If this book had been written a couple of generations ago, every chapter would have been substantially different in content, methodology, and emphasis, but this chapter would not have existed at all. Plautus and Terence were notoriously ‘apolitical’, especially by comparison with Aristophanes, and it would almost certainly have been taken for granted that there was not much to say about the politics of Roman comedy beyond pointing out its absence. Today the situation is different, but not because we have discovered some previously unnoticed fund of political jokes in these plays. Rather, we have grown accustomed to thinking of politics in more capacious terms, not simply as advocacy for or against specific public persons or programmes, but as a broader set of discourses pertaining to the mediation of power in society and to the very constitution of social life. Indeed, even apoliticism, the studied refusal to address overtly political themes, presupposes an implicit definition of politics, as opposed to the rest of life, and an intensely political commitment to policing the boundary between the two. Instances of political engagement could thus be plotted on a spectrum of abstraction, ranging from explicitly partisan activism to tacit and apparently unconscious implication in a system of values. I begin this study at the more concrete end of the spectrum, examining topical allusions (and their absence) in Roman comedy and move on from there to consider the more abstract rubric of

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1 All translations are my own.
2 The history of the term ‘politics’ in the twentieth century is immensely complex, and the bibliography on this issue is vast. For a brief but excellent survey of the various relevant modes of thinking about politics, specifically in their application to antiquity, see Hammer (2009).
cultural politics and the politics of everyday life. In the first section I offer a fresh reading of the famous allusion to Naevius in *Miles Gloriosus*, and in the second I extend the investigation of politics to embrace one of Roman comedy’s most remarkable features, its propensity for metatheatrical play.

These comedies were produced in the context of state-funded *ludi* under the management of a junior magistrate whose future political career may have been affected by their success or failure, so it is implicitly unlikely that Roman comedy could be devoid of political import. It would be true – but only trivially so – simply to insist that everything public is political. I hope to go beyond such banality here and show how Roman comedy is richly imbedded in concerns that must legitimately count as political. Our central contention is that comedy is not just political in the sense that it touches on politics, but that it also has a political function, that comedy is, to misquote Clausewitz, the continuation of politics by other means.

**The Politics of Topical Allusion**

sed in uitium libertas excidit et uim
dignum lege regi; lex est accepta chorusque
turpiter obticuit sublato iure nocendi.

But freedom transgressed into licence and into aggression
Deserving law’s bit. A law was passed and the chorus
Was silenced in shame when the right to offend was annulled.³

One of the most mysterious differences between Attic Old Comedy and New Comedy is the disappearance of the overt political engagement so abundant in Cratinus, Eupolis, and Aristophanes. Horace’s rapid survey of the history of Greek drama at *Ars* 275–84 gives canonical formulation to the most enduring account of this shift: once poetic freedom could be cast as offensive attack, legal measures effectively curbed the playwrights’ *parrhesia* (candidness). The choruses of Old Comedy were the locus of the plays’ most concentrated political bombast as we know from the Aristophanic parabases (the moments in which the chorus is left to address the audience directly). Choruses were diminished in New Comedy to (apparently) non-verbal placeholders in between acts, so that the silence of the Menandrian chorus would become proverbial in antiquity.⁴ Horace thus explains the single

³ Hor. *Ars* 282 4.
⁴ On the proverbial silence of Menander’s chorus, well into the Byzantine period, see Burkert (2000). Of course, the New Comic chorus was not actually silent; they generally represented a band of revellers, and can thus be assumed to have made a good deal of noise! The papyri simply indicate where the chorus fit into the play with the word *XOPOY*, but transmit no text. Whether the chorus provided an interlude of music and dance without
most striking formal change from Old Comedy to New as a reflex of a political development, and the suppression of the chorus becomes legible as an act of erasure.

It has been difficult to pinpoint what specific law, if any, Horace had in mind; we have a few similar hints in the scholia to Aristophanes, but there is no clear evidence of long-term legal sanctions limiting comic licence. Nevertheless, most scholars in the past have followed Horace in attributing New Comedy’s near silence on public issues and persons to a changed political climate in which the poets could fear reprisals against more outspoken engagement. Under Macedonian rule, it is often assumed, the great age of Athenian democracy was at an end, and the citizen audience could hardly have taken much interest anyway in so depressing and futile a subject as politics had become. More recent scholarship, however, has tended to emphasise the robust continuity of democratic institutions and ideals right through the fourth century BC and the ways in which New Comedy may have been embedded in contemporary political discourses, if only covertly or allegorically.

If Greek New Comedy has thus been somewhat rehabilitated for the history of political thought, the problem of Roman comedy’s evident apoliticism becomes all the more interesting. The third- and second-century BC playwrights working in Latin took their models for nascent Roman tragedy from the fifth-century Athenian ‘classics’, especially Euripides, but when it

song or whether they also sang songs that were not transmitted, we can only guess. In either case, Menander’s chorus is only ‘silent’ for cultures (such as Horace’s and our own) in which Menander is typically read, rather than watched.

5 The testimony pertaining to Athenian legal regulation of comic speech is most fully treated at Pauly Wissowa’s *Realencyclopädie* (1921) vol. xi 1233 6, but a convenient evaluation of the evidence (in English) may be found in Maidment (1935) 9 11. Horace also mentions the outspokenness of Old Comedy at S. 1.4.1 5 and makes a similar point about the legal restriction of early Roman libertas (freedom (of speech)) at Ep. 2.1.152 5. On Horace, slander, and the law, see most recently Lowrie (2005).

