

Article

The Utility of Humour as a Conduit of Political Subversion in the Early Roman Empire

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The hypothesis that approaches the use of humour throughout the ages as something approximating a coping mechanism, has been subject to a long-standing discussion in what is known as humour studies. In this particular essay, by looking through the spectacles of one of the discipline's theories, called relief theory, I will attempt to find out whether humour was used to lighten the weight of oppression in Imperial Rome, and can thus corroborate this hypothesis.

Keywords: humour studies; relief theory; roman empire; political subversion; ridicule; tyranny; oppression; liberty.

People have often been found to contend with an existence of political repression by putting up some sort of resistance; meaning that when they feel trapped by a political system, it inevitably leads them to push the boundaries that restrain them. At present, people employ everything from journalism, social media, poetry, theatrical performance to academia, in order to voice their political grievances. Equally, there are also those who vocalise their dissatisfaction about political issues through the prism of humour. A good

example that illustrates this point may very well be the old Middle Dutch, allegorical 'beast epic' *Of Reynaert the Fox*: a zoomorphised political tale devised to communicate a critique of sinners and oppressors—political *satire*, in other words, disguised as fiction.¹ And the aim of this paper will be to identify and explain similar uses of humour under the yoke of Imperial Rome.

Sourcing the humorous

Why trace the utility of humour back to the Roman world, one may well ask. Well, the higher the pressure, the purer the diamond, so 17th century politician and philosopher Lord Shaftesbury may very well have thought. Insofar that, when he alluded to the acuity of political humour in his *Sensus Communis*, he wrote: 'The greater the Weight is, the bitterer will be the satir.'² And after all, it was Roman rhetorician Quintilian

¹ For those interested, see: Thea Summerfield, trans. *Of Reynaert the Fox: Text and Facing Translation of the Middle Dutch Beast Epic Van Den Vos Reynaerde*, eds. André Bouwman and Bart Besamusca (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009).

² Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury, "Sensus Communis: an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour," in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* Vol. 1 (London: 1711), 49.

(c. 35-100 AD) who touched upon said political humour, claiming it as ‘all our own’. As did he credit Lucilian (c. 180-103/102 BCE) satire for having demonstrated that the *use* of free expression in particular, can give ‘so sharp an edge and such abundance of wit’ to humour³—perhaps, so this essay will explore, even more so when said free expression is critically endangered. A premise that begs the following question: can instances of humour serving as a ‘conduit’—meaning, as an *instrument*—of political subversion be identified and, if so, why? Theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas, who commented on the nature of the humorous in his *Summa Theologica*, so Terry Eagleton argues, approximated an answer to the why of the question, recommending the utility of humour as a ‘therapeutic play of words’—as a coping mechanism of sorts.⁴ Eagleton, in his book *Humour*, furthermore writes that humour has actually quite often been proposed to be ‘a form of relief’—encapsulated in what is known as *relief*—or: *release*—*theory*. The theory on humour that according to Eagleton the aforementioned Lord Shaftesbury was one of the first to write about as the ‘releasing of our constrained but naturally free spirits’.⁵ And as such, Eagleton theorizes, humour can be a dangerous weapon: a ‘threat to sovereign power’, ‘loosening the grip of authority’ and ‘bringing low the mighty’ to ‘keep a harsh

world at arm’s length’⁶—an instrument, in short, of *subversion* and *liberation*.⁷

Roots in Rome

Which brings us to how the imperial period specifically, fits into all this. As implied, between *humour theory* and *political oppression*, the Roman Empire is one of the most obvious common denominators that both phenomena can be traced back to. And looking to establish a reading of history that might illustrate just how important and unbanishable the use of humour as a coping mechanism can be, one of the most consistently dictatorial periods in history seemed a fitting place to start—likely providing us with two necessary ingredients. That of tyrannical *autocracy* and the thing Eagleton would say is considered to endanger it: *humorous expression*. Of course, two things precede its analysis: first, to answer the question of what the use of humour according to relief theory actually means and, second, how this helps us isolate and explain cases of humour used in the employ of critics under Imperial Rome. As far as looking for accounts of individuals using humour as a tool to resist the tyrannical are concerned, we may avail ourselves of such sources as Cassius Dio, Juvenal, Flavius Josephus and Petronius, thus confining this essay to the Empire’s 1st through 3rd century AD. As one will have noticed, these are hardly authors playing the same sport: the first and last are historians, the second a poet and the third a (satirical) novelist. This particular diversity of

³ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, X, 1.93-94.

⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Humour* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2019), 95; in reference to Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 168, a. 3.

⁵ Eagleton, *Humour*, 10.

⁶ Eagleton, *Humour*, 96, 114, 123.

⁷ See also Henk Driessen, “Humour Matters,” *Etnofoor* 28, no. 1 (2016): 144.

genres however, is neither objectionable nor intentional, as it is not what is *relevant* to the topic of this essay—but the authors being fellow travellers on the road of humorous expression, *is*. As for this essay, it is about the (underlying) *message* in such expressions, not the literary style through which it is conveyed. Admittedly, this still prompts one to ask: why mainly involve *these* authors' works? Well, for one, all of them are known to have been on thin ice with Roman authority at some point during their lives (and thus making it *unlikely* for there to have been zero trace of potentially politically subversive elements in their works). And secondly, the authors' works do not all speak to the same audiences—which is to say: they provide us with insight into humorous subversion as expressed *by* and *on behalf* of different social classes. Moreover, as already stated, the source texts are descriptive of events not limited to but, rather, spread across the reigns of a variety of imperial oppressors. From Nero and Caligula, to Commodus and Elagabalus—spanning a period rich enough in tyrants and scenarios via which we might use relief theory to explain people's use of humour to cope with them.

