

BELLARIA XCIV



MACROBIUS AMBROSIUS THEODOSIUS (i) (c. AD 390- after 430)

Introduction

Macrobius, who was praetorian prefect of Italy in AD 430 (we know little else of his life), was an enthusiast for education. As he says at the beginning of his *Saturnalia*, 'I judge nothing dearer than my children's education ... and to complete it I prefer summaries to long excursions. Having no time for delay, I am not going to wait for you to progress only in the subjects you are learning through your own efforts, but I have read in your interests various volumes of both Greek and Latin, both before you were born and after, to provide you with a fund of information. So if ever you need some historical event which lies hidden from common knowledge in a mass of books, or have to call to mind some memorable deed or saying, it will be easy for you to find it ... we ought to imitate bees, wandering about sampling the flowers. So I shall commit to writing all that I discovered from my varied reading, so that, by being arranged consistently, it will come together in an orderly whole'. The result was Macrobius' *Saturnalia*.

It is dedicated to Macrobius's son Eustachius, and claims to record discussions in private houses over four days, including the three of the *Saturnalia* (December 16-19 in all) in order to offer his children 'an accumulation of things worth knowing ... everything that the ancients developed to perfection'. And he started with witticisms, which cover the first day's discussion (December 17) — sugaring the pill?— and on which these extracts will concentrate (in fact most of the dialogue is taken up with a reverent discussion of Virgil as the supreme authority on philosophy, religion, grammar and rhetoric).

Interestingly, Christianity, now well established as Rome's religion, is completely ignored and there is a degree of nostalgia for Rome's past. But there is no sense in which it is an anti-Christian document; Virgil, for example, was often interpreted as a Christian-before-his-time.

There is a fine text and translation of Macrobius' *Saturnalia* by Robert Kaster in the Loeb series (2011).



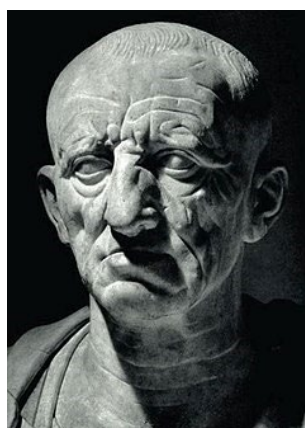
Saturnalia (Antoine Caillet, 1783)

Good, clean fun over dinner

2.1.7 Symmachus interrupted: “At the Saturnalia, best of days” [Catullus 14.15], as the poet of Verona says, I take it that we should neither imitate the Stoics and repel pleasure as a foe nor follow the Epicureans and make pleasure the highest good. Let us then make humour without impropriety our aim; and, unless I am mistaken, I think I have found out how to do this. I suggest that we relate to one another a selection of the jests of famous men of old—there are a number of books of these *bons mots*. 2.1.9 And let such literary delights and learned badinage take the place of the improper and indecent jokes of the barefoot dancer and crude clown...’

2.1.7 *excepit Symmachus: quia Saturnalibus optimo dierum, ut ait Veronensis poeta, nec uoluptas nobis ut Stoicis tamquam hostis repudianda est, nec ut Epicureis summum bonum in uoluptate ponendum, excogitemus alacritatem lasciua carentem: et, ni fallor, inueni, ut iocos ueterum ac nobilium uirorum edecumatos ex multiugis libris relatione mutua proferamus* 2.1.9 *haec nobis sit litterata laetitia et docta cauillatio uicem planipedis et subulonis inpudica et praetextata uerba iacientis ...*

Cato set the precedent



Cato the Elder sends the table into hysterics

2.1.15 'The famous Marcus Cato, the Censor, also used to make clever jokes. And so, even if the jests we make were our own, we could rely on the precedent set by these men to shield us from criticism; but, since we are proposing to repeat sayings of by gone times, we certainly have a sound defence in the high position of the men who made them. If, then, the suggestion meets with your approval, let us jog our memories for such sayings and repeat, each in turn, what comes to mind.' **2.1.16** All approved of the innocent merriment proposed, and they urged Praetextatus to begin and thus give them a lead by his example.

