SUETONIUS AND VESPASIAN’S HUMOUR∗

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ABSTRACT

Suetonius, in his Vita of Vespasian, gives considerable prominence to Vespasian’s wit and humour as a part of that emperor’s character and method of dealing with people. The picture that emerges is of an educated man, well versed in the Greek language and literature and capable of witty improvisation in that language. At the same time, his penchant for clever but coarse jokes and his use of down-to-earth humour in his ‘unseemly’ money-making activities are indicative of his non-aristocratic, bourgeois origins. His idealised Republican prototype and model might well be the Elder Cato.

Plutarch, the older contemporary of Suetonius, stresses at the beginning of his life of Alexander (1.2) that he is not writing history but biography, and that often a small act or word or joke makes more impression of character (the subject of biography) than the greatest of battles. In the Vespasian of Suetonius, jokes or wit or humour are obviously such an important aspect of this emperor’s character, that they virtually form a separate ‘rubric’ devoted to the subject’s humour or wit; and it is obviously especially important as Suetonius devotes almost a twelfth of the biography to this topic.1 It is noteworthy that Tacitus, in the Histories (2.5.1), does not refer to this aspect of Vespasian’s character when he sums him up with the famous epigram prorsus, si avaritia abesset, antiquis ducibus par, which is strange since Vespasian’s humour is closely associated by Suetonius with his avaritia. However, it must be borne in mind that most of the text of the Histories is lost and Tacitus may have discussed this subject in his detailed treatment of Vespasian’s reign. Perhaps, too, the topic was not sufficiently elevated for the dignity of history.

It is worth looking at the words with which Suetonius introduces this

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1 For an exhaustive study of Suetonius’ own humour, as compared with that of Plutarch, see T. Reekmans, ‘Verbal humour in Plutarch and Suetonius’s Lives’, Ancient Society 23 (1992) 189-232.
topic: erat enim dicacitatis plurimae, etsi scurrilis ac sordidae, ut ne praetextatis quidem verbis abstineret (Vesp. 22). I would translate this as ‘for he was a man very much given to witticisms, even though scurrilous and vulgar, so that he did not even refrain from obscene words.’ The word dicacitas recurs in Vesp. 23.1: maxime tamen dicacitatem adefectabat in deformibus lucris, ut invidiam aliqua cavillatione dileret transferretque ad sales. I translate this as ‘However, he especially made use of witticisms in the case of unseemly profits, in order that he might lessen the animosity by means of some joke and turn it into a witty saying.’

The word dicacitas is not a very common word in Latin. Lewis & Short s.v. define it as ‘biting wit, raillery, banter’ and cite only five examples, two from Quintilian and three from Cicero; Suetonius, who uses the word twice, is not cited for this word, nor for the adjective dicax which he also uses twice. The Oxford Latin Dictionary (OLD) s.v. defines the word as ‘mordant or caustic raillery’ and cites six examples, including Suetonius, Vesp. 23, though again, Suetonius is not cited under dicax. The Thesaurus Linguae Latinae (TLL), vol. V s.v. defines the word as ‘i.q. facete, mordaciter dictum, irrisio, maledicentia, scurrilitas sim.’ (‘that which is spoken in a witty, biting manner, mockery, abuse, buffoonery sim.’) and cites both chapters 22 and 23 of the Vespasian. The TLL’s definition of the adjective states that for the most part the idea of mocking, abusing suggests itself (notione irridendi, maledicendi plerumque subente). Perhaps the tone of the noun is best summed up by Suetonius’ near-contemporary Quintilian, who states (Inst. 6.3.21) that dicacitas ‘significat sermonem cum risu aliquos incessantem’ (‘indicates speech attacking people with laughter’).

The adjectives that Suetonius uses at Vespasian 22 with dicacitas are also interesting. Thus scurrilis, defined by Lewis & Short as ‘buffoon-like, jeering, scurrilous’, is the equivalent of βομολοχή; sordida, defined as ‘low, mean, base, abject, vile, despicable, disgraceful’, is the equivalent of the Greek φάνλος.

