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Imago Clodiae Christianae? Jerome's Imitation of Cicero in *Ep.* 45, 4

Abstract: The relationship between Christianity and Classical literature in Late Antiquity constitutes a well-defined field of study. Jerome's letters have traditionally been cherished by scholars for their content, as well for their references to the classical authors. This study focuses on the use of allusions in an interesting passage from Jerome's *Epistle* 45, written in 385. Our analysis will demonstrate that Cicero's influence in the writing of this piece of work is profound and full of hidden meanings. If one reads the text focusing on Cicero's rhetoric, the entire scope of meaning shifts.

Keywords: Jerome's Epistolography, Cicero, *Pro Caelio*, Rhetoric, Asceticism, Classical Allusions.

Epistle 45 was written in the summer of 385, from the port of Ostia, shortly after an ecclesiastical tribunal had forced Jerome to leave Rome and settle permanently in Bethlehem. From a formal point of view, the epistle is an apologia *pro vita sua*, perhaps the most exquisite sample of apologetic prose preserved from Jerome's correspondence (Cain 2009, 107; 209)¹. Although dedicated to Asela, a consecrated virgin in the community of women who practised asceticism under his guidance, the epistle is intended for a wider audience, having been composed by Jerome in order to convince his friends and associates in Rome that the accusations at his trial were unfounded and the verdict of the Roman clerics was based on a long list of slander and hearsay. Although we know neither the text of the court's decision, nor the details of this trial from other ancient sources, we learn from the succession of rhetorical interrogations posed by Jerome² that the main accusations concerned his relationship with Paula, a wealthy widow who decided to adopt the asceticism recommended by her friend and confessor. In addition to this accusation that he had an inappropriate relationship with the woman he was guiding in the practice of asceticism and who had decided to accompany him on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem³, Jerome was also subject to a law issued on 30 July 370 by Emperor Valentinian. This law, nowadays found in *Codex Theodosianus*, was aimed at an ancient practice of "inheritance hunting" (*captatio*), which punished

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clerics who, under the pretext of religion, sought to obtain material advantages from their wealthy disciples⁴. The trial of Jerome, according to his testimony, involved conflicting testimonies extracted under torture from the witnesses⁵. Contemporary scholarship perceives it as a conspiracy hatched by the moderate clerics of Rome. Indeed, the sources of his time indicate sufficient motive for their attempt to eliminate an inconvenient monk: the rigorous asceticism he demanded of all Christians, the envy provoked by his position as secretary to Pope Damasus (who died on 11 December 384), the revision of biblical texts regarded by his contemporaries as a veritable blasphemy, and the translation into Latin of the writings of Origen – an exegete already accused in the East of heterodox theological views.

Although Jerome makes no explicit remarks on this matter, *Epistle 45* suggests that he was not backed by any of his friends with real influence in Roman ecclesiastical circles, while Asella – the addressee of the epistle – was an exception. The introduction states that she at least considered him innocent. More significantly, there is a passage in the epistle in which, Jerome seems to criticise the morals of the Christian matrons of Rome in his usual manner and praise the asceticism practised by two Roman widows, Paula and Melania Maior:

Nullae aliae Romanae urbi fabulam praebuerunt, nisi Paula et Melanius, quae contemptis facultatibus pignoribusque desertis crucem Domini quasi quoddam pietatis lenauere uexillum. Baias peterent, unguenta eligerent, diuitias et uiduitatem haberent, materias luxuriae et libertatis, domnae uocarentur et sanctae; nunc in sacco et cinere formonsae uolunt uidere, et in gehennae ignis cum ieiuniis et pedore descendere. Videlicet non eis licet adplaudente populo perire cum turbis. Si gentiles hanc uitam carperent, si Iudaei, haberem solacium non placendi eis quibus displicet Christus; nunc uero – pro nefas! – nomine Christianae, praetermissa domum suarum cura et proprii oculi trabe neglecta in alieno oculo festucam quaerunt. Lacerant sanctum propositum, et remedium poenae suae arbitrantur, si nemo sit sanctus, si omnibus detrahatur, si turba sit pereuntium, si multitudo peccantium.

Of all the ladies in Rome, the only ones that give Rome an opportunity for scandal were Paula and Melania, who, despising their wealth and deserting their children, uplifted the Lord's cross as a vexillum of their faith. Had they frequented Baiae, or chosen to use perfumes, or employed their wealth and widow's freedom as opportunities for extravagance and self-indulgence, they would have been called «mistresses» and «saints»; as it is they wish to appear beautiful in sackcloth and ashes, and to go down to the fires of Gehenna with fasting and filth. Plainly, they are not allowed to perish amid the mob's applause along with the multitude! If it were Gentiles or Jews who assailed this mode of life, I should at least have the consolation of not pleasing those to whom Christ Himself has failed to please; but now – what a shame! – it is women, in name only Christians,

who, neglecting the care of their own households and disregarding the beam in their own eyes, look for mote in those of their neighbours. They tear every profession of religion to shreds and think that they have found a remedy for their own doom, if no one is a saint, if they can detract from everyone, if those who perish are many, if great is the multitude of the sinners.⁶