So the outline is clear. The example of *Of Reynaert the Fox* was, in essence, a story of mostly submissive herbivores protesting the vices of their time and their carnivore overlord, subtly channelling suppressed sentiments of resentment amongst a medieval people toward their oppressor, without the risk of repercussion from the latter. And now looking to stories of Roman oppression

expressed through humour, this essay thus hopes to determine if the selected historical sources could allow for the idea that the 'submissive herbivores' and 'the carnivore overlord' can be interchanged with the *Roman people* and their *emperor*—and that, whenever the former uses humour to subvert the latter, relief theory can explain their motive.

Humour in theory

Motive, is often the word used as the point of departure for the various theories on humour.⁸ Delving further into the proper definition of relief theory in particular—and indeed the larger theory on humour—one is likely to stumble upon the fact that these 'motivational theories of humour' have been the object of the on-going discussion that is humour scholarship for quite some time. As for example relief theorists as 'recent' as Sigmund Freud and Herbert Spencer defined the utility of humour to be a 'way to release or save energy generated by repression'⁹, the pursuit of properly defining the overarching theory of humour itself actually goes all the way back to such figures as Plato (c. 428/427-348/347 BCE), Aristotle (384-322 BCE), Cicero (106-43 CBE) and Quintilian. It is in part in the works of these four ancient scholars that modern scholars have rooted¹⁰ the three theories¹¹ of *superiority*, *incongruity* and the one selected to explain political

⁸ Lisa Glebatis Perks, "The Ancient Roots of Humor Theory," *Humor* 25, no. 2 (2012): 119.

⁹ Aaron Smuts, "Humor," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Accessed May 23, 2020), <https://www.iep.utm.edu/humor/>.

¹⁰ Perks, "The Ancient Roots," 120.

¹¹ For a succinct summary of the three theories, see Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2002), 2-3.

humour in Rome: *relief*. It would seem to me that the latter, in contrast to the first two is, in essence, *not* predominantly about amusement for the sake of it, or about what it is a consequence of. Meaning that incongruity and superiority theory posit that humour is, respectively, a *product* of the unexpected ('a response to an incongruity'¹²) or a product of a pompous intolerance for those whose perceived idiocy invites mockery or ridicule (and to act upon that invitation to elevate oneself above others).¹³ Whereas relief theory is not *just* an explanation for what humour is *derived from*, but rather also an explanation for what it is a *conduit* of, from a psychological perspective. As Viktor Raskin put it, relief theory's basic principle 'is that laughter provides relief for mental, nervous and/or psychic energy, and thus ensures homeostasis after a struggle, tension, strain' or something of the like.^{14,15} Succinctly put, humour can play a salutary role for the oppressed creature. 'Salutary', because as Quintilian implied, humour can serve to absolve us of suppressed emotions toward 'words or actions (...) which reveal folly, anger or fear.'¹⁶ And where there is room to relieve oneself of, as Raskin said, nervous or tense 'energy', there is room for humour to become politically subversive—as after all, Quintilian submits: 'laughter is never far

removed from derision.'¹⁷ Which is to say that mockery in particular, we know to be an allergen to tyrannical authority. Something we will hopefully be able to further demonstrate when looking at the use of humour amongst the Roman populace. (Who a number of emperors have certainly been attested to have put a heavy 'strain' on during their reigns.)

To laughter, to liberty

What, one should think, is it about humour that scares authority? Might it be the *exposing* nature of it? After all, in his work *The Dead Come to Life or The Fisherman*, Lucian (c. 120-180 AD) suggests that 'no harm can be done by a joke; (...) on the contrary, whatever [or whomever] is beautiful shines brighter and becomes more conspicuous'¹⁸ and, therefore, by implication what- or whomever *does not* shine brighter after enduring ridicule, must face the reality of perhaps being not so beautiful after all—like, say, the *ugly* face of autocracy. And if indeed humour *is* or *can be* ipso facto politically subversive, then a fear of ridicule expressed by tyrannical authorities is not so strange a thing. Philosopher of humour John Morreall certainly attests to this, recalling the example of even Hitler being 'so wary of the danger of humour to the Third Reich that he had special "joke courts" set up for, among other things, punishing people who named their dogs and horses "Adolf".'¹⁹ What follows is that apparently the use of humour can

¹² Smuts, "Humor."

¹³ Perks, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*, part of series Synthese Language Library 24 (Dordrecht; Boston: D. Reidel Pub, 1985), 38.

¹⁵ The idea of humour as a 'stress-reductant' is actually quite widely held. See John C. Meyer, "Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication," *Communication Theory* 10, no. 3 (March 2006): 312.

¹⁶ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, VI, 3.7.

¹⁷ Quintilian, *ibid.*

¹⁸ Lucian, *Reviviscences sive Piscator*, 14.

