

RICHARD F. HARDIN

New Light on Jonson and Roman Comedy: *Volpone* and *Eunuchus*, *Magnetic Lady* and *Truculentus*

Behind the practice of imitation in Renaissance literature lay the knowledge that the ancients themselves had imitated. Roman followed Greek comedy as Virgil followed Homer. Terence readily countered the charge that he had kidnapped characters from Greek comedy. So do all comic playwrights: indeed, “Nothing in fact is ever said which has not been said before” (Nullumst iam dictum quod non sit dictum prius).¹ As it happens, Terence’s remark appears in the preface to a play that shows evidence of Ben Jonson’s imitation in *Volpone – The Eunuch*. The connection between these plays has apparently not previously been made, despite work on Jonson and ancient comedy over the past century.² My discussion of *Volpone* and *Eunuchus* will lead into observations on the English playwright’s *The Magnetic Lady* as it echoes the plot of the mysterious pregnancy in Plautus’s *Truculentus*. Peter Happé writes that *The Magnetic Lady* shows Jonson, beginning around 1632, inclining toward “the staging practices of Plautus and Terence. The latter in fact are the chief debt, and Jonson both

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acknowledges their importance to him at this time and makes several minor allusions to them."³ The allusions in both *Volpone* and *The Magnetic Lady* are beyond minor.

Volpone and *Eunuchus*

Volpone and *Eunuchus* both involve a seduction attempt on an innocent woman by a man faking impotence. Audiences of *Volpone* cannot help leaving the theater impressed by the spectacular *coup de théâtre* in 3.7, when Corvino's wife, Celia, is horrified to discover that the aged, infirm Volpone is anything but. The comparable moment in *Eunuchus* is not enacted but narrated by the perpetrator, Chaerea. This youth falls in love at first sight with the virgin Pamphila, destined for life as a sex slave in the house of the courtesan Thais. Having surreptitiously raped the girl, Chaerea reports to his friend Antipho how his disguise as Thais's new eunuch gained him access:

[T]he girl sat in her room, looking up at a picture on the wall which showed the story of Jupiter pouring a shower of gold into Danaë's lap. I began to look at it too, and my spirits soared to think how he had played the same game long ago; a god turning himself into a man and crawling secretly across another man's roof, coming down to seduce a woman—down through the skylight!⁴

The work of art, with its subject myth of Jupiter and Danaë, psychologically prepares both seducer and victim for the act to follow. In *Volpone* the equivalent pagan seduction-art is Catullus's song, imitated as "Come My Celia." Jupiter is the archetypal seducer as shape-shifter whose rapes Ovid chronicles in the *Metamorphoses* (Volpone tells Celia he and she "will act Ovid's Tales"),⁵ but he is more especially the Roman aristocratic male who can have his way with any defenseless girl. The difference between Chaerea and Jupiter or Volpone lies in the truth of the young man's love, or at least its "truthiness." In Jonson's play, love, as opposed to desire, has nothing to do with it. Terence's Chaerea

continues his tale:

During these meditations of mine the girl was summoned to her bath. She went, had it, and came back . . . [The attendants] all went off to the bath, chattering as servants do when their masters are out of the house. The girl meanwhile fell asleep. I took a secret peep at her, sideways behind the fan, like this, and at the same time looked round to make sure the coast was clear. I saw it was. Then I bolted the door.⁶

The girl is vulnerable, having just bathed, now sleeping. Celia's case differs sharply. Her own husband has turned her over to her seducer in hopes of receiving a shower of gold for himself. While Volpone thinks he will rape his victim with utter security, Chaerea takes great risk in acting. But Chaerea's boldness pays off. The terseness of "Then I bolted the door," has the finality of Terence's "Pessulum ostio obdo." The Latin phrase, literally "I put the bolt against the door," is more obviously a sexual pun. The phallic bolt works with the familiar metaphor of the door ("ostio"), which represents that which males seek to enter.⁷

