ON CICERO'S HUMOR IN *EPISTULAE AD FAMILIARES*

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Abstract. In this paper we aim to analyze the Ciceronian humor, based on a corpus of letters from the *Ad familiares* series, starting from certain theoretical premises of the theory of humor, which involve incongruity, consolation and superiority. Cicero is one of the ancient scholars who attach importance to humor, which he analyzes from a typological and functional point of view, in his *De oratore* treatise. We will focus on how Cicero applies his own theoretical views, in the humor that transpires in his correspondence with Varro, Dolabella and Paetus.

Keywords: Cicero, humor, letters, Roman society, critical perspectives.

Lisa Glebatis Perks, in her work *The Ancient Roots of Humor Theory*, identifies three theories of humor rooted in antiquity: the theory of incongruity, consolation and superiority. According to the first theory, humor derives from the element of surprise, from something unexpected, that contradicts one's past experiences, expectations or cognitive frame. The consolation theory shows that humor derives from the release of repressed emotions.

The same author writes the major tenet of superiority theory is that "mockery, ridicule, and laughter at the foolish actions of others are central to the humor experience" (Keith-Spiegel 1972: 6)[1]. In *De oratore*, Cicero discusses two types of wit, resulted from deeds or from words: *Duo sunt enim genera facetiarum, quorum alterum re tractatur, alterum dicto* (2.59.238), but he continues in the same context, emphasizing that the copious laughter is obtained from the combination of the two categories: *…maxime autem homines delectari, si quando risus coniuncte re uerboque moueatur* (2.61.248). Gravity (*grauitas*) and joke (*iocus*) have the same origins, can start from the same facts or words; on the other hand not all jokes are funny (*non esse omnia ridicula faceta*). According to Cicero, the most popular kind of humor is the one that arises from surprise: *notissimum ridiculi genus, cum aliud exspectamus, aliud dicitur* (2.63.255), which the Arpinate relates to the concept of *urbanitas*. Cicero is not witty in the gregarious sense of the term;

[1] Lisa Glebatis Perks, "The Ancient Roots of Humor Theory", in *Humor*, 25 (2), p. 120.

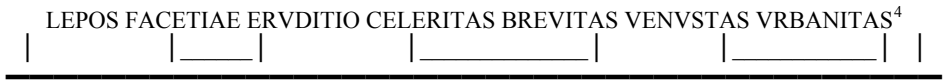
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especially in *De oratore*, he rejects the coarse humor and the depraved and obscene language. He is a refined man of spirit, for whom the manipulation of words is at the same time a joy, a technique and an art. Rude humor is not worthy of a free man, a recurring idea in this work: *non est nostrum... minime est liberale... non digna nobis... non foro digna…sed uix conuiuio liberorum* (LXII). The theory of incongruity is the one that best describes Ciceronian humor. According to it, humor is achieved through the succession of incongruous statements, therefore surprising to the receiver, or by the contrast between the character of the speaker and his/her statements, or by contextual irony, meaning that the gravity (or the lack of it) within a discourse is not consistent with the seriousness of a situation[2].

In his treatise *De oratore* (1.5.17), Cicero discusses the internal structure of a fine discourse. It contains witty spirit (*facetiae*) which, oriented towards the receptor, must contain what Cicero calls "charm" (*lepos*). From a formal point of view, the discourse must be characterised by "readiness" and "conciseness" (*celeritas, breuitas*). In terms of content, the erudition of the speaker will be accompanied by witty words, so that the effects in the end will be "elegance" (*uenustas*) and "urbanity" (*urbanitas*). Eugen Cizek considers that among all of these concepts, which Cicero pictures as interrelated (*coniuncta*),

> *lepos* and *urbanitas* emerge as the pillars of this conceptual field, that is, the charm, without which nothing is built effectively, to act on the soul of people, and spiritual and witty politeness, *urbanitas*[3].

Eugen Cizek refines the relationship proposed by Cicero between these seven concepts and advances a scheme that links, in a subsidiary way, charm with witty words, erudition with promptness and conciseness, elegance with urbanity. We consider that the scheme can be slightly modified, since Cicero clearly associates wittiness with erudition. Wittiness implies a refined intellectual activity, related to another essential concept introduced by Cicero, *humanitas* (*De oratore*, 1.8.32). In his opinion, a person lacking erudition would not be able to transmit a quality humor: *accedat eodem oportet lepos quidam facetiaeque et eruditio libero digna celeritasque et breuitas et respondendi et lacessendi subtili uenustate atque urbanitate coniuncta* (*De oratore* 1.5.17).



