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Introduction: Roman Comedy

> quod si personis isdem huic uti non licet:
> qui mage licet currentem seruom scribere,
> bonas matronas facere, meretrices malas,
> parasitum edacem, gloriosum militem,
> puerum supponi, falli per seruom senem,
> amare odisse suspicari? denique
> nullumst iam dictum quod non dictum sit prius.   (*Eun.* 35–41)

But if he is not allowed to use the same characters as others do, how is it more permissible to create a running slave, to make matrons good and prostitutes bad, a parasite greedy, a soldier boastful, to sneak in a baby, to have an old man deceived by a slave, to love, to hate and to suspect? In sum, nothing is now said which has not been said before.

> sed quasi poeta, tabulas quom cepit sibi,
> quaerit quod nusquam gentiumst, reperit tamen,
> facit illud ueri simile quod mendacium est,
> nunc ego poeta fiam: uiginti minas,
> quae nunc nusquam sunt gentium, inueniam tamen.   (*Ps.* 401–5)

But just like a poet, when he picks up his writing-tablets, seeks something which exists nowhere in the world – and finds it, and makes what is false seem like truth, so now I shall become a poet: those twenty minae, which exist nowhere in the world, I shall nevertheless invent.

There's nothing new under the sun; I'll invent it out of nowhere. I offer these two quotations not to suggest 'Plautus against Terence', originality *against* tradition, but as a nutshell in which the paradoxical genius of Roman comedy may sit comfortably and laugh at our attempts to tie him down. For what is comedy? An art and a natural gift; artificial, yet basic to all human societies; all in the timing, dependent on the number of audiences, yet subjective and personal; dependent on recognition, yet cheating of expectation; subversive, and also reactionary; culture-specific, yet drawing on that most fundamental and fundamentally human of psychosomatic actions – laughter.

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INTRODUCTION

Critics down the ages have attempted to confine the comic spirit to a theoretical box by seeking to articulate its essence.[1] In the ancient world, much comic theorising was directed towards moral justification of comedy, unsurprisingly given comedy's rather obvious connections with naughtiness,[2] in which the reason we laugh is in order to correct the failings of others, and so too in society and even in ourselves. Such moralising sometimes (often) became itself the subject of comic playwrights' humour,[3] but such humour only works because everyone knows its basis: the notion that comedy is for the edification of society needs to be recognisable in order for it to be undermined.

The moralising tradition had extensive progeny in discussions of comedy throughout the medieval and early modern periods, but it was not the only ancient theoretical contribution to the nature of comedy. The lost second book of Aristotle's *Poetics* famously and enticingly theorised about comedy as the extant book does for tragedy, certainly including the moral argument but also exploring other aspects of laughter and how it may be elicited by literature. We can hear echoes of Aristotle's theories of comedy in the later ancient *Tractatus Coislinianus* which almost certainly derives from Aristotle, if at several removes, and from which scholars have partly reconstructed what Aristotle might have said.[4] The best bit of the *Tractatus* is a list of the causes of laughter, both in diction and in substance.[5] It includes such recognisable comic techniques as deception, illogicality, cheating of expectation, and vulgarity, in addition to various forms of word-play. What the author does not appear to do is to try to find some overarching scheme into which all these causes of laughter may be fitted, his centralising drive being more towards the purposes of comedy (a reflection of the Aristotelian cathartic effect of tragedy) rather than its causes.

[1] Purdie (1993) points out that any attempt to say 'what comedy is', while it may be both useful and perhaps inevitable, risks bringing the joke on itself – a common problem for the critic of comedy. As she says, 'even at its simplest, joking is always overdetermined' (13, see also 36). See also Hokenson (2006) and Olson (1968) on theories of comedy, plus, specifically with regard to Roman comedy, Duckworth (1994).

[2] Dover (1972); Anderson (1993) 92. Ancient critical and moral anxiety about comedy is in part an extension of ancient anxiety about representation in general, on which, with regard to comedy, see Sharrock (2009) 2–6.