The listening Antipho, absorbed by the bolting of the door, asks, "What then?" Chaerea responds: "What do you mean, 'What then,' you fool? . . . Was I to lose the chance offered me, an opportunity so brief, so unexpected and so much desired? My God, if I had, I should really have been what I pretended."⁸ Taking advantage of chance and opportunity ("occasionem") assumes an almost moral imperative for both Chaerea and Volpone; the latter, just before seizing Celia, reproaches himself: "I do degenerate, and abuse my nation, / To play with opportunity this long" (*Volpone* 3.7.263–64). Until Bonario, on hand by chance (unless Mosca has planned this turn of events), bursts into the room, Fortune has played no part in the plot. As in another great Renaissance comedy, Machiavelli's *Mandragola*, the plotter has completely mastered Fortune until now. In Roman comedy the schemer and Fortune nearly always work in tandem; the give and take of wit and chance keep the plot going. Nevertheless, in the crisis Terence's false eunuch and Jonson's false invalid share equally the joy of the male seducer on the threshold.

“Eunuchness” holds an important place in the whole structure of both plays. Volpone’s three zanies, his dwarf, hermaphrodite, and eunuch, appear to symbolize the diminishing of humanity by the obsessive pursuit of wealth. This is another way of saying the three figures are all dissociations of Volpone himself. In Enck’s words, “they make external [Volpone’s] inner defects.”⁹ If the real Eunuch in Terence is “a worn out, wrinkled, senile old man,” “an old woman of a man,”¹⁰ the woman-man recalls the close identification, in Volpone’s household, of androgyne with eunuch. The senility of Terence’s real eunuch leaves its mark, in the English comedy, on both the character of Corbaccio and, eventually, Volpone, should he survive long enough in the Hospital for Incurables. When Chaerea dons his eunuch disguise, says one critic, “His costume symbolizes the degradation he so willingly assumes.”¹¹ The same might be said of Volpone’s invalid’s disguise. The plot of *Eunuchus* after the rape works to restore Chaerea’s integrity, or at least to put him on the right path. Volpone’s attempted rape, however, marks a turn in the audience’s view of the character, who is now becoming what he had performed.

The contrast often drawn between Jonson’s satirical comedies and Shakespeare’s romantic ones also applies to *Volpone* and this somewhat romantic comedy by Terence.¹² Of course, Jonson began his dramatic career with a romantic reprise of Roman comedy, *The Case Is Altered*, using the plots of two comedies by Plautus. *Every Man in His Humor* employs a Plautine braggart soldier, and *The Alchemist* and *Epicoene* have roots in *Mostellaria* and *Casina*. On the surface, *Volpone* departs utterly from imitating Romans. Yet the play has deep-dyed Roman traits: the unity of a single day, a *senex* (Corbaccio) obstructing a youth’s (Bonario’s) inheritance, and a parasite-servant who aids his master in a plot of deception. It also develops through ironic opposition to Roman practice. Roman comedy usually, though not always, builds on youth and erotic desire; the only young couple in *Volpone* is no couple: Celia is almost destroyed by Cupid, Bonario by cupidity. Chaerea, as younger brother to one of Thais’s young lovers, proves even more *adulescens* than usual, while *Volpone*’s greedy males, Volpone included, possessed more by cupidity than Cupid, are oblivious that they are all becoming Corbaccios.¹³ A further ironic parallel is that in Terence a servant, Parmeno, jokingly suggests the eunuch

disguise but later is terrified that he will be blamed if the deception is revealed. Mosca initiates the rape-plot by inducing Corvino to hand over his wife to a pretended invalid, but maintains a confidence that Parmeno lacks.