6 Sandbach (1977) 69 on Athenian politics in this period: ‘They were bitter and sometimes deadly. They were not a suitable subject for entertainment on a holiday. Even Aristophanes had shut his eyes to many unpleasant political facts; the authors of New Comedy shut their eyes, generally speaking, to politics as a whole.’ More recently in the same vein, see Patterson (1998) 186 91. Some scholars have been less inclined to accept such excuses on behalf of New Comedy’s apoliticism and have expressed a harsh verdict on its ‘escapism’. See, for example, Green (1993) 74.

7 More often now the dispute is between those who would read Menander as a Macedonian sympathiser (Major (1997)), and those who read him as a voice of democratic resistance (Lape (2004b)). More globally, Csapo (2000) makes a strong case that the sharp line we perceive between Old Comic political engagement and New Comic reticence is itself an artefact of critical history under the dominant (and falsifying) influence of Aristotle’s theory of comedy.
came to comedy they ignored Aristophanes and the other fifth-century poets and drew their inspiration from New Comedy instead. This choice is easy enough to explain in terms of intelligibility: the dense topical allusions of Old Comedy would have been totally opaque to all but the most learned Romans in the third century, just as they often are for us, whereas the New Comic world of Hellenistic stock types in a reliably non-specific historical environment was readily learnable or already recognisable from daily life in Rome. Greek New Comedy’s investment in Athenian democratic culture, subtle enough to escape scholarly attention until recently and still ambiguous in its import, would have been just the kind of feature that could be left out of a Roman version without causing structural problems or could even be retained and go unnoticed. The last-minute revelation of the ingénue’s citizen status, for example, which makes possible so many happy endings in Menander, might also have democratic overtones for an Athenian audience still steeped in the myth of autochthony and laws stipulating citizenship only in cases of bilateral Athenian descent.\(^8\) In Rome, however, where the franchise was less stringently mythologised, the marriage laws different, and there was no democratic tradition being threatened by Macedonian overlords, the discovery of the girlfriend’s Athenian parentage could hardly have so much political resonance.

The problem of intelligibility could have been solved, of course, by finding local substitutes for many of the Athenian topical references. Just as Livius Andronicus could replace the Homeric Mousa with a Latin Camena (Odissia, fr. 1), surely there must have been a home-grown scoundrel who could have stood in for Aristophanes’ vilified Cleon. But apart from intelligibility there may have been other reasons for the poets of Roman comedy to avoid the kind of personal invective characteristic of Old Comedy. Early Roman culture seems to have been significantly less tolerant of comic lampoon, beginning at least with the Twelve Tables (fifth century BC), which prescribed the death penalty for very few crimes, but among them: ‘if anyone committed slander or composed a poem to bring ill repute or disgrace on someone else’ (Cic. Rep. 4.12). We cannot know how consistently this law was ever enforced or what statutory analogue there may have been in the middle Republic, but it is interesting that the text comes to us in the mouth of Cicero’s Scipio (dramatic date, 129 BC) as part of his critique of early Greek poetic licence and its contrast with Roman practice. ‘But really,’ Scipio asserts in the same passage, ‘it was no more decent to attack Pericles with poetry and perform it onstage, than it would have been if our Plautus or Naevius had spoken ill of P. and Cn. Scipio or Caecilius of Marcus Cato.’

\(^8\) See Lape (2004b) 68–109 and passim.
The odd thing about this unreal hypothetical is that the comic poet Naevius apparently did mock P. Cornelius Scipio for a youthful peccadillo, a humiliating moment involving a girl and the great commander dragged home by his own father half dressed. The only thing we know of Naevius suffering from Scipio, perhaps by way of payback, was a witty insult punning on Naevius' name: *quid hoc Naeuio ignauius?* (What could be more knavish than this Naevius? (quoted in Cicero's *De Or* 2.249)). This was not the only time Naevius tangled with a public figure, however, and he is said to have found himself incarcerated at Rome 'because of his constant slander and abuse of prominent members of the community, after the fashion of the Greek poets' (Aulus Gellius *NA* 3.3.15). Though it is impossible to be sure about the boundary between history and legend, Naevius' run-in with the Metelli is one of the better-attested literary events of the late third century. 

Probably in 206 BC, when Q. Caecilius Metellus was consul, Naevius insulted the powerful family with an ambiguous line: *fato Metelli Romae funt consules* ('By fate the Metelli are made consuls at Rome' or 'To the misfortune of Rome the Metelli are made consuls'). The double meaning rests in the word *fato*, which might mean 'by chance' or, more darkly, 'to (Rome's) misfortune', *Romae* being construed as a locative in the first instance and as a dative in the second. The line is an iambic senarius and is generally assumed to have been spoken in a comedy. But the Metelli were not amused; they fired back the pasquinade: *dabunt malum Metelli Naeuio poetae* ('The Metelli will give the poet Naevius a thrashing').

As grisly as this response sounds, scholars may have erred in reading it as altogether unsporting. The threat is metrical, after all, and there are obviously less playful ways the Metelli could have responded than with a poetic riposte. In fact, the first-century AD grammarian Q. Asconius Pedianus in his commentary to one of Cicero's speeches (*ad Cic. Ver. 1.29*) refers to it as a *parodia* (parody), and this may be exactly right. The word *poetae* should certainly be construed primarily with *Naeuio* (dative), but by