[3] See Sharrock (2009) 258–60.

[4] See Cooper (1922) esp. 224–6; Janko (1984). Watson (2012) makes a strong case for the Aristotelian authenticity of the *Tractatus*, as well as offering extensive analysis of its contribution to the theory of comedy. Grube (1965) 144–9 is doubtful about the Aristotelian purity of the *Tractatus*, but for our purposes even some confused echoes of the classical Greek theorist, by way of versions and epitomes through different periods of antiquity and beyond, tell us something of what people have felt it appropriate to say about comedy over the centuries.

[5] Grube (1965) 141 gives a good brief account of the list.

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Many later critics have had a go at the 'essence of comedy', including Bergson's notion of automation (something is comic when it displays a certain inelasticity and a kind of automatism, like a puppet or clockwork, but still keeping the pretence of life – bear in mind that he was writing at the time of the rise of the machine in Western culture), Baudelaire's absolute and reductive humour (this theory, with its roots in Romanticism, sought to distinguish between 'absolute' comedy which is creative, spontaneous, and life-affirming, and on the other hand 'significant' – in the sense of signifying – or 'reductive' comedy, which works by reference to, or even is parasitic on, social reality, so for example political satire would come into this category), and Freud's emphasis on the unconscious (Freud's famous *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, first published in 1905, is the great-grandfather of all those 'Freudian slips' of language at which we laugh, but the theory goes much wider than that, with the idea that all joking activity works to persuade our inner policeman, and society, to let us do things that it thinks we should not, while providing safe release for pent-up emotions), to mention only those which arise from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' anxious interaction with the development of modernity.[6] The drive for moral superiority and the correction of society has by no means disappeared, manifesting itself particularly in political satire, but it now sits alongside the potential of comedy to overturn society. Bakhtin's theory of Carnival has been highly influential in this mode, but it leaves a problem for critics of all comedy, not only Roman, as to the extent to which innovations such as the Roman Saturnalia and the medieval Feast of Fools serve as much to reinforce hierarchies as they do to question or undermine them.[7]

So far, I may seem to have played into the common notion that the primary purpose of comedy is the production of humour and the elicitation of laughter. One of the reasons for the relatively poor press gained by Roman comedy in the modern world (by which I mean, approximately, the Western world since the Second World War) is that many people have not found the plays particularly funny. There are two approaches that I suggest we take to addressing this problem: on the one hand, the plays of Plautus and Terence are funnier than is thought, while, on the other hand, humour is not their

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[6] See Sharrock (2009) 166–7.
[7] See Germany's contribution to this volume. The classic work on the destabilising drive of Roman comedy is Segal (1968/1987). Bakhtin (1984) is one of the more readable works of this difficult but brilliant Russian critic. The role of his theories in understanding Roman comedy have been as yet little pursued, although there has been some work on Aristophanes, for example Platter (1993). The main Bakhtinian influence on classical scholarship has been in the field of the novel, on which see particularly Branham (2005).

only goal. As regards the second point, it is worth stressing that Roman comedy, as a genre, has dramatic entertainment as its primary goal, not laughter. The vein is light and the outcome positive – these are essentials of ancient comedy, more than the production of belly laughs. There are various reasons for our historic difficulties in appreciating the humour of Roman comedy: lack of familiarity and understanding; the perennial difficulty in treating a play-script as if it were the entire performance; a false and damagingly prejudiced (in its true sense: judged in advance of knowledge) desire for lost Greek originals, which have often been constructed precisely out of negative criticisms of Roman plays; and then all the usual difficulties of appreciating the humour of another culture.[8] Many people of my generation thus struggled through the difficult Latin of perhaps one or if they were (un)lucky two plays of Plautus, often chosen more for their perceived connection with something Greek than for their own sake, for example *Aulularia* or *Bacchides*, and then far too often the atypical *Adelphi* of Terence,[9] without any understanding of how it fits into and disturbs comic tradition, nor any sense that it might actually have something to say about Roman families.

