Introduction

Titus Maccius Plautus was one of several comic playwrights writing in
Latin c. 200 BC. Victorious in the Second Punic War, and flexing its
military muscles in North Africa and in Greece, Rome had begun to
establish itself as an ancient superpower. The development of Roman
New Comedy (the *fabulae palliatae*, or 'plays in Greek dress' as they came
to be called, from *pallium*, a Greek cloak) coincided with this growth,
and reflected a sophisticated, cosmopolitan attitude shared by the
Hellenistic Greek world. Rome was also consciously cultivating a sense of
'literature' for the Latin language, and theatre was at the forefront in this
cultural programme.[1]

Plautus is the best-represented playwright from antiquity, with twenty
plays surviving more or less complete, plus significant fragments. Though
much of his work is lost, Plautus remains the earliest Latin author whose
complete literary works survive. Even dating the plays of Plautus is
notoriously uncertain, though it is generally thought they were written
between c. 205 and 184 BC.[2] A generation later, Publius Terentius Afer
(Terence) wrote six *palliatae*, also surviving, produced between 166 and
160. The plays of Plautus continued to be performed at least until the end
of the republic, and there are indications Terence was performed into the
fourth century AD. Both authors have influenced modern European comic
playwrights from Elizabethan times until the present, and the humour has

[1] Representative but somewhat dated accounts in English of the historical and literary background to
Roman comedy can be found at Duckworth (1952) 3–72, Bieber (1961) 129–60, Beare (1964) 10–158.

[2] Two plays are securely dated by *didascalia* ('production notices'): *Stichus* to 200 BC and *Pseudolus*
to 191 BC. Much has been written on dating the plays, but the schemes proposed are all
questionable. For rival proposals, all of which have adherents today, see Buck (1940), Sedgwick
(1949), Schutter (1952), and De Lorenzi (1952). Not enough is known for any confidence, however.
Even the principle that the amount of lyric *cantica* increases over time, proposed by Sedgwick
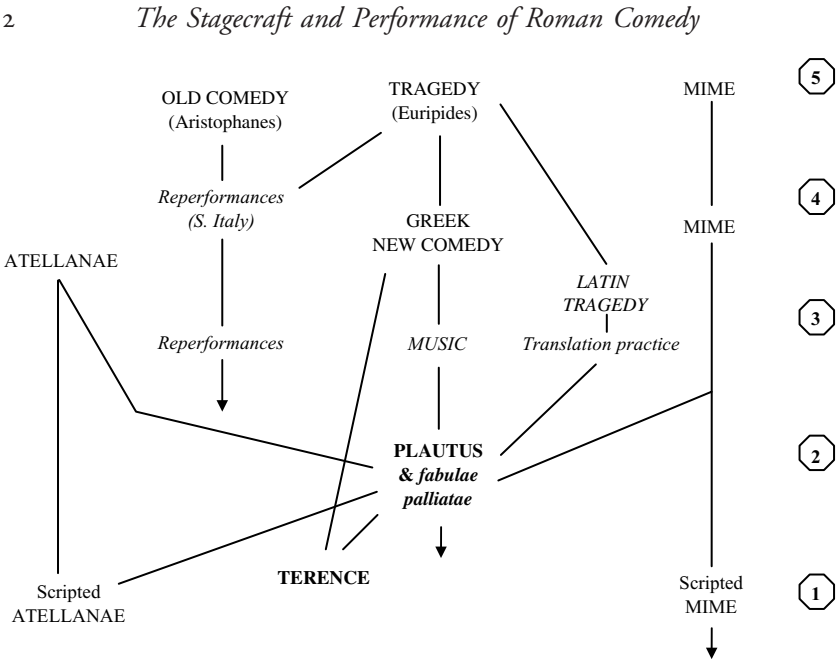(1925), has been questioned: see Dumont (1997) 45 and n. 26.

Fig. 1   Primary influences on Roman comedy: Plautus and Terence.

proved resilient and capable of crossing linguistic and cultural borders.[3] By examining the plays as works intended for performance – asking what they expect of actors, directors, and audiences – it becomes possible to understand Roman comedy and its performance culture better (see Fig. 1).