¹⁹ John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York, 1983), 102.

indeed be an ‘intrinsic defence against tyranny’—or at least something challenging it.²⁰ Andrew Stott also referred to Lord Shaftesbury when, in his contemplation of Shaftesbury’s work, he argued that ‘humour offers a release from the frustrations of social [in]justice’, and that ‘a nation’s appetite for comedy is formed in direct proportion to the degree of political oppression at work there.’²¹ So we know that in the context of coping mechanisms, humour and oppression may exist relative to one another—but what ties it to liberty, then? According to Herodotus (c. 484-430/420 BCE), humour is a conduit of political subversion insofar that it is a conduit of *isegorie*, or ‘equality of speech’²²—which almost by definition, is a hallmark of people *not* suffering under tyrannical rule.²³ The subversive element to humour, then, lies in that it is an expression of liberty. As Morreal stated: an individual ‘with a sense of humour can never be fully dominated, (...) for his ability to laugh at what is incongruous in the political situation will put him above it to some extent, and will preserve a measure of his freedom—if not of movement, at least of thought.’²⁴ And whenever a people or person faces political constraint, humour offers a way out from under the painful condition of constant prostration and acquiescence. What it allows

for, as I started off by saying in this essay, is to *push back*—to *resist*.

From theory to practise

So now that we know what relief theory refers to when speaking of the utility of humour, I’m left with the question of how this helps us explain cases where humour might have served as a conduit of political subversion during the Principate. Although perhaps, I should instead ask: how *doesn’t* it help? After all, relief theory explains *that* which a citizen of Imperial Rome might certainly have felt, but would not necessarily have put into writing—meaning the *emotional circumstance* of a humorous expression cannot always be inferred from the literal words of a source. And relief theory allows for a *deeper* reading of instances where the display of humour is described. In this way, we might just be able to discover and reconstrue any potential underlying motivations. Mary Beard, in her book *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up*, points to the example of Cassius Dio’s account of laughter in the presence of the vicious emperor Commodus.²⁵ Dio writes: ‘Having killed an ostrich and cut off his head, he [Commodus] came up to where we were sitting, holding the head in his left hand and (...) wagged his [own] head with a grin, indicating that he would treat us in the same way. And many would indeed have perished (...) for laughing at him (for it was laughter rather than

²⁰ Andrew McConnell Stott, *Comedy. The New Critical Idiom* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 98.

²¹ Stott, *Comedy*, *ibid.*

²² Herodotus, V, 78.

²³ Frederick Ahl, “The Art of Safe Criticism in Greece and Rome,” *The American Journal of Philology* 105, no. 2 (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984): 174.

²⁴ Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, 101.

²⁵ Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up* (Ser. Sather classical lectures, volume seventy-one) (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2014), 1-2.

indignation that overcame us), if I had not chewed some laurel leaves (...) so that (...) we might conceal the fact that we were laughing.²⁶ Somewhat later Dio adds that Commodus' behaviour of a petty tyrant had caused them all 'to believe that we were surely about to be rid of him.'²⁷ Just on the *surface* of it, this tells us first, that Dio was no fan of Commodus' erratic handling of the imperial office; second, that the emperor intimidated Dio and his fellow senators; and third, that Dio claimed to have kept his cool and to have felt no fear, but rather could barely contain himself, and only because he had 'laurel leaves' on him to force-chew himself through his impending burst of laughter. Relief theory offers suggestions to consider that perhaps, in this instance, Dio might not have been entirely upfront about his state of mind in that moment. Assuming for now that Commodus' amusement over the fact that he had just divorced an ostrich from its head was not something he had intended to share with those present, expecting everyone to courteously join in on his 'grin', but rather as Dio says, meant it as a threat upon their lives, then surely it must not have been laughter but shock that 'overcame' him? And if so, then the humorous manner in which he reports on this moment two decades later (or indeed perhaps even *right after*, in the privacy of his home), boasting about surviving another autocrat that did not manage to command his fear, was perhaps really only a cover to distract from the emotional distress that he

likely must have felt. Beard's observation goes the same direction with this, arguing that Dio's portrayal of the scene as amusing rather than nervous, is rather 'tendentious', clearly brushing up reality to a version that 'simultaneously indicts and ridicules the tyrant while casting the writer as a down-to-earth, genial observer not taken in by the ruler's cruel but empty posturing.'²⁸ What this, then, reveals about the scene, Beard argues, is that Dio's containing of what he claims was a humorous occasion, would suggest 'that laughter could be one of the weapons of those opposed to Roman autocracy,'²⁹ and as such in a way amount to 'an act of subversion or resistance to Commodus' tyranny'.^{30,31}

Eagleton's 'harsh world'

Now that I have illustrated the use of relief theory in contextualizing, in this case, the relationship between humour and subversion in the Roman political realm, I will move on to provide some period-context to give an idea of the state of life during the days of the early Empire. Roman poet Juvenal (c. 55/60-127 AD) for example, touches upon the plight of the oppressed citizen, in this case some poor passerby who, so historian Alfred G. K. L'Estrange comments on the scene, is about to be scolded in the street by some

²⁸ Beard, *Laughter in Ancient*, 7-8.

²⁹ Beard, *Laughter in Ancient*, 3.

³⁰ Beard, *Laughter in Ancient*, 5.

³¹ For the 'subversive power of laughter' see also Jan Rüger, "Laughter and War in Berlin," *History Workshop Journal* 67, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 25-27.

²⁶ Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana*, LXXIII (LXXII), 21.1-2.

²⁷ Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana*, LXXIII (LXXII), 21.3.

‘drunken magnate and his retinue’.³² Juvenal writes³³:

‘Where are you from?’ shouts he; ‘whose vinegar, whose beans have blown you out? With what cobbler have you been munching cut leeks and boiled wether’s chaps?—What, sirrah, no answer? Speak out, or take that upon your shins! Say, where is your stand? In what prayer-shop shall I find you?’ Whether you venture to say anything, or make off silently, it’s all one: he will thrash you just the same, and then, in a rage, take bail from you. Such is the liberty of the poor man: having been pounded and cuffed into a jelly, he begs and prays to be allowed to return home with a few teeth in his head!