In the apologetic context of the epistle the names of the two widows, offered as models of asceticism, fit perfectly. Paula's name is invoked to reaffirm the idea that their relationship is strictly spiritual, and that the court's decision was unjust⁷. The name of Melania Maior appears because, in the perception of the Christians of Rome, she is the first truly important Roman widow who renounced the comfortable and luxurious life of Rome, went to Jerusalem, and dedicated herself entirely to the monastic life also promoted by Jerome⁸. Melania Maior is known to be of Hispanic origin and belong to the famous gens Antonia. She married at an early age, probably to Valerius Maximus Basilius, who became *praefectus urbis* during the reign of Emperor Julian⁹. At the age of 21 she was widowed after her husband's death in 363, inheriting a huge fortune (Clark 1992, 21). Melania decided not to remarry and left to practise monasticism in Egypt, leaving Valerius Publicola, her only surviving son after the death of the others, in Rome in the care of a tutor. Jerome had known Melania Maior for a long time, probably since his studies in Rome¹⁰, although the first mention of her name appears in an epistle of 374, in which we learn that Hylas, one of Melania's freedmen, had become a monk in Aquileia¹¹. In addition to the flattering portrait in *Epistle* 39, written a year before the trial of Jerome (384), Melania was praised in various writings between 374-375, being called "saint", "the new Thecla" and representative of the "true aristocracy" of Christianity¹². Such eulogies prompt a literal reading of *Epistle* 45, without much attention to the intertextual allusions on which it was built. For a long time, the only mention of this text was the observation made by the earliest editor of Jerome's correspondence, who indicated in a note a lexical borrowing from Cicero's *Pro Caelio* discourse¹³. A more detailed analysis of the Latin text will show that the intertextual allusions are more complex than they appear at first and their functions more than mere Ciceronian allusions used for decorative purposes.

In a book chapter published in 2007, Owen Hodkinson proposed a new discussion of the relationship between epistolography and the established ancient genres, where the epistles borrow themes and motifs (283–300). Hodkinson's theoretical analysis argues using examples identified in fictional epistolography of the Second Sophistic period, but his conclusions remain valid for the entire ancient epistolography. The so-called "fluidity" of epistolary literature would consist in the capacity of these compositions to

imitate elements specific to other genres and to reproduce them in the conventional form of real letters. In other words, an epistle containing quotations or allusions to a lyric poem seeks to convey by epistolary means exactly the same message as the poem. Similarly, epistles in intertextual relation with oratorical speeches aim to convey identical messages, the understanding of which cannot be separated from the contexts from which they were borrowed.

If we follow Hodkinson's theoretical considerations, a reference that Jerome makes to the legal discourse *Pro Caelio* should include a message almost identical to that of the initial context. Jerome's allusions to the luxurious and immoral life either in the ancient city of Baiae¹⁴ or in the private baths of a wealthy widow in the republican period (*Pro Caelio* 27 and 38) have been regularly read in the manner of a transfer of republican vices onto the Christian widows criticized in 385 by Jerome¹⁵. Thus, examining the context and the way Cicero wrote his speech becomes absolutely necessary in order to understand the functions of these allusions.

The *Pro Caelius* speech was delivered on April 4, 56 BC in defence of Marcus Caelius Rufus (an ambitious young politician) accused of abuse of power or violence (*vim*) in an age specific political struggle, involving interests in appointments to the throne of Egypt, murder, and a good deal of immorality¹⁶. From a rhetorical point of view, the speech in defence of Caelius is a masterpiece of diversion, by which Cicero sought to ignore the real charges against his client and get him acquitted. The main character of the Ciceronian speech is not Caelius, but a widow named Clodia (former wife of Quintus Caecilius Metellus Celer, who died in 59 BC), one of the witnesses at the trial, who claimed that the accused had borrowed money from her to buy poison. Cicero's defence strategy was to discredit Clodia's testimony with a ferocious attack on the morality of the witness. Since rumours were already circulating in Rome about an alleged incestuous relationship between Clodia and her brother, Publius Clodius Pulcher, Cicero had no trouble attacking her sexual morality to emphasise that her testimony lacked all credibility. In Cicero's version, his young, innocent, and honourable client wanted a political career in Rome. For this reason, Caelius rented a room in Clodius' villa on the Palatine Hill, where he met Clodia, the landlord's older sister. The mischievous widow seduces poor Caelius who falls into her trap as did other young men of the time. Because of her alleged immorality, Caelius would end the relationship and concentrate on his political career. Full of resentment, Clodia would have found the opportunity for revenge through this trial, making herself the main witness for the prosecution.