Other characters and situations suggest points of resemblance. Mosca plays the role of parasite as well as clever servant (in the cast list he is called parasite), corresponding to Gnatho in Terence's play. Mosca's exaltation of the parasite ("O, your parasite / Is a most precious thing . . .")¹⁴ corresponds to Gnatho's self-congratulatory speech (lines 232–54), boasting that he has learned the wisdom of living through flattery and sponging, without concern for human dignity. Gnatho's assuring the braggart soldier that Thais was "Not so much pleased with the gift as with the fact that you were the giver"¹⁵ recalls several similar assurances by Mosca. In both plays parasites make a practice of playing both sides. Volpone and the courtesan Thais share the role of desired object, but they also epitomize the difference between the two plays, revealing clues as to the English playwright's thoughts in building his comedy. Thais admits in an early monologue (lines 197–206) that Chaerea's brother, Phaedria, is her real love, and in act 5, in a speech forgiving Chaerea for his eunuch-deception, she declares that she is not so devoid of humanity as to deny the power of love (line 881). But the major characters of *Volpone* know neither the love, generosity, nor forgiveness of *Eunuchus*. Jonson locates the scene where the lover reveals his love to his servant (Volpone to Mosca, 2.4) at about the same point where Terence does (Chaerea to Parmeno, 2.3). Compare the opening words of each scene: Volpone says, "Oh, I am wounded"; Chaerea cries, "Occidi!" – "I am struck down!" There is the same desire for possession, but violence and torment color Volpone's language of love: he is "wounded," Cupid is "angry," he brings "flame," and "burning heat." "The fight," says Jonson's deceiver, "is all within me."¹⁶ Here the Petrarchan lover's heat is translated into the solipsistic passion of Milton's Satan and "the hot Hell that always in him burns."¹⁷ This is consistent with the view that Jonson deliberately wrote an anti-romantic comedy – one that Stefan Zweig could rightly call, in his 1925 adaptation, "a loveless comedy."¹⁸ In *Eunuchus*, Chaerea's "I've completely lost my head . . . I'm in love"¹⁹ presents a very different kind of lover, whose ego is on the verge of annihilation.

At the end of *Eunuchus*, as often happens in Roman comedy, the final distribution of justice requires that bygones be bygones. Thais welcomes the blowhard braggart soldier, with his parasite, Gnatho, into her home after Gnatho pleads, "Please let me into your circle."²⁰ Thais generously admits soldier and parasite, promises to help her former slave, Pamphila, to secure favor with her long-lost family, and forgives Chaerea. As R. L. Hunter has observed, reconciliation and forgiveness are the rule in New Comedy.²¹ Justice in *Volpone*, however, is dire by comparison, as characters are isolated and alienated, not reconciled. The eunuch metaphor serves both plays at several points. Terence associates three men in his play with the myth of Hercules enslaved by Omphale: Thraso, in a moment of typical grandioseness, sees this as his fate;²² but Phaedria, too, no less than Chaerea, has allowed passion to reduce him to a eunuch. In Jonson's comedy the operative passions that have castrated the three would-be heirs are greed joined with the all-consuming self-love of Volpone and Mosca.

The Magnetic Lady and Truculentus

Jonson's *The Magnetic Lady*, perhaps written in 1632, also gains somewhat in appreciation when read in the context of *Eunuchus*. Like *Eunuchus*, *Truculentus* sets the action around a "magnetic lady," a prostitute, Phronesium. Almost all the action occurs in her house, as it does both in Thais's house and in Lady Loadstone's²³ home in *The Magnetic Lady*. More interesting are the echoes of Plautus's naughtiest play, *Truculentus*.²⁴ The men are all fools in both *Magnetic Lady* and *Truculentus*, except for Jonson's Compass, probably a stand-in for the author, so both plays accord women a more respectable place on the scale of folly. As Ostovich observes, "With the exception of Compass, the companion of her late husband, Lady Loadstone's male advisers are vulgar, duplicitous, and exploitative."²⁵ Jonson's two older ladies serve as go-betweens for their young female charges in the marriage quest. They are thus polite versions of the Roman *lena* or procuress, who was often the mother of the *meretrix* in Roman comedy. It may seem far-fetched to associate the honorable widow Loadstone with

sex-workers, but the morphing of Roman prostitutes into widows is a familiar gambit in Renaissance Roman-comedy adaptation, exemplified in England by Dame Custance in *Ralph Roister Doister*. Phronesium's gatekeeper and assistant whore, Astaphium, plays a major role in fleecing the men; Loadstone's assistant, Polish, is fleecing her. The cast listing of Polish as Loadstone's "she-parasite" has obvious Roman origins. Both plays present a series of visits from three would-be husbands or lovers. But Jonson displaces the love-interest from the lady of the house, Loadstone, to her niece, Placentia, whom Ostovich equates with false pleasure as opposed to Pleasance, true pleasure.²⁶ One of the visitors in each play is a soldier, though Jonson's Ironside is not one of the foolish suitors as Plautus's counterpart is. Most important, both plays involve a mysterious pregnancy, a cover-up, and a temporarily lost or missing baby. For a while the audience remains mystified, first about Placentia's unexplained illness as early as act 2, then about the baby's father. In *The Magnetic Lady*, as it turns out, there are two pregnancy mysteries, if we include the switching of the Loadstone and Polish babies.