Despite the challenge of translating laughter into different cultures, it is worth noting that Plautus and (yes, even) Terence provide us with easier access to Roman humour than pretty much any other Roman text. I would offer the following as a comparison. As an undergraduate, the second play that I read (after a disastrous interaction with *Bacchides* and Menander's *Dis Exapaton*, which I think has scarred me for life) was Plautus' *Rudens*. Despite no great enthusiasm for the task, I was pushed into laughing out loud – in the library – at the magnificent *licet* scene between the old man Daemones and the slave Trachalio (*Rud.* 1212).[10] The old man gives Trachalio a series of instructions, to which the slave replies each time *licet*. Since this word means something like 'okay', it is not of itself funny. What makes it funny is the repetition, and Trachalio's control in contrast with the old man's eagerness and excitement. At one point, Trachalio turns the interaction around, and he tricks Daemones into saying *licet* to a series of delights for himself. Finally, in comes the unknowing slave Gripus and asks '*Quam mox licet te compellare, Daemones?*' ('How soon will it be okay to talk to you, Daemones?', 1227). One can easily supply the stage direction 'Daemones jumps out of his skin'. Contrast the easy humour of that scene with my contemporaneous reading of the incomprehensible 'joke' in the interchange between Sarmentus and Messius at Hor. *Sat.* 1.5.56–61. To be fair, there are

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[8] See Douglas (1999) ch. 10, first published in 1970, on the challenge of interpreting jokes of other cultures.

[9] For the argument that *Adelphi* is unusual within Roman comedy, see Sharrock (2009) 98.

[10] For discussion of the scene, see Sharrock (2009) 175–7.

plenty of jokes in Plautus and Terence that do take a bit of explanation in order to be appreciated by the modern reader, but perhaps the biggest hurdles to enjoyment are the prejudice about secondariness (on which see Telò in this volume) and the failure to perceive both the diversity of the corpus and, paradoxically, the role of repetition in the games comedy plays with itself, its tradition, and its audience.

A standard defence of the perceived unfunniness of Roman comedy is to say that the play-script is merely a shadowy reflection of the glorious visual extravaganza which would be the play in performance. This is a fair point, which can apply to the script of any performance genre. What is surprising, I suggest, is how little true it is that the experience of Roman comedy is irreparably damaged by treating it as a text. How is it that the supposedly so inadequate script of a genre which was meant to produce one-off entertainment for the masses could so quickly become a literary text, the subject of a huge scholarly industry within 100 years of its production, a school text (in the case of Terence) from which to learn good Latin, an intertext with other far more elevated genres (such as the oratory of Cicero), and be rediscovered to help form the dramatic tradition of modern Europe mostly not through continuous theatre history but through the reading of texts? The answer, I suggest, is word-play – this is a performance genre, yes, but one in which the words carry so much of the burden of production that they can transmit its spirit even in the absence of all that music, dancing, colour, and movement which would no doubt have enhanced the original performance.[11] In the contemporary world, most of us most of the time get our Plautus and Terence in the form of a text, whether Latin, English translation, or a mixture of the two. We may lose something by comparison with the experience of the original audience, but we also gain something: not only do we have the imaginative possibilities of constructing ourselves as audience, but we also have the opportunity for literary readings which allow us to break free of the real-time constraints of performance, to compare one play with another, one passage with another, to superimpose the first-time reader and the knowledgeable reader on top of each other and watch them both from the vantage point of a super-reader. It is also much easier for us to put the play in question into a literary historical context. In doing so, we are sharing in the experience of readers throughout most of antiquity and the Middle Ages, as well as the modern world, who have treated these texts, to a greater or lesser extent at different times, as works of literature in their own right.

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[11] Beacham (1991) is a sustained effort to offer more than a textual reading of Roman comedy. Anxieties about reading play-texts as if they were plays is not confined to the ancient world. See Fortier (2002) 12.