2.1.15 *Marcus etiam Cato ille Censorius argute iocari solitus est. horum nos ab inuidia muniret auctoritas, etiamsi nostris cauillaremur: at cum ueteribus dicta referamus, ipsa utique auctorum dignitate defendimur. si ergo probatis inuentum, agite quod cuique de dictis talibus in mentem ueniet uicissim memoriam nostram excitando referamus. 2.1.16 placuit uniuersis laetitiae excogitata sobrietas: et ut Praetextatus incipiendo auctoritatem de exemplo praeberet hortati sunt.*

Antiochus' pride in his army ...



Antiochus III 'The Great'

2.2.1 'I propose', said Praetextatus, 'to tell you of a saying of one of our country's enemies and, since we defeated him, to recall the story is to celebrate anew the triumph of our arms. **2.2.2** Hannibal of Carthage made this most witty jest, when he was living in exile at the court of king Antiochus. Here it is. Antiochus was holding a review, on some open ground, to display the huge forces which he had mustered for war against the Roman people, and the troops were marching past, gleaming with accoutrements of silver and gold. Chariots, too, fitted with scythes were brought on to the field, elephants with towers on their backs, and cavalry with glittering reins, housings, neck chains, and trappings.'

2.2.1 *tum ille: dictum uolo hostis referre, sed uicti et cuius memoria instaurat Romanorum triumphos. Hannibal Carthaginiensis apud regem Antiochum profugus facetissime cauillatus est. 2.2.2 ea cauillatio huiuscemodi fuit. ostendebat Antiochus in campo copias ingentes quas bellum populo Romano factururus comparauerat, conuertebatque exercitum insignibus argenteis et aureis florentem: inducebat etiam currus cum falcibus et elephantos cum turribus equitatumque frenis et ephippiis, monilibus ac faleris praeferentem.*

... which Hannibal deflates

2.2.2 'Glorying in the sight of his large and well-equipped army, the king then turned to Hannibal and said: "Do you think that all these is enough for the Romans?" 2.2.3 The Carthaginian, in mockery of the king's troops, who for all their costly equipment were cowardly and unwarlike, replied: "Yes, I think they will certainly be enough for the Romans—even if they are the greediest people in the world". There could not have been a neater or more pungent remark...'

2.2.2 *atque ibi rex contemplatione tanti et tam ornati exercitus gloriabundus Hannibalem aspicit et: putasne, inquit, satis esse Romanis haec omnia?* 2.2.3 *tunc Poenus eludens ignauiam inbelliamque militum eius pretiose armatorum: plane, inquit, satis esse credo Romanis haec, etsi auarissimi sunt. nihil prorsum neque tam lepide neque tam acerbe dici potest...*

Mockery of Mucius

2.2.8 Eustathius spoke next. Mucius, he said, was the most ill-natured of men; and so, finding him looking even gloomier than usual, Publilius remarked: 'Either Mucius has been unlucky, or someone else has been lucky.'

2.2.8 *Eustathius deinde: Publilius Mucium inprimis maliuolum cum uidisset solito tristiolem: aut Mucio, inquit, nescio quid incommodi accessit, aut nescio cui aliquid boni.*

Jokes on launderers and artists



Roman launderers hard at work

2.2.9 'Sulla's son Faustus', said Avienus, 'hearing that his sister was having an affair with two lovers at the same time—with Fulvius (a launderer's son) and Pompeius surnamed Macula ('a stain')—declared "I am surprised to find my sister with a stain, seeing that she has the services of a launderer.'"

2.2.10 Then Evangelus said: 'Servilius Geminus happened to be dining at the house of Lucius Mallius, who was held to be the best portrait painter in Rome and, noticing how misshapen his host's sons were, observed: "Mallius, you do not make children the way you paint them." "Naturally" replied Mallius. "I make children in the dark, but pictures in the light.'"

2.2.9 *inde Auienus: Faustus Sullae filius, cum soror eius eodem tempore duos moechos haberet, Fulvium fullonis filium et Pompeium cognomine Maculam: miror, inquit, sororem meam habere maculam, cum fullonem habeat.*

2.2.10 *hic Euangelus: apud L. Mallium, qui optimus pictor Romae habebatur, Seruilius Geminus forte coenabat: cumque filios eius deformes uidisset: Non similiter, inquit, Malli, fingis et pingis. et Mallius: in tenebris enim fingo, inquit, luce pingo.*

Cicero on Vatinius (a bitter enemy of Cicero)