The reasons why Cicero's speech was highly appreciated in Antiquity, entered rhetoric textbooks as a subject of study in schools, lie in the quality of the prose, occasioned by an oratorical strategy worthy of a director. The

date of the trial of Caelius coincided with the *Ludi Megalenses* (a celebration in honour of the goddess Magna Mater) during which theatrical performances were held. Since the judges were present at this trial and could not attend these theatrical pieces, Cicero turned his legal speech into a trilogy held instead (Austin 1960, 151; Ciruolo 2003, 236; Dyck 2013, 4,11; Lintott 2008, 430-433; Geffcken 1973, 11-12). The Ciceronian speech quotes lines from the tragedy *Medea* by Ennius, dramatically narrates the events in the manner of theatrical scenes, frequently resorting to the comedies of Caecilius and Terentius, and ends with a famous scene in the bath of Clodia, which is part of the art of the ancient *mime*¹⁷. In short, Cicero turns his entire speech into an artistic performance that employs the means of tragedy, comedy and then farce, a trilogy designed to amuse the judges and downplay serious charges of violence and attempted murder. The charges are reduced to trivial jokes. To achieve his aims, Cicero resorts to a wide variety of stylistic devices, which are later offered as models for the rhetoricians of the following generations.

If the influence of Ciceronian discourse can be found in several passages of Jerome's correspondence¹⁸, in the case of the text of *Epistle* 45,4 the linguistic allusions and modes of construction point to a key passage in *Pro Caelio* 38, where Cicero resorts to several rhetorical devices to create a negative moral portrait of Clodia:

At fuit fama. Quotus quisque istam effugere potest, praesertim in tam maledica civitate? [...] Nihil iam in istam mulierem dico; sed, si esset aliqua dissimilis istius, quae se omnibus pervolgaret, quae haberet palam decretum semper aliquem, cuius in hortos, domum, Baias iure suo libidines omnium commearent, quae etiam aleret adulescentis et parsimoniam patrum suis sumptibus sustineret; si vidua libere, proterva petulanter, dives effuse, libidinosa meretricio more viveret, adulterum ego putarem si quis hanc paulo liberius salutasset?

«But there was a rumour». How many people can avoid it, especially in a city as slanderous as this one? [...] I am not saying now anything against this woman, but if there were another one, unlike her, who made herself common to everybody, who always had somebody in her sights, in whose gardens, whose house, whose place at Baiae the lusts of every one had free access as of their own right, who supported young men and made up for their fathers' stinginess with her own resources; if a widow lived loosely, a shameless woman flagrantly, a rich woman lavishly, a wanton woman like a slut, am I to think a man an adulterer if he is greeted her with a little too much familiarity?¹⁹

From a stylistic point of view, the Ciceronian passage is an accumulation of rhetorical elements. It begins with a *dissimulatio* (εἰρωνεῖα), recognisable in the substitution of Clodia's obvious name by *aliqua mulier*, and continues

with an *ethopoia* (ἠθοποιῖα)²⁰, favoured by optative conjunctions, in which Clodia's vices are attributed to a hypothetical character. The details of the portrait of this imaginary woman are actually drawn from Clodia's biography and constitute a combination of *amplificatio* ("amplification") and *minutio* ("attenuation"), offered as a model by Quintilian in his *Institutio oratoria*, where Cicero calls a courtesan an impudent woman and mentions the long-lasting love affair between Caelius and Clodia as merely a familiar greeting²¹.

Re-reading Jerome's text, one will notice the far greater influence of the Ciceronian discourse than initially assumed. The Christian author borrows from Cicero's speech not only the content, *i.e.*, the criticism of luxury and moral decadence, favoured by the freedom of widowhood, but also the stylistic means by which they are expressed. From the very beginning, Jerome immerses the reader in the atmosphere of *Pro Caelio* when he uses the expression *urbi fabulam praeberere* ("to give to the city a story", "a spectacle", or "an opportunity for scandal"), an allusion to the spectacle of imorality offered by Clodia²². The term *fabula*, used by Jerome to designate the example of monasticism offered by Paula and Melania, has both positive and negative meanings in Latin; it can refer to either a moralizing narrative, or a subject of gossip or a farce. Jerome does not use the established term *exemplum* to indicate a moral model, but the ambivalent term *fabula*, which also appears with negative meanings in his epistolography²³. Jerome also borrows from *Pro Caelio* 27 the colloquial pronoun *nullus* (used instead of the negation *non*) by which Cicero sought to achieve comic effects²⁴. Even if in the Latin of Jerome's time *nullus* has become a common mode of negation it is hard to believe that the function of the colloquial idiom in *Ep.* 45. ("Nullae aliae Romanae ... nisi Paula et Melanius") is far removed from the comic register of Ciceronian discourse, especially since the pattern of construction remains the same in the next sentence. In the negative portrayal of the Christian widow, Jerome's text reflects the same *imitatio morum alienorum* of Cicero also built on the basis of the optatives subjunctives ("Baiae peterent, unguenta eligerent, diuitias et uiduitatem haberent"). But the ironically suggested incompatibility immediately appears: why should widows living in the manner of Clodia be called *domnae et sanctae*? This incompatibility can be explained in the following way. These women who prefer to go to the baths, to procure ointments, to enjoy the freedom of widowhood, and to live in luxury, are Christians in name only because they have abandoned their responsibilities for the administration of property and the maintenance of the family. Furthermore, they seek pretexts to slander others (especially monks like Jerome) out of a sense of envy derived from their inability to fully assimilate monastic precepts. Although the negative portrayal of the Christian widow gives the impression