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In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scholarship on Roman comedy was dominated by three areas: language, the establishment of a fixed text, and the question of the plays' relationship with their so-called Greek originals. It was mainly these three elements which made Plautus important enough to command the attention of great nineteenth-century scholars such as Friedrich Leo.[12] The work of Plautus in particular was of great linguistic interest for its contribution to the history of the Latin language, being the earliest extensive text and one which bears a closer relationship with colloquial language than most works of literature. The linguistic tradition has taken something of a new turn in recent years, with the focus changed from what Plautus and Terence can tell us about the language to what the language can tell us about Plautus and Terence.[13] Establishment of the text of Plautus is extraordinarily fraught (Terence is much easier): as Slater says: 'the texts themselves sometimes seem to be quicksand beneath our feet'.[14] In addition to the normal problems of textual transmission from antiquity, the plays of Plautus had to contend with a living theatrical tradition, with actors and producers who used and abused them both within and after Plautus' lifetime, leaving traces, visible and possibly invisible, of their handiwork in the play-texts that have reached us.[15] To a lesser extent the same is true of Terence, whose texts, despite their complete and, seemingly, relatively stable form, contain an alternative ending (*Andria*) and a highly complex alternative beginning (*Hecyra*), which may be the result of multiple performances.[16] Indeed, we might see the layering of the texts caused by their life in the living theatre as a continuation of that which derives from their origins as in some sense translations of Hellenistic Greek plays. As I suggest above, the search for originals was a dominant strand in scholarship on Roman comedy. This was *Quellenforschung* on steroids, for not only was it regularly directed at assessment (often negative) of the Roman achievement by comparison with the Greek, but it was also driven by a desire to unearth the lost glories of Greek originals by stripping away the covering of Roman dross. My characterisation of this scholarship is something of a straw man, and so hardly fair or representative of the best of such work, but neither is it entirely wrong to be concerned both at the circularity of some of the

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[12] See Leo (1895–6) and (1895).   [13] Karakasis (2005); Fontaine (2010).

[14] Slater (2000) 3. This quotation is so good I have made it twice: Sharrock (2009) 18. On the problem of the text of Plautus, see especially Gratwick (1993) 3–4; Tarrant (1983) 302–3; on the textual transmission of Terence, see Reeve (1983).

[15] An extreme example of this mode of reading Plautus is the work of Zwierlein (1990–2).

[16] On which, see Sharrock (2009) 243–8.

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arguments put forward by this 'analyst' school of reading Roman comedy and also at the resultant distraction from reading the plays in their own right.[17]

In the second half of the twentieth century, the reading of Roman comedy was enhanced by a number of developments, which in their different ways sought to explore the theatrical and social significance of the plays. Konstan's 1983 book, called simply *Roman Comedy*, provided a particularly sensitive analysis of the social meanings of the plays, and paved the way for more explicitly political readings such as those introduced in James (1998a). On the theatrical side, while Roman comedy has not enjoyed the spectacular modern success of Greek drama and remains very much the poor relation in the *Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama*,[18] it had a long tradition of performance, both in Latin and, more often, in translation, in public schools such as Eton and the King's School, Canterbury, from as early as the sixteenth century, when Nicholas Udall, author of the Plautine inter-text *Ralph Roister-Doister* and producer of many Roman plays in closer translation, was headmaster of Eton. The baton has now been taken up most effectively, to my knowledge, by American institutions, such as the National Endowment for the Humanities summer school on Roman comedy and performance in 2012.[19] In Britain, Richard Beacham (also an American) has spearheaded work on Plautus as living theatre[20] and on the archaeology of the Roman stage.