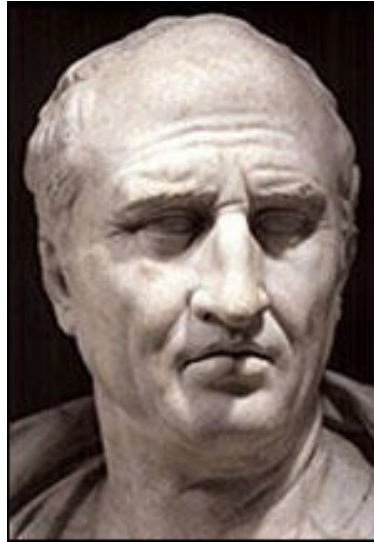
2.3.5 ‘The consulship of Vatinius which lasted for only a few days, gave Cicero an opportunity for some humorous sayings which had wide currency. “Vatinius’s term of office” he said, “has presented a remarkable portent, for in his consulship there has been neither winter, spring, summer, nor autumn.” And again, when Vatinius complained that Cicero had found it too much trouble to come to see him in his sickness, he replied: “It was my intention to come while you were consul, but night overtook me”. Cicero, however, was thought to be getting his own back here and to have had in mind the retort made by Vatinius to his boast that he had returned from exile borne in triumph on the shoulders of the people: “How, then, did you get those varicose veins in your legs”?’

2.3.5 *in consulatu Vatini, quem paucis diebus gessit, notabilis Ciceronis urbanitas circumferebatur. magnum ostentum, inquit, anno Vatini factum est, quod illo consule nec bruma nec uer nec aestas nec autumnus fuit. querenti deinde Vatinio, quod grauatus esset domum ad se infirmatum uenire, respondit: uolui in consulatu tuo uenire, sed nox me comprehendit. ulcisci autem se Cicero uidebatur, ut qui respondisse sibi Vatinium meminerat, cum humeris se rei publicae de exilio reportatum gloriaretur: unde ergo tibi uarices?*

Cicero on Caninius

2.3.6 ‘Caninius Reuilus, as Servius has already reminded us, was consul for only a single day and mounted the rostrum to assume office and at the same time to relinquish it. Cicero therefore, who welcomed every chance to make a humorous remark, referred to him slightly as “a consul in theory only” and said later of him: “He has at any rate done this: he has obliged us to ask in whose consulship he was consul,” adding, “We have a wide-awake consul in Caninius, for while in office he never slept a wink”’.

2.3.6 *Caninius quoque Reuilus, qui uno die, ut iam Seruius retulit, consul fuit, rostra cum ascendisset, pariter honorem iniit consulatus et eierauit: quod Cicero omni gaudens occasione urbanitatis increpuit: Λογοθεώρητος est Caninius consul, et deinde: hoc consecutus est Reuilus, ut quaeretur quibus consulibus consul fuerit. dicere praeterea non destitit: uigilantem habemus consulem Caninium, qui in consulatu suo somnum non uidit.*



Cicero

2.3.11 ‘There was another occasion on which Cicero openly jeered at the readiness with which Caesar admitted new members to the Senate; for, asked by his host Publius Mallius to procure the office of decurionate for his stepson, he said in the presence of a large company: “Senatorial rank? Well, at Rome he shall certainly have it, if you so wish; but at Pompeii it isn’t so easy.”

2.3.12 And indeed his biting wit went even further; for, greeted by a certain Andron from Laodicea, he asked what had brought him to Rome and, hearing that the man had come as an envoy to Caesar to beg freedom for his city, he made open reference to the servile state of Rome by saying, in Greek, “If you are successful, put in a word for us too.”

2.3.11 *idem Cicero alias facilitatem Caesaris in adlegendo senatu inrisit palam. nam, cum ab hospite suo P. Mallio rogaretur ut decurionatum priuigno eius expediret, adsistente frequentia disicit: Romae, si uis, habebit: Pompeis difficile est.*

2.3.12 *nec intra haec eius mordacitas stetit: quippe ab Androne quodam Laodiceno salutatus cum causam aduentus requisisset comperissetque, nam ille se legatum de libertate patriae ad Caesarem uenisse respondit, ita expressit publicam seruitutem: Ἐὰν ἐπιτύχῃς, καὶ περὶ ἡμῶν πρέσβευσον.*

Next week: Macrobius (ii)