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Greece & Rome, 2nd Ser., Vol. 20, No. 1. (Apr., 1973), pp. 20-24.

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SOME PUNS ON ROMAN *COGNOMINA*

By VICTOR J. MATTHEWS

SINCE so many Roman *cognomina* are derived from physical peculiarities and personal idiosyncrasies, it is not surprising that the unfortunate bearers were often the butt of laughter. As Cicero says (*de Or.* ii. 236), 'Locus autem, et regio quasi ridiculi (nam id proxime quaeritur) turpitudine et deformitate quadam continetur: haec enim ridentur vel sola, vel maxime, quae notant et designant turpitudinem aliquam non turpiter.'¹ Cicero remarks that there is need for restraint and good taste in such jokes, and he adds (247) that it is not enough just to get a laugh, a man must also derive some benefit from the remark. Cicero's qualifying comments are in reference to an occasion when a man called Vargula was embraced by A. Sempronius, a candidate for office, and the latter's brother Marcus, whereupon he shouted to his slave 'Puer, abige muscas' ('Boy, chase away the flies'), *Musca* being a *cognomen* of the Sempronii.²

Yet Cicero himself was an inveterate punster, and even Quintilian (vi. 3. 2-3, 5) wishes that the collectors of Cicero's witticisms had exercised some restraint. Cicero's puns on the name Verres (*verres*, 'boar'; *everro*, 'clean out'; *everriculum*, 'drag-net') are well known (Quint. v. 10. 31, vi. 3. 55), though the name is actually a *nomen*, not a *cognomen*, as can be seen from *in Verr.* ii. 4. 57: 'Ridiculum est me nunc de Verre dicere, cum de Pisone Frugi dixerim; verum tamen quantum intersit videte. iste cum aliquot abacorum faceret vasa aurea, non laboravit quid non modo in Sicilia, verum etiam Romae in iudicio audiret; ille in auri semuncia totam Hispaniam scire voluit unde praetori anulus fieret. nimirum ut hic nomen suum comprobavit, sic ille cognomen.'³ In the passage quoted Cicero manages to pun not only on Verres, but also on Frugi, the *cognomen* of Piso. Other punning references to Frugi are to be found in *Tusc.* ii. 8. 16 and *de Fin.* ii. 28. 90. The name seems to have been one of Cicero's favourites, and in *pro Font.* xv. 39 he tells the story of its origin: 'At in quem virum! [i.e. L. Calpurnium Pisonem, cos. 133] qui tanta virtute atque integritate fuit ut etiam illis optumis temporibus cum hominem invenire nequam neminem posses, solus tamen Frugi nominaretur. quem cum in conationem Gracchus vocari iuberet et viator quaereret quem Pisonem, quod

¹ Cf. ii. 239; Quint. vi. 3. 8, v. 10. 31; Cic. *de Inv.* ii. 9. 28.

² For *Musca* as a *cognomen* of the Sempronii, see I. Kajanto, *The Latin Cognomina* (Helsinki, 1965), 333; *RE* iiA. 1435, nos. 71-2.

³ It is of Etruscan origin. See *RE* s.v. 'C. Verres', 1562.

erant plures: "Cogis me", inquit, "dicere: inimicum meum Frugi." Even his enemies had to acknowledge the outstanding qualities of Piso.¹

Similarly at *in Verr.* ii. 1. 121, Cicero again produces a double pun, 'cum Sacerdotem execrabantur qui verrem tam nequam reliquisset' (cf. *Quint.* vi. 3. 55), Sacerdos being the *cognomen* of Verres' predecessor as governor of Sicily, C. Licinius (praet. 75). Quintilian (vi. 3. 4 and 55) attempts to justify Cicero's jokes against Verres by saying that they are always attributed to others and produced as evidence, with the result that 'quo sunt magis vulgaria, eo sit credibilis illa ab oratore non ficta sed passim esse iactata'. Quintilian thus suggests that such jibes were common currency.

In *de Or.* ii. 256, Cicero refers to plays upon words or names by a slight change in spelling 'ut "Nobiliorem, Mobiliozem" Cato', this being a reference to M. Fulvius Nobilior, the consul of 189. Wilkins notes that Fulvius took the poet Ennius with him on his campaign in Aetolia (*Cic. Brut.* xx. 79; *Tusc.* i. 2. 3; *pro Arch.* xi. 27), but suggests that the taunt arose perhaps because of his favour towards literature, especially Greek literature, or because of his readiness to confer distinctions on his soldiers for slight services (*Gell.* v. 6. 24).² However, the specific occasion for Cato's remark may well be found in *Tusc.* i. 2. 3, where we read that Cato censured Fulvius for taking poets to his province. Presumably for Cato this denoted levity (*mobilitas*), a serious matter in the eyes of staid conservative Romans. An interest in literature may have been one thing, but actually to take poets with one on a campaign was quite another.