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9 Aulus Gellius (*NA* 7.8.5 6) tells the story and gives the offending iambic septenarii.
10 For a survey of all the ancient testimony pertaining to both this controversy and the one involving P. Cornelius Scipio, see Jocelyn (1969). Gruen (1990) 96 106 rejects the historicity of this story, but see also Sánchez Vendramini (2009).
11 Mattingly (1960) 415.
12 Not all modern readers have failed to detect the possibility of wit in Metellus’ reply. Goldberg (1989) 254 5 and Gruen (1990) 100, independently of each other, note that *malum dare* is the standard comic formula for threatened punishment, and they argue that this repartee was only mistakenly interpreted by later generations as a serious political quarrel. As I make clear below, I agree with Goldberg and Gruen on the comic valence of *malum dare*, but I do not believe that playfulness should be confused with benign intention.
form it could also be read with *Metelli* (nominative). This syntactical equivocation would echo Naevius’ case-play on *Romae*, and it would make the Metelli the poets in the same emphatic final line position as they were made consuls in Naevius’ line. The first word of Naevius’ attack, *fato*, fronted the poet’s game of semantic instability, and the Metelli answer by inverting the structure and revealing in the last word of their reply that they can play the poet’s game too. If the Metelli are hinting at appropriation of Naevius’ role of comic poet, what role are they giving Naevius? The comic convention of *malum* = ‘the punishment threatened for a slave’ may indicate how they mean to cast him.

How long Naevius was imprisoned we can only guess, but there seems to be a reference in Plautus’ *Miles Gloriosus* to his incarceration as a current fact. The tricky slave Palaestrio is wracking his brains to think up a plan to save the day, and the genial old man Periplectomenus gives a running commentary on the slave’s dumb-show. At one point in his cogitations Palaestrio strikes a pose like Rodin’s *Thinker* and Periplectomenus remarks:

> ecce autem aedificat: columnam mento suffigit suo.  
> apage, non placet profecto mihi illae ædificatio;  
> nam os columnatum poetæ esse indaudui barbaro,  
> qui bini custodes semper totis horis occubant.

Hey look, he’s building! He’s got a column propped beneath his chin.  
No thanks! I don’t care for that type of building too much.  
For I’ve heard there’s a barbarian poet with a columned mouth  
And two guards watching him all the time. (Mil. 209.12)

Plautus usually refers to Romans as *barbari*, and the interpretation of this *poeta barbarus* as a reference to Naevius may be traced back to antiquity and has been accepted by almost all modern scholars.  

If the biographical tradition about Naevius is even roughly correct, it was bound to be an effective cautionary tale for other comic poets of that period who may have wished to call out prominent political figures from the stage, and it probably goes a long way towards explaining why there is not more direct topical reference of any kind in Plautus and Terence. Any allusion to controversial current events in Roman comedy would have to be vague

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13 Paulus’ *Fest*. 32 seems to make this identification, and if his epitome of an epitome of Verrius Flaccus can be trusted, then the reading is traceable back to the Augustan period. Gruen (1990) 104 doubts all the biographical traditions about Naevius, including even this identification, but most scholars have not been persuaded to such radical scepticism. See, for example, Moore (1998b) 73 and Rochette (1998). In the context of a general dismissal of topicality in comedy, Leigh (2004) 20, n. 95 remarks, ‘It is, however, hard to believe that Plaut. Mil. 210.12 is not an allusion to the imprisonment of Naevius.’
enough to provide a cover of plausible deniability, but this vagueness may also make the reference unintelligible for us. For example, assuming this passage in *Miles Gloriosus* is a reference to Naevius, what precisely is being said about him? What could possibly be meant by *os columnatum* (‘columned mouth’)? Whatever the details of the punishment hinted at here, it would be fanciful to read Periplectomenus’ negative reaction (*non placet profecto mihi*) as an indication of Plautus’ sympathetic solidarity with his fellow playwright. But then what is Plautus’ point in alluding to Naevius at all?

Naevius and his troubles are introduced into a passage that is already richly complex in its associative significance. Both within *Miles Gloriosus* and elsewhere, Plautus loves to describe the tricky slave who authors a comic subplot as an *architectus*, a word that will be applied to Palaestrio no less than six times by the end of the play. By describing Palaestrio as a builder (*aedificat*) in the moment that he is crafting his intrigue, this passage introduces one of the play’s most important unifying themes and analogises Palaestrio’s role to that of the comic poet. But Palaestrio’s contorted thinking pose reminds Periplectomenus of the tortured posture of another comic poet now languishing in prison, and Palaestrio finds himself sliding within the metaphor from builder to part of the building. Periplectomenus’ fear is that the architect becomes trapped by his own creation (*aedificat . . . os columnatum*), just as Naevius became tangled in the unintended effects of his poem. Palaestrio’s creation, his play-within-the-play, should make a comic butt of Pyrgopolinices, the eponymous *miles gloriosus* (‘braggart soldier’), but if he fails and gets caught out by his opponent, he will be treated to a slave’s punishment. Thus the analogy between Palaestrio and Naevius requires an obvious extension to their adversaries, Pyrgopolinices and Metellus. In this connection, since Pyrgopolinices is explicitly a soldier of fortune (Mil. 72–7; 948–50), I note that in addition to being a family name, *metellus* is also a common noun, attested in Accius, meaning ‘mercenary’.

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14 Suggestions have ranged from metaphorically forcible silencing (as we might say a ‘gag order’) to some kind of stockade or even irrumation. See Jocelyn (1969) 36; Killeen (1973).


16 On the theme of building in *Mil.*, see Forehand (1973) 10, 11; on the metatheatrical valence of this passage, see Frangoulidis (1994), who does see Palaestrio as playwright, and Sharrock as well as Christenson in this volume.