The plays agree as to where Plautus' literary debts lie. The prologue may tell a Roman audience that there is a Greek original, and that this is an adaptation of it: e.g. *huic Graece nomen est Thensauro fabulae: | Philemo scripsit, Plautus vertit barbare* (*Trinummus* 18–19: 'The name of this play in Greek is *Thensaurus*, "The Treasure"; Philemon wrote it, Plautus made it Latin').[4] There is a sense already that self-deprecating irony colours this picture. Accepting for the moment that Plautus can choose to refer to himself as either 'Plautus' or (as in *Asinaria*) 'Maccus', the change from Greek to Latin is represented with the words *vertit barbare*. *Barbare* ('into barbarian') is a funny way of speaking about one's own language. The prologue is here adopting a Greek perspective, one

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[3] Study of the afterlife of Roman drama has been limited, though see Lefèvre (1997) 115–50, Baier (1998), (1999b), Lefèvre (2001) 157–201, Götte (2001), and Elm (2001). For a general overview, see Duckworth (1952) 396–433.

[4] There are similar claims at *Asinaria* 10–11, *Mercator* 9–10, *Vidularia* 6–7. See Wright (1974) 93–4.

still within the ostensible world of the play,[5] as he jokingly sneers at his Roman audience.

The publication in 1968 of a substantial papyrus fragment of Menander's *Dis Exapatôn* ('The Double Deceiver') gave for the first time a clear sense of how Plautus appropriated and reinterpreted source material.[6] The surviving lines of *Dis Exapatôn* correspond directly to Plautus' *Bacchides* ('The Bacchis Sisters') lines 494–561. Some phrases are rendered almost verbatim, so that it is possible in places to use the Greek to restore the Latin text. There are also large-scale additions and alterations. This discovery confirmed the theory that Plautus introduced large amounts of additional material into his versions of Greek plays.[7] Because this is a familiar and much-discussed example, here I merely list six types of change evident in this overlap. (1) Stylistic and rhetorical flourishes (assonance and wordplay) are regularly introduced. Names of characters are changed. (2) Where the Greek verse is spoken (iambic trimeters), Plautus alternates between a chanted metre (Latin trochaic septenarii) to a spoken meter (Latin iambic senarii, at *Bacchides* 500–25) and back again. (3) This metrical change has other performative implications, as the trochaic lines would be accompanied by music on the *tibia*, played by a piper standing at the side of the performance area. While Menander's play also had a piper, he did not play in the passage represented by the *Dis Exapatôn* fragment. (4) Menander's play almost certainly possessed four act divisions, creating five acts; Plautus' play was performed continuously. The *Dis Exapatôn* fragment shows that Plautus has smoothed over Menander's act division by combining two speeches of a character separated by a choral interlude into a single speech. Not insignificantly, the single speech is the unaccompanied passage. (5) Characterisation has changed: 'where Menander's characterisation is complex, subtle, and realistic, Plautus' is simple, bold and comic'.[8] (6) Whole speeches are omitted and others are invented, and this affects the narrative flow. In addition, there must have been many more alterations not obvious from the text.[9] Audience expectations change as the performance venue

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[5] It is only ostensible, though: there exist many Roman elements in this supposedly Greek world. See Moore (1998b) 50–66.

[6] There is an immense bibliography on this. In particular, see Handley (1968), Questa (1970), Bain (1979), Schönbeck (1981), Primmer (1984), Zwierlein (1990) 24–40, Anderson (1993) 3–29, and Damen (1995).

[7] Fraenkel (1960), an Italian translation with addenda to the German original of 1922.

[8] Barsby (1986) 140.

[9] Another parallel passage (surviving in Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 2.23) compares about fifteen lines from *Plocium* ('The Necklace') by Caecilius, a rival of Plautus writing in the early second century,

changes, and a successful performance in a large, Greek stone theatre will necessarily require alteration if it is to be equally successful in the smaller, temporary Roman venue. Vocal delivery, acting style, the vocabulary of gesture, and the scale of movement are all products of an actor's relationship with the stage and the audience. When any factor is changed, the others shift to accommodate it. This degree of alteration was typical.

