

## Book review

**Marcus Tullius Cicero (2021). *How to Tell a Joke: An Ancient Guide to the Art of Humour. Selected, translated, and introduced by Michael Fontaine. Princeton University Press.***

*How to Tell a Joke: An Ancient Guide to the Art of Humour* is a part of Princeton University Press' series of "how to" texts from Antiquity, which aims to present the ideas of classical thinkers about being free, giving, caring for animals, focusing, running a farm or a country, etc. in new translations, thus making ancient practical wisdom accessible to modern readers. *How to Tell a Joke* is compiled of large excerpts of Cicero's *De Orator* (II.216–290) and Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* (VI.3), which deal with different ways to win listeners' attention with the joke, allowing a reader to get an insight into a kind of "theory of humour", developed by these two authors, key to the Latin rhetorical tradition. Michael Fontaine, an eminent specialist in the history of Ancient Rome and Latin literature, who has already made a contribution to the *Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers* series (Vincent Obsopoeus 2020; Cicero 2022), prepared a new translation of these texts. It is worth noting that Fontaine addresses the problem of humour in ancient literature not for the first time: he authored a number of articles and a book about Plautus' comedies (Fontaine 2010) and co-edited a guide to Greek and Roman comedy (Scafuro & Fontaine 2014).

Being a part of the series determines the specific features of the book. Unlike traditional editions of classical texts (aiming, first of all, at the presentation of a text *per se*, as something valuable in its own right, regardless of contents), *How to Tell a Joke* is, so to say, very "practice-oriented". Its goal is not only to make specific texts accessible and understandable to the average reader but also to present him/her with Cicero the joker, able to teach us stand-up comedy. (Despite the fact that the excerpt from Quintilian's *Institutio* occupies almost half of the volume, its author is not in the focus of Fontaine's attention — unlike Cicero, Quintilian was not a prominent joker, and his work may seem rather donnish to modern readers.) This Cicero seems extremely relatable, pursues goals, which are fully understandable to our contemporaries, and poses questions, which can be posed by any public speaking coach.

Fontaine begins his introduction with Cicero's question: Is it possible to teach humour, or is the sense of humour innate? According to Cicero, natural talent is the first and most important precondition not only for the ability to make good jokes, but also for the art of eloquence as a whole (Cicero 1942, I.25 (113)), although he did not deny that "what is good can be made better by teaching, and that what is not very good can still somehow be honed and corrected" (Cicero 1942, I.25 (115)). Citing the opinions of contemporary humour writers and stand-up comedians (Jay Sankey, Joel Stein, and Mark Saltveit), Fontaine demonstrates that the question itself is about two different things: when we talk about talent for joking, we mean rather a sense of humour (which is a derivative of a particular person, her character, background and social position, range of interests, experiences, current situation, etc.), while "science of humour" (which, of course, can be taught) is what today we would call speaking or writing skills, the ability to phrase the punch-line (p. xxix). In Fontaine's translation, Cicero and Quintilian are intended to teach us the technique of the joke.

Cicero, who tried to describe a kind of Platonic *eidos* of the ideal orator (Cicero 2002, 2.7-9), can be called one of the most perfect incarnations of this *eidos* — and especially when it comes to laughter. Fontaine recalls Cicero's famous love of mockery and his tendency to get "carried away with the ridicule". As Plutarch notes, "Cicero was often carried away by his love of jesting into scurrility, and when, to gain his ends in his cases, he treated matters worthy of serious attention with ironical mirth and pleasantry, he was careless of propriety" (Plutarch 1919, 1.4). It is important, however, to remember that every joke has a context and a specific audience: those jokes of Cicero and his contemporaries that we know about were heard either during the trials or during the political discussions and violent events of the Civil war. For these people, humour was a powerful (and often double-edged) weapon, a way to weaken the enemy and win the sympathy of the audience, and, last but not least, a disciplinary mechanism and a source of power. As Anthony Corbeill puts it, "aggressive humour exercises real powers of persuasion over a late Republican audience and... as a cultural product, this humour also helped shape the ethical standards current during the politically convulsive period of the late Republic" (Corbeill 1996, 5). Fontaine also emphasises this instrumentalisation and weaponising of humour (p. xxv), hinting that they are in demand today: like modern politicians, lawyers, and journalists, Cicero made jokes in order to win.

The works of Cicero and Quintilian are, of course, well-known to specialists in the theory of humour. As we have already noted, they both avoid the discussion of the phenomenon of laughter itself and are rather laconic when it comes to its causes. Both offer readers a version of the superiority theory of humour (Cicero 1942, II.58 (236); Quintilian 1953, VI.3 (1)), which can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle, and also make some comments on incongruity as a source of comedy. Both discuss the advisability and propriety of jokes in different situations (court or public speech, hearty talk or heated argument, etc.), describe different kinds of jokes (pertaining to things and people or words and ideas, using ambiguity, diminishment or exaggeration, playing upon the literal and figurative sense of words, etc.), and give a lot of examples.