Cicero "adapts" his jokes and the manner of joking, according to his relationship with the recipient of the letter. The connection between erudition and

[2] *Ibidem,* p. 124.
[3] Eugen Cizek, *Istoria literaturii latine.* Vol. I, Bucureşti: Societatea "Adevărul" S. A., 1994, p. 208.
[4] *Ibidem*.

his character as a refined man of spirit is very clear from his correspondence, especially with another scholar of the time, Marcus Terentius Varro. We selected four letters sent by the famous orator, two from Rome, two from Tusculum, in 46–45. Cicero repeatedly alludes to Varro's immense culture, when he writes to him about having returned to his old friends, that is to say books: *cum ueteribus amicis, id est cum libris nostris* (*Ad fam.*, 9.1.2). Referring to their mutual friend Caninius (*noster Caninius*), Cicero puts special emphasis on his erudition: *sed cum eo, ut cum homine docto et amatissimo tui locutus ea sum*. Amidst the turbulent events of the spring of 46, Cicero resumes the same topos, of how readings not only delight, but uphold morale in unpopular times and, considering himself unfairly marginalized from political life, he proposes to Varro that they both remain men of action in the service of the state, if not in the forum, at least through their writings:

> *si nemo utetur opera, tamen et scribere et legere* πολιτείας *et, si minus in curia atque in foro, at in litteris et libris, ut doctissimi ueteres fecerunt, nauare rem publicam et moribus ac legibus quaerere* (*Ad fam*., 9.2.4).

Jovial tone rarely surfaces in his correspondence with Varro. One of the jokes Cicero uses repeatedly gravitates around the following pattern: I invite you, and if you can't come, then I'll come to you. The humor here arises from the element of surprise at the end of a sentence in which Cicero states his need for a relaxing space, such as the garden, the library, the bathroom, deprived of which he will not come to Varro:

> *si tu minus ad nos, adcurremus ad te; si hortum in bybliotheca habes, deerit nihil* (*Ad fam.*, 9.4); *si mihi spatium fuerit in Tusculum ante Nonas ueniendi, istic te uidebo; si minus, persequar in Cumanum et ante te certiorem faciam, ut lauatio parata sit* (*Ad fam.*, 9.5).

In another letter (*Ad. fam.*, 9.8.1) overtly and with black humor, Cicero expresses his distrust of the future under the authority of Caesar. The letter had killed a distant relative, namely Lucius Caesar. After taking him prisoner in the battle of Thapsus, Caesar first pardoned him, then commanded him to be assassinated. Cicero expresses his concern by quoting a line from Terentius' comedy *Andria*, offering a surprising reinterpretation of its rhetorical question. Seeing his son Pamphilus weeping in condolence at the funeral of a non-relative, Simo asks himself *Quid hic mihi faciet patri?* (Terentius, *Adria*, 112). Cicero gives another interpretation to this line, meaning that if Caesar had behaved so cruelly with a family member, he could not hope for a gentler treatment for himself. Moreover, other lines from Ennius, quoted below, in the same letter, also allude to Caesar's cruelty, to the slaughter of Scipio's army, on April 6, 46 BC[5]. For this

[5] William Melmoth, *The Letters of Marcus Tullius Cicero to several of his Friends. With Remarks,* Vol. II, London, 1804, p. 261.

situation, Cicero uses the term *ridicula*, thus creating a polyptoton between this noun and the verb *rideamus*. This is a black joke, which the sender himself fines as such: *Sed ridicula missa, praesertim cum sit nihil quod rideamus* (*Ad fam*., 9.7.2).

Another recipient of Cicero's letters was Dolabella, his son-in-law. A complex portrait of him can be reconstructed from Cicero's correspondence. From a letter sent to Varro and another one addressed to Paetus we learn that Dolabella was Cicero's disciple in terms of rhetoric (*Ad fam.*, 9.7.2; 9.14.7). In another long letter to Marcus Coelius (*Ad fam.*, 7.14), it appears that Dolabella was buried in debt and had an extravagant lifestyle. Because he was a strong politician and a close friend of Caesar's, Cicero had always treated him as a man whom it was better to have as a friend rather than an enemy. In fact, Dolabella's appreciation for his former mentor was very high too, since he calls him *mi iucundissime Cicero* (*Ad fam.*, 11.9.3). Of the three letters analyzed here, one is dated two months before the divorce between Tullia and Dolabella, while the other two were written after the event, but Cicero's tone towards his former son-in-law remains affectionate. Nevertheless, behind his witty remarks, we can detect signs of concern about the political state of Rome, and it is obvious that Dolabella enjoys special attention, due to his privileged status at the time of receiving the letters. The sender of the letter himself takes precautionary measures related to the limit of the joking tone and the content of the smart words: *Cum igitur mihi erit exploratum te libenter esse risurum, scribam ad te pluribus* (*Ad fam.*, 9.10.3). A pecuniary dispute between Curtius Nicias and Vidius is described allegoricaly, as if it were a philological dispute over a Greek text. Humor here derives from a pun based on the word *uersicula*, that can mean both 'lyrics' and 'written lines' that record a debt in money. Nicias had asserted that certain lines did not belong to him, that they had been fraudulently introduced by Vidius. Cicero compares the situation with Aristarchus' efforts to establish the interpolated lines in the Homeric epics[6]. The joke will later be used by Horatius in his *Ars poetica* (v. 450). Cicero is called to analyze the conflict between Nicias and Vidius. Writing to Dolabella, he imagines that the latter suggests the risk of being subjective to Nicias, due to the fact that Cicero had often been invited to plentiful dinners with Nicias' family. It is just a joking excuse for Cicero to remind Dolabella that he does not mix friendship and civic duties:

> *Oblitusne es igitur fungorum illorum, quos apud Niciam, et ingentium squillarum cum sophia Septimiae? Quid ergo? Tu adeo mihi excussam seueritatem ueterem putas, ut ne in foro quidem reliquiae pristinae frontis appareant?* (*Ad fam.*, 9.10.2).