Further, Terence, *Adelphoe* 6–11, shows scenes could be omitted or transferred from one play into another:

> *Synapothnescontes Diphili comoediast;*
> *eam Commorientis Plautus fecit fabulam.*
> *in graeca adulescens est qui lenoni eripit*
> *meretricem in prima fabula: eum Plautus locum*
> *reliquit integrum, eum hic locum sumpsit sibi*
> *in Adelphos; verbum de verbo expressum extulit.*

Synapothnescontes is a Greek comedy by Diphilus; Plautus rendered it as his play 'Partners in Death'. At the beginning of the Greek play there is a young man who abducts a girl from her pimp. Plautus left that scene untouched; that scene Terence has taken over for his *Brothers*; he has reproduced and rendered it word for word.[10]

Terence provides his play's pedigree. He claims to render at least one scene in his play *verbum de verbo* ('word for word'), though 'This cannot be literally true.'[11] Plautus' playwriting is described with the prosaic word *fecit* ('made'); Terence has no reason to present another playwright from a previous generation favourably. Terence also claims Plautus could omit whole scenes, not just speeches: line 10 must mean this, since Terence presents his own practice (*verbum de verbo*) as contrast.

Where Plautus streamlines, Terence incorporates a scene from another play into a Latin version of a Greek comedy. Terence uses the verb *contaminare* ('to pollute') to describe this practice at *Andria* 16, *Heauton Timoroumenos* 17, and *Eunuchus* 552, and the name *contaminatio* continues to be used.[12] Terence grafts a neglected scene by Diphilus – i.e. one Plautus did not translate – onto his version of Menander's *Adelphoe B* (his second version of 'The Brothers'). In his prologue Terence admits

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with his Menanderean source (see J. Wright (1974) 120–23; for other examples, see Law (1922) 3–4). Caecilius changes the spoken metre of Greek comedy into a polymetric monody.

[10] Text and translation, Gratwick (1999) 60–61, slightly adapted.

[11] Gratwick (1999) 179. Compare Cicero, *de Finibus* 1.2.4.

[12] See Duckworth (1952) 202–8 for the practice generally, and Fantham (1968), Grant (1980), and Gratwick (1999) 34–6 for *Adelphoe*.

this is part of a defence against an accusation of plagiarism. This provides insight into the concept of intellectual property rights in the second century, and shows that Terence sees his activity as an acceptable practice for playwrights.[13]

These techniques are part of the Roman comic translation practice, a practice Plautus describes with the verb *vertere* (*vortere* at *Asinaria* 11) which means 'to twist', like a screw. 'Plautus twists [the Greek play] into barbarian' gives a much rougher image of translation than we might typically assume, but it does more closely reflect his observed practice. The double meaning of the English word 'render' might capture the spirit of *vertere*. The bare-bones information the prologue provides is probably meant to close down inquiry concerning Greek originals, rather than to invite audience speculation: 'We need not suppose that the audience demanded or expected close fidelity to Greek originals, or that they would have bothered to ask what changes Plautus had made to them.'[14] But there were other literary debts, too, and by examining them it is possible to identify the influence exerted on Plautus' compositional practice by contemporary performance traditions. An understanding of these other genres will help to define many aspects of Roman comic stagecraft, but it will also identify key ways in which the *palliata* remained distinct from them.

The *fabulae Atellanae* ('Atellan farces') were, in the time of Plautus and Terence, unscripted, improvised plays performed in and around Rome in the Oscan dialect, native to Campania in Southern Italy. Umbria used a related dialect, and the ancient biographical tradition asserts that Plautus came from Umbria.[15] Oscan continued as the language of Atellan performance throughout its history, even into the Augustan period (Strabo 5.233).[16] The plays used a set of stock characters, represented by traditional masks: Pappus the old man, Maccus the clown, Bucco the fool, Dossennus the glutton, and Manducus the ogre. Characters were put into stock situations, as indicated by surviving titles: *Pappus the Farmer*, *Maccus the Maid*, *Maccus the Soldier*, *Bucco Adopted*, *The Twin*

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[13] Gratwick (1982) 98–103 argues that Plautus similarly grafts a scene from Menander's *Sicyonians* into his *Poenulus*. Other examples of Plautine contamination have been suspected but remain unproved (e.g. *Miles Gloriosus*, with the supposedly extraneous duping of Sceledrus). Terence, *Andria* 18, implies Naevius, Plautus, and Ennius all practised *contaminatio*.

[14] Brown (1995) 678.

[15] There is no good reason to doubt this claim: it cannot derive solely from *Mostellaria* 770, where a joke about an Umbrian girl is made, for example.

[16] Only rarely does Roman comedy joke about accent or dialect. This was a feature of Greek New Comedy, as with the Doric doctor from Cos in Menander's *Aspis*.