17 Paul. *Fest.* p. 146 M: *metelli dicuntur in lege militari quasi mercenarii. Accius Annali XXVII: calones famulique metellique caculaeque; a quo genere hominum Caeciliae familiae cognomen putatur dactum*, (‘Metellus is a military term, roughly mercenary. Accius *Annals* 27: “porters, attendants, metelli, and stewards”. The cognomen of the Caecilian family is thought to derive from this type of person.’) Scholars have argued that Naevius actually used the common noun *metelli* in his attack on Metellus, hoping
If Palaestrio is too much like Naevius then Pyrgopolinices may turn out to be another Metellus, so Periplectomenus rejects this identification scheme (non placet profecto mihi) and casts about for another public figure to serve as Palaestrio’s model. In the six lines immediately following the passage quoted above, he continues to praise Palaestrio’s resourceful diligence, rallying him to banish delay and spring into action. He demands to know whether his words are getting through, and Palaestrio acknowledges that he is listening (audio, Mil. 218). The audience’s attention also thus dramatically focused, Periplectomenus launches into an elaborate address as to a military leader (Mil. 219–30), figuring Palaestrio as a general and his foe as a public enemy (hostis, perduellis). The speech is too lengthy to be quoted in its entirety here, but in a long-neglected essay A. F. West argued that many details of the exhortation only make full sense if the speech is understood as an apostrophe to Scipio Africanus. On the basis of the timing of Naevius’ troubles with the Metelli and the available ludi scaenici soon after, West argues fairly convincingly for a production date of Miles Gloriosus in mid-205 BC, when Scipio was consul, fresh from victories in Spain and preparing for the campaign that would finally turn the tide against Hannibal.

If West is even roughly right on the production date (and his estimation is perfectly in line with the consensus of other scholars who hazard guesses on this issue), it is hard to see how this speech could not be heard in reference to current events, particularly given the admonition to surround and besiege the enemy, the strategy which had nearly defeated Hannibal in 212 BC at the Battle of Capua, the rejection of the Fabian policy of delay in favour of Scipio’s policy of immediate action (propere hoc, non placide decet, ‘this has got to go fast, not slow’, Mil. 220), and the hints at a Scipionic personality cult of the general (tute unus ... confidentiast ..., ‘you alone ... I have faith ... ’ Mil. 229). But the point of the passage is not so much to ride the popular wave of patriotic hope for Scipio’s success, as West assumes. Rather, if read in tension with the immediately preceding Naevius reference, it becomes clear what Periplectomenus is doing: Palaestrio as Naevius implies Pyrgopolinices as Metellus and portends failure for the good guys, so Periplectomenus suggests Palaestrio as Scipio, recasting the ‘braggart soldier’ as Hannibal.

homonymy would be enough to save him, but the relevance of this word for Pyrgopolinices has not been noted. See Sánchez Vendramini (2009) 473. West (1887).

The first thing Palaestrio says about Pyrgopolinices after this scene is that he is ‘wrapped in elephant skin rather than his own and no smarter than a rock’ (Mil. 235 6). Whichever real life figure Pyrgopolinices is aligned with in the audience’s mind, the elephant presents interesting resonances. The beast’s associative possibilities with Hannibal are obvious enough, and it was the perennial emblem of the Metelli after 251 BC and L. Caecilius
This assumed identity is not only more propitious for Palaestrio, it also
gives a promising part to everyone else. Periplectomenus repeatedly mentions
the general’s troops (arrire opem auxiliumque, ‘marshal your supplies and
forces’, Mil. 220; legiones tuas, ‘your legions’, Mil. 224; res subitaria est, ‘it’s
a job that will need volunteers’, Mil. 225). West points out that the adjective
subitarius in a military context is used only for volunteer forces, which fits
perfectly with Scipio’s situation in the summer of 205 training an army of
fresh volunteers in Sicily in preparation to invade Africa.20 Livy tells the story
(29.1) of Scipio masterfully delegating the training of these Roman volun-
teers to more experienced Sicilian forces on an individual basis, thus getting
his army ready with minimal trouble and expense. But this language also fits
perfectly with the image that will be repeated throughout the play of
Palaestrio as the master instructor of his troupe of volunteers and specifically
as a commander able to delegate training.21 Periplectomenus has landed on
a public paradigm that will be auspicious for Palaestrio and his friends and
that will cast Pyrgopolinices not as an ascendant Metellus, but as a Hannibal
on the run.

We have tarried so long with these topical allusions in Miles Gloriosus for
three reasons. First, the Naevius affair may well explain why we see so little
direct political reference in Plautus and Terence, so it is worth taking the
fullest possible stock of Plautus’ reaction to it. Second, these allusions have
been noted but never interpreted. They have a point in the play, namely to
establish a paradigm for Palaestrio’s struggle with Pyrgopolinices, and
because the one model is meant to replace the other, they must be understood
together. Third, the reference to Naevius in Miles Gloriosus, though it has
sometimes been disputed, is perhaps the most generally recognised topical
allusion in extant Roman comedy.22 Of course many passages have been
suggested over the years as possible topical references, some more plausibly
than others, but all must be acknowledged as speculative. Apart from Stichus
(200 BC) and Pseudolus (191 BC) none of Plautus’ plays come with didasca-
lia (‘theatre notices’) giving the original production date. Heavily veiled and
only subjectively legible allusions thus become the basis for dating most of

Metellus’ defeat of Hasdrubal at Panormus. One wonders, also, whether the infamous
stupidity of the Metelli was a trope that went back this far. Many years later Scipio
Aemilianus would mock the Metelli for their stupidity, saying of C. Caecilius Metellus
Capraurius, si quintum pareret mater eius, asinum fuisse parituram, (‘If his mother had
given birth to a fifth child, it would have been a donkey.’ Cic. De Or. 2.267).