Since *Truculentus* is one of Plautus's less-known plays today, a plot description is in order, especially regarding the misplaced infant. A young man, Diniarchus (ruled by the *dinē* or "whirl" of passion), loves the magnetic courtesan Phronesium (derived from *phronis*, wisdom or prudence). Phronesium has led her household to think she has given birth to a baby fathered by the soldier in the play, Stratophanes. Even her maidservant and handler, Astaphium (probably from *astaphion*, raisin, because the patrons are sucked dry), believes this. But in 2.4 Phronesium reveals that her hairdresser brought her the baby to use against the soldier in a paternity claim. She promises Diniarchus she will ditch the soldier as soon as possible, then be with him alone. The middle of the comedy introduces Diniarchus's two rivals, the soldier and a young moneyed fool from the country, Strabax with his rude, rustic servant, Truculentus, who scorns the prostitutes, hoping to protect his young master from perdition. Yet he cannot resist the wiles of Astaphium. (After she shows him some city love he sheepishly admits, "I'm not truculent anymore.")²⁷ In act 4 a father discovers that a baby born to his unmarried daughter is the baby that eventually found its way to Phronesium. Diniarchus admits to

the father that this is his child and agrees to marry the daughter. Still, he lets Phronesium borrow his infant son for a few more days so she can finish her scam on the soldier. Diniarchus will marry, but promises Phronesium he will visit her on the sly now and then. Phronesium's closing lines address the (largely male) audience: "What happy hunting I've had, quite to my liking. And now that my own affairs are in such good shape, I'll be glad to help you with yours."²⁸

The concealed pregnancy and baby are among those "substantial elements in the plot of *The Magnetic Lady*," as Happé notes, that "have not been traced to the specific work of other authors"²⁹ A claim for *Truculentus* in this regard is surely arguable. Jonson rethinks the subject as befits a comedy about a moral, respectable household and the respectable practices of the marriage market. These are comically distorted by reflection in the Roman world of high-class prostitution, a satirical analogy not new to Jonson's audience. Ann Jennalie Cook notes Shakespeare's comparison of pimping with matchmaking: in *Measure for Measure*, "The pimps, whores, and bawds in the subplot merely engage more blatantly in the same business as do Angelo and Claudio."³⁰ Actually, the hypocritical Bias and Interest accuse poor Placentia of prostitution once her shame is known: she is a "lewd, known and prostituted niece," says Bias. Interest, the fourteen-year-old girl's uncle, declares, "Now that she is prostitute . . . I mean to keep the [marriage] portion in my hands."³¹ This intrusion of greed is consistent with Jonson's more general practice, in *Volpone* and elsewhere, of replacing the motivating force of Cupid with that of cupidity, building his plot around a legacy pursued by fools and knaves. Both Plautus and Jonson present a commanding female character and her influential assistant manipulating three suitors in a plot involving a young virgin's secret pregnancy. In *Truculentus* the newborn child is a pawn in a confidence game run by a prostitute; in *The Magnetic Lady* the baby brings to light a long-concealed swindle by Polish in switching Pleasance and Placentia at birth. The deception in Plautus is fairly innocuous except for the soldier, whose profession seems to make him fair game in Plautine comedies. Polish's deception is a more serious betrayal—as Compass says, a betrayal of "trust." The greedy

woman "Changed the poor infants in their cradles, / Defrauded them o' their parents, changed their names" (5.9.7–10).

A secondary interest in Jonson's comedy is indicated in the subtitle, "Humors Reconcil'd." Humor comedy is Jonsonian, not Plautine, but reconciliations do occur, and bear comparison, in both comedies. In *Truculentus* the first step toward resolving the conflict between erotic love and personal or family honor comes with the submissiveness of the title character, the moralistic slave, who surrenders to the appeal of Astaphium. The competition for Phronesium among the three suitors is resolved by the prostitute's willingness to continue entertaining all three. In truth there was never any doubt of this so long as each had something to give. Phronesium and Diniarchus swindle the soldier out of his gold; the prostitute tells the soldier she loves Strabax more than him, but he is elated to receive any place in her affections. Phronesium and the soldier allude to the myth of Venus's subjugation of Mars, hence her final line to the audience, "For the sake of Venus, give your applause; this play is under her care" (134). If *amor* reconciles all the rivals in Plautus's comedy, in Jonson's "all are reconciled to truth" (5.10.126). Lady Loadstone accepts the soldier as spouse and much-needed protector of her honor. Compass saves the truth by exposing Polish's deceit, and saves Loadstone's real daughter from the kind of dowry-hunting idiots who pursued the false one.

