

THE HUMOUR STUDIES DIGEST BOOK REVIEW

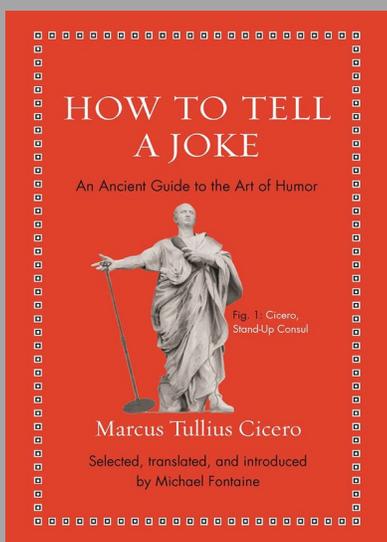
August 2021

Marcus Tullius Cicero and Michael Fontaine (trans). 2021. *How to Tell a Joke: An Ancient Guide to the Art of Humor*. Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers Series. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press. 328pp. ISBN (Hardcover): 9780691206165 ISBN (eBook): 9780691211077 DOI: 10.2307/j.ctv160btp8.



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This book is one of a series entitled “Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers”, that includes *How to Drink*, *How to be a Leader*, and *How to Keep Your Cool*. *How to Tell a Joke* boasts a bonus not advertised in the title; not only is there a translation of the section of Cicero’s *On Oratory* that is devoted to humour, the book also incorporates the corresponding section of Quintilian’s later treatise on the same subject. The titles of their complete treatises reveal that both Cicero and Quintilian are only concerned with the use of humour by the orator, whether he is running for office, arguing a case in court, or making a speech on policy in the Senate. This means that the art of the stand-up comic and the clown is in general frowned upon, and the jokes in Roman Comedy do not appear at all. The focus is on humour as a tool in the orator’s armoury of persuasive devices.

I myself am a translator of Aristophanes, so I am well aware that humour is one of the most difficult things to render from one language into another – and when puns are involved, the difficulties become almost insurmountable. Fontaine provides a bilingual text, with the Latin *en face* with his translation. And he does a pretty good job, resorting to explanatory footnotes only when the examples of jokes cited by Cicero and Quintilian become really impossible to render effectively into English, or where special knowledge is required to understand the joke. The translation is strikingly informal; words like “quip”, “schtick”, “zinger”, “chutzpah”, “wise-crack”, and “zap” are used to translate the various forms of humour that Cicero and Quintilian analyse. *De omne isto genere quid sentiam exponam* (literally “I’ll tell you what I think

about that whole genre”, 37) becomes “I’ll outline the whole shebang” (!). “Motel” is used to render *devorsorium* (more traditionally “lodging-house”) and “McMansion” for villa. This is typical of the colloquial and contemporary (not to say anachronistic) style of the translation, which is particularly suited to Cicero’s animated dialogue, though perhaps less so to Quintilian’s more formal treatise.

1. Cicero

Cicero’s *How to Tell a Joke* takes the form of an imaginary dialogue set in 91 BCE; his remarks on humour are mainly outlined in a discourse by Julius Caesar – not the famous general and dictator, but a forebear of his who was noted as a great orator. The principal questions he asks are: Should an orator want to make people laugh? If so, how much? And what are the different kinds of jokes? He answers that it is clearly in the orator’s interest to make people laugh, but not, for example, at criminal evil or obvious misery. Cicero argues through the *persona* of Caesar that there are two main types of humour; that which depends on the thing being recounted (if it’s funny, it will not matter what words are used for it), and that which depends on the language (puns being the most obvious example; but also, for example, taking literally something meant metaphorically). According to Cicero’s Caesar, the best jokes are those in which laughter is provoked by a combination of the two. He categorises and provides examples of both types.

It must be admitted that quite a few of the jokes are not very funny today; but here is a good specimen, in the category of intelligent people offering a funny non-sequitur when speaking disingenuously (113):

Nasica’d come to the house of the poet Ennius and when he asked for Ennius at the front gate, the maid said he wasn’t home. Nasica sensed she’d said that at her master’s behest and that Ennius really *was* inside. A few days later, when Ennius came to Nasica’s house and asked for him at the front door, Nasica shouted, “I’m not home!” Then Ennius said, “Huh? I recognize your voice!” “You sonofabitch,” replied Nasica, “When I came looking for *you*, I believed your maid that you weren’t home. Aren’t you going to believe *me* myself?” (115).

‘Caesar’ concludes that laughter is provoked by (1) surprises, (2) making fun of other people’s quirks or giving a funny clue as to our own, (3) comparing a thing to something worse, (4) disingenuousness, (5) non sequiturs and (6) criticising stupidity (137).

II. Quintilian

Quintilian is a more conservative writer than Cicero; he makes it plain that he disapproves of Cicero’s notoriety for making jokes (there was even a collection of his most famous witticisms, now lost). Early on in *On the Art of Humor*, Quintilian states, “A joke is typically untrue, often deliberately slanted, and always demeaning and never flattering” (147). His values are encapsulated in these three sentences: “Generalizations are another bad idea, where you attack whole groups based on ethnic identity, class, status, or activities the masses enjoy. A gentleman

(*vir bonus*) will say what he will contingent on maintaining his dignity and self-respect. A laugh is overpriced if it comes at the cost of integrity” (173). Cicero, who was active in the rough and tumble of the lawcourts and Senate of late Republican Rome, would never have expressed that sentiment, admirable though it is; Quintilian practised law in the much more restrained world of the Empire. And his remarks on humour are concluded by an Appendix in praise of *urbanitas*, the grace and charm he identified as characteristic of the wealthier inhabitants of Imperial Rome.

Quintilian accepts Cicero’s binary division between laughter generated by language and that generated by things. He further diagnoses three main uses of humour (163); to make people laugh at someone else, at us ourselves (this, he argues elsewhere, is not appropriate for an orator, only for stand-up; 229), or at neutral things. He categorises jokes as (1) risqué and corny, (2) insulting, (3) harsh and (4) light-hearted. Humour, he believes, depends on context: “What matters is when and where they’re told” (167). At work, for example, “risqué jokes will suit the lower classes, while corny jokes will be fine for everyone. We should never want to cause hurt, and let’s keep far from the idea that ‘it’s better to lose a friend than a jest’. In our court battles, I’d rather get to use light-hearted jokes” (167). The author’s genteel values shine through in these remarks, which contrast considerably with the powerful, often hurtful court-room witticisms exhibited in Cicero’s treatise.

The theory of humour has of course advanced, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, into realms of study which would have been unimaginable to Cicero or Quintilian; but the discourses translated in this book show how two highly intelligent orators in Republican and Imperial Rome categorised different kinds of humour. Both Cicero and Quintilian illuminate their theoretical arguments with a rich array of illustrations, which give further insight into the types of jokes that were told in Ancient Rome.

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