



FULVIA AND THE CHEEKY RHETOR (SUET. *RHET.* 5)*

ABSTRACT

This paper concerns the translation and interpretation of a succinct quip of Sextus Clodius, a rhetorician in Antony's entourage, on the subject of Fulvia's swollen cheek. The jest is often interpreted as having suggested that she tempted Clodius' pen, and various double meanings have been proposed. Contextualization may supply a key. The remark could mean that Fulvia seemed to be testing the point of her stylus, and the dark allusion might then be to reports of the manner in which Fulvia had allegedly mistreated the severed head of Cicero.

Keywords: Fulvia; Antony; Sextus Clodius; Cicero; Roman wit; rumour

When one cheek of Antony's wife Fulvia was more swollen than the other (*altera bucca inflator erat*),¹ Sextus Clodius, a notoriously sharp-tongued rhetorician in Antony's entourage, offered a witticism that was edgy enough to prompt Suetonius' comment that it *gained* rather than lost the man favour with Antony (*nec eo minus, immo uel magis ob hoc Antonio gratus*).²

Fulviam ... acumen stili tentare dixit (Suet. *Gram. et rhet.* 29.1 [= *Rhet.* 5])³

Wordplay was probably involved (though we shall later present another option) and no literal translation of these five words is likely to convey the quip's multiple potential meanings. In 1909 Thomas Forester, availing himself of the double meaning then current in the word 'style' (as both pen and composition), offered:

he said that '[Fulvia] tempted the point of his style'⁴

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¹ It is unclear whether this swelling was a facial characteristic of Fulvia or the result of a passing complaint. *erat* might suggest the former. Space unfortunately precludes here a discussion of the coin portraits sometimes identified with Fulvia.

² The intimation may be that Antony showed a lapse in taste in finding the man amusing (he was reputed to be careless and undiscerning in his bestowal of favours and ill will; Plut. *Vit. Ant.* 24.7–8; cf. C.B.R. Pelling, *Plutarch: Life of Antony* [Cambridge, 1998], 181–3). Suetonius clearly accepted Cicero's negative appraisal of the man (*Phil.* 2.42–3); cf. M.-C. Vacher, *Suétone. Grammairiens et rhéteurs* (Paris, 1993), 235 n. 4; P. Montlahuc, *Le pouvoir des bon mots. "Faire rire" et politique à Rome du milieu du III^e siècle a.C. à l'avènement des Antonins* (Rome, 2019), 204, 217–18 (on Antony's entourage as 'une contre-République néfaste'). See also M. Barartin, 'Le de *Grammaticis et Rhetoribus* de Suétone: un texte polemique?', *HEL* 20 (1998), 81–90 (on the generally derisive tone in this treatise).

³ *temptare* and *tentare* are alternatively found in the manuscript tradition. The question of orthography, interesting in itself, makes scarce difference to the present paper.

⁴ *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, transl. A. Thomson, rev. T. Forester (London, 1909), 528.

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That undoubtedly catches one of the wordplays Clodius had in mind, though it cannot capture the polysemy of *tentare*. John Rolfe offered: ‘he ... said: “[Fulvia] tempts the point of my pen”’;⁵ Francesco Della Corte: ‘disse che [Fulvia] tentava l’acutezza dello stile’;⁶ Marie-Claude Vacher: ‘il dit qu’elle tentait la pointe du stylet’;⁷ Robert Kaster: ‘he ... said that ... Fulvia was “testing the point of his pen”’;⁸ Judith Hallett: ‘he said that ... Fulvia ... provokes the point of a pen’;⁹ and Gesine Manuwald: ‘he said that [Fulvia] tempted the point of the pen’.¹⁰ Most versions will carry an embedded interpretation of *one* meaning and require an exegetical elaboration.¹¹

Fulvia is clearly the subject of the auxiliary clause, though the translations of Thomson, Rolfe, Hallett and Manuwald tend to objectify her, making her role an inactive one; Kaster’s is appropriately ambiguous (and the Italian and French versions allow for the same ambiguity). It is as likely that her role was active; that, in the action described in Clodius’ initial bon mot (which may be construed as: *Fulvia acumen stili tentat*), she was the agent. Options for interpretation and authorial intent are rehearsed by Kaster (and those interpretations, Kaster’s excepted, usually assign passivity to Fulvia). Most scholars have discerned a double meaning, one of the meanings being that Clodius was tempted to pen a sharp epigram regarding Fulvia (and her condition), a project that had been virtually effected by the apophthegm’s delivery. Some have suggested that Clodius’ primary professed temptation was to ‘lance’ her cheek with his stylus, a disingenuous avowal of pseudo-medical concern.¹²

This, however, is to overlook the most likely meaning of *tentare*—not ‘to tempt’ but ‘to investigate in an exploratory fashion’, ‘to feel’, ‘to test’ (as Kaster has it).¹³ If we see Fulvia as the agent of the action described, the literal meaning will probably have been caught in the explanation proffered by Kaster: ‘because of her slight deformity, Fulvia looked as though she were perpetually poised “to test a stilius’ point” by touching it

⁵ *Lives of the Caesars*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA and London, 1914), 443.

