Dark Humor in Imperial Latin Literature

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Date of Award
Spring 1-1-2015

Document Type
Dissertation

Degree Name
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Department
Classics

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Abstract
This project analyzes the functions of dark humor in Latin literature of the Flavian period and immediately thereafter. This dark humor, the humorous exploitation of taboos like sexual immorality, cannibalism, and especially death, appears across a variety of genres of the era, from the "high" epic and tragedy, to prose historiography, to the "low" epigram. In order to overcome difficulties in interpreting humor across millennia and cultural differences, the first chapter traces the roots of modern humor theories back to Greek and Roman sources and illustrates these theories with ancient examples. It then uses their methods and vocabularies to guide the distillation of a Roman humor theory. The excurses on wit from Cicero's De Oratore and Quintilian's Institutio Oratoria reveal a combination of superiority theory and incongruity theories. This enables the confident assessment of the humorous potential of given language in a variety of Latin texts of the Flavian era, the literature of which period this dissertation will argue is characterized by dark humor.

The second chapter examines selections from Martial's epigrams, which exploits the genre's traditional affinity with obscenity and death in order to wield dark humor in an assault on epic and tragedy. Statius' Thebaid, subject of the third chapter, lies at the opposite end of the generic spectrum from epigrams. Otherwise serious and bleak, the martial and mythological epic published in the early 90s confronts the reader on rare occasions with humor which, by violating generic boundaries, reinforces the horror of the nefas, the unspeakable wrong, which constitutes the epic's material. The fourth chapter shows how the Annals of Tacitus problematize humor as a mode of communication, particularly in and around the persons of the emperors, yet participate in humor in their commentary upon the narrative. This constitutes another example of Tacitus' style as mirror of content.

Recommended Citation

https://scholar.colorado.edu/clas_gradetds/11
Latin literature: Latin literature, the body of writings in Latin, primarily produced during the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire, when Latin was a spoken language. When Rome fell, Latin remained the literary language of the Western medieval world until it was superseded by the Romance languages it had generated. Though his anti-imperial bias in attributing motives is plain, his facts can rarely be impugned; and his evocation of the terrors of tyranny is unforgettable. He is read for his penetrating characterizations, his drama, his ironical epigrams, and his unpredictability. His is an extreme development of the Sallustian style, coloured with archaic and poetic words, with a careful avoidance of the commonplace. Lesson Ideas for Analyzing Humor in Literature. Create a six-column chart with the following headers: Example, Meiosis, Hyperbole, Comic Irony, Humorous Dialect, Satire. Read a humorous work—"The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" by Mark Twain, "Gary Keillor" by Garrison Keillor, any of Shakespeare’s comedies, "The Catcher in the Rye" by J.D. Salinger, or "The Once and Future King" by T.H. White, for example—and identify elements of humor and categorize which type. Imitate a humorous work with a creative writing assignment. Read several humorous works in class and instruct students to choose one to use as a model. Latin American History, Military History, US History. The most popular literature at the time was the genre in which our friend Fraimer and his abbot feature: it was hagiography, stories about people who had lived so virtuously that they were supposed to be worthy of emulation. In medieval and modern library catalogs these writings are shelved away as “saints’ lives.”