What is truly innovative, is Michael Fontaine's new translation of these texts, designed, as already mentioned, for the general readers, who, perhaps, have never been acquainted with Roman literature before. This translation "goes for the jest" (p. xxx); the translator chooses words in such a way that the jokes, told two thousand years ago, make the reader laugh. He simplifies the text and, in fact, makes ancient authors sound like our contemporaries. "You can call it paternalism," writes Fontaine, "or you can call it good comedy. A comedian limits the distractions. So do I" (p. xxx).

His translation is indeed freer, more elegant, and in many ways clearer than both earlier renderings by Watson (1860) or Sutton & Rackham (1942) and more recent and comprehensive translation by James M. May & Jakob Wisse (2001).

I will provide a couple of examples. At the very beginning of the chapters devoted to humour, one of the three participants in the dialogue, Caesar (Gaius Julius Caesar Strabo Vopiscus), jokingly remarks that it is not easy to be witty while talking about wittiness: "Ego vero (inquit) omni de re facetius puto posse ab homine non inurbano quam de ipsis facetiis disputari" (Cicero 1942, II.54 (217)). May & Wisse translation of this phrase is precise, though may be slightly tight: "To my way of thinking, someone who does not lack elegance and humour can discuss any other subject more wittily than witticism itself" (Cicero 2001, p. 181). Fontaine's translation is much shorter and simpler, he does not strive to accurately convey the specific constructions of classical Latin: "Actually, I think a decent funnyman can discuss anything with greater wit than wit itself" (p. 3). The translation of *homo non inurbanus* as *decent funnyman* seems, maybe, too risky, but the translator can be even more audacious. For example, while discussing jokes, based on the resemblance, Quintilian mentions Junius Bassus, "one of the

wittiest of men” (*homo imprimis dicax*), who was nicknamed the “white ass” (*Asinus albus*) (Quintilian 1953, VI.3 (57-58)). The translator emphasises the wordplay and characterises this man as “a *serious* jerk” (italics supplied by M. Fontaine), who was named “white jackass” (p. 199).

Comparing the translation with the Latin original, the reader may notice not only the simplification of grammar and modernising of language but also the omission of some realities, the appropriateness of which could be argued (for example, in a joke from II.240, *Terracina* turned into an indefinite “beach town”, while *triclinium* (II.263) became “living room”). But that is the point: Fontaine’s translation, with all his “being a jerk” (*dicacitas*), “wisecrack” (*facetia*), “stand-up comedians” (*scurrae*), “private party” (*convivium*), or “but genetics are in charge” (*sed domina natura est*), and other daring word choices is not intended for Latinists, — and if it is intended, it is rather as a kind of corporate joke. Few people will enjoy the pun “And that explains why humour is risky, since *wit* is so close to *twit*” (p. 149) (*ideoque anceps eius rei ratio est, quod a derisu non procul abest risus* (Quintilian 1953, VI.3 (7))), as much as a modern scholar, unfortunately for her, familiar with social media. Of course, the charm of ancient literature in no small degree lies precisely in the specific turns of speech, culture-bound terms, and historical context omitted in Fontaine’s translation, but, on the other hand, it is their absence that can make it easier for a novice to make a first acquaintance with Cicero and Quintilian.

That is not to say that the translation is oversimplistic or lacks scholarly apparatus—quite the opposite. In the introduction, the reader will find all the relevant historical information. Fontaine briefly touches on the problem of the Medieval and Renaissance reception of Cicero and Quintilian’s works. Considerable work has been done in editing the Latin text: a number of emendations have been made to make it easier to read and interpret (minor changes of capitalisation, punctuation, and spelling as compared to other editions, occasional diacritical marks, and, finally, added signs indicating quotations from ancient poetry). In addition, the text of both works is slightly reformatted in order to articulate the structure. All this makes the current edition perfect reading material for students of Latin. And last, but not least, the notes accompanying the text are funny and informative — especially those that deal with explaining jokes, which require some familiarity with the context or additional interpretation.

All in all, it is an excellent book that will bring a lot of pleasure to those who are interested in the history of humour and theoretical discussions about it. On the one hand, for those who are not yet familiar with Roman literature, in general, and Cicero and Quintilian, in particular, it will greatly facilitate this acquaintance (sometimes a little bit more than needed, to my mind). On the other hand, it will entertain specialists, and allow them to see a well-known text in a new light.

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