How Roman?

To some extent, earlier source-and-influence studies of Elizabethan and Roman comedy have made only a down-payment on the subject, even though such tracking has existed for a century and more. Because much more is known now about the theory and reception history of the two dramatic traditions, some of the earlier studies should receive a second look in the light of this new knowledge. Older source-studies often suggested that Jonson's age "borrowed" from ancient texts mainly to dress up.³² The more recent history of Renaissance thought and literary theory supports the contention that Jonson was participating in the wider European project of rehabilitating (if not habilitating) comedy

from its indigent medieval status.³³ Jonson saw himself creating moral comedy from Plautine comedy of the ridiculous, to use categories familiar in Renaissance criticism.³⁴ This role accords with the Renaissance, especially Erasmian, humanist project of imitation aimed at the baptizing of classical culture. The aim finds rather clumsy expression in the "Christian Terence" vogue of comedy, but exists more subtly in the writing of many dedicated to the *studia humanitatis*. "Mighty though their admiration was for Greek clarity and Roman civility," says G. K. Hunter of the English humanists, "they had no doubt that they themselves had a basic advantage over their classical forebears in the revelation of Christian truth."³⁵ Knowing English theatrical traditions, Jonson seems to have believed that the old morality play could be refurbished with the kind of social-problem plays exemplified in, say, *The Three Ladies of London*.³⁶ Critics have generally agreed on, in Happé's phrasing, "the moral issues which are at the heart of Jonson's poetic art."³⁷ The playwright himself asserts that "the principal end of poesy" is "to inform men of the best reason of living," and that the particular aim of the comic poet should chiefly be "to imitate justice, and instruct to life."³⁸

To foreground the moral issues in comedy is to advance what Aristotle called *ethos*, often translated as "character" in the *Poetics*. An equally valid reading of the Greek word might also be "behavior," implying the question, would these persons really behave as they do, given the plot in which they appear? Jonson's moral issues, then, depend chiefly on the characters of his comedies, so it is on this topic that comparison with the Roman playwrights might best begin. Do characters in their comedies imitate justice or inform "men" of the best way to live? The great variety of their plays—a variety that belies the reductive version of Roman comedy found in literary handbooks—prevents a simple response. A qualified yes for the six plays of Terence. Plautus's *Trinummus* (one of twenty surviving plays) opens with a morality-play-like scene between Luxuria and Inopia (poverty); *Captivi* and *Rudens* would also qualify as moral comedies. But except for a handful of plays Plautus does not share Jonson's stated aims or Terence's implicit ones. Can comedy "instruct to life?" An important theorist of comedy, Elder Olson, argues convincingly that if you were creating a pure comedy, "you would make the

characters as *unlike* you as possible, and their misfortunes as *unlike* any that might befall even the persons involved." This is owing to what Olson calls "comic alienation," whereby the reader or viewer is "so indifferent to the fortunes of the persons he is observing that he can concentrate on the absurdities of actions and fortunes as such, without emotional commitment."³⁹ Hence the feeling one has watching Bonario and Celia in *Volpone*, that they have materialized from another planet. And, mean-spirited as it seems, do audiences really care that much about Placentia's mistake? A related insight is expressed by the Belgian scholar Marie Delcourt, who finds in Plautus an "impartialité comique." In Plautus, she writes,

we discover a quiet contempt for received ideas, whether the moral ones that underlie Greek comedy, or the ethical ones of Roman society during the second Punic War. This contempt is not expressed in formulas but by a kind of casualness that people are too easily content to see as the carelessness of an author who writes for the common people.⁴⁰