The words in Juvenal’s poem are in part those of his friend Umbricius who, in this and other sections of Juvenal’s *Satire*, describes the ever-impending lethality of being *alive* when not a member of the Roman elite. Besides insomnia, the threat of getting trampled, beaten by an angry mob or indeed something as silly as having a wagon collapse on you or, even sillier, instant death by stray pottery plummeting down on one’s face from high-rise buildings³⁴, the average Roman citizen should especially watch out for the archetypical petty tyrant—or as Erin Moodie refers to Umbricius’ narration of the common man’s oppressor: ‘The Bully’.³⁵ *Just* in between the aggressive questioning (*Unde venis?* and *ede ubi consistas; in qua te quaero proseucha?*) and the humiliation and stripping

of his victim’s dignity (*feriunt pariter, vadimonia deinde irati faciunt*) the drunken magnate, with his sense of superior standing in Imperial society, *bullies* his fellow but ‘lesser’ man into submission.³⁶ Why? Because *that*, Juvenal has Umbricius say, ‘is the liberty of the poor man’ (*libertas pauperis haec est*). And if this kind of narrative is in any way reflective of Roman society under the early Empire, we might just imagine how humour could serve as a relief from its weight.

Dionic derision

Discussing such relief, I look again to Cassius Dio for a first case where I suspect humour to have been at play as a conduit of political subversion. Having *just* had a three-month interlude named Pertinax to catch his breath and acclimatize to a Commodus-ridden Rome, Dio and the Roman people were caught in the middle of a brewing conflict of imperial succession. Vying for the emperorship pursuant to Pertinax’s assassination, Julianus reportedly moved mountains to quickly erect a military base in the suburbs of Rome, preparing himself for the coming conflict with his political rival Severus.^{37,38} Between jump-jacking legionnaires, shouting quartermasters and gladii clattering down on grinding stones, *war* hung in the air. Rome oozed a tense energy, Dio reports—saying the city ‘became nothing more nor less than a camp, in the

³² Alfred G. K. L’Estrange, *History of English Humour, Vol. 1: With an Introduction Upon Ancient Humour* (Tredition, 2012), 126.

³³ Juvenal, *Satura*, 3.292-301.

³⁴ Juvenal, *Satura*, respectively: 3.232-242; 3.243-248; 3.257-260; 3.269-277.

³⁵ Erin K. Moodie, “The Bully as Satirist in Juvenal’s Third Satire,” *The American Journal of Philology* 133, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 96.

³⁶ Moodie, “The Bully as Satirist,” 95.

³⁷ Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana*, LXXIV, 16.

³⁸ Publius Helvius Pertinax (126-193 AD), Marcus Didius Julianus (133-193 AD) and Lucius Septimius Severus (145/146-211 AD).

enemy's country, as it were'.³⁹ Unlike with the ostrich affair, this time Dio writes it was fear rather than laughter that overcame him upon hearing the news that Julianus had won the bid for the emperorship. 'We were possessed by fear of Julianus (...) especially all of us who had done any favours for Pertinax or anything to displease Julianus,' Dio writes, while also confessing that he himself 'was one of these' people.⁴⁰ It would have seemed that amidst these rising tensions the senators and people ('and great, also, was the fear inspired in the rest of the population') were walking on eggshells. Despite this however, Dio sets the scene for a brief expression of humour that managed to slip through.⁴¹

(...) at times we would be overcome by laughter; for the Praetorians did nothing worthy of their name and of their promise, for they had learned to live delicately; the sailors summoned from the fleet stationed at Misenum did not even know how to drill; and the elephants found their towers burdensome and would not even carry their drivers any longer, but threw them off, too. But what caused us the greatest amusement was his [Julianus'] fortifying of the palace with latticed gates and strong doors. For, inasmuch as it seemed probable that the soldiers would never have slain Pertinax so easily if the doors had been securely locked, Julianus believed that in case of defeat he would be able to shut himself up there and survive.

Knowing full well the Praetorian Guard in question was, for the moment at least, still at

Julianus' beck and call, Dio here quite plainly laughs in the face of authority after having observed live its efforts to prepare for the coming conflict. Already admitting to have been a Pertinax collaborator and, as we now know, a Commodus-opponent like Laetus and Marcia⁴² (who Julianus had just executed⁴³), Dio nonetheless takes the risk of pushing the political boundaries that restrain him. We can only speculate as to why Dio had suddenly mustered the bravery to smile in the face of his oppressor, where he did not before. Did Dio have a premonition that Julianus was likely to lose to Severus? That after Julianus' wet performance of a sixty-six days crack at the emperorship, he would be able to add another name to the list of autocrats that he had outlived? Looking at Dio's humorous scene as a product of such suspicions, it could seem likely to say that his mocky observations of Julianus' military officers was a matter of sticking it to him, knowing he could get away with it—a calculated act of subversion, then. At least as much might we deduce if we think of Shaftesbury's take on relief theory. As the late Lord submitted, through humour, comes liberty: 'And thus the natural free spirits of ingenious men, if imprison'd and controul'd, will find out (...) ways to (...) relieve themselves in their constraint: and whether it be Burlesque, Mimickry or Buffoonery, they will be glad (...) to vent themselves, and be reveng'd on their Constrainers.'⁴⁴ And when looking at Dio's ridiculing of Julianus'

³⁹ Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana*, LXXIV, 16.2.

⁴⁰ Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana*, LXXIV, 12.

⁴¹ Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana*, LXXIV, 16.3-4.