Dossennuses (Manducus is not attested as a title character). There were also mythological titles that suggest the same approach applied to other familiar faces: *Hercules the Tax Collector*, for example.[17] A small performance troupe would present these plays and would travel to local festivals to offer entertainments.[18] Because the *Atellanae* at this time were improvised, no scripts can survive, and we cannot know how long a performance would have lasted, but a rough guess might be half an hour or more.[19] In an improvised performance, actors draw on stock routines that they have performed before to extend the narrative when it is working well, or to shorten it when the weather turns sour, for instance. It is a pre-literary form of entertainment.[20]

In the late 90s BC, however, a century after Plautus flourished, certain individuals began to script *Atellanae*. The literary *Atellana* of Pomponius and Novius in some ways continued the traditions of the unscripted genre, and from these authors many verse fragments survive, most of which are *sententiae*, gnomic maxims.[21] The titles seem to suggest continuity with the earlier improvised forms, and the plays continued to be performed in Oscan long after it would have ceased to be the native tongue of even part of the audience. Claims cannot extend beyond this, however, and Beare is right to treat the scripted and unscripted *Atellanae* in separate chapters.[22] Consequently, the extant fragments of the *fabulae Atellanae*, which postdate all extant Roman comedy, cannot tell us

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[17] Surviving fragments and titles are collected and translated in Frassinetti (1967). See also Kamel (1951) and Lowe (1989).

[18] Professional Atellan troupes still existed in the time of Tiberius: Tacitus, *Annals* 4.14.

[19] Duckworth (1952) 11 guesses they were 'perhaps about three or four hundred verses' but bases this on the much later testimony that they were *exodia* ('afterpieces'), which would follow a main entertainment. While this was the custom for later, literate *Atellanae* (Livy 7.2.11; Cicero, *ad Fam.* 9.16.7; Juvenal 3.175 with the scholiast on 6.71; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 45, *Domitian* 10), it need not have been the case for the plays Plautus knew. Similar difficulties exist in determining the length of an improvised performance of the *commedia dell'arte*.

[20] 'Pre-literary' is not a completely satisfying term, but seems preferable to its rivals ('sub-literary'? 'illiterate'?). I use it to designate three aspects of the genre's social context. First, the term emphasises that the genre does not depend upon the literacy either of its practitioners or of its audience. Second, the term locates the genre in a transitional period where the literacy rates in Rome were beginning a substantial increase, which coincides to a large degree with the development of Latin literature. Third, the term avoids establishing a hierarchy among genres, with a presumed privileging of 'literate' or scripted entertainment.

[21] Frassinetti (1967).

[22] Beare (1964) 137–42, 143–8. Beare does raise the possibility that the literary stage was short-lived: 'We hear practically nothing of literary *Atellanae*, or of the authors of such *Atellanae* as were performed on stage. Perhaps after the time of Pomponius and Novius this type of farce had returned to its sub-literary, semi-improvised form' (238–9). I am not certain that the mechanism for such a reversion is effectively paralleled, but this remains a possibility. The point is that we cannot know.

anything certain about the improvised *Atellanae* (in terms of themes addressed, sententious style, metre used, or narrative development, etc.) because all of these features may have been imported into first-century literary *Atellanae* from Plautus and other Roman comic playwrights. The improvised *Atellanae* did affect the writers of the *palliata*, but we cannot use later fragments of literary *Atellanae* for evidence of this performance tradition any more helpfully than the *monostichoi* ('one-line maxims') of Menander can shed light on Greek New Comedy. So much uncertainty remains.

Plautus was also influenced by the Hellenistic mime, a genre that was performed throughout the Greek world, including Alexandria (where literary imitations of it were produced by Theocritus), Greece, and the Greek cities in Southern Italy and Sicily.[23] Literary forms of the genre survive in the work of Herodas, whose Greek mimiambs (mimes written in iambic verse, another distinctive Hellenistic conflation of genres, like the *palliatae*) were probably written in Alexandria in the 270s or 260s.[24] The term 'mime' was applied to a wide variety of performance styles in antiquity, none of which, it should be noted, coincide with the modern western tradition of unspeaking solo mime.