⁶ F. Della Corte, *Svetonio, Grammatici e Retori* (Turin, 1968), 61.

⁷ Vacher (n. 2) for the Budé series.

⁸ R.A. Kaster, *C. Suetonius Tranquillus De Grammaticis et Rhetoribus* (Oxford, 1995), 35.

⁹ J.P. Hallett, ‘Fulvia. The representation of an elite Roman woman warrior’, in J. Fabre-Serris and A. Keith (edd.), *Women and War in Antiquity* (Baltimore, 2015), 247–65, at 258–9; cf. J.P. Hallett, ‘Fulvia, mother of Iullus Antonius: new approaches to the sources on Julia’s adultery at Rome’, *Helios* 33 (2006), 149–64, at 153.

¹⁰ G. Manuwald, *Fragmentary Republican Latin. Oratory Part 3* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2019), 233 (‘159: M. Antonius Triumvir’ T2).

¹¹ Thus J.T. Ramsey, *Cicero Philippics I–II* (Cambridge, 2003), 224 understands this to mean, by way of a gloss, that Clodius ‘was tempted to poke (fun at) [Fulvia’s puffy cheek] with his pen’. C. Schultz, *Fulvia. Playing for Power at the End of the Roman Republic* (Oxford, 2021), 14 translates: ‘[Fulvia] tempted the tip of his (sc. Clodius’) pen’ and interprets that as meaning that she inspired him both to write about her and to poke her face.

¹² Forester, in his notes to Thomson’s translation ([n. 4], 528 n. 3), thought of a cheek-piercing exercise: ‘The direct allusion is to the “style” or probe used by surgeons in opening tumours.’ Rolfe (n. 5), in his accompanying notes (443 b), is also attracted to the idea that a quasi-surgical intervention is referenced. Kaster (n. 8), 310 believes that interpretation ‘is very doubtful ...’. Vacher (n. 2), 235 n. 4 entertains the notion that *le mot spirituel*, in this case, might be *obscene* (though we need not overinterpret the word). The double meanings are also explored by S. Rocca, ‘Acumen stili’, *Maia* 31 (1979), 259–61, dealing with, inter alia, the rhetorical associations of *acumen stili* (cf. Cic. *De or.* 1.151) and advancing the hypothesis that the stylus might simultaneously serve as a reference to a goad (*pungulo*): ‘lo stimolo, il pungolo a pronunciare orazioni’. Kaster (n. 8), 35 demurs.

¹³ *OLD* s.v. *tempto* 1, 2, 3. The Romance language translations of Della Corte (n. 6) and Vacher (n. 2) allow for that double meaning within *tentare* and *tenter*, without forcing them, as English compels Kaster (n. 8), 35 to choose between that and *éprouver* or *essayer*.

against her puffed-out cheek ... to make certain it was sharp enough to inscribe a clear line on a waxed writing-tablet'.¹⁴ That is to say, Clodius' allusion was to an everyday practice, routinely observed amongst the literate elite. For the practice of testing the edge or point of a sharp metal object in this fashion, a parallel is provided by Petronius' *Satyricon* (70.3) where Trimalchio brags of his possession of a set of sharp iron knives from Noricum, inviting his guests to test them against their cheeks (*ad buccam*).¹⁵ The boast is gauche; and the testing vulgar;¹⁶ the point remains (no pun initially intended).¹⁷

The reference to such a quotidian gesture was amusing but hardly daring. Wordplay, if wordplay was intended, would have possibly lain in the aforementioned different meanings of *tentare*; while Fulvia tested the acuity of the stylus, she might have tempted some action from Clodius such as, to reiterate, a sharply derisive composition (a *fait accompli*) or a surgical procedure. With regard to the 'temptation', the first option constitutes a relatively gentle exercise in irreverence; the second, at worst, signals an inappropriate forwardness on the part of the epigrammatist. This is plausible, but it also relies on a significant absence. The translations of Della Corte, Vacher, Hallett and Manuwald remove explicit tenure of the *stilus* in question from Clodius, tacitly underlining the obvious omission of any pronoun in the fragment as transmitted. Who owned and/or wielded the instrument? Kaster's interpretation of the action described implicitly allows that the *stilus* could be Fulvia's—though he does not follow through on that in his translation. But surely Clodius' insinuation was that Fulvia looked as if she was testing the point of her *own* stylus.