of generality (favoured by allusions to biblical texts such as *1Timotei* 5:8 and *Matei* 7:3), it nevertheless refers to Jerome's particular situation. "The saint profession" (*sanctum propositum*) to which the Christian author alludes is nothing other than his decision to devote himself to the ascetic life²⁵. But we shall return later to this matter. Just as the young and innocent Caelius suffers from the rumours spread in such an indiscreet city as Rome, Jerome was condemned solely on the basis of rumours that Paula will accompany him to Palestine.

Cicero's imitation is not limited to paragraph 4 of Jerome's epistle. It continues in the immediately following paragraph (in the same manner of an imaginary portrait). However, the shift from indirect to direct discourse also seems to indicate a change in the abstract character to whom the text is addressed. We will quote only part of this passage, sufficient to illustrate its construction:

Tibi placet lauare cotidie, alius has munditias sordes putat; tu attagenam ructuas et de comeso acipensere gloriaris, ego faba uentrem impleo; te delectant cachinnantium greges, Paula Melaniumque plangentium; tu aliena desideras, illae contemnunt sua [...]

You find a pleasure in taking a bath daily, another regards such refinement as defilement; you belch after a meal of wild fowl and boast of eating sturgeon, I fill my belly with beans; you take delight in troops of laughing, Paula and Melania prefer those who weep; you covet other people's goods, they despise their own [...].

The polytheist of noble origin, faithful to the old Roman traditions, is Jerome's probable addressee. It is not impossible that the person targeted is one of the members of Paula's family, who – contemporary research commonly assumes – played a major role in instigating the trial of Jerome. However, the context is intentionally ambiguous and thus the assumption remains questionable. What is of particular interest here for us is that Jerome does not fall outside the sphere of Ciceronian influence. The series of moral antinomies, based on the contrast between *urbanitas* and *rusticitas*, are borrowed by Jerome from the Ciceronian discourse *In P. Clodium et C. Curionem* (preserved today in fragments) where Cicero creates a comic portrait of Clodius Pulcher, Clodia's brother (Austin 1960, 166)²⁶. In one part of this invective speech (fr. 22), Clodius was attacked in the same devastating manner as his sister²⁷. Cicero describes Clodius with epithets such as *urbanus* and *elegans*, associating "the urbanity" with effeminacy. At the same time, Cicero puts himself in the position of a *rusticus*, unfamiliar with his opponent's feminine wardrobe:

Nam rusticos ei nos videri minus est mirandum, qui manicatam tunicam et mitram et purpureas fascias habere non possumus. Tu vero festivus, tu elegans, tu solus urbanus, quem decet muliebris ornatus, quem incessus psaltriae, qui effeminare vultum, attenuare vocem, laevare corpus potes. (fr. 22)

For it is less surprising that we are peasants to him, who cannot have tunic with sleeves, headscarf, and purple bands. You are graceful indeed, you are elegant and you are alone polite; to you befits the adornment of a woman and the gait of a female lyre player, a man who knows to make his face appear feminine, to soften his voice and to smooth his body.²⁸

In Cicero's antithesis between *urbanitas* and *rusticitas*, one notices the use of a *slow-motion* strategy (borrowed from ancient comedy), which involves the almost mechanical repetition of syntactic parallels in the description of the character (Geffcken 1973, 78). This includes both descriptive nouns and adjectives of the caricatured portrait of Clodius and a series of anaphora of the pronouns *tu* or *qui*, repeated in the same anaphoric form in *Pro Caelio* 27 (*qui in hortis fuerit, qui unguenta sumpserit, qui Baias viderit*). Jerome preserves the Ciceronian antitype *urbanitas-rusticitas* and its mode of construction but changes the descriptive details of the portrait and adapts it to his particular situation. More interestingly, Jerome's characteristics of *urbanitas* continue the series of criticisms of Christian widows, bringing together a number of commonplace themes for Roman moralists often associating sumptuous banqueting feasts (*convivia*) with perfumed ointments (*unguenta*) and frequent baths – symbols for lack of moderation and indecent luxury (*luxuria*).

The imitation of Cicero's speeches in Jerome's epistle seems to be quite clear, manifesting itself not only in the borrowing of themes and motifs at the content level, but also in a similar linguistic and stylistic construction. This imitation automatically raises another problem: If in Cicero's *ethopoiia* of *Pro Caelio* the character concerned is well known, given the fact that the details associated with the portrait of the immoral woman are those of the rumours that all Rome attributed to Clodia), why would Jerome's "Christian Clodia" be an abstract projection and would not target a specific person? Judging by the principle of analogy between model and imitation (proposed and exemplified by Hodkinson) we think there is sufficient reason to consider the person targeted by Jerome is no other than Melania Maior, who seems to be not only praised in this context, but even excluded from suspicion. In a manner similar to Cicero, the details of the negative portrait that Jerome attributes to the Christian widow are drawn from the biography of Melania Maior²⁹.