⁴² Marcia Aurelia Ceionia Demetrias and Quintus Aemilius Laetus, two of the conspirators to Commodus' assassination.

⁴³ Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana*, LXXIV, 16.5.

⁴⁴ Shaftesbury, "Sensus Communis," 49.

defence force, his expression of humour certainly fits that of burlesque.

Jewish relief

The same kind of ridicule can again be found in Titus Flavius Josephus' (c. 37/38-100 AD)⁴⁵ attitude towards members of the Flavian dynasty. Steve Mason points out that Josephus had a knack for subjecting his rivals to rhetorical entrapment, whereby he stressed the implications of their praise of the Flavians in such a way that it all of sudden would appear not commendatory, but rather trivializing.⁴⁶ And in the grand scheme of laughter and power, as Jan Rüger put it, the utility of humour—in this case of the ironical variety—has 'become fixed into a "subversive" versus "supportive" dichotomy'—meaning humour can be either to deride, or to give praise.⁴⁷ And as undermining the praising of emperors generally makes for poor political *support*, we are better served fitting Josephus' political stance in the *subversive* category—which, Mason submits, 'raises the question whether Josephus' own apparent flattery of the Flavians was not often intended, and understood by his audiences, ironically.'⁴⁸ And if indeed Josephus' flattery of the Flavians was more mockery⁴⁹ than it was

genuine praise, relief theory would prompt us to consider any grudges Josephus would have held against Rome. On the surface of it, Josephus seems to have had somewhat of a complicated and, in a way, awkward relationship with the Flavians—something one would imagine one can hardly have with tyrants and oppressors. And yet, Dio reports, Vespasian was both the person to condemn Josephus to imprisonment on *multiple* occasions as well as the one to have granted him absolution after Josephus turned out to be right when he had laughed at Vespasian and said: 'You may imprison me now, but a year from now, when you have become emperor, you will release me.'⁵⁰ Moreover, after this affair, Josephus had received from Vespasian a gesture of reconciliation: the emperor's support, an apartment inside Vespasian's house and, later, 'land and property in Judea'—land that Domitian had even exempted from tax.^{51,52} Quite appropriately, Beard called the Jewish historian 'the luckiest traitor ever.'⁵³ However, as Mason points out, despite having only *just* escaped prosecution by the Empire, Josephus *still* did not bother to omit in his *Bellum Judaicum* (c. 78 AD⁵⁴) such events as the unimpressive, 'humiliating' performance that was Domitian's campaign

⁴⁵ Originally named Joseph Ben Matthias, Flavius Josephus was a Jewish priest and historian.

⁴⁶ Steve Mason, "Figured Speech and Irony in T. Flavius Josephus," in *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, eds. Jonathan Edmondson, Steve Mason and James Rives (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 258.

⁴⁷ Rüger, "Laughter and War," 25.

⁴⁸ Mason, "Figured Speech and Irony," 259.

⁴⁹ And indeed opportunism, as it had helped buy his freedom. See Sarah Emanuel, *Humor, Resistance, and Jewish Cultural Persistence in the Book of Revelation: Roasting Rome* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 128.

⁵⁰ Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana*, LXVI (LXVI), 1.4.

⁵¹ Keith Prosser, *Was Jesus Crucified?* (Lulu Press, Inc.: 2016), 198.

⁵² Supposedly for these reasons, Josephus took up the 'Flavius' in his name (which may very well have been a ruse to win the emperors' confidence). See Per Bilde, *Flavius Josephus between Jerusalem and Rome: His Life, His Works, and Their Importance* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 54.

⁵³ Mary Beard, "The Triumph of Flavius Josephus," in *Flavian Rome: Culture, Image, Text*, eds. A.J. Boyle and W.J. Dominik (Leiden; Boston: BRILL, 2003), 543.

⁵⁴ Michael Grant, *Readings in the Classical Historians* (New York: Scribner's, 1992), 367.

in Germania Superior.⁵⁵ And mentioning the failings of Domitian, one surely does not come to lightly, or randomly (after all, Juvenal *did* indicate that so much as criticizing members of Nero's social circle on Domitian's watch—let alone Domitian *himself*—could lead to one's execution^{56,57}). Regardless, Josephus writes⁵⁸:

[Domitian] had a courageous mind from his father, and had made greater improvements than belonged to such an age: accordingly he marched against the barbarians immediately; whereupon their hearts failed them at the very rumor of his approach, and they submitted themselves to him with fear, and thought it a happy thing that they were brought under their old yoke again (...). When therefore Domitian had settled all the affairs of Gaul in such good order (...) he returned to Rome with honor and glory, as having performed such exploits as were above his own age, but worthy of so great a father.

Mason thought the irony here obvious. Why? Because, so he argues, 'the tone and content' of Suetonius and Tacitus' version of events, 'flatly contradicts Josephus' extremely flattering revision.' (e.g. Domitian's victory: *Illi autem expeditionis fama percussi, ei se permiserunt, lucrum hoc ex ea re maximum nacti, ut sine clade pristino jugo sub jicerentur.*) One might compare it to the 'admirers' of Nero's singing, praising him for his 'celestial voice'⁵⁹, only emphasizing that which had already bothered Nero immensely: that his

singing performances had been 'thinly attended'.⁶⁰ Ergo: ridicule *disguised* as excessive praise, showing just how *exposing* humorous exaggeration can be. Something Domitian apparently hadn't recognized in Josephus' account of *his* qualities. Which begs the question: was Josephus conning his way through the Flavian dynasty, and making them look like idiots in the process? Of all 'flattery' Josephus devoted to the Flavians, that which was in actuality an expression of 'humorous irony', Mason writes, 'was there for all to see, a source of quiet ridicule.'⁶¹ So yes, political subversion through humorous irony, it would seem. But relief theory demands motive—and what was Josephus'? As Dio stuck it to Commodus and Julianus to relieve himself of his constrainers, perhaps Josephus' patronizing fawning upon Flavian authority was his version of doing the same thing. After all, reasons to be recalcitrant in the face of said authority were increasingly aplenty. Suetonius reports that later during Domitian's reign, he had become more and more of an oppressive autocrat.⁶²

(...) he for some time showed himself inconsistent, with about an equal number of virtues and vices, but finally he turned the virtues also into vices; for so far as one may guess, it was contrary to his natural disposition that he was made rapacious through need and cruel through fear.