From all this, it would appear that the essence of Vespasian’s humour, as far as Suetonius is concerned, is that it was not ‘gentlemanly’ and, despite the statement of Brian Jones that ‘Vespasian’s occasional ribald sense of humour was part of what would now be dubbed “a carefully cultivated image” and should not be interpreted as indication of lowly birth or a “peasant” upbringing’,2 we may, I believe, assume that Suetonius implies that it was appropriate to one descended from money-lenders or tax-collectors, i.e. a true ‘gentleman’ would not do or say such things. Suetonius himself (Vesp. 12) says that ‘he never tried to hide his former modest background and he often even flaunted it’, and shows how he mocked people who tried to find

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for him an elevated lineage (e.g. descent from Heracles). Suetonius, however,continues his account in chapter 22 with the adverb *tamen*, ‘nevertheless’, i.e.despite the vulgar humour just mentioned, *nonnulla eius facetissima extant, in quibus baec* etc. (‘some very witty sayings of his are extant, among them thefollowing’). *Facetus*, the adjective from *facetiae*, is defined as ‘elegant, witty,polite’ and linked with the Greek *eironia*. Vespasian, therefore, also hadhumour that was appropriate to a gentleman and educated person. Theexamples given, all in chapter 22, are:

(i) The incident with Mestrius Florus, who chided Vespasian for saying *plostra*not *plaustra* and was greeted the following day by Vespasian as *Flaurus*. Thisjoke is certainly a play on the pronunciation of the Latin words, but mayalso, as Brian Jones has pointed out (Jones & Milns, *op.cit.* 85), be a play onthe Greek word *φανελος*, pronounced *φλαύρος* in the Ionic dialect andmeaning ‘cheap, vulgar, useless’. If this is correct, we have a double joke,which implies that Vespasian had a good knowledge of Greek.

(ii) The story of Vespasian’s being *expugnatus a quadam ... Vespasiano adamato*.This passage has attracted considerable discussion among scholars, especiallyconcerning the significance of *pro concubitu* and *Vespasiano adamato*. Despitemy own earlier translation of *pro concubitu* as ‘in return for her sexualfavours’, I am now attracted by Zinn’s interpretation of the phrase as‘instead of bed’, i.e. he did not succumb, as this would make another doubleword-play with *adamato* being either the Latin perfect participle, meaning (asI translated) ‘the object of a passion’ or the Greek adjective *ἀδάματος*,‘unvanquished’, in its Latinised spelling. We might note that Suetonius givesanother example of such educated playing on similar sounding Latin andGreek words in his *Nero*, when Nero says that Claudius has ceased *morari*among men. By lengthening the first syllable, Nero makes the word soundlike ‘to play the fool’ (μωρος) instead of ‘to linger’. This interpretation of*Vespasiano adamato* is rejected by Hudson-Williams, who would translate as‘the loving of Vespasian’. Reekmans interprets *adamato* as playing on theGreek *ἀδάματος*, but in the sense that Vespasian had decided to stay‘unwed’ (the sense of *ἀδάματος* when applied to women) after the death ofhis wife Flavia Domitilla. These two examples of Vespasian’s *facetiae* whichare possibly plays on Greek words in addition to their immediate and

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3 Jones & Milns (note 2) 21.
5 Cf. the pun at *Dom.* 13.2.
7 Reekmans (note 1) 210 n. 74.
obvious interpretation lead on to:

