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Book reviews

M. Fontaine, ed., *How to tell a joke. An ancient guide to the art of humor. Marcus Tullius Cicero. Selected, translated, and introduced by Michael Fontaine* (Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers), Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press 2021. 292 pp. ISBN 9780691206165 (hardcover), ISBN 9780691211077 (ebook)
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Did you know that one of the two funniest men in history was Marcus Tullius Cicero? According to the author Macrobius, this was a fact: "The two most eloquent men that antiquity produced—the comedian Plautus and the orator Cicero—were also its two best at telling jokes ... Who doesn't know that Cicero's enemies routinely used to call him 'the stand-up Consul?'" Macrobius, who lived 500 years after Cicero, had access to a collection of Cicero's jokes assembled by his secretary Tiro, which is unfortunately lost today, so we have to take him at his word, in conjunction with the quotations presented in the book under review.

The Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers series produced by Princeton University Press comprises small hardback books presenting a nucleus of quotations from influential classics, along with translations and comments, concerning not only the worldly essentials in the life of a statesperson: how to win an argument, to be a leader or a bad emperor, how to run a country and win an election and how to think about war, but also the true essentials, such as how to be free, to keep your cool and be content, to be a friend, grow old and die. Now we can read all there is to know about how to tell a joke. According to the title page, this is an ancient guide to the art of humour according to Marcus Tullius Cicero, but the selection of quotations on the art of humour in the book is actually based just as much on quotations from Quintilian as it is from Cicero. The first half of the book is devoted to quotations from Cicero's *De Oratore*, while the second half presents quotations from Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*. Michael Fontaine selected and translated the quotations including comments given as endnotes, and also gives the readers an elegant introduction to the contents. In his introduction, we read about Cicero's nickname, "the stand-up Consul". Macrobius quotes sources contemporary to Cicero, such as his biographer Plutarch. According to Plutarch, "Cicero often got carried away with the ridicule and veered into stand-up comedy". It is interesting to see the different perspectives provided by Cicero on one hand, and Quintilian on the other, in the same book. Cicero was highly aware that wit was a source of power, and made ample use of it. Plutarch observed that there is actually a fine line between a stand-up comedian and a politician speaking in public, as well as noting the ambiguity in humour, the difference between laughing *with* someone, and laughing *at* them. Cicero used humour as a technique, and "would ignore protocol at trials and kid around, using irony to laugh away serious arguments. The point was to win". At the same time, jokes could backfire, as Fontaine also observes: "Cicero considered himself a smartass. Others considered him a jackass, and reacted accordingly. Plutarch regarded Cicero's inability to resist a sick burn a causal factor in his downfall and eventual murder."

Quintilian and Cicero chose to present their thoughts on how to tell a joke differently. While Quintilian writes a treatise including both presentation, discussion and examples, Cicero chooses the dialogue format, as was his style. Cicero's dialogue *De Oratore* was written in 55 BC but is set in 91 BC. The three speakers, Gaius Julius Caesar Strabo Vopiscus (*c.* 130–87 BC), Lucius Licinius Crassus (140–91 BC), and Marcus Antonius (143–87 BC), who was the grandfather of the Marcus Antonius most known to us (*c.* 83–30 BC), were great orators, and all three died (two of them by assassination) soon after the time the dialogue is set—quite ironically, considering Cicero's own fate.

Cicero lists different categories of jokes, and explains how they work through ample examples. The categorization is clear and to the point. A few examples:

> (*De Oratore*, book 2, 281): "*Ridentur etiam discrepantia: '¿Quid huic abest—nisi res et virtus?'*"
>
> "Inconsistencies also get laughs. 'That guy has it all —except money and redeeming qualities.'"
>
> (Book 2, 284): "*Bellum etiam est, quom quid cuique sit consentaneum dicitur; ut quom Scaurus nonnullam haberet invidiam ex eo quod Phrygionis Pompei locupletis hominis bona sine testamento possederat, sederetque advocatus reo Bestiae, quom funus quoddam duceretur, accusator C. Memmius, 'Vide (inquit), Scaure! Mortuus rapitur, si potes esse possessor.*"
>
> "Also cute is when you point out someone's quirks. For example, people really envied Scaurus because he'd wound up in possession of a wealthy guy's property, and there hadn't been a will. When he came to a trial in an unrelated case, a funeral parade came passing by. As it did, the prosecutor, Memmius, quipped, 'Check it out, Scaurus—a dead man's being hustled off! Go see if you can get possession!'"

Fontaine aims at making his translations reflect the wit and pun intended as far as possible. He also includes a different and non-traditional punctuation in rendering the Latin text, including Spanish punctuation with question and exclamation marks both at the start and ending of a question, and diacritical marks—a tradition in later, Renaissance manuscripts, also included in the Early Modern editions that Fontaine primarily has seen them in. On the one hand this is laudable since this type of diacritical mark does make the reading easier, which was exactly why the Renaissance Latin copyists made use of them, even though the use was not consistent. On the other hand, however, earlier Carolingian manuscripts did not include diacritical marks, and certainly not the contemporary manuscripts in antiquity; thus, the use only reflects later manuscript traditions (and the first editions in Early Modern times). In that way, it is an anachronism, especially since it is all mixed with the more modern Spanish punctuation. It would have been good, even though this series is more "popular science", to include more information about this in the introduction; this type of mix is unorthodox.

Quintilian was born 80 years after Cicero's death. His treatise was written in his role as the first chair of Latin rhetoric in Rome. Everything that Cicero wrote, including the collections of jokes that are not available to us today, was known to him. It is interesting to see in Quintilian's mentioning of Cicero how he was regarded—also concerning the question about the use of wit and humour. In the beginning of the section on humour in Quintilian's treatise, he says: "I wish his (i.e. Cicero's) freedman Tiro (or whoever it was that published his three books on the topic) had been stingier about the number of quips and used a little more judgment in selecting than enthusiasm for collecting them! Then Cicero would've been less of a target for his critics, who will, as with every other area he was good at, nevertheless even now more easily find something to reject than to add in." Most of what Quintilian has to say is filtered through Cicero's previous work. Quintilian adds another layer: since his presentation is a treatise, there is more discussion on a metalevel compared with Cicero's work. Still, both Cicero and Quintilian allow the readers to judge for themselves on the character and effectiveness of different jokes and puns exemplified, by giving ample examples of different types. Quintilian categorizes even more than Cicero, and also towards the end lists the type of jokes that are related to rhetorical figures, also adding what he considers to be the funniest wisecracks of them all—the ones fooling expectations or misunderstanding words.

Even though much of what Cicero said and wrote on humour is lost to us, we do get a good picture of different aspects in the parts of *De Oratore* included in the book under review, and even more filtered through Quintilian, who has also a lot of his own experience to add to the discussion. It is a pity that the book is not titled correctly as being an ancient guide to the art of humour through the lenses of *both* Cicero and Quintilian. Leaving that aside, this is indeed a nice book to have in the library. The translations are skillfully made and the reader is provided with many perspectives on the art of humour —which is indeed independent of time or genre.

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G. Cifani, *The origins of the Roman economy. From the Iron Age to the Early Republic in a Mediterranean perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2021. 450 pp., 68 ills. ISBN 9781108478953 (hardcover), 9781108781534 (ebook)
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This is an interesting book that successfully combines both archaeological and historical source material. It also presents an overview of the latest archaeological field research in central Italy, concentrating on Rome and Latium Vetus. Studies