As Philip Bosman points out, when 'featuring in provocative humour, the body is

⁵⁵ Mason, "Figured Speech and Irony," 260-261.

⁵⁶ Juvenal, *Satura*, 1.155-171.

⁵⁷ See also on Domitian's terror: Mason, "Figured Speech and Irony," 286; and Ronald Syme, "Domitian: the last years," *Chiron* 13 (1983): 134.

⁵⁸ Flavius Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum*, 7.87-88.

⁵⁹ Tacitus, *Annales*, XVI, 22.1.

⁶⁰ Tacitus, *Annales*, XV, 33.1.

⁶¹ Mason, "Figured Speech and Irony," 261-262.

⁶² Suetonius, *Domitianus*, 3.2.

an unflinching instrument of subversion'.⁶³ And if Josephus felt Domitian was 'rapacious' and 'cruel' enough to be deserving of ridicule, he could have just gone after, say, his bald head⁶⁴—but he did not; he took the route of humorous irony. Perhaps because Josephus *knew* very well he was dealing with a tyrant, ready to dispose of him were he to find Josephus writing unsupportively of him in a more *direct* manner. It would not have been sensible to come after the emperor that was once likened to the monstrous serpent Typhon—*tyranny incarnate*.⁶⁵ A monster that, Suetonius mentions, was rather prickly about things as seemingly trifling as one's countenance, saying 'he was so sensitive about his baldness, that he regarded it as a personal insult if anyone else was twitted with that defect in jest or in earnest'.⁶⁶ So, as open mockery would likely have resulted in his death (or yet another jail cell), Josephus kept himself to subtly⁶⁷ taunt imperial authority through humorous irony—a cautious, praise-wrapped rebelliousness that allowed for Josephus to loosen the grip of Flavian authority and bring low its might. Perhaps, we can only imagine, to do as relief theory would suggest, and contend with the painful condition of having to be a historian

at the disposal and mercy of his tyrannical overlords—the very rulers of the empire on whose opposite side he had fought in the rebellion that was to emancipate Jewry from its Roman oppressor.⁶⁸ And an oppressor Rome certainly was—*particularly* to Jews.⁶⁹ Something Josephus mustn't have neglected to consider in his accounts of the eternal city's heads of government. In fact, there had been a tradition of anti-Jewish sentiments coming from the imperial throne.⁷⁰ Sentiments only *suspected* of the Flavians, but *identified with certainty* in the emperors before them. Not four decades before Josephus' writing, in the spirit of Juvenal's bully, the thin-skinned emperor Caligula had mocked and humiliated an envoy of Jews who had asked to be heard on the brewing ethnic conflict between Jews and Greeks in Alexandria.⁷¹ And so, Philo laments, in Caligula they would not find an ally, as *all* the emperor could bring himself to do was to dismiss them with indifference and ignore their plight.^{72,73} And then four decades later, somewhat North-East of Alexandria, Jerusalem was set aflame and Rome had smashed a Jewish rebellion. Wanting to punish Jews collectively for this revolt, Vespasianus subjected them to the *fiscus Judaicus*, making them all—literally—pay for

⁶³ Philip Bosman, "Selling Cynicism: The Pragmatics of Diogenes' Comic Performances." *The Classical Quarterly, New Series* 56, no. 1 (May 2006): 101.

⁶⁴ One of the most obvious and *classic* ways of knocking man's power and pride of its pedestal: stressing the loss of hair. See Beard, *Laughter in Ancient*, 146.

⁶⁵ Dio Chrysostom, *Orations*, 1.66-67; 1.76; 1.78.

⁶⁶ Suetonius, *Domitianus*, 17.2.

⁶⁷ The same kind of subtlety as in Martial's—perhaps deliberately ambiguous—epigram to Domitian, claiming to hope the gods will indulge him 'with whatever you deserve!' Which can of course be praise as much as ridicule, leaving it to the audience whether to interpret the message as supportive or subversive. See Martial, VI, LXXXVII.

⁶⁸ Beard, "The Triumph of Flavius," 543.

⁶⁹ Emanuel, *Humor, Resistance, and Jewish*, 126, 150.

⁷⁰ Mary E. Smallwood, "Domitian's Attitude toward the Jews and Judaism," *Classical Philology* 51, no. 1 (January 1956): 1. See also Paul Keresztes, "Nero, the Christians and the Jews in Tacitus and Clement of Rome," *Latomus* 43, no. 2 (April-June, 1984): 406, 409.

⁷¹ An attitude quite in line with what one would expect: 'No man was so forward as Caligula to break a jest, and no man was so unwilling to bear it.' See Seneca, *De Ira*, 8.354.

⁷² Philo, *Legatio ad Gaium*, 349-367.

