

Umberto Eco popularized the *Cena Cypriani* through a climactic nightmare sequence in *The Name of the Rose*. But perhaps as a result we have taken this glorious poem, this absurdist compression of biblical characters and motifs, too much for granted. The poem has in any case been buried for years away from its chronological origins – generally agreed to be fifth-century – in an edition by K. Strecker amid the *Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini* in the MGH. A newer edition with commentary by C. Modesto (Tübingen 1992) has prompted a couple of good recent articles (R. F. Gleis's 'Bemerkungen zur *Cena Cypriani*' in *Literaturparodie in Antike und Mittelalter* [Trier 1993], F. Mosetti Casaretto on 'modelli e antimodelli' for the *Cena* in *Wiener Studien* 119 [2006]), but neither, to my mind, quite captures the richness and novelty of the poem.

The last words of the *Cena Cypriani* (in its oldest version) are 'ridebat de facto Sarra', which we may in their context translate as 'Sarah laughed at what had happened'. The presence of Sarah, wife of the great patriarch Abraham, upstages even the Virgin Mary, whose weeping forms the first half of that final line. Sarah's laughter seems to ripple back across the poem. But how does it function? What sort of key does it provide to reading the work? Is it what makes sense of the aforementioned 'absurdist compression' – or is the point not to make sense, but merely to point out the absurdity?

I shall examine these questions against various possible approaches. The epigrammatic style of the poem is not without precedent, though the *Cena*'s many subsequent imitations, rewritings, and epigones somewhat obscure its originality in its own time. Its mockery of the typological motifs woven seriously into complex biblical exegesis in late antiquity, or into the burgeoning decoration of Christian churches and artifacts, is arresting. One possible interpretative framework is, of course, Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque – but this poem is composed some nine hundred years before the festivals on which Bakhtin focuses his attention. A more satisfying, and less time-bound, context may be provided by the notion of 'Lachgemeinschaften', recently developed along the lines of B. Stock's 'textual communities' and explored in a volume edited by W. Röcke and H. R. Velten (*Lachgemeinschaften* [Berlin/New York 2005]). This, in its turn, leaves the poetic dynamics unexplained, however well the social dynamics round a humorous composition or performance may be accounted for. We return, as we must, to the piecemeal beauties of M. Roberts' 'jeweled style', which fits the poem well – but can Sarah's laughter catch those beauties, enhance them, make them shimmer? And at the same time, show how delightfully ridiculous they are? In the end, I shall attempt to articulate a 'poetics of laughter', in the light of which the droll absurdities of this poem may shine.