The information that survives about mime resists integration, and apparently aberrant facts need not refer to the same sort of performance. Mimes were variously performed in public, in theatres and amphitheatres, and at symposia. For at least part of their history, they had scripts, but apparently allowed for some degree of improvisation. Examples survive in prose, in verse, and in combination ('prosimetric' mimes). Performers of mime have scurrilous reputations, but could consort with the highest levels of Roman society: one of Sulla's companions was a mime (Plutarch, *Sulla* 36) and Augustus' reported last words compare his life to that of a mime (Suetonius, *Augustus* 99). No single performance context for the mime existed and the imprecise use of the term in antiquity means that certain knowledge will continue to elude us. A type of unmasked performance involving men and women is apparently suggested by the bulk of the evidence, and this may be thought to characterise the Greco-Roman mime for most sources.

Mime (like Roman satire) was fundamentally an urban genre. Its defining feature was that performances were unmasked. The actor's

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[23] Surviving fragments and titles are collected and translated in Bonaria (1965) and Cunningham in Rusten and Cunningham (2002) 178–421. See also Reich (1903), Wüst (1932), Cunningham (1971) 3–11, Wiemken (1972), Benz, Stärk and Vogt-Spira (1995) 139–225.

[24] Cunningham in Rusten and Cunningham (2002) 179–283.

physical face, pulled into a variety of exaggerated expressions, imitated
('mimicked') a range of emotions and at times perhaps even multiple
characters. A second defining feature was the sex of the performers, which
(again, unlike other ancient performance genres) was not restricted only
to men. At the end of the fifth century Sophron of Syracuse was writing
'women's mimes' and 'men's mimes'.[25] This may mean actors would only
play their own sex: unlike the regular practice elsewhere of male actors
playing both sexes, there is no clear indication this ever happened in
mime, though references to mimes wearing a *ricinium* ('shawl') may
suggest they did at times impersonate women in mourning.[26] Perhaps
appropriate *mimêsis* of the other sex was thought to require masks.
Inscriptions attest that the lead actor of a mime troupe could be called an
archimimus ('head-mime', masculine) or an *archimima* (feminine).[27]
Troupe size could vary considerably.[28] Venue was not fixed – mime did
not need a formal stage – and opportunities for performance could come
at formal and informal occasions for professional and non-professional
performers. For male professional mimes, visual representations and lit-
erary descriptions regularly present the mime as bald (*calvus*) and barefoot
(*planipes*; see Festus 342 L); there seem to have been no distinctive cos-
tumes used (*scholion* to Juvenal 3.177), despite references to a multi-
coloured jacket (*centunculus*).

It seems likely that in at least some cases mimes wore tights that
simulated nudity. For men, of course, this is a well-established Greek
tradition reaching back to the days of Aristophanes with the padded
bodysuits (*de rigueur* for comic actors) with a distended belly and
buttocks, and an oversized phallus dangling between the actor's legs: vase
illustrations demonstrate that the representation of naked women on the
comic stage was also accomplished by 'genital tights' with artificially

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[25] Cunningham in Rusten and Cunningham (2002) 287–351. Sophron's work may have been in prose
(a scholion to Gregory of Nazianzus, *PCG* I, Sophron *testimonium* 19 KA, says it was rhythmical
prose), or in a combination of verse and prose.

[26] For this and other terms, see Beare (1964) 369–70, nn. 16 and 17. Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 620e
and 621c–d, identifies 'Magode' and 'Lysiode' as specialists in playing the other sex; while the sung
solos of these individuals could be lumped with 'mime' in casual speech, they are different from
the type of performance discussed here.

[27] *Archimimus*: *CIL* 14.2408, and see Seneca, fr. 26 (Haase, p. 426), Suetonius, *Vespasian* 19.2, and in
Greek, Plutarch, *Sulla* 36. *Archimima*: *CIL* 6.10106.

[28] Some mimes apparently performed individually. The 'adultery mime', a standard plot apparently,
required at least three performers, and perhaps many more. The 'Charition mime' (to be discussed
shortly) needed many more, though most have minor parts. An inscription from AD 169 records
sixty names of members of a mime troupe (*CIL* 14.2408) though this may be better thought of as a
guild than a troupe; see Nicoll (1931) 85–86.

represented pubic hair.[29] Given that adultery and other sexual themes became synonymous with the mime in the Roman Empire, it seems the simulated sex of the mime would be represented with this degree of realism. The erotic component is present in descriptions of mime from the very beginning: Xenophon, *Symposium* 9, concludes his Socratic dinner party with a sexy mythological mime recounting the story of Dionysus and Ariadne. Mime was indecent enough for Cato to leave a performance so his fellow citizens could enjoy the show without his moralising presence. When we are later told that mime actresses could appear naked on stage (Valerius Maximus 2.10.8, *scholion* to Juvenal 6.250, Seneca, *Letter* 97.8, Lactantius, *Institutes* 1.20), this is likely what was meant, though no doubt private performances may at times have used real nudity. Augustine, *Confessions* 3.2, describes the simulated sex in some sort of performance. In some circles, the fact that the emperor Justinian's wife Theodora had been a successful mime actress was a permanent blot on her character.