⁷³ Beard, *Laughter in Ancient*, 141-142.

their pursuit of liberty.⁷⁴ The Empire had struck back. And could Josephus *really* do what Philo's delegation could not, and *still* find an ally in his emperor? If not, he might have indeed been more likely to indulge in holding a grudge against Rome and his Flavian masters. And ridiculing said masters, Josephus may have felt, was the least he could do to *relieve* himself of the presumed⁷⁵ sense of guilt and shame of having been vengeless to the murderers of his brethren.⁷⁶

A culinary critique

To round off this exercise of explaining humorous expression, I would present my third, closing case. Right now, we've inspected ridicule as expressed by Cassius Dio, laughing in the face of authority, and Flavius Josephus' stinging irony, praising his lieges into discomfiture. The next example of political subversion via the humorous, is one administered through allegory: that of Gaius Petronius Arbiter's (c. 27-66 AD) *Satyricon*—this time not taunting the sharp teeth of Emperor-elect Julianus, or the Flavian trinity, but of the emperor that like Domitian, was in retrospect described as a 'ferocious Typhoeus'⁷⁷, and a 'dreadful serpent'⁷⁸—hailing from Pandæmonium to wreak havoc on earth.⁷⁹ Not quite the jolly chap whose court it would be pleasurable to serve at, you would think. And yet, it was

exactly while serving at that court—*Nero's* court—that Petronius (presumably) wrote his comical *Satyricon*. A section of which, called *Cena Trimalchionis* (Trimalchio's dinner), has been often interpreted as communicating an underlying message or critique—a wittily crafted 'sneer' at Nero's emperorship.⁸⁰ The *Satyricon's* telling of a group of Romans dining at a party hosted by Trimalchio, an obscene and decadent specimen of a freedman, could very well have been intended to mirror the governance of the empire under Nero's reign. A section of the story introduces us to Trimalchio via a pre-dinner bathing scene⁸¹:

'See! That's the gentleman you are to dine with!' [Menelaus] had not finished speaking when Trimalchio snapped his fingers, and at the signal [a] eunuch held out the chamber-pot for him (...) After easing his bladder, he called for water, and having dipped his hands momentarily in the bowl, dried them on one of the lads' hair.

After, Petronius sets the scene for the dinner, and describes the atmosphere and serving of the first course⁸²:

At last we take our places, Alexandrian slave-boys pouring snow water over our hands, and others succeeding them to wash our feet and cleanse our toe-nails (...) I had (...) asked for a drink of wine. Instantly an attendant was at my side, pouring out the liquor to the accompaniment of [servants' 'singing']. Demand what you would, it was the same; you might have supposed yourself among a

⁷⁴ Smallwood, "Domitian's Attitude toward," 2-3.

⁷⁵ As implied by the fact that Josephus tried to 'justify' his surrender to Vespasian. See Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Josephus in Galilee and Rome: His Vita and Development as a Historian* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002), 94-97.

⁷⁶ For which Domitian's brother Titus had been mainly responsible.

⁷⁷ (Seneca), *Octavia*, 58-272.

⁷⁸ *Sibylline Oracles*, 5.40.

⁷⁹ Commodian, *Instructiones*, XL-XLI.

⁸⁰ Edward John Kenney, "Gaius Petronius Arbiter," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, January 1, 2020,

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaius-Petronius-Arbiter>.

⁸¹ Petronius, *Satyricon*, XXVII.

⁸² Petronius, *Satyricon*, XXXI.

troupe of pantomime actors rather than at a respectable citizen's table.

Then the preliminary course was served in very elegant style. (...) On (...) miniature bridges were dormice seasoned with honey and poppy-seed. There were sausages, too, smoking hot on a silver grill, and underneath (to imitate coals) Syrian plums and pomegranate seeds.

And finally, Petronius announces the host's arrival at the dinner hall⁸³:

We were in the middle of these elegant trifles when Trimalchio himself was carried in to the sound of music, and was bolstered up among a host of tiny cushions, a sight that set one or two indiscreet guests laughing. And no wonder; his bald head poked up out of a scarlet mantle, his neck was closely muffled, and over all was laid a napkin with a broad purple stripe or *laticlave*, and long fringes hanging down either side. Moreover he wore on the little finger of his left hand a massive ring of silver gilt, and on the last joint of the next finger a smaller ring (...) of solid gold.⁸⁴

In a bombastic, burlesquish manner⁸⁵, the plump, amply decorated Trimalchio is carried into the banquet-hall, ready to enjoy a night of lavish consumption. Clearly, relative to any one dinner we the readers might imagine having, this banquet is indeed presented as an obscene and decadent affair, quite in line with the outrageous character that is Trimalchio himself. And how this might read as political subversion, becomes clear when you think of Critchley's suspicion

that the whole scene is a humorous reference to the Neronian Principate. He argues that 'Trimalchio—himself some sort of twisted reflection of Petronius' employer, the Emperor Nero—appears like a great, shining pig.'⁸⁶ What more makes it clear that Trimalchio's dinner scene is a humorous expression of the ridiculing kind, is that it is reminiscent of one of 'two customary strands of culinary critique in Roman satire'—in this case that of mocking 'the luxurious and excessive delicacies of the wealthy'.⁸⁷ And if indeed Trimalchio is a reflection of Nero—and likely, then, his dinner a reflection of Nero's court—the underlying message becomes clearer still. For example, Beard argues, the sinister yet humorous portrayal of Trimalchio in contrast to his guests, stresses 'the inequities of the imperial dinner table', 'exposing the differentials of power and status'.⁸⁸ So we may operate, for now, on the assumption that Petronius had intended for his story to sneer at Nero's blindness to his 'moral bankruptcy and (...) snobbish pretensions'.⁸⁹

As such, we know that the culinary section of the *Satyricon* qualifies as humorous and, moreover, that it can serve as a conduit of political subversion. And one is inclined to have relief theory make quick work of this and conclude that it must have been Nero's oppressive regime providing the emotional duress for which Petronius' therapeutic allegory was intended. The main obstacle to this theory of Trimalchio's dinner

⁸³ Unable, like a true jester, to omit a reference to his *bald* head.