The 'wit' may have lain not in wordplay but in a suggestive allusion—and one that was truly audacious. The stylus might serve as a weapon (and not exclusively in its ability to inflict the wounds of libel); the mental association with grievous (sometimes lethal) bodily harm was well established.¹⁸ There was also, of course, a far more specific association; it was alleged in some quarters that, after Cicero's murder on December 7th, 43 B.C.E., Fulvia, who nursed her own grievances against the man, his pen and his tongue,¹⁹ had the severed head (duly to be displayed upon the *rostra*) brought to her so that she might ill-treat it in a grotesque fashion. Most ancient authors do not mention this grisly action on her part,²⁰ but Cassius Dio (47.8.4) reports it as though fact, writing that Fulvia took the severed head in her hands, abused it and spat upon it, before taking it upon her knee, opening the mouth, pulling out the tongue and piercing it. Zonaras's *Epitome* (10.17) rehearses the same. The *Suda* (s.v. 'Fulvia' [1594 Adler]) also registers

¹⁴ Kaster (n. 8), 310.

¹⁵ *attuli illi Roma munus cultros Norico ferro. quos statim iussit afferri inspectosque miratus est. etiam nobis potestatem fecit, ut mucronem ad buccam probaremus.*

¹⁶ On this passage, see R.G.M. Nisbet and M. Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace Odes, Book 1* (Oxford, 1970), 208; cf. M.S. Smith, *Petronii Arbitri Cena Trimalchionis* (Oxford, 1975), 193.

¹⁷ It was possibly this item that Kaster (n. 8), 310 had in mind when alluding to the practice.

¹⁸ See Ramsey (n. 11), 212 (on Cic. *Phil.* 2.34) for references.

¹⁹ On Fulvia's personal grievances, Schultz (n. 11), 84.

²⁰ See Schultz (n. 11), 89 n. 41 for references. Stories circulated. This paper is not concerned with the historicity or otherwise of the alleged atrocity, but it is easy to suspect later embroidery; cf. F. Münzer, 'Fulvia' 113, *RE* 7 (Stuttgart, 1910), 281–4, at 282, lines 35–45 (noting the 'exaggeration' and the lack of parallel accounts in Plutarch and Appian). Many—too numerous to cite here—concur with the scepticism and with the belief that 'terrible stories ... of the rapacity and blood-lust of Fulvia' were transmitted by way of 'Augustan' *apologiae*: R. Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford, 1939), 191. Some suggest an Antonian source (or Antonian complicity with anti-Fulvian anecdote): e.g. Münzer (this note), 283, lines 13–15; Hallett (n. 9 [2006], 154; [2015], 259); Schultz (n. 11), 74. If our hypothesis concerning Clodius' allusion is correct, the allegations of Fulvia's atrocity circulated in Fulvia's lifetime (or, at least, before Antony's death).

the item, in language which suggests that the lexicographer followed the same source. Ditto, John of Antioch.²¹ The image is one of the most macabre of the triumviral period. If that story circulated at the time, Clodius' apparently casual observation that Fulvia looked as if she was testing the tip of her *stilus* may well have drawn a sharp intake of breath from his auditors. An offhand acknowledgement of such allegations would have indeed been shocking.

Two apparent obstacles to the foregoing interpretation may be easily addressed. The allegation, as it surfaced in Dio, has Fulvia using *hairpins* to puncture Cicero's tongue.²² The Suda and John of Antioch offer the same detail (a single pin sufficing); but the strikingly similar vocabulary in all versions indicates that these reiterations derive from the same source rather than from an independent tradition.²³ They repeat rather than confirm this version of the story; they may represent the only version that survived in the literary tradition, but that need not have been the only one in circulation.²⁴ If the story had been transmitted (if not generated) by way of public gossip-mongering (let us imagine the whispered *rumores subrostranorum*—the tale-telling of those who lounged around the *rostra*), it was vulnerable to the distorting embroideries and cumulative variations that are a hallmark of such a medium.²⁵ The precise details were elastic. It may be suspected that the 'urban myth', as transmitted to us, had 'domesticized'—with deliberate incongruity—the transgressive act.²⁶