The first arguments in favour of such an interpretation are suggested by the epistles of Jerome written after 393 when the Origenist controversy began³⁰. On opposite sides, Jerome would launch more or less direct attacks

on the monasticism practised by Rufinus of Aquileia and Melania Maior in the monastic complex built on the Mount of Olives. The main criticism Jerome indirectly aimed at Melania Maior was the transgression of biblical teachings calling for the absolute renunciation of possessions in Christian practices. Moreover, accusations of *luxuria* are found in an epistle of 394, where Jerome reacts on the occasion of a pilgrimage made by Melania Maior and Rufinus to the monks in the Egyptian desert, commenting: „I have lately seen a most miserable rumour flying to and through the entire East. The lady’s age and style, her dress and mien, the indiscreet company she kept, her dainty meals and her royal appointments bespoke her the bride of a Nero or of a Sardanapalus”³¹. Jerome’s critique can be compared to a scene described in an epistle by Paulinus of Nola in the year 400, on the occasion of a visit by Melania to Campania. Of Iberian origin and most likely related to Melania Maior³², Paulinus praised Melania’s modesty, contrasting it with the opulence of the retinue of senators who accompanied her on her visit to Nola³³. In another epistle from 396 Jerome repeated the same criticism of his rivals’ opulence: „Still it would be absurd for one of us, living amid the riches of Croesus and the luxuries of Sardanapalus, to make his boast of mere ignorance”³⁴. He criticized the luxurious life of the Jerusalem ascetics again in 401 AD: “Even if a man is bursting with the wealth of Croesus and Darius, learning will not follow the money-bag. It is the companion of toil and labour, the associate of the fasting not of the full-fed, of self-mastery not of self-indulgence”³⁵.

A second significant detail why Jerome’s “Christian Clodia” seems to have been Melania Maior is that the Christian widow owned extensive family properties both in Campania and at Thagaste, where the Christian widow built a luxurious baths complex³⁶. A commemorative inscription, preserved in the *Anthologia Latina* (109), renders the name of the patroness of the baths as a *telestich* in a poem (Evans-Grubbs 1987, 237-239). This would have allowed Jerome to allude to a widow who combines luxury with asceticism, but at the same time is called “lady” and “saint” by all her panegyrists, including Jerome³⁷.

A third important detail in the Hieronymic *ethopoiia* regarding the biography of Melania Maior is the expression *praetermissa domum suarum cura*, which I have translated as “neglecting the care of their own households”. This phrase also implies the care for family, not just for the owned property, and is in fact a veiled criticism of Melania’s abandoning of her son in Rome. Here, Jerome makes use of generalised criticism on the part of Roman society aimed at women such as Melania Maior. Roman society is horrified that a woman, who has had three children die, is able to leave her only remaining 15 years old son in order to go on an ascetic adventure to the East, where she took her entire fortune (converted into gold). We know that this criticism was widespread from the attempt of Palladius (the friend

and panegyrist of Melania Maior) to counter these criticisms in the *Historia Lausiaca*³⁸. Palladius tells us also that Melania “stood up to the beasts of senators and their harassing wives (ἐθηριομάχησε τοὺς συγκλητικούς καὶ τὰς ἐλευθέρους κωλύοντας αὐτήν)” and justifies her behaviour by saying that nothing has deterred Melania Maior from her divine mission to help the Church, not even love for her only remaining son (οὐκ ἐμέρισεν αὐτήν τῆς πρὸς τὸν Χριστὸν ἀγάπης ὁ τοῦ μονογενοῦς υἱοῦ πόθος). The same Palladius assures us that it was only thanks to Melania’s prayers (ταῖς προσευχαῖς αὐτῆς) that her son received a good education, married into a good family, and acquired positions in the empire. The same type of justification can also be found in Paulinus of Nola in *Epistle* 29, from where we learn that Melania wished to leave her child in Christ’s care and that of all the relatives (*potentissimi et clari*) in Rome she found none worthy of leaving her huge fortune (*magna copia*) as a means to take care of her son’s “sustenance” (*alendum*), “education” (*erudiendum*) and “protection” (*tuendum*)³⁹.

A fourth clue that Melania Maior is probably the target of Jerome’s *ethopoia* consists in deleted allusions to early envies and conflicts over monasticism, expressed in *sanctum propositum lacerant* (“they tear every profession of religion to shreds”). The text suggests an earlier dispute that Jerome may have had with Melania Maior in 372 AD at Aquileia. Jerome mentions “an Iberian viper” (*Hibera excetra*) who slanders him and destroys his reputation as a young ascetic, but never mentions her name: „Even though the Iberian viper shall rend me with her injurious rumour, I will not fear men’s judgment, since I shall have my Judge”⁴⁰. Although there is room for argument here too, the evidence is much less conclusive. The association between an opponent of Iberian origin, who defames (*dilaniet*) Jerome around 375, and an abstract collective character who ten years later does the same (*lacerat*) is remarkable.

