

totum genus oppugnationis huius: Cicero's Theory of Humor in Pro Caelio

There is something undeniably, delightfully human about laughter. But what is the purpose of laughter, especially in ancient Rome? While recent literary work has taken on the challenge of addressing Roman humor (Beard 2014, Corbeill 1996), the topic is still no easy feat, mostly due to the literature, people, and society of a culture that has been lost with time. The humor in Cicero's *Pro Caelio* has also long been recognized (Geffcken 1973), but what has not been recognized before is that Cicero's actual usage of humor in this speech is closely related to the theory of humor he presents in *De Oratore*. In this paper, I will show that despite having interlocutors narrate *De Oratore* (perhaps in an attempt to separate himself from the ideas presented), the *Pro Caelio* closely follows several points presented in the dialogue, suggesting that not only was Cicero fully aware of the specific ways he crafted humor into the *Pro Caelio*, but that the theory of humor in *De Oratore* was uniquely Cicero's own personal agenda. I conclude that this specific usage of humor in antiquity, oratorical humor, was a powerful political tool that could be crafted by speakers for the purpose of enticing and controlling an audience.

That Cicero was arguably one of the funniest Romans is no secret. Plutarch describes him as one who was often "carried away by his love of joking" (*Comp. Dem. Cic.* 1.4). He is famous for his perfectly timed responses in the courtroom (the witty phrase "*Sero*" probably comes to mind quickly), and according to Quintilian, the freedman Tiro even wrote three joke books based off Cicero's quips (*Inst.* 6.3.5). Besides these sources, Cicero's handbook on oratory, *De Oratore*, includes a lengthy passage in Book II that has given the modern world one of our fullest accounts of not just humor, but laughter itself, in antiquity.

Cicero's laughter methodology in *De Oratore* takes an in-depth look at the usage of humor, especially in the political realm of oratory. This theory attempts to answer five questions about laughter by first explaining the two types of wit—wit that stems from “word play” (*dictus*) and wit that arises “from the situation” (*res*). It then goes on to include advice such as keeping an unexpected turn in your jokes (*De or.* 2.284), and it especially warns orators to not to mirror the joking techniques of a *scurra* or a *mimus*. With this theory of laughter, Cicero supports the idea that a well-crafted joke, just like a well-crafted oration, is a power move at its core—it has the potential of building the jokester up while tearing the joke-ee down, all to the delight (and distraction) of those watching. Cicero understands the art of the joke, and as I will show in this paper, it is his own methodology that he cleverly follows in many of his court room orations, including that on behalf of Marcus Caelius Rufus, the *Pro Caelio*.

In this paper, I will demonstrate that the theory of laughter outlined by Cicero in *De Oratore* is reflected in the case he makes in the *Pro Caelio*. For example, in *De Oratore* 2.284, the interlocutor Gaius Julius Caesar Strabo states, [*S*]ed ex his omnibus nihil magis ridetur, quam quod est praetor expectationem (“nothing provokes laughter more than an unexpected turn”). This is clearly expressed in the *Pro Caelio* when Cicero seems to slip up, *accidentally* referring to Clodius as Clodia's husband instead of her brother (*Pro Caelio* 32). In addition, much of the witty humor in the *Pro Caelio* centers around the speech's antagonist, Clodia Metelli. As a Roman woman, Clodia held little social status, but as the sister of Publius Clodius Pulcher, she was not entirely snubbed by society either. She was someone *neque carorum neque calamitosorum* (“neither of great care nor of wretchedness”) and therefore, she was the perfect subject for a good joke (*De or.* 2.238). This paper will thus conclude that the true brilliance of the wit and humor used by Cicero throughout this speech is due, in fact, to his adherence to his

own theory, and that Cicero is successful in his ultimate goal of breaking down the character of Clodia, elevating his own status, and securing the favor of both the audience and the jurors, all by leaving the courtroom distracted and humored by his defense speech.

Works Cited

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