

“What a funny consul we have!”: New Comedy in Cicero’s *Pro Murena*

New Comedy’s lively presence in Cicero’s speeches has been well established since K. Geffken identified *adulescentes* and *meretrices*, *senes* and *lenones*, in the *Pro Caelio* (Geffken 1973; also Leigh 2004). To these stock-types I would like to add—as new and quite different cast-members—Cicero’s caricatures of the jurist Sulpicius Rufus and the younger Cato in the *Pro Murena* of 63BCE. I posit that Cicero parodies these two opponents as *palliata* ‘agelasts,’ comparable to the incompetent *advocati* from Terence’s *Phormio* and the ‘killjoy’ tutor from Plautus’ *Bacchides*.

In his *Juristenkomik* (*Mur.* 19-30), Cicero pokes fun at Sulpicius by singling out unnecessarily hypotactic formulations in property disputes. It would, e.g., have been easy enough to say: *fundus Sabinus meus est*. Instead: ‘*fundus,*’ *inquit,* ‘*qui est in agro qui Sabinus vocatur.*’ *satis verbose; cedo quid postea?* ‘*eum ego ex iure manum consertum voco*’ (*Mur.* 26). The counselor Cicero is here imitating speaks in sentences structurally similar to those of an *advocatus* in the *Phormio*: *ego quae in rem tuam sint, ea velim facias* (459). The interjections Cicero delivers in his own *persona* strengthen this evocation of the comic stage: *quid postea?*, e.g., occurs at Plaut. *Bacch.* 728, *Cist.* 548, *Poen.* 480, *Pseud.* 1092, *Rud.* 1276, *Truc.* 509; Ter. *Ad.* 529, 929.

This humorous impersonation of Sulpicius Cicero sprinkles with metaliterary hints that he is indeed having the jurist enact a comedy. At *Mur.* 26, he describes the action as a spectacle laughable to the forefathers (*haec iam tum apud illos barbato ridicula, credo, videbantur homines*), in which the jurist jumps back and forth between clients and *praetor* much like a pipe-player would between actors (*transit idem iuris consultus tibicinis Latini modo*). The comparison to the comic stage continues at *Mur.* 29. Here, Cicero belittles Sulpicius’ profession, claiming

that only those who fail at oratory turn into scholars of the law; similarly, those who do not succeed as *citharodes* turn into *aulodes* (*eos auloedos esse, qui citharoedi fieri non potuerint*). The *aulos*-flute was associated with drama and often considered beneath the *cithara* that accompanied loftier compositions (Bürge 1974 *ad loc.*; Hall 2002). Cicero is thus not merely citing a proverb, but also clarifying that he considers his opponent's 'comedy' not altogether despicable, but ultimately inferior to the 'lyric' poetry of his own oratory. Both of these occupations in turn have to yield to Murena's martial accomplishments, which Cicero also compares to a literary genre. This time, he turns to epic poetry (30), quoting from Ennius' *Annales* (247-253 Skutsch) to conclude that in times of military crisis, '*bonus, horridus miles amatur.*' *vestrum vero studium totum iacet.*

Correspondingly, Cicero's parody of Cato, again delivered in character, recalls a Plautine *magister*. In the *Bacchides*, Lydus objects to his student's presence at a dinner party (109-26); Cato criticizes Murena for entertaining voters at banquets (72). The spoilsport tutor then counters the young man's every objection with clever literary references (e.g., to Hom. *Il.* 2.489 at *Bacch.* 128: *qui si decem habeas linguas, mutum esse addecet*), just as Cato is described as foiling criticisms with commonplaces about Stoic sages (e.g.: '*iratus dixisti!*' '*numquam,*' *inquit,* '*sapiens irascitur,*' 62). In the end, both Cato and the tutor may win the battle of wits, but the *adulescens* simply silences Lydus (*Bacch.* 169: *sequere hac me ac tace*) and Cicero dismisses *vestri virtutis magistri* (!) as taking their precepts too seriously (*Mur.* 65). Still, the listeners must have laughed *with* Cato more than *at* him; after all, Cicero acknowledges Cato's 'Plautine' smarts even as he repels his strictures.

This gentle, New Comedy-based ridicule allows Cicero to succeed in his defense while leaving his opponents—potential allies in the ongoing struggle against Catiline—not altogether

alienated. That this is the purpose of his references to New Comedy can be surmised from the *De oratore*, which recommends *cavillatio* for situations where an adversary's feelings have to be spared (*parcebat enim adversarii dignitati*, 2.221); one relevant subcategory is 'parodistic imitation,' *imitatio depravata* (2.242), an example of which is provided from a *palliata* play. It seems that this strategy is at play in the *Pro Murena* (compare Quint. 11.1.68-72), which may be why Plutarch referred to Cicero's technique in this speech as κωμῳδεῖν and Cato himself commented wryly: "What a funny consul we have!" (Plut. *Comp. Dem. Cic.* 1.5-6, *Cat. Min.* 21.9).

Works Cited

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