The physical staging is not the only way of engaging with the text of Roman comedy as performance. Marshall (2006) is an outstanding example of the scholarly reading of the 'stagecraft and performance' of these plays, while my own 2009 book sought to approach the plays as a reader, but a reader who is always conscious of playing the imaginative role of audience. In recent years also, the so-called Freiburg school of Plautine scholarship has reacted to the analyst school of thought, and interacted interestingly with the performance-based and the social-embedded approaches, by stressing the contribution to Roman comedy from native Italian theatrical traditions, including those involving improvisation.[21] While apparent improvisation within a fixed text can only be a mimesis of making it up on the spot,[22] we can never know what role true improvisation might have played in

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[17] A recent example of this mode of reading Plautus, and a good paper in its own terms, is Lowe (2007).
[18] www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk//.   [19] http://nehsummer2012romancomedy.web.unc.edu/.
[20] Beacham (1991) and (forthcoming).
[21] A representative example of the relationship between the improvisatory reading and the analyst tradition would be Stärk (1989).
[22] Arnott (2001).

performance and indeed in the rather fluid development of these texts. A 'mimesis of making it up' might be one way to characterise metatheatre, that great explosion of critical engagement with the plays of Plautus, which began with Slater (1985). While not everyone appreciates the virtues of this approach,[23] its staying power is considerable and a sign of its success is the way the metatheatrical approaches have now been taken up by scholars of Greek literature also, just as happened with intertextuality which was also pioneered for classical literature by Latinists.

So what exactly are they saying about Roman comedy? If I were, most unfairly, to pick two strands in the history of recent criticism on Plautus and Terence and to characterise one as negative and the other as positive, then the first would be the search for Greek originals and the second the celebration of metatheatre. The question of the relationship between the plays of Plautus and Terence and those of Greek New Comedy thankfully features relatively little in this volume, while the analysis of Roman comedy as a site of complex interaction with earlier theatrical and comic traditions both Greek and Roman has instead been highlighted (Telò and Panayotakis). Much earlier criticism has tended towards the circular, reconstructing Greek plays on the basis of Roman difference and then analysing the Roman as different. Even when it has been directed towards celebrating Roman originality, such as in the groundbreaking work of Fraenkel, it often falls into the trap of assuming or excusing Roman inferiority.[24] For a truly powerful intertextual reading of Roman comedy against Greek, we really need more texts of Greek comedy than currently exist, but it is good to see the tide turning in this direction.[25] It does so alongside the great development in, originally, Plautine studies which is metatheatrical reading, in which the great game of the play is reference to itself as play.[26] Terentian studies have been slower to gain admittance to the metatheatrical party, but it is becoming acknowledged that he deserves to sit at the head of the table.[27]

Terence says of two plays of Menander, the *Perinthia* and the *Andria*, that *qui utramvis recte norit ambas noverit* ('whoever knows the one, knows

[23] Rosenmeyer (2002).
[24] Fraenkel (2007) is the English translation of the magisterial 1922 book, the aim of which was undoubtedly to celebrate Plautine brilliance, but which did so in ways that could be taken, and were often taken, as disparagement of Roman contribution. See Halporn (1993) for an account of the literary history of what he nicely calls the 'Homeric Question of Latin Studies'.
[25] It is worth remembering just how little we know for sure about Greek New Comedy. Handley (2011) 146, for example, estimates that we have just about 5 per cent of Menander – and that mostly in tiny snippets.
[26] Slater (2000, originally 1985); Moore (1998b); and very many readings thereafter.
[27] See Christenson in this volume.

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them both', Ter. *And.* 10). Many people would take this as the pot calling the kettle black, but it is important to realise that he is *only joking*. One of the common complaints against Roman comedy is that it is 'all the same'. This, I suggest, is doubly wrong: first, because the games with stock characters, theatrical conventions, repeated scenes, stock plots, and so on which drive so much of the humour of Roman comedy depend on those elements being recognisable, which can only be the case if they exist elsewhere; and, second, because in fact the plays are considerably less similar to each other than is generally thought. To illustrate this point, let us take a few examples of what would generally be thought of as standard elements in Roman comedy, and see how common they actually are. What we will find is that they do indeed keep popping up often enough for us to recognise and enjoy them, but, in Plautus especially, rather less often than we might expect. As regards Terence, we will find that certain leitmotifs do indeed have a high degree of prevalence within his corpus, sometimes to the extent that they have entered the popular imagination as parts of 'Roman comedy' without actually being at all common in Plautus. I have tried elsewhere to argue that Terence is 'self-consciously aware of his place in an established literary tradition. He is, I suggest, more artful, more artificial, more farcical than is generally assumed, as well as being (even) more literary.'[28] He is both more and less like Plautus than is often thought: less like, in that many of his plot elements are relatively rare in Plautus, but more like in his metatheatrical artistry, his obsession with plotting, and his skirting with the absurd.