Not surprisingly, the adultery theme was common in mime narratives: Ovid, *Tristia* 2.497–514, describes a mime featuring a wife, her husband, and her lover, and this pattern is found illustrated and appropriated by elegy and the Latin novel.[30] While the pattern of the 'adultery mime' has been studied,[31] the desire to determine a single cast and number of scenes for the mimic presentation of an adultery tale is misguided. The basic narrative is familiar, but different performances will emphasise different aspects of what is essentially the same basic situation, employing different permutations of characters, different numbers of scenes, and different settings. Some adultery mimes might have the lovers arranging a rendezvous, some might have the lovers caught in the act, some might be set at a subsequent trial, and some might present a combination of scenes. All would be 'adultery mimes', yet individual examples would possess enough variation and interest to ensure the ongoing presence of repeat audiences from one show to the next.

While the genre clearly could appeal to a range of tastes and found audiences at all levels of society, the plots possessed an earthiness that could include vulgarity.[32] Narratives could appear disjointed and episodic. Cicero describes the arbitrariness of the endings of mime plots in his day: *mimi ergo est iam exitus, non fabulae; in quo cum clausula non*

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[29] Marshall (2000a) 19–20.
[30] Apuleius, *Golden Ass* 9.5–6 and 10.2–12 both may be derived from the plots of popular mimes.
[31] See particularly Reynolds (1946), McKeown (1979), and Kehoe (1984).
[32] Rawson (1993).

invenitur, fugit aliquis e manibus, deinde scabilla concrepant, aulaeum tollitur ('This, then, is now the end of a mime, and not of a play, in which, when an ending cannot be found, someone flees from another's hands, then the clappers rattle and the curtain is pulled', *pro Caelio* 65). Mime could have an acrobatic component and musical accompaniment and songs may have featured (Petronius, *Satyricon* 35.6). Few properties were required, and nothing beyond a curtain for a set. Dogs could appear in mimes, as on the Elizabethan stage (Plutarch, *Moralia* 973e). Perhaps during a performance someone moved through the crowd collecting change, as continues to happen with street theatre and buskers today.[33]

It is very difficult to identify the degree of scriptedness of these performances, and perhaps it is safest to remain agnostic. As with the *Atellanae*, in the first century BC there seems to have been a move to make literary what had been improvised previously, and the names of Decimus Laberius (a Roman knight born 106 BC) and Publilius Syrus (a freedman from Syria) are given as those who first wrote Roman mimes. Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 2.7.1–10, describes a contest between these two authors of literary mimes, instigated by Julius Caesar. Ashamed at being asked to perform in his own work at a time when acting on stage made an individual *infamis* ('without political rights'), Decimus Laberius appeared on stage as a Syrian slave and exclaimed, *porro Quirites! libertatem perdimus* ('Arise, citizens! We lose our freedom!'), and later added *necesse est multos timeat quem multi timent* ('He whom many fear must fear many') – clear warnings to Caesar concerning abuse of power in the time of the civil war (as Seneca notes, *On Anger* 2.11.3). Caesar awarded victory to Publilius Syrus, but rewarded Laberius sufficiently to restore his political rights. This anecdote reveals much about the performance context of mimes in 46 BC: the competitive aspect, the presumption that normally Decimus would not act in his own mimes, his choice to appear in a costume that evokes his rival, and the insertion of politically motivated sentiments into an already scripted play. This last point suggests a blending of scripted and improvisational elements may have been an expected feature of literary mime. We have other fragments of the mimes of Decimus Laberius and Publilius Syrus, and we might expect them to exist in the same relationship with previous Latin mimes as literary *Atellanae* do with improvised *Atellanae*. However, since mimes did possess an earlier literary form in Greek, perhaps the innovation of these men was to write mimes in Latin.

[33] Reich (1903) 540.