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CICERO ad Fam. 9.22

The notorious letter of Cicero to Paetus dealing with obscenity has been fully commented on by editors and others.¹ But I am not sure if it has been fully exploited as a source for the development of the Latin language, although it contains useful linguistic material. For instance, the statement that Latin *bini* is obscene if used in Greek proves that it could also be heard as a pronunciation of Greek βίνοι (imperative; the indicative would have its accent in a position impossible for Latin).²

This note concerns the story of the senator who in a speech produced the rhetorical question:

Hanc culpam an illam dicam?

Cicero's comment on this, *potuitne obscenius?* shows that it was possible to interpret this apparently innocent sentence as having an obscene meaning. The major step towards its elucidation was taken long ago, when it was recognised that the last three syllables could be heard as *landicam* the accusative of a very rare word which is given by a glossary as the equivalent of κλειτορίς.³ But interpreters seem to have been satisfied that this metanalysis produced only one improper word. The rest of the sentence would have been meaningless, and it would therefore have been instantly rejected by the censorship the mind imposes on meaningless utterances; we either emend them or dismiss them as nonsense. We do not grasp one part and reject the rest. Thus to be a convincing example we need to give the whole sentence a second, obscene meaning. Obviously the suppression of the verb *dicam* leaves the accusative *hanc... landicam* with no construction.

The first question therefore is what to make of the syllables *ani(l)* left suspended by the metanalysis. We can hardly suppose that *a* would be heard as *ā* and *āni* is utter nonsense applied to *landicam*. But one of the facts we know about Vulgar Latin, the result of a

¹ Most recently, D.R. Shackleton Bailey, *Cicero: Epistulae ad Familiares*, II 330–334.

² Shackleton Bailey writes βινει, but this is improbable for the reason given, and in any case the word is more obscene in the imperative.

³ See Tyrrell and Purser's edition; it is doubted by E. W. Fay, *C. Q.* 1(1907)13f.

long process which was certainly already developing in the substandard Latin of Cicero's day, is that the fourth declension was suppressed. All nouns of this type ultimately shifted to the second declension, and of course *domus* in Cicero's time had advanced far along this route. *Senati* for genitive *senatus* is as old as the second century BC, and this in a formal decree. Thus the colloquial genitive of *ānus* must have been *āni*, a perfectly appropriate word to associate with *landicam*. What of the beginning of the sentence? *Hanc* can perfectly well qualify *landicam*. But *culpam* is impossible, and as noted above a verb is needed. The simplest solution would be to suggest that *culpam* might have been heard as *culpem* giving the deliberative subjunctive needed. But although final *-m* was frequently realised as nasalisation of the preceding vowel, would not *-ā* and *-ē* have remained distinct? Especially since *ē* tended in Vulgar Latin to move towards *i*.

A more involved explanation may therefore be needed. The present subjunctive of all verbs except those of the first conjugation has the endings *-am*, *-as*, *-at*, etc. There must therefore have been analogical pressure on the verbs of the first conjugation to change *-em*, *-es*, *-et*, etc. to match. But in all persons but the first singular the result would have been to neutralise the opposition between indicative and subjunctive. Again, a feature of Vulgar Latin is its loss of the correct distinction of these moods. So perhaps it is not fanciful to suggest that *culpam* might in colloquial speech have been used as first person singular of the present subjunctive. The whole sentence would then have been intelligible as a piece of substandard Latin.