research Groups:

ESPIEGLE (Enjeux Sociaux et Politiques des Recueils facétieux: Gaieté et Liberté de rire en Europe (XVe siècle-XVIIe siècle))

