

### *Cicero's Puns*

"I SHOULD," says Menage, "have received great pleasure to have conversed with Cicero, had I lived in his time. He must have been a man very agreeable in conversation, since even Cæsar carefully collected his *bon mots*. Cicero has boasted of the great actions he has done for his country, because there is no vanity in exulting in the performance of our duties; but he has not boasted that he was the most eloquent orator of his age, though he certainly was; because nothing is more disgusting than to exult in our intellectual powers."

Whatever were the *bon mots* of Cicero, of which few have come down to us, it is certain that Cicero was an inveterate punster; and he seems to have been more ready with them than with repartees. He said to a senator, who was the son of a tailor, "*Rem acu tetigisti.*" You have touched it sharply; *acu* means sharpness as well as the point of a needle. To the son of a cook, "*Ego quoque tibi jure favebo.*" The ancients pronounced *coce* and *quoque* like *co-ke*, which alludes to the Latin *cocus*, cook, besides the ambiguity of *jure*, which applies to *broth* or *law*—*jus*. A Sicilian suspected of being a Jew, attempted to get the cause of Verres into his own hands; Cicero, who knew that he was a creature of the great culprit, opposed him, observing, "What has a Jew to

do with swine's flesh?" The Romans called a boar pig *verres*. I regret to afford a respectable authority for forensic puns; however to have degraded his adversaries by such petty personalities, only proves that Cicero's taste was not exquisite.

There is something very original in Montaigne's censure of this great man. Cotton has not ill expressed the peculiarities of his author, though he has blundered on a material expression.

"Boldly to confess the truth, his way of writing, and that of all other long-winded authors, appears to me very tedious; for his preface, definitions, divisions, and etymologies, take up the greatest part of his work; whatever there is of life and marrow, is smothered and lost in the preparation. When I have spent an hour in reading him, which is a great deal for me, and recollect what I have thence extracted of juice and substance, for the most part I find nothing but wind; for he is not yet come to the arguments that serve to his purpose, and the reasons that should properly help to loose the knot I would untie. For me, who only desired to become more wise, not more learned or eloquent, these logical or Aristotelian disquisitions of poets are of no use. I look for good

and solid reasons at the first dash. I am for discourses that give the first charge into the heart of the doubt; his languish about the subject, and delay our expectation. Those are proper for the schools, for the bar, and for the pulpit, where we have leisure to nod, and may awake a quarter of an hour after, time enough to find again the thread of the discourse. It is necessary to speak after this manner to judges, whom a man has a design, right or wrong, to incline to favour his cause; to children and common people, to whom a man must say all he can. I would not have an author make it his business to render me attentive; or that he should cry out fifty times *O yes!* as the clerks and heralds do.

“As to Cicero, I am of the common opinion that, learning excepted, he had no great natural parts. He was a good citizen, of an affable nature, as all fat heavy men (*gras et gausseurs* are the words in the original, meaning perhaps broad jokers, for Cicero was not fat)—such as he was, usually are; but given to ease, and had a mighty share of vanity and ambition. Neither do I know how to excuse him for thinking his poetry fit to be published. ’Tis no great imperfection to write ill verses; but it is an imperfection not to be able to judge how unworthy bad verses were of the glory of his name. For

what concerns his eloquence, that is totally out of comparison, and I believe will never be equalled.”