20 West (1887) 31.
21 For Palaestrio as both direct trainer and as overseer relying on troops who are already up
to speed to teach the newcomers, see Mil. 247, 256, 354, 793, 795, 812, 903, 905, 1035,
and 1173.
22 See above, n. 16.
the comedies, by matching them to historical events attested in Livy or Polybius.\\(^{23}\)

There is an obvious circularity in the attempt to read Plautus’ plays for their allusions to current events, while simultaneously figuring out which events are current by dating the plays on the basis of these allusions. But there is a further problem in the evident assumption that topical references must be contemporaneous with specific legislative or military events. For instance, in *Aulularia* Megadorus twice complains of the luxurious ways of women (*Aul. 167–9, 475–535*), and these denunciations have sometimes been taken as evidence that the play should be dated to around 195 BC when the *lex Oppia*, a sumptuary law regulating feminine adornment, was debated and repealed.\\(^{24}\) But the *lex Oppia* had been in place since 215 BC and there is no reason to assume that cavils about women and their finery could only come up because of its repeal. Indeed, purple and gold are everywhere associated with women in comedy, including, by chance, one of the two securely dated Plautine plays, *Stichus*, five years before the repeal of the *lex Oppia*.\\(^{25}\) Other attempts to detect topical allusions in Plautus run into similar problems. *Stichus* and *Pseudolus* and the plays of Terence, because they can be dated with some confidence by production notes, ought to furnish a more solid basis for reading topical allusions (assuming they are there to be read), but strangely here too most suggestions have met with only mixed assent.\\(^{26}\)

### Cultural Politics and the Politics of Everyday Life

Most recent scholarship has avoided this morass of speculation by moving away from the search for allusions to specific persons and events, focusing instead on the presence of themes of more general or typological political significance in Roman comedy.\\(^{27}\) In this vein, returning to the issue of feminine luxury in *Aulularia*, we might note that although there is nothing

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23 The two grandest attempts to establish a chronology for Plautus’ plays are still Buck (1940) and Schutter (1952). The tide seems to have turned decisively against such studies after Harvey (1986).

24 See, for example, Buck (1940) 37; Haury (1976); Moore (1998b) 162.


26 For recent work on topical allusions in *Stichus* and *Pseudolus*, see Owens (2000) and Augoustakis (2007), respectively. It may be that the difficulty of finding such references in Terence is due to his closer adherence to his Greek models. The most obvious contender, though much disputed, is the case for some connection between L. Aemilius Paullus and the bifurcated models of paternity in *Adelphi*. On the complex problem of this identification, see Leigh (2004) 148 91.

in Megadorus’ remarks to connect them specifically to the repeal of the *lex Oppia*, they can certainly be associated with the persistent Plautine trope of the perils of prodigality, a theme of some prominence in Roman political discourse of the late third and early second centuries BC. The *lex Orchia* (182 BC) and the *lex Fannia* (161 BC), laws restricting libertine expenditure at meals, were both passed after Plautus’ death but before the death of Terence. Plautus’ outrageous catalogues of gourmandising excess thus cannot be allusions to these laws, but the moral convictions and patterns of thought that gave rise to these restrictions, with their explicit lists of forbidden fancy foodstuffs and prescribed quantities, can hardly be irrelevant to the impulse that generated the comic poet’s luridly fantastic banquets.

In 184 BC, the traditional year of Plautus’ death, Cato delivered a speech on dowries (*de dote*) and another on women’s clothing and transportation (*de uestitu et uehiculis*). Megadorus’ criticism of spendthrift dowered wives with ivory chariots and purple clothes may not be a comment on the *lex Oppia*, but it shares with the *lex Oppia* and with Cato’s speeches a common genealogy in Roman public discourses weaving together gender, display, domestic authority, imported luxuries, and the imperilled social order. In other words, whatever his complaints’ precise relationship to the *lex Oppia*, they are indisputably political. Such oblique political engagement as this, however, hardly makes Megadorus a partisan, still less does it make Plautus one. Are we meant to take Megadorus’ protestation seriously, perhaps even hear it as an indication of the playwright’s cultural sympathies, or is this a parody of such moralistic harangues, spoken by a hypocritical old fool? Critics are divided on this question.

The apparent difficulty of parsing the playwright’s own political sentiments is hardly unique to this case; there

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28 See, for example, the prologue of *Trinummus*, where a personified Luxuria introduces her daughter, Inopia, into the home where she has been helping a young man destroy his inheritance.

29 On Plautus’ complex love affair with food and the cook’s role in metaphorical spicing and cultural mixture, see Gowers (1993) 50–108.

30 Malcovati (1953) ORF 158 and 93, respectively; cf. Liv. 39.44.

31 Megadorus’ horror of rich wives is explicitly framed as public prescription. If everyone accepted his views, ‘society would be happier’ (*fiat ciuitas concordior*, Aul. 481), and Euclio agrees that Megadorus should be made ‘commissar of ladylike behaviour’ (*moribus praefectum mulierum hunc factum uelim*, Aul. 504). For a reading of Megadorus’ programme within *Aulularia*’s larger moralistic theme of the danger of wealth, see Kruschwitz (2002) 151–6.