Quintilian (vi. 3. 53) expresses disapproval of the invention of punning names of this type and provides us with some further examples: a man by the name of Acisculus was called Pacisculus 'quia esset pactus', a certain Placidus was called Acidus 'quod is acerbus natura esset', and (an example with a *nomen*) one Tullius was called Tollius 'cum fur esset'.

Quintilian goes on in vi. 3. 56 to give another example of Cicero taking advantage of a man's name: Cicero said of Sextus Clodius Phormio 'Nec minus niger nec minus confidens quam est ille Terentianus Phormio' (cf. *pro Caec.* x. 27), *niger* here meaning 'black-hearted', 'bad'. Rather similar to this exploitation of the name of a character in a play is the punning use of a proverb in conjunction with a *cognomen*, mentioned by Cicero in *de Or.* ii. 258: 'in hoc genus coniciuntur proverbialia, ut illud Scipionis, cum Asellus omnes provincias stipendia

¹ Kajanto remarks (op. cit. 67-8) that Frugi was one of the very few laudatory names among the family *cognomina* of the republican nobility. This is another indication of the meritorious character of the consul of 133.

² A. S. Wilkins, *Ciceronis De Oratore Libri Tres* (Oxford, 1892, repr. 1962), 357-8.

merentem se peragrasse gloriaretur, "Agas asellum", et cetera.' The actual proverb is said to have been 'Agas asellum, cursum non docebitur' (Wilkins, p. 359). Scipio, as censor in 142, attempted to expel Ti. Claudius Asellus from the equestrian order, but was thwarted by his colleague L. Mummius. In revenge, Asellus, when tribune in 140, prosecuted Scipio for not delivering the customary prayer at the lustration.¹ As Wilkins suggests, Asellus must here have complained about his degradation and boasted of having served in every province. Presumably Scipio's rejoinder is meant to suggest that, as a soldier, Asellus was made to go to the provinces, and did not do so of his own free will.

Another person with whose name Cicero made sport was his personal enemy, P. Clodius Pulcher (trib. 58). Cicero frequently refers to him as *pulchellus*, 'pretty boy' (e.g. *ad Att.* i. 16. 10, ii. 1. 4, ii. 18. 3, ii. 22. 1). Actually Cicero was being sarcastic as well as derogatory, as can be seen from *in Clod. et Cur.* frag. 25: 'postquam speculum tibi adlatum est, longe te a pulchris abesse sensisti.' The word *pulcher* can mean 'noble', 'glorious', 'illustrious', as well as 'handsome', and it is probably in this sense that the Claudii used it as a *cognomen*.²

There are other punning references to *cognomina* to be found in Cicero's letters. One such is in *ad Att.* ii. 13. 2: 'Quanto in odio noster amicus Magnus! cuius cognomen una cum Crassi Divitis cognomine consenescit' (24 April 59). A similar reference to Pompey's *cognomen* occurs in *ad Att.* ii. 19. 3: 'Nostra miseria tu es magnus' (spoken against Pompey by the actor Diphilus at the *Ludi Apollinares*). When the names of Pompey and Crassus are mentioned together, it is a reasonable assumption that Crassus is the other triumvir. However this does not seem to be the case in *ad Att.* ii. 13. 2. Although Cicero may have had cause to think Pompey's *cognomen* a little anachronistic in 59, Crassus can have been no less wealthy than before. As Shackleton Bailey has pointed out, the triumvir did not bear the *cognomen* Dives, and the reference is actually to P. Licinius Crassus Dives, called Crassus Dives by Cicero to distinguish him from the triumvir, as in *ad Att.* ii. 24. 4.³ This man was praetor in 57, and is to be identified with the bankrupt Crassus mentioned by Valerius Maximus (vi. 9. 12), which would explain Cicero's remark about the obsolescence of the name Dives. If, as seems likely, Crassus Dives held the expensive office of plebeian aedile in 60, therein may lie one reason for his financial circumstances.⁴

¹ Cic., *de Or.* ii. 268; Gell. ii. 20. 5-6; iii. 4. 1; iv. 17. 1; vi. 11. 9; Val. Max. iv. 1. 10. Asellus' tribunate was in 140, not 139 as Wilkins dates it. See Livy, *Oxy. Per.* 54, 'Q. Caepione C. Laelio Sapiente coss.'; *MRR* i. 480.