(iii) utebatur et versibus Graecis tempestive satis etc. (‘He used Greek verses also in a very appropriate manner’). I am inclined to think that the et should be taken closely with versibus to indicate that Suetonius used Greek verses as well as prose or individual words amongst his facetiae. This leads into the two stories involving quotations from Homer (Il. 7.213) and Menander’s Theophoroumene (‘The Girl Possessed’, fr. 223.2 Kock). The Iliad quotation given by Vespasian is unchanged, but if indeed improbius natus does mean having an enormous sexual organ, it is brilliantly appropriate, especially if quoted on the spur of the moment. The passage from Menander, εἰ τις προσελθὼν μοι θεῶν λέγοι ‘Κράτων, / ἐπάν ἀποθάνης, αὐθίς ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἔση. / ἔση δ’ ὅ τι ἀν βούλη, κύων, πρόβατον, τράγος, ἀνθρωπος, ἰππος ...’ (fr. 223 Kock), may be translated as follows: ‘If any of the gods were to approach me and say “Kraton, / when you die, you will be from the beginning again: / and you will be whatever you wish – a dog, a sheep, a goat, / a man, a horse ...”’. Vespasian has emended the passage to read ὁ Λαχής, Λάχης, / ἐπάν ἀποθάνης, αὐθίς ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἔσει / σὺ Κηρύλος (‘O Laches, Laches, / when you die once again you will be / Kerylos’) by changing the final half of Menander’s first line, keeping the second intact, omitting the third line and emending the first four syllables of the fourth – and in the process perfectly maintaining the Greek original’s iambic trimeter scansion. He has thus shown an ability to compose (and improvise) Greek iambics.

What we have here, then, is a series of jokes or bon mots which show a very good knowledge of the Greek language and literature and help us to understand why he was the first to endow a ‘chair’ of Greek as well as Latin (Vesp. 18).

From the Greek facetiae Suetonius turns to Vespasian’s dicacitas, which he used in deformibus lucris, ‘to lessen the animosity by means of some joke and turn it into a witty saying.’ Four examples are given (‘get yourself another brother’; ‘how much had it cost to shoe it?’; ‘and yet it comes from urine’; and ‘the pedestal is ready’). These jests may or may not have eased the sting of the demand, but they do show a down-to-earth, ironic wit, a personality which will not brook any nonsense and also what may be described as an excessive desire to acquire money, even small sums, by ‘ungentlemanly’

means. In this respect Vespasian comes close to the definition of the _aneleutheros_, ‘the illiberal man’, described by Aristotle, _EN_ 4.1.40ff, whose αἰσχροκερδία, ‘love of base gain’, makes him willing to endure reproach for even a small gain. Such people follow degrading professions, according to Aristotle, such as brothel-keepers and petty usurers. Vespasian’s ancestors, it will be recalled, had followed such illiberal professions as money-lending and tax-collecting (_Vesp._ 1.2), and he himself had had to resort to mule-trading (_Vesp._ 4.3).9

Vespasian’s wit and mocking irony are also seen in the two examples quoted by Suetonius dealing with his approaching death (_Vesp._ 23.4). Though Suetonius’ emphasis is on Vespasian’s inability to desist from jesting even in the most serious _personal_ situation faced by everybody, the first two incidents again show Vespasian’s ability to play with words and their etymology, in these cases the relation of _Calvina_ to _calvus_, ‘bald’, and _stella crinita_, ‘hairy star’, to his baldness.10 The third example is more problematic in its interpretation. This is the famous statement _prima quoque accessione morbi: vae, inquit, puto deus fio_ (‘At the first attack of the illness, “Alas,” he said, “I think I am becoming a god”’).11 The significance of these words depends on whether one believes they are genuinely Vespasian’s words or whether they are a later invention attributed to Vespasian, perhaps by enemies for a malicious purpose. If they are Vespasian’s, are they to be treated as the last ironic joke of the dying emperor or as a serious statement of what he believed would happen to him after his death?12 To me, the words have all the appearance of Vespasian’s no-nonsense irony and, especially in view of their acceptance by Suetonius, may be regarded as the last piece of humour of this ‘empereur du bon sens’, as he was once called by Leon Homo.