⁸⁴ Petronius, *Satyricon*, XXXII.

⁸⁵ Richard H. Crum, "Petronius and the Emperors, I: Allusions in the *Satyricon*," *The Classical Weekly* 45, no. 11 (February 1952): 162.

⁸⁶ Critchley, *On Humour*, 32.

⁸⁷ Moodie, "The Bully as Satirist," 106.

⁸⁸ Beard, *Laughter in Ancient*, 148.

⁸⁹ Emanuel, *Humor, Resistance, and Jewish*, 143.

being a medium for Petronius to get back at his bully however, is Tacitus' account of Petronius' station at Nero's court. According to Tacitus, Petronius was 'adopted into the narrow circle of Nero's intimates' as the emperor's chief of etiquette (hence the epithet, *arbiter elegantiae*).⁹⁰ Tacitus describes Petronius' initiation as somewhat of a friendly embrace—something seemingly tantamount to becoming a close confidant, an emperor-whisperer (*dum nihil amoenum et molle adfluentia putat, nisi quod ei Petronius adprobavisset*), ever lurking at Nero's side, ready to dispense fresh council. But this may very well just have been the *facade* of a courtier who has reached the uppermost echelons of power, with *nowhere* to go but down: a politician in survival mode, hoping to keep his emperor's trust (just as Josephus had adapted to appease Vespasian). After all, even if there *had* been any kind of 'amity' between Petronius and Nero, it would likely still have been rather superficial. As superficial, unreliable and volatile as Commodus' smile at Dio, Caligula's cheerful reception of his Jewish guests or indeed the friendly gesture of Vespasian, heeding the advice to keep one's friends close but one's enemies closest, offering Josephus a bed in his very home. Nero's supposed amity, in short, was the kind one could lose at a moment's notice. And to have lived under the *constant* pressure of that, may very well be indicative of Petronius' *Satyricon*'s function as a release valve—his *only* way of discharging free, uncensored thought. The pressure of

knowing how vital it was to remain in Nero's good graces, Petronius himself conveys through a scene hinting at the smothering aura of Nero's presence.⁹¹

At the end of this [second] course Trimalchio left the table to relieve himself, and so finding ourselves free from the constraint of his overbearing presence we began to indulge in a little friendly conversation.

Based on what we now know, the tension or nervous energy Petronius might have experienced would turn out to be well-founded, as the trust between him and Nero was indeed as fleeting as he may have suspected, when a jealous political rival by the name of Ofonius Tigellinus ensured Petronius' implication in a conspiracy to assassinate the paranoid emperor—leading to that unfortunate inevitability of the carnivore overlord devouring his herbivore subject. But even as his life was demanded, Petronius took charge of his death by slowly letting his severed but bound up veins run dry, while he engaged in humorous expression to *ease* his last moments, electing to converse with his friends, listening 'to [their] light songs and frivolous verses'.^{92,93} And with his dying breath, as though a last act of *relieving his spirit of Nero's constraint*, rather than seek reconciliation, he scorned his emperor by sending him a list 'detailing' Nero's 'imperial debauches'.⁹⁴ An act of subversion which, so

⁹¹ Petronius, *Satyricon*, XLI.

⁹² Tacitus, *Annales*, XVI, 19.1.

⁹³ Or as L'Estrange translates it: '(...) love verses and humorous epigrams, and endeavoured to withdraw his thoughts from the sad reality by indulging in all kinds of amusing caprices.' See L'Estrange, *History of English Humour*, 125.

⁹⁴ Tacitus, *ibid*.

⁹⁰ Tacitus, *Annales*, XVI, 18.1.

Holly Haynes argues, Tacitus did acknowledge and approve of—at least as much did he express in his obituary of Petronius, confirming that he too had thought of Trimalchio’s inventor as ‘one who put up a witty resistance to Nero.’⁹⁵

one’s plight (of living under oppression in Imperial Rome).

In conclusion

Having reviewed a host of ancient sources containing or referring to humorous expression, and qualifying a number of them—amongst which the three examined in this paper—as sources whereby the expression in question may be read as politically subversive, it has proven certainly insightful to try and explain the motive and emotional circumstance behind said humour, through the lens of relief theory. Not just because the theory offers context per individual case, but because as I progressed through this paper, it caused a certain *pattern* to emerge of ‘energy’ (Dio—civil war; Josephus—treachery and defeat; Petronius—corruption and barbarism) building up, each time at some point resulting in an excess, inevitably leading to an ‘outburst’ of ridicule—an act of subversion, thwarting imperial authority. For Dio it was via burlesque, for Josephus irony, and for Petronius allegory—but for *all* of them it would seem, it was the weight of withheld emotion that made them express themselves as they did; thus indeed corroborating the hypothesis that humorous expression can serve as a coping mechanism to contend with

⁹⁵ Holly Haynes, “The Tyrant Lists: Tacitus’ Obituary of Petronius,” *The American Journal of Philology* 131, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 72.

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