Let us take first that most Plautine of characters, the controlling slave, who drives the action of the play and plots against the anti-comic forces of authority such as the stern father in order to promote the interests of the young lover. This *architectus*, as Palaestrio is cleverly called at *Mil.* 901, is often seen as some sort of reflection of the playwright himself. Ten or so years ago, I tried the experiment of asking a random group of Classicists, not comedy specialists, how many plays of Plautus they thought contained a character of this nature, to which the answer was all or nearly all of them. I asked how many plays of Terence contained this character, to which the answer was none of them. I would say that the answer is something more along the following lines.[29] The classic examples in Plautus are Pseudolus and Epidicus in their own plays, Palaestrio in *Miles Gloriosus*, Tranio in *Mostellaria*, and Chrysalus in *Bacchides*. A further group of plays, including *Persa, Amphitruo* (where the god Mercury is only pretending to be a comic slave), and *Asinaria*, give some role to a character of this nature, while in *Poenulus* and *Curculio* aspects of the role are shared between the

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[28] Sharrock (2009) 20–1.   [29] See Sharrock (2009) 116–17 and 131–40.

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active parasite who directs the action and the ironic slave who directs the audience's view of the play. Many other plays contain controlling characters who draw on the metatheatrical role of the slave-*architectus* (for example, the *matrona* in *Casina*, the prostitute Phronesium in *Truculentus*, and the group of old men in *Trinummus*), but they are not slaves. The slave-*architectus* Toxilus in *Persa* performs his role conventionally, with one very major exception – he is working for himself as lover. In all, I would suggest that just under half of the plays of Plautus contain a clever slave who controls the action. On the other hand, all of Terence's plays, except the extremely unusual *Adelphi*, contain a character who either plays the role as if he were in competition with Pseudolus (Davos in *Andria*, Syrus in *Heauton Timorumenos*) or plays around with the edges of the role (*Hecyra, Phormio*, where again the role is shared with someone who also plays around with the role of parasite[30]), or try to resist the role (*Eunuchus*).[31]

What about the topos of recognition? The paradigm is that of the baby, usually a girl, usually exposed at birth but sometimes lost in other ways, who is brought up as a slave, usually with a view to prostitution, but conveniently develops a relationship only with one lover, whom she will marry when she is recognised as a citizen. To pull out all the stops, the recognition should take place by means of some physical tokens, such as a ring, a bracelet, or some other trinket. Is this almost universal? No. Less than half of the extant plays of Plautus contain an explicit example of someone turning out to be someone else and thus enabling (or, in the case of *Epidicus*, obstructing) a marriage, but of those perhaps only three, *Cistellaria, Curculio*, and *Rudens*, can be described as full-blown classic examples of the motif. Several others play with the idea in a variety of ways. There is, for example, the way that a recognition-plot hovers around the edges of Plautus' *Casina*, although neither of the young couple ever appears, because this is a play about a *senex amator* and his conflict with his magnificent wife, who herself controls the action. With delightful disregard for propriety and comic convention, the prologue nonchalantly informs us that the nubile supposed slave girl Casina who is the bone of contention between father and mother/son will turn out to be freeborn and able to marry the son, but that the son will not appear in the play, because 'Plautus did not want him [to get back in time] and so demolished a bridge on his way' (*Cas.* 64).[32] *Poenulus* also contains the recognition of lost daughters by their father, but in this case the father in

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[30] See Frangoulidis (1995); Sharrock (2014); and further bibliography mentioned there.

[31] See Sharrock (2009) 140–62.

[32] Many critics have traditionally suggested that Plautus has gone further in many of his plays and removed recognition plots where they would have existed in the Greek originals. See for example Auhagen (2009).