32 Most scholars seem to incline to the latter view, pointing out that, for all his austerity, Megadorus is a *senex amator* who will be soundly tweaked by the play’s events. See Gruen (1990) 146; Moore (1998b) 163–4. The fact that Megadorus will be one of the play’s butts, however, does not necessarily make him wrong here. For a more sympathetic view of his complaints as valid social criticism, see Konstan (1983) 44–5.
seems to be no political issue where we can speak conclusively of Plautus or Terence having a legible partisan position. The most extensively studied cultural political issue in Roman comedy is surely Hellenism, and here perhaps more than anywhere else there is deep ambivalence, reflective no doubt of the combined attraction and suspicion with which many Romans in this period regarded Greek culture.\textsuperscript{33} Roman comedy itself is – paradoxically enough – Greek, both because it is an adaptation of a Greek form of entertainment and more importantly because it remembers this fact constantly, reinscribing Greekness into its own text by naming the Greek source in the prologue, retaining Greek character names, locations, and civic institutions, and even calling itself \textit{fabula palliata}. Romans, when they are mentioned at all, are \textit{barbari} in every instance but one, and that one exception only proves the rule: it is a complaint about the stench of Roman oarsmen.\textsuperscript{34} The plays thus pretend to look out at the world from an emphatically Greek perspective, and their characters’ charm and comic heroism seem partially attributable to this performance of Greekness.\textsuperscript{35} But the characters are not only charming, they are also often devious and dissolute, and references to ‘Greek trustworthiness’ (\textit{Graeca fides}) and ‘Greeking it up’ (\textit{pergraecari}) at luxurious feasts make it clear that these moral shortcomings too are integral to the Hellenic ethnicity as constructed in Roman comedy.\textsuperscript{36} Across the long history of the Roman importation and adaptation of Greek culture, few periods were as decisive as the late third and early second centuries B.C., but it would be a mistake to think of this process as ‘Hellenisation’ if only because the Romans had been absorbing Greek cultural practices for centuries. Rather, we may perhaps more accurately think of it as a period of Romanisation, in the sense that the accelerating pace of assimilation of Greek cultural forms, along with other shifts in the experience of Roman \textit{imperium}, was

\textsuperscript{33} See Moore (1998b) 50–66. For the Roman cultural engagement with Greece more generally in this period, see Gruen (1990) and (1992).
\textsuperscript{34} For \textit{barbarus} (or \textit{barbaricus}) = Roman or Italian, see As. 11, Trin. 19, St. 193, Capt. 492 and Telò in this volume; on Mil. 211, see pp. 71–2 above. For the stinky Romani remiges, see Poen. 1314.
\textsuperscript{35} Donatus, \textit{ad Eu.} 57: \textit{concessum est in palliata poetis comicis servos dominis sapientiores fingere, quod idem in togata non fere licet} (‘In \textit{fabula palliata} the comic poets are allowed to make slaves smarter than their masters, which is pretty much not permitted in \textit{fabula togata}’). In \textit{Stichus} the eponymous hero invites the audience to see his bad behaviour in its cultural context: \textit{atque id ne uos miremini, hominis seruolos / potare, amare atque ad cenam condicere: licet haec Athenis nobis} (‘And don’t be surprised to see us slaves drinking, making love, throwing parties: that’s how we roll in Athens’, St. 446 8).
\textsuperscript{36} For \textit{graeca fides}, see As. 199; for \textit{pergraecari}, see Most. 22, 64 and 960.
prompting the Romans to articulate a distinctively non-Greek cultural space for themselves, even in the most overtly ‘Greek’ practices.\textsuperscript{37} For all these reasons, when it comes to thinking about Greece, we should not expect Roman comedy to be ideologically tidy. These plays do not represent a philhellenic programme foisted on the masses by a cultural elite, nor are they a form of xenophobic popular resistance. But they are no less political for being politically complex.

These cultural issues – luxury and Hellenism – concern the behaviour of the rich and the public construction of Romanness vis-à-vis a cultural other. But Roman comedy also engages with the politics of everyday life, as encountered by all social levels, in the privacy of their most intimate experiences of power. Most cultures could fairly be described as male-dominated, but Roman society was patriarchal in the proper sense of the word: the metaphor of paternity was everywhere inscribed in relations of hegemony.\textsuperscript{38} The Senate was a body of ‘fathers’ (\textit{patres}), consisting largely of the traditional aristocratic class, the Patricians (\textit{patricii}). Its control was not, at least notionally, in the nature of raw power or command (\textit{potestas} or \textit{imperium}), which was vested in the magistrates and people, but rather \textit{auctoritas}, a vaguely defined cache of social esteem, explicitly on the model of a Roman father’s advisory influence within his family.\textsuperscript{39} Roman society itself was expansive and diverse but internally organised into subsidiary networks of patrons (\textit{patroni}) and their clients, bound together with ties of mutual obligation defined more by custom than statute. This patronage system might nest to several levels, so a given individual could be one man’s patron and another man’s client, and it could also extend beyond individuals to corporate bodies, such as guilds, religious associations, and even foreign cities. When we speak of the organisation of power in the household as a form of politics we may be inclined to assume that we are applying a public metaphor to a private affair and that the metaphor works only because domestic experience has been so thoroughly infiltrated by the public discourse of power.\textsuperscript{40} But to a Roman this essentially Gramscian formulation would probably have seemed backwards, since the political organisation of Roman society at all levels and even the Senate’s relationship to foreign cities was understood as a form of paternal authority. Rome’s

\textsuperscript{37} See Habinek (1998) 34-68.
\textsuperscript{38} See Dinter in this volume.
\textsuperscript{39} \textit{cum potestas in populo, auctoritas in senatu sit} (‘While power resides in the people, authority rests in the Senate’, Cic. \textit{Leg.} 3.28). For a nuanced treatment of the distinction between \textit{auctoritas} and \textit{potestas}, see Hellegouarc’h (1963) 299-307. Though primarily focused on a later period, Galinsky (1996) 10-41 is useful.
\textsuperscript{40} Connolly (2007) 42 (my emphasis): ‘Taken as a collection of individuals, “the people” incorporate ruling practices in their own lives, especially in the household, where the treatment of slaves and women \textit{enacts the polity in miniature}.’
politics begins at home, and her comedy’s almost exclusively domestic interest, far from rendering it politically irrelevant, makes it an invaluable source for understanding the strategies that governed the generation and management of auctoritas.