Perhaps the most important argument that the text of *Epistle* 45, 4 constitutes a subtle irony against Melania Maior, created through a type of irony-figure (*schema*)⁴¹, is the very reaction of the addressee of the message, mediated by her client, Rufinus of Aquileia, which demonstrates that the passage was not read as a eulogy. In *Epistle* 57, Jerome’s first public intervention in the dispute with the monks on the Mount of Olives, one reads a very interesting justification suggesting that in the epistles prior to the conflict he criticized Rufinus and Melania in a way imperceptible to the public: “So long as I do not publish my thoughts, the persiflages are not accusations; in fact they are not even persiflages, since the public doesn’t know them”⁴². Although lapidary, the statement seems to refer to exactly this text and not to another, because Jerome makes the “imprudence” of answering Rufinus with a text borrowed from *Pro Caelio*. The expression *maledicta non crimina sunt* (“the persiflages are not accusations”) is again a

borrowing from Ciceronian discourse⁴³, which clearly shows that Jerome's irony has achieved its purpose. In order to circumvent the serious accusations made against Caelius, Cicero creates a distinction between real accusations (*crimina*), which must be proved by arguments and confirmed by witnesses, and *maledicta*, a term that can be translated depending on the context, with strong connotations such as "invectives", "insults" or "calumnies", but also with weaker meanings such as "slanders", "persiflages" or "mockeries"⁴⁴. According to Cicero, if the persiflage is offensive it becomes an insult (*convicium*) and constitutes an abuse, but if it is done with subtlety and politeness, it passes for elegance and proof of urbanity (*urbanitas*). Thus, Jerome takes this distinction between *crimen* and *maledictum* from Cicero to justify his earlier subtle attacks on Rufinus and Melania Maior. Also, it is worth mentioning that none of this evidence of *urbanitas*, as Jerome claims his criticisms were up to 395, alludes to the *Pro Caelian* discourse, except for the passages in *Epistle* 45.

In conclusion, the rhetorical means employed by Jerome are no different from those of Cicero. Unlike the traditional interpretation, we have argued that in *Ep.* 45 Jerome's criticism is also aimed at a specific person, rather than a general condemnation of the vices of Christian widows. In this sense, the functions of the allusions to Cicero's speech precisely suggest that the new creation is no different from the model. If Cicero's judges could easily recognize the character abstracted in his *ethopoiia*, so could Christians educated in Rome's rhetoric schools, who read Jerome's public epistle, recognize the biographical details of one of the most important Christian widows. Jerome's subtlety lies in his ability to write a text with double meaning: read linearly it is undoubtedly a eulogy to Melania Maior, however if read in terms of intertextual allusions it becomes a veiled criticism, perceptible only to an educated audience, comprehensively trained in the rhetorical schools of the time.

Notes

¹ For the specifics of the ancient theory concerning apologetic epistolography and also for some suggestive examples see Malherbe (1988, 40-41) and Stowers (1986, 166-170).

² "*Dicant, quid umquam in me aliter senserint, quam Christianum decebat? pecuniam cuius accipi? munera uel parua uel magna non spreui? in manu mea aes alicuius insonuit? obliquus sermo, oculus petulans fui?*" Jerome, *Ep.* 45, 2. All texts quoted from the epistles of Jerome follow the J. Labourt edition (1949-1963).

³ "*nihil mihi aliud obicitur nisi sexus meus, et hoc numquam obicitur, nisi cum Hierosolyma Paula proficiscitur.*" Jerome, *Ep.* 45, 2.

⁴ *C.Th.* 16, 2, 20 and 16, 2, 22 (Mommsen and Meyer, 1905). For a detailed explanation of these laws, see Davidson (2001, 33-43) and Grubbs (2001, 225-227).

⁵ "*crediderunt mentienti; cur non credunt neganti? idem est homo ipse qui fuerat: fatetur insontem, qui dudum noxium loquebatur; et certe ueritatem magis exprimunt tormenta quam risus, nisi quod facilius creditur quod aut fictum libenter auditur, aut non fictum ut fingatur impellitur.*" Jerome, *Ep.* 45, 2. It

appears from Jerome's text that one of the prosecution's witnesses was probably one of Paula's slaves, since in the legal proceedings of Late Antiquity aristocrats were exempt from torture. Cf. Dossey (2001, 98-114).

⁶ Translated by Wright (1933), slightly modified.