² See T. P. Wiseman, *HSCP* lxxiv (1970), 213 n. 33.

³ D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *Cicero's Letters to Atticus*, i. (Cambridge, 1965), 379.

⁴ See *MRR* ii. 184.

The first Licinius Crassus to have the *cognomen* Dives was probably P. Licinius Crassus, consul of 205 and Pontifex Maximus (Dio, frag. lvii. 52). The *cognomen* became hereditary in his branch of the family.¹

Another famous Ciceronian pun is that on the name Q. Marcius Rex, used against Clodius in *ad Att.* i. 16. 10: "Quousque", inquit, "hunc regem feremus?" "Regem appellas", inquam, "cum Rex tui mentionem nullam fecerit?" ille autem Regis hereditatem spe devorarat.' Cicero was not the only man to make a pun on the name Rex. When Julius Caesar returned to Rome on 26 January 44 after celebrating the *Feriae Latinae*, some of the people greeted him as king. Caesar protested that his name was not Rex, but Caesar.² Clearly Caesar was here employing a sense of humour in an attempt to get out of an embarrassing situation. As Fraenkel remarks, it was only later, because of the action of the tribunes, that Caesar lost his temper.³ Fraenkel mentions Caesar's pun on the name Rex in commenting upon Horace's rather feeble use of the same pun in *Satires* i. 7. 33-5:

Persius exclamat, 'per magnos, Brute, Deos te
oro, qui reges consuieris tollere, cur non
hunc Regem iugulas?'

The Rex who was the target of this joke was P. Rupilius Rex, probably praetor in 43.⁴ Horace makes Persius call upon Brutus, who had removed Caesar (by assassination) and whose ancestor had removed Tarquinius (by exile), to get rid of this Rex too.

Such jokes on names are to be found even earlier than the time of Cicero and Caesar. A good example from the late second century is that by the orator Licinius Crassus against Cn. Domitius Ahenobarbus (cos. 122), reported by Suetonius (*Nero* ii. 2): 'In hunc [i.e. Cn. Domitium] dixit Licinius Crassus orator non esse mirandum, quod aeneam barbam haberet, cui os ferreum, cor plumbeum esset' ('... it was not surprising that he had a bronze beard, since he had a face of iron, and a heart of lead'). Such clever remarks were no doubt a regular feature of both political and forensic speeches from an early date.

But perhaps the neatest and most succinct witticism of this type, and one with which we may well close this paper, is a double pun contained in an anonymous verse, probably from the Marian period: 'Postquam Crassus carbo factus, Carbo crassus factus est'⁵ ('After Crassus became

¹ Shackleton Bailey, loc. cit.

² Appian, *BC* ii. 108; εὐμηχάνως εἶπε τοῖς ἀσπασαμένοις: "οὐκ εἰμι Βασιλεὺς, ἀλλὰ Καῖσαρ", ὡς δὴ περὶ τὸ ὄνομα ἐσφαλιμένοις; Dio xlv. 10. 1: οὐκ ἔφη Βασιλεὺς ἀλλὰ Καῖσαρ καλεῖσθαι. See E. Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford, 1957), 120 n. 1.

³ Fraenkel, loc. cit.

⁴ *MRR* ii. 339.

⁵ Vers. Anon. 4, in *Poetarum Romanorum Veterum Reliquiae*, sel. E. Diehl (repr. Berlin, 1967), 164.

carbon [i.e. was cremated], Carbo became fat'). This would appear to refer to the death of P. Licinius Crassus (cos. 97 and cens. 89), father of the triumvir, who perished in 87 at the hands of the Marians, prominent among whom was Cn. Papirius Carbo (cos. 85, 84, 82).¹ Carbo may well have grown fat on the proceeds of Crassus' estate.²

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¹ Plutarch, *Crass.* iv. 1; Appian, *BC* i. 72, 75.

² It is a strange coincidence that the names of another Crassus and Carbo occur together in 130, when C. Papirius Carbo (cos. 120) succeeded P. Licinius Crassus Dives Mucianus (cos. 131) as a member of the Gracchan land commission. However it is difficult to see how this would have benefited Carbo to any material extent, and I am sure that the Marian context is the right one. [Victor], *Vir. Ill.* lxv. 4, confuses the names of Carbo and Crassus (see Greenidge and Clay, *Sources for Roman History* 133-70 [2nd edn. Oxford, 1960, repr. 1961], 34; *MRR* i. 503). Could the author have been influenced by this verse?