Comedy’s inversion of domestic authority is, of course, one of its primary sources of appeal. Forty years ago Erich Segal popularised the idea that the evident ascendency of clever slaves, impecunious lovers, and other comic underdogs was a mark of the genre’s Saturnalian inversion of Roman norms, offering the pleasure of Oedipal fantasy to slaves and sons in the audience, while reassuring any bourgeois old men in attendance that all such shenanigans were strictly holiday fantasy played out in the Never Never Land of an obviously imaginary Greece. Scholars have since extended this Freudian approach to provide more sophisticated accounts of how various segments of the audience may have found pleasure watching the ceaseless bidding for control within these comedies and may have been able to identify with the success of either of these parties or even of both simultaneously. If such ‘cross-identification’ was part of the aesthetic experience of Roman comedy, it would be extremely fanciful to take the preponderance of slaves smarter than their masters as evidence that the Roman comic playwrights resented the institution of slavery and intended to subvert or even substantially critique it. Bakhtin’s concept of carnival may be apt for describing the inversion of social norms in Roman comedy, especially given the festival context of production, but the holiday was never supposed to last forever, and the question remains whether the political point of carnival is the subversion of norms or the final containment of disruptive forces. Most scholars would incline strongly to the latter view of Roman comedy, as a periodic ‘safety valve’ of discontent rather than as a hotbed of revolution, but there may be richer ways of understanding carnival than with this sterile dichotomy, for the two alternatives are neither mutually exclusive nor fully coherent without each other. On any of these three general models of carnival – as bitter critique, as pointedly temporary folly, or as some eternally unstable and permanently renegotiable combination of the two – the carnivalesque aspects of Roman comedy are inevitably political, though in different senses for each model.

See Fantham in this volume. Segal (1968).
For carnival, see Bakhtin (1984). Bakhtin clearly believed in the liberatory potential of carnival; for the ‘pessimistic’ perspective, consider Eagleton (1981) 148: ‘Carnival, after all, is a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art. As Shakespeare’s Ophelia remarks, there is no slander in an allowed fool.’
Alongside the charismatic tricky slaves, comedy also occasionally presents virtuous but less successful slaves complaining of the injustice of their lot in quite pathetic terms. These rants generally lead nowhere, dramatically, unless perhaps they help characterise the slave’s master as unlovable even to his own household. But the master’s nastiness is usually already sufficiently clear, so the very gratuitousness of these scenes invites interpretation. Similarly, women in Roman comedy, for all their typical petulance, occasionally give voice to complaints about men that are undeniably accurate and fair, and it is hard to imagine playing the scene entirely for laughs. Carnival is probably not an apposite category for explaining the social function or the appeal of such scenes, but like the carnivalesque motif of authority inversion, these articulate protests against the injustice of masters preying on their slaves and husbands cheating on their wives would probably have evoked different responses from different segments of the audience and maybe complex responses within the same viewer.

As a rule, the women in Roman comedy are not simply passive victims of men, and their combination of vulnerability to and power over elite males is in many ways analogous to the tricky slave’s. The successful female comic character, whether matron, madam, or mistress, may exercise nearly absolute control over money, sex, and the play’s resolution, and this power can even be expressed as patronal authority. So, for example, in Eunuchus when the prostitute Thais magnanimously forgives Chaerea for raping her adopted sister, he pleads with her to help him in his suit to marry the girl. He hopes that magna familiaritas (‘a great friendship’, Eun. 874) will arise between himself and Thais, and now he clarifies how their relationship will be structured: ego me tuae commendo et committo fide[i] / te mihi patronam capio, Thaï’ (‘I do hereby entrust myself to your good faith / I take you as my patroness, Thais’, Eun. 886–7). The play of dominance and submission between the rape and this scene is inescapably political in that it turns on the complex dynamics of power between man and woman, guardian and protégé, citizen and alien, and these dichotomies are built into the ideological structures that organise Roman society, but the negotiation for authority becomes more pointedly mapped onto the Roman political landscape when it ends in what amounts to a deditio in fidem (surrendering oneself).
Comedy thus elevates slaves to triumphing generals and prostitutes to patrons, but these are not simply promotions, they are new roles, and recognisably Roman ones at that. In adopting these roles, however briefly, the characters simultaneously rupture the theatrical illusion of Greekness and hint at their own artefactual status as roles played in a play. This metatheatrical aspect of Roman comedy is one of its most distinguishing features, but it has typically been associated with only the most primly formalist modes of reading. I believe we are now in a position to consider the relationship between self-conscious, variable role-playing and the negotiation of auctoritas – in short, the politics of metatheatricality in Roman comedy.

Moderns, especially ‘late’ moderns, tend to assume a sharp dichotomy between identity and performance: playing is so totally antithetical to being oneself that the presence of one implies the absence or impairment of the other. This divide has been problematised in recent years by theorists such as Judith Butler, and Romanists, armed with performance theory, have discovered the remarkable extent to which the ancient Romans understood identity to be necessarily inflected by performance, if not indeed performative to the core. This awareness is perhaps nowhere so evident as in the Roman theorisation of rhetoric, a discipline that came into its own and was first formalised in handbooks during the floruit of Roman comedy. Rhetoric and comedy were thus historically parallel performance arts and reflect overlapping modes of thinking about the intense interpenetration of ethical and acted selves. Rhetorical theory’s relationship to the irreducible

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48 On metatheatricality, see Christensen in this volume. For criticism of metatheatricality studies as a kind of hyper formalism, see Rosenmeyer (2002) 93 4. Moore (1998b) 67 90 argues that Plautine metatheatricality is consistently connected to the deflation of moralistic pomposity. His conclusion fits well with my claim here about what metatheatricality ‘means’.