⁷ Jerome deliberately omitted from his apologetic epistle any information concerning the proceedings of the trial and the sentencing decision, as a result of which he was exiled from Rome. The proof is a threat of exposure on these two uncomfortable issues, which Rufinus of Aquileia addressed to Jerome in a private letter from around 400 (now lost). Jerome quotes verbatim the threat received ("*Numquid et ego non possum enarrare tu quomodo de urbe discesseris, quid de te in praesenti indicatum sit, quid postea scriptum, quid iuraveris, ubi navim conscenderis, quam sancte peritrium vitaveris?*") *Apol. c. Ruf.* III, 21) and in his equally threatening reply he almost admits the intentional omissions, but also that they might not be convenient for Rufinus either ("*si vel parvam schedulam contra me romani episcopi aut ulterius ecclesiae protuleris, omnia quae in te scripta sunt mea crimina confitebor*") *Apol. c. Ruf.* III, 22). For a more detailed interpretation of the texts, see Cain (2009, 119-121).

⁸ In a quasi-hagiographic context, Jerome says this about Melania Maior ("*Sancta Melania nostri temporis inter Christianos vera nobilitas*") *Ep.* 39, 5). But this statement is merely a rhetorical device that he also employs on other occasions. When his preferences turn to other wealthy Roman matrons, such as Marcela, she will acquire the exclusive honour of being the first woman of high rank in Rome to adopt the monastic life ("*nulla eo tempore nobilium feminarum noverat Romae propositum monachorum*") *Ep.* 127, 5). In reality, such statements are part of Jerome's desire to appease his friends (or *patrons*) and integrate them into the vast campaign to promote asceticism initiated by Damasus, the former bishop of Rome between 383-384 AD (Rebenich 2002, 9). For details on the context and reasons for the promotion of asceticism in the Roman world, see Hunter (2007, 188-189); Lizzi (1989, 134-137); Cooper (1996, 78; 84; 91); Shaw (1998, 487; 491).

⁹ Cf. *PLRE*, s.v. "Melania 1 (the elder)."

¹⁰ The hypothesis remains valid only if we accept that Jerome is not untruthful in his hagiographic portrait in *Epistle 39* (see above n. 8), where he suggests that he witnessed events around 363, when Melania lost her husband and two of her children (*Ep.* 39, 5).

¹¹ Jerome, *Ep.* 3, 3.

¹² Jerome, *Ep.* 3, 3; *Ep.* 4, 2; *Chronicon, ad ann.* 374 (*PL* 27, 505-508; Donalson 1996, 55).

¹³ *PL* 22, 481-482, n. (c).

¹⁴ Situated in Campania, Baiae became towards the end of the Republican period a place of relaxation for wealthy patricians, but also a place of guilty pleasures and opulence. Varro satirized this place and advised Cicero to avoid it (*Ad Fam.* IX, 2, 5), because it had already become a symbol of easy morals and luxury. Baiae's bad reputation continued also during the Empire. Propertius addressed Cynthia: "*tu modo quam primum corruptas desere Baias*" (I, 11, 27), Seneca described it suggestively in *Epistle 51*, and the senator Symmachus could still enjoy *otium* at its thermal baths (*Ep.* I, 7 & *Ep.* I, 67; *PL* 18, 150C & *PL* 18, 283B).

¹⁵ For instance see Gilliam (1953, 103-107) whose article aims to reflect the influence of Ciceronian discourse on Jerome's epistolography, noting the lexical similarity between Jerome's text in *Ep.* 45, 4 ("*Baias peterent, unguenta eligerent, divitias et viduitatem haberent?*") and that of Cicero in *Pro Caelio*, 27 ("*qui in hortis fuerit, qui unguenta sumpserit, qui Baias viderit?*"), but considers that the allusion to the ancient city of Baiae "is perhaps a piece of literary antiquarianism" (104).

¹⁶ We won't dwell too much on the intricate plots that led to the Ciceronian speech. They are well analysed and explained in the editions of Cicero's work, which we have consulted in the present study. (Austin 1960; Ciruolo 2003; Dyck 2013).

¹⁷ Geffcken (1973, 24-26) provides the best explanations of this. She speaks of a degenerative technique of portraying Clodia, borrowed from dramatic art. We witness a progressive degradation of the main character, accompanied by a transition from a higher form of comedy, also from tragedy, to a lower one, like the ancient *mime*; from a tragic heroine, comparable to Medea in Ennius' tragedy (*Pro Caelio*, 18), Clodia becomes at the end of the discourse a *meretrix*, the main character in an inconsistent *fabella* (*Pro Caelio* 61-69).

¹⁸ Cf. Gilliam (1953, 103-107).

¹⁹ My translation after Zetzel (2009).

²⁰ Quintilian, *Inst. orat.* IX, 2, 58-59.

²¹ Quintilian, *Inst. orat.* VIII, 4, 1-2.

²² “*si illam commenticiam pyxidem **obscenissima** sit **fabula** consecuta?*” Cicero, *Pro Caelio*, 69.

²³ Negative meanings of the term *fabula*, associated with the idea of urban hearsay, can be found several times in the writings of Jerome, and they are often related to the discourse of Cicero. “*ut nullam **obsceni** in se rumoris **fabulam** dare?*” *Ep.* 60, 10; “*et ne **obsceni** rumoris in se **fabulam** dare?*” *Ep.* 79, 5; “*Difficile est in **maledica civitate** et in urbe [...] non aliquam **sinistri rumoris fabulam** contrabere?*” *Ep.* 127, 3; “*nulla **obsceni** rumoris et pollutae virginitatis ullam **fabulam** dedit.*” *Adversus Iovinianum* I, 41.