The second possible objection concerns chronology. Suetonius' very brief (and sketchy) profile of Sextus Clodius indicates that the scurrilous witticism in which we are interested here *preceded* a large benefaction that the inappropriately amused Antony made to Clodius 'when he was presently consul (*mox consule*): an extravagant gift of land in Sicily which Cicero denounced in the *Second Philippic* (42–3).²⁷ Both the implicit placement of the *dictum* prior to Antony's consulship (in 44) and Cicero's excoriation of the donative would locate the episode *before* Fulvia's alleged mistreatment of Cicero's head in December 43. Plainly, with *mox*, Suetonius had attempted to introduce a relative chronology to his sequence of items (and, if we were to accept this chronology as well informed, we would need consequently to 'explain away' his introduction of Fulvia as the wife of the *triumvir* as momentarily abandoning that chronological framework for the purposes of easy identification). Is, however, the chronological indicator a reliable one? If Kaster's persuasive reconstruction of Suetonius' research methods in the *De grammaticis et rhetoribus* (offered independently

²¹ Fr. 152, pages 268–9 Roberto [= fr. 106, pages 172–3 in S. Mariev, *Ioannis Antiocheni fragmenta quae supersunt omnia* (Berlin, 2008), 173].

²² καὶ τοῖς βελόνας αἷς ἐς τὴν κεφαλὴν ἐχρήτο κατεκέντησε. Zonaras follows.

²³ καὶ τῇ βελόνῃ τῇ κατὰ τὴν κεφαλὴν κατακεντήσαι; cf. n. 21 above, for John of Antioch.

²⁴ This version was clearly circulating when Jerome chose to compare Fulvia with Herodias: *Adv. Rufin.* 3.42; cf. A. Wright, 'The death of Cicero. Forming a tradition: the contamination of history', *Historia* 50 (2001), 436–52, at 450 (underlining the embroidery in play).

²⁵ As underlined by R. Laurence, 'Rumour and communication in Roman politics', *G&R* 41 (1994), 62–74. On *rumores* more generally, see C. Rosillo-López, *Public Opinion and Politics in the Late Roman Republic* (Cambridge, 2017), 75–97. Here we merely pause on the *uarietas sermonum opinionumque* to which Cicero alludes at *Att.* 2.15.1.

²⁶ Modern accounts that are inclined to accept the report of Fulvia's barbarity focus on the hairpin as a symbolic (female-coded) weapon, albeit a picture at odds with the virago imagery that prevails in the hostile literature. Consider *Ov. Am.* 1.14.16–18 and *Ars am.* 3.239–40 (on the vulnerability of servile *ornatrices* to a hairpin-wielding *domina*). It is easy to imagine the elaboration of an urban myth employing such a motif, the similarity between the two instruments, *acus* and *stilus* (*qua* implements), being striking.

²⁷ On the land grant, see Kaster (n. 8), 312–13; Ramsey (n. 11), 225.

of the present argument) is correct,²⁸ we shall envisage Suetonius compiling evidence from scratch from ‘primary sources’—with no pre-existing authoritative scholarly tradition upon which to rely. This resulted in the patchy presentation of anecdotes, often in the form of *dicta*. Many of the more general statements—the characterizations, for example, in the lemmata—may have been extrapolated from those items which may have been found by Suetonius without any precise historical context.²⁹ More to the point, Kaster is inclined to dismiss Suetonius’ attempt to impose a chronological framework on this uneven material.³⁰ The joke at Fulvia’s expense might well, therefore, have been made after the execution of Cicero in December 43.

We suggest that Sextus Clodius, observing Fulvia’s inflated cheek, remarked that she looked as if she were in the act of testing the sharpness of her stylus. Wordplay aside, the breath-taking allusion was to the allegations of Fulvia’s mistreatment of Cicero’s severed head. The humour was dark.

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²⁸ Cf. J.-W. Beck, ‘Sueton und Kaster: zwei Prosopographen fanden sich’, *IJCT* 4 (1998), 400–5, at 402 (for qualified acceptance of Kaster’s speculation).

²⁹ Kaster (n. 8), xxix–xxxix; see especially xxxi (research) and xxxv (on ‘[an occasional] certain lack of coherence’). He finds this particularly pronounced in the lives of the first four rhetors (xxxvi n. 26), within which falls that of Clodius, which, we reiterate (and Kaster underlines), consists basically of an embroidered lemma (of debated worth), two *apophthegmata* and an extract from Cicero (the aforementioned passage from the *Philippics*). An anonymous reader points usefully to Kaster (n. 8), 321–3, where the latter underlines the chronological distortion created by Suetonius linking anecdotes at *Gram. et rhet.* 30.4–5.

³⁰ ‘[When] combining the citations from his two sources, [Suetonius] assumed that the [two] *dicta* found in the first [which Kaster proposes was some collection of sayings such as C. Melissus’ *Ineptiae/loci*] antedated the incident described in the second [the extract from the *Philippics*], hence *mox*; but nothing in the *dicta* places them before summer 44, the date of Antony’s gift to [Clodius]: Kaster (n. 8), 311; cf. Kaster (n. 8), 307 for the suggestion with regard to Melissus.