Delcourt believes this impartiality to be one of the aspects of Plautus's comedies that shaped Early Modern European comedy from Machiavelli to Molière, and provides the following instance of quintessential comic impartiality from Jonson's *Alchemist*. Sir Epicure Mammon has been duped into believing that the alchemist can change all his pots and pans to gold, and is speaking to the assistant alchemist:

Mammon. Where's Master?
Face. Now preparing for projection, sir.
 Your stuff will all be changed shortly.
Mammon. Into gold?
Face. To gold and silver, sir.
Mammon. Silver I care not for.
Face. Yes, sir, a little to give beggars.⁴¹

Alienation and impartiality are two sides of the same thing: a consequence of the comic author's perceived impartiality is the audience's feeling of alienation from the comic characters and their misfortune. Untempered by sentiment and romance, comic

characters feel emotionally cold. In recent comedy, think of *The Simpsons* or *Seinfeld*. Erich Segal, both critic and translator of Plautus, while not mentioning Olson or Delcourt, expresses this aesthetic of impartiality and alienation in declaring that "True comedy should banish *all* thought—of mortality and morality."⁴² In *Truculentus* the assistant whore mocks the moralist's concern that fine old Roman families are fading like an old garden wall, brick by brick, as their youths behave recklessly: "So what if it's falling down," she says, "it's an old wall."⁴³

A genre-determinist encounters a dilemma with character in ancient, and therefore modern, comedy. It is true that New Comedy made the genre "able to present real people"; Menander's "depiction of character in all its complexion and nuance is a major dramatic value."⁴⁴ Yet this seems not at all a comic value in most Plautus. A Plautus editor states the difference briefly: "Where Menander's characterization is complex, subtler, and realistic, Plautus's is simple, bold, and comic; Menander portrays the character sympathetically from the inside. Plautus rather stands outside and risks destroying the credibility of the character for a laugh."⁴⁵ Yet many would say today that "Comic characters are traditionally one-dimensional in the sense that they are apparently unable to learn and change."⁴⁶ Jonson's humor characters, and almost all his characters, support this observation. The evidence of Menander's predecessor Aristophanes, and of medieval comedy apparently untouched by Romans, is that comedy lends itself to the incredible, the absurd, the laughably unreal. So it is with the characters of comedy. Hunter finds that in Jonson, by contrast with Shakespeare, "change is presented as social rather than psychological."⁴⁷ Shakespeare created Falstaff and Malvolio ("We can contemplate Malvolio in a way that we need not contemplate Sir Epicure Mammon."⁴⁸); they are the remarkable exceptions that serve the rule. Dryden's contemporary Thomas Enoch, translator of Plautus and Terence, would probably say that Shakespeare learned characterization from Terence, not Plautus. Comparing two braggart-soldier plays, Plautus's *Miles Gloriosus* and Terence's *Eunuchus*, Enoch shows how "modestly" Terence handles Thrasyo by comparison with the representation of Pyrgopolynices in *Miles*. Plautus "has too much outgone Probability and strained his characters to an extravagant pitch."⁴⁹

"Probability" returns us to Jonson's requirement that comedy should "instruct to life." Extravagance of character, or of anything, means abandoning nature, comedy shirking its duty to mirror society. "With these sorts of Characters," Echard complains—meaning Plautus's absurdly sex-hungry old men, silly adolescent lovers, and clever servants—"many of our modern comedies abound, which makes 'em too much degenerate into Farce, which seldom fails of pleasing the Mob." Echard is probably thinking of the enormous impact of Jonson, rather than Shakespeare, on Restoration comedy. But his theory, favoring modest, credible characterization, conflicts with much successful comic practice, which in Jonson, and even in Shakespeare, mostly travels the course laid down by Plautus rather than Terence-Menander. Larry Gelbart and Stephen Sondheim wrote *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* to prove "that Plautus's characters (always one-dimensional or less) and his style of plotting (which could be as complicated as a Rubik's Cube) were timeless."⁵⁰ The mimetic view of fiction in a fiction-reading age is understandable, if erroneous. If characters in comedy can imitate virtue, I would argue, that can happen only by negation, by depicting the opposite vice. Well-rounded characters, then, tend to be alien to comedy, chiefly because comedy is alien to them.