²⁴ “*qui **nullum** convivium renuerit, qui in hortis fuerit, qui unguenta sumpserit, qui Baias viderit.*” ²⁴ Cicero, *Pro Caelio*, 27. For explanations of the repeated use of the pronoun *nullus* in *Pro Caelio*, 17, 22, 27 and 30, see the considerations of Dyck (2013, 18; 84; 102).

²⁵ E.g., “*meum propositum sine sexu est.*” Jerome, *Ep.* 22, 18.

²⁶ The speech was composed after the events of 61 BC, when Clodius was acquitted in a trial in which he was accused to disguising himself as a woman in order to fraudulently participate to the sacred rites of the *Bona Dea* in 62 B.C.E. In the disputes in the Senate, which took place on 15 May 61, Cicero was accused by Clodius of being “a peasant and a provincial” (*homo agrestis ac rusticus*) from Arpinum, who the month before (in April) had been feasting at the thermal baths in the town of Baiae in Campania (*In P. Clodium et C. Curionem*, fr. 20), the famous place associated with the opulence and luxury of the urban elite (see above, n. 14). Enraged by the hypocrisy of Clodius (a regular client of the mentioned place) now posing as a moralist censor, Cicero will use the theme of the baths of Campania in both discourses against the two Clodians, in an acid antithesis between *rusticitas* and *urbanitas*.

²⁷ Cicero alludes directly to this attack in *Pro Caelio* 36 (*ex his igitur sumam aliquem ac potissimum minimum fratrem qui est in isto genere urbanissimus*), but less obvious insinuations are found in numerous other passages.

²⁸ Translated by Radicke (2022), slightly modified.

²⁹ A part of the arguments here have already been published in another paper, in which we sought to point out that the late polemic between Jerome and Melania Maior seems to have been born much earlier and to have manifested initially only through literary allusions. (Răchită 2019, 370-380).

³⁰ A good analysis of the Origenist controversy, especially useful with regard to the disputing sides, can be found in Clark (1992).

³¹ “*Vidimus nuper ignominiosum per totum orientem uoluisse: et aetas et cultus et habitus et incessus, indiscreta societas, exquisitae epulae, regius apparatus Neronis et Sardanapalli nuptias loquebantur.*” Jerome, *Ep.* 54, 13.

³² Paulinus de Nola, *Ep.* 29, 5 (PL 61, 312D); See also Murphy (1947, 62).

³³ Paulinus de Nola, *Ep.* 29, 12 (PL 61, 320A-320C).

³⁴ “*Caeterum ridiculum, si quis e nobis manens inter Croesi opes et Sardanapali delicias, de sola rusticitate se iacet.*” Jerome, *Ep.* 57, 12.

³⁵ “*Quamvis Croesus quis spiret et Darius, litterae marsupium non sequuntur. Sudoris comites sunt et laboris; sociae ieiuniorum, non saturitatis; continentiae, non luxuriate.*” Jerome, *Apol. c. Ruf. I*, 17. The same critique can be found also in *Apol. c. Ruf. III*, 4.

³⁶ Cf. Cameron (1992, 140-144).

³⁷ Jerome, *Epp.* 3, 3; 4, 2; 39, 5. With the same flattering qualifications will be named the other disciples of Jerome: Asella (*Ep.* 45, 6), Marcela (*Epp.* 47, 3; 49, 4; 54, 18; 127, 9), Paula and Iulia Eustochia (*Epp.* 108, 35; 108, 27).

³⁸ Palladius, *Hist. Laus.* 46 (PG 34, 1225A) and 54 (PG 34, 1226B–1227D).

³⁹ Paulinus de Nola, *Ep.* 29, 9.

⁴⁰ “*Et licet me sinistro Hibera excetra rumore dilaniet, non timebo hominum iudicium, habiturus iudicem meum.*” Jerome, *Ep.* 6, 2.

⁴¹ Quintilian, *Inst. orat.* IX, 2, 44–46.

⁴² “*Quamdiu non profero cogitata, maledicta non crimina sunt; imo ne maledicta quidem, quae aures publicae nesciant.*” Jerome, *Ep.* 57, 4.

⁴³ “*Sed aliud est male dicere, aliud accusare. Accusatio crimen desiderat, rem ut definiat, hominem ut notet, argumento probet, teste confirmet.*” Cicero, *Pro Caelio*, 6. „*Omnia sunt alia non crimina, sed maledicta, iurgi petulantis magis quam publicae quaestionis.*” Cicero, *Pro Caelio*, 30.

⁴⁴ Cicero’s distinction between *crimen* and *maledictum* is also found in Greek, e.g. in Demosthenes (*De corona*, 123) between the terms κατηγορία (“accusation”) and λοιδορία (“reproach”, “abuse”). Cf. Austin (1960, 52).

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