In a cheerful tone, Cicero suggests that if Nicias were sentenced to be exiled, Dolabella could persuade Caesar to bring him back to Rome, or else Plancus Bursa

[6] The joke will later be used by Horatius in his *Ars poetica* (v. 450).

would not know what to do. Bursa had been exiled, with Cicero's involvement as an accuser, for having participated in the riots which followed Clodius' death in January 52. In an ironic manner, the word *litteras* is used meaning 'letters', 'alphabet', which suggests not only the political substrate of the discussion, but also the fact that Titus Munatius Plancus Bursa was an uncultered character, whom lofty Cicero despised[7].

The end of the letter refers to the death of Publius Sylla, who during the dictatorship of his relative Lucius Sylla used to buy the estates of the proscribed at a reduced price and continued to do so in Caesar' time. Cicero refers to the custom of marking the land put up for sale by placing a spear on the spot, but in fact he suggests that Caesar is exaggerating in this regard and might become the target of popular hatred. Formally, his conclusion is similar to the one he draws in 15.17, written the same year to Caius Cassius:

> *Hoc tu pro tua sapientia feres aequo animo (...) Caesarem putabant moleste laturum uerentem, ne hasta refrixisset* (15.17.2). – *Ego ceteroqui animo aequo fero: unum uereor, ne hasta Caesaris refrixerit* (9.10.3).

Again, Cicero uses the allusion, thus realizing a smooth transition from seriousness to joke, in order to remain in good terms with his influential son-in-law.

Cicero's friendship with Lucius Papirius Paetus is reflected in a number of letters where witty words are customary, as both man value each other's fine sense of humor. Cicero describes Paetus to Atticus as *uir bonus amatorque noster* (*Ad Att.*, 1.20.7). His correspondence with Papirius Paetus reflects a series of Ciceronian views regarding the quality of humor and its use in public and in writing. In just one letter, *Ad fam.*, 9.15, Cicero uses a number of synonymous terms, *facetia, sal, lepos, urbanitas*[8], in order to illustrate the witty humor typical of the Latium people. Cicero believes that the loss of this characteristic type of humor is partly due to the influx of immigrants from across the Alps, *bracatis et Transalpinis nationibus*, thus establishing an antithetical relationship between *Latinitas* and *peregrinitas*. In Cicero's view, Paetus is a symbol of the once glorious witty refinement, while his precarious state of health (the main reason for issuing the letter) comes to epitomize the deficient state of the whole Roman society in a troubled time. By painting this subtle moral portrait of Paetus, Cicero indirectly links his own person to such concepts as *moderatio, libertas* while being consciously aware of the celebrity that his wittiness earned him (*fama ingenii*). On this, and upon, Caesar's capacity (*peracre iudicium*) to recognize humor Cicero's hope is based that unspoken words will not be attributed to him, since Caesar is able to distinguish false from truth, as far as the orator is concerned. Cicero finely ironizes the network of informers around the dictator. They pay special attention to

[7] D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *Cicero. Select Letters*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 196.

[8] TTL, online edition, *s.u. facetia.*

the Arpinate, that could be confused with affection – comments Cicero – if it were not known that they inform Caesar in detail of any of his movements. With fine irony, he thus underlines his own value which the dictator's informers only seem to highlight: *...sic enim color, sic obseruor ab omnibus iis, qui a Caesare diliguntur, ut ab iis me amari putem* (9.16.2)[9].

> As the laws, traditions and culture of Rome underwent a profound and traumatic change during the first century BCE, Cicero's epistolary testimony stages the parallel drama of an individual looking to reconnect with a stable subjectivity that can be grounded in the world around him[10].

The letters to Paetus attest to Cicero's nostalgia for past times when he felt safe. They deplore the political instability of his time, as well as the degrading of many traditional practices and cultural institutions, including the typical Latin humor. Cicero's letters to his friends show that humor is part of the cultural heritage of a changing society, in which the traditional values that have given power and stability to the Roman state are in danger.

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[9] Antony Corbeill, *Controlling Laughter: Political Humor in the Late Roman Republic*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 214.

[10] Orazio Capella, *The School of Doubt. Skepticism, History and Politics in Cicero's* Academica. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2019, pp. 72–73.