The opening sentence of _Vespasian_ 22, which begins Suetonius’ discussion of Vespasian’s humour, tells us that the emperor was _comissimus_, both at dinner-time and always on other occasions (_alias_). _Comis_, the adjective from

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9 A.B. Bosworth, ‘Vespasian and the slave-trade’, _CQ_ 52 (2002) 350-57, suggests that Vespasian’s trading activity was in slaves, especially eunuchs, and that _mulio_ indicates this.

10 For an excellent discussion of this passage, see Brian Jones, _Suetonius: Vespasian_ (Bristol 2000) 121-23.

11 Similar words are reported by _Dio_ (66.17.3): ἐπειδὴ τε ἐπίστευσεν ὅτι τελευτήσει, ἔφη θεὸς ἢ ἢ γίνομαι” (‘When he was convinced that he was about to die, he said “I am already becoming a god”’).

comitas, may be defined as affability or obligingness and is one of the social virtues or quasi-virtues. Suetonius also attributes the quality of comitas to Augustus (Aug. 53.2, 74, 98.1), Titus (Tit. 8.2) and even Nero (N. 10.1) where it is included in the section on his commendable deeds. In Tacitus’ portrait of the emperor Otho, comitas is the only moral virtue he has and his excessive indulgence in it can frequently impair his dignitas. It may also be the intention of Suetonius to show us how Vespasian’s comitas could result in his dignitas being compromised by his allowing – even asking – others to make jokes about his person. This produces the famous joke about his facial appearance – veluti nitentis – and the wit’s joke cum ventrem exonerare desieris (‘when you’ve finished unloading your belly’). The implication of this joke is that Vespasian knew that people made jokes about his features, but it also puts him in breach of that quality called by Aristotle (EN 4.8.5) ἐπιστεφέρεσις (‘tact’): ‘and it is the nature of the tactful man to say and have said about him the sort of things which are befitting for a worthy and free-born man.’ The joke may, however, tie up with Suetonius’ own words in chapter 24: dum consurgit ac nititur. The verb nititur has been referred back to the word nitentis in chapter 20,13 where it means ‘straining’, i.e. with constipation, to give a double entendre to nititur (‘whilst he struggled and/or relieved himself’). If correct, this would be perhaps a unique joke on Suetonius’ part, but the preceding words alvo repente usque ad defectionem soluta (‘his bowels suddenly being loosened up to the point of his fainting’) would seem to militate against this interpretation.

What sort of person is revealed from Vespasian’s jokes and humour? He was obviously, at one level, well educated, a connoisseur of Greek literature and language, with the ability to use his knowledge in a quick-witted and satiric manner. But the fact that many jokes refer to his concern to acquire money, even from sordid sources – a habit satirised in the famous story of his funeral (Vesp. 19.2) – indicates, or is intended to indicate, his origins in the Italian bourgeoisie that had had to make its money rather than having inherited wealth from the land. Vespasian’s exchange with Mestrius Florus may also indicate that the emperor had an unaristocratic accent and this, combined with his often less than gentlemanly wit and humour, might indicate that he would have more in common with the North Country industrialists of the British Industrial Revolution than with the landed aristocracy whose ranks they were striving to enter.

If one were to speculate on whom Tacitus had in mind when he said of Vespasian (Hist. 2.5.1) prorsus, si avaritia abesset, antiquis ducibus par (‘in a word, if avarice had been absent, he would have been the equal of the commanders of old’), one obvious candidate would be the Elder Cato, who has all the

13 See Jones (note 10) 125.
qualities of Vespasian: \textit{novitas generis}; a simple, no-nonsense approach to life and politics; the willingness to partake of the same food, clothing and hardships as his soldiers; an ability to relax at table; a biting, ironic wit; and, though at times denied, an ability with the Greek language and literature. Cato, too, was frugal, even tight-fisted, in pecuniary matters, but, when seen at a distance of more than 200 years, Cato’s attitude could be regarded as the virtue of \textit{parsimonia}; Vespasian, at a closer distance, was saddled with the moral vice of \textit{avaritia}.

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