49 Butler’s theory of performance is anchored in her proposal of the radical performativity of gender, on which see Butler (1990) and (1993); on the political ramifications of performance more generally, see Butler (1997). For examples of the application of performance theory to Roman culture, see Gunderson (2000) and Wray (2001).

50 See Quint. Inst. 3.1.19 20 and Dinter in this volume.

51 The similarity between rhetoric and comedy may also be described as institutional homology. The principal occasion for Republican oratory was the contio, an open air assembly where a magistrate would address a crowd on some political issue and petition them for support. Some scholars, following Syme (1939), doubt the real importance of popular opinion in Roman politics, where others, especially Millar (1984), have seen the contiones as a democratic element in Rome’s governance structure. Even if the people’s assent was not strictly necessary, contiones were never framed as mere proclamations or top down assertions of senatorial control. Rather, the orator would address the crowd as ‘the People’ and solicitously bid for their sovereign favour. Recently scholars have focused on this illocutionary function of the contio and theorised that the contio’s real significance lay in its performative authorisation of the people as a constitutive partner in the Roman
performativity of selfhood, the lability of identity in play, is at times remarkably candid and at others ambivalent, but rhetoric’s problem is comedy’s proper domain. The one prevaricates where the other gleefully embraces, but the consistent ‘lesson’ of both comedy and rhetoric is that auctoritas is radically inseparable from the performance of a role.\textsuperscript{52} This role is encoded in relatively fixed and legible features, such as dress, comportment, and voice, but an actor/orator can change roles between performances and even slide from role to role within a single performance, and such changes may naturally entail expansion or diminution of power, since power is always mediated through a contextually located persona.

Ulrich Gotter has posited a fundamental difference between Greek and Roman formulations of power precisely here. The Greeks generally conceived of power as an impersonal abstraction, whereas ‘the exercise of influence in Rome, whether on the basis of potestas or auctoritas, was highly context-specific. All forms of legitimate power that the Romans lexically defined were inextricably linked to certain roles and positions within Roman society. Hence one and the same person could embody them at various moments to varying degrees of intensity.’\textsuperscript{53} There is something distinctively Roman, then, in Roman comedy’s insistence that the contest for control plays out in the field of stock character types and in variable role-playing within and between those types. Stock characters construct a world in which there is a shockingly small number of generic human forms interacting with each other according to a fixed economy of complementarity. They also imply that moral character, at least in its rudiments and in most cases in its entirety, is fully legible from appearance and behaviour. Finally, they remind us that there is a radical fungibility built into all such systems of social roles, such that for most practical purposes we are interchangeable with any other specimen of our type.

The Romans of later generations, no less than those of the middle Republic, found themselves reflected in and formed by the theory of human nature implicit in this type system, and comedy continued to provide the Romans with a grammar for articulating differential constraints on freedom of action.

\textsuperscript{52} Gotter (2008) 201. Gotter cites two remarkable stories in Aulus Gellius (2.2.1 13) showing elite Roman fascination with their own practice of navigating simultaneous, overlapping roles and the requisite shifts in decorum depending on which role is dominant at a given moment.
For example, when Roscius of Ameria is accused of murdering his father, the prosecutor, Erucius, posits that he must have been motivated by hatred and resentment after the father expressed a clear preference for his other son by keeping him in the city, while he left Roscius in the country to manage the estates. When Cicero comes to this point in the prosecution’s narrative he would like to forgive poor Erucius for having so little idea how things work in the father–son relationship, after all Erucius probably doesn’t even know who his own father is, but still he might have learned how these things work from literature: ‘Look at comedy, do you think that old man in Caecilius loved Eutychus, the country son, more than the other one, Chaerestratus? ... You think he kept the one in the city to honour him and left the other in the country to punish him?’ (Pro Sexto Roscio Amerino. 46–7). Cicero explains that he could just as easily point to family and friends who kept their sons on the farm precisely because they loved them so much, but he is not sure they would like to be named in a trial. ‘Besides nobody is going to be more recognisable for you than this Eutychus, and it makes no difference whether I name this comic youth or someone from the country near Veii. In fact, I think the poets construct these things just so we can see our own characters represented in other persons, an exact likeness of everyday life.’

The political impact of Roman comedy is revealed here not only because comedy furnishes Cicero with a locus of authoritative appeal in a legal speech rife with political import, but more significantly because it establishes a code of ethical predictability. Roscius’ character is interchangeable with Caecilius’ Eutychus, just as Eutychus is essentially the same as all the other country sons of Roman comedy. He is also like all the Italian country sons Cicero could cite, but, in a move reminiscent of the dynamics we saw in the first half of this chapter, the locals’ names are suppressed and a (Greek) comic character is used as a cover for them. Thus the comic ‘good son’ type must serve both as an index for Roscius and the Italian boys and as a screen, effectively obscuring further inquiry into their real characters. Roman comedy’s claim to verisimilitude becomes its profoundly political justification as an authoritative construction of the roles by which Romans live and understand each other.

Further Reading

The most ambitious chronological schemes for Plautus’ plays, and thus also the best compendia of older scholarship on topicality, are still Buck (1940) and Schutter (1952), although such projects are now almost universally

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dismissed as hopeless. In the more plausible effort to elucidate general cultural politics (including nasty Carthaginian stereotypes, repatriated Roman prisoners of war, suspicious maritime trade, and whether fathers should be stern or lenient), Leigh (2004) is excellent. On Roman culture and Hellenism, not just in comedy, but in the middle Republic more generally, Gruen (1990) and (1992) are indispensable, as is ch. 2 of Habinek (1998). On slavery, McCarthy (2000) and Fitzgerald (2000) should be read together. For rhetoric and theatricality, see Connolly (2007), esp. ch. 1 and 5.