Reading plays as if they were novels has led to some miscues, as has reading plays without sufficiently accounting for their theatricality. I refer especially to the "metatheatrical" element in both fields, not fully appreciated until the later twentieth century. Metatheater is a feature of Roman comedy that early English playwrights were seeing, but that modern scholarship generally neglected until the 1960s. It requires some attention here because it impinges on the nature of Roman comic characters as they enter those of Jonson's plays, and, more generally, the nature of comedy in both periods. Specifically, it questions the supposed mimetic nature of comedy, the extent to which characters chiefly represent real (though not actual) people, people whom "we can all recognize," as the saying goes.

Plautus is incurably self-referential or metadramatic. If meta-theater refers to "theater pieces about life seen as already theatrical,"⁵¹ the subject must be central in any approach to Plautine drama. Often this feature is found in a single line, such

as the remark by one of the women plotting against the dirty old man in *Casina*: “No comic poet ever contrived a more tricky plot than this one which we’ve invented.”⁵² Ergasilus in *Captivi* says he will deliver good news, “like the slave in comedy” (ut comici servi solent) (778). The audience suddenly becomes aware that this plot is about a plot. Or there is the moment in *Truculentus* when the soldier enters and tells the audience not to expect him to brag about his achievements on the battlefield (482), something comic soldiers always did. Stasimus, the slave in *Trinummus*, fears he will have to follow his master into the army, and put heels on his *soccis* (720, referring to the soft shoe worn by actors in comedy). In *Cistellaria* (671) a careless maid implores the audience to tell her where the titular casket is; getting no help, she says the spectators enjoy seeing poor women in trouble. Act 4, scene 1 of *Curculio* is an address to the audience by the stage manager, and when Toxilus in *Persa* plans a deceit involving disguises he tells Saturio to get these from the stage manager (159). *Pseudolus* is central to Petrone’s study of this trait in Plautus; “the whole comedy . . . can be read as a meditation on the theater and its artifices, of which the ‘metatheatrical’ jokes become the emerging focus.”⁵³ Commenting on metadrama in *Truculentus*, Alison Sharrock writes that “the playwright is hidden in the most unlikely guise of the scheming prostitute Phronesium, whose lovers [i.e., the audience] make constant demands and yet are pathetically easy to control as long as she feeds them the right stuff.”⁵⁴ The origin of such moments (in Plautus but not Terence—one reason why the formulaic “Plautus-and-Terence” of literary history is disconcerting) may lie with Greek New Comedy. In Menander’s *Pherikeiromene* (*The Shorn Bird*) the goddess Agnoia tells the audience she stirred up the hero’s passion “for the sake of the story.”⁵⁵ Richard Andrews sees metatheater as in fact wedded to comedy as a genre:

It is hard to perform comedy, and impossible to deliver a comic monologue, without addressing the audience or winking at them for some of the time. The fact that Plautus allowed this to happen and Terence did not coincides, probably, with the fact that Plautus is funnier than Terence. Italian humanist writers wanted in theory to keep direct address for the Prologue and

the *plaudite*, but if they had any instinct for comic theatre they usually followed Plautus in the end.⁵⁶

Addressing the audience may seem different from presenting life as theatrical, but the effect of breaking the fourth wall, of drawing the audience into the play, is the same.

Although Jonsonian criticism and scholarship has given less attention to metatheater than has that of Shakespeare, the idea has long been acknowledged. G. K. Hunter remarks about Jonson that, in the endings of both *Alchemist* and *Epicoene*, "the outwitting inside the plot reflects the trickery by which the dramatist outwits our expectations about the play."⁵⁷ The metatheatrical element joins onstage plotter with offstage plotter-playwright; it means that Jonson's audiences can admire "the energy and wit of Volpone and Mosca ... in precisely the way that we admire a fine performance."⁵⁸ Not surprisingly the idea receives attention in a recent collection of pieces centered on Jonson in the theater. One essay invites us to see Lovewit, the absentee owner of the house in Blackfriars in *The Alchemist*, as representing the collective ownership of Blackfriars, the theater. Another underscores "Jonson's metatheatricality ... when he insists that we all recognise the extent to which life in society provokes the manifold duplicities which today might be labeled the performative."⁵⁹ Thorough and systematic investigation of Jonson and metatheater still awaits doing, whether by theatrical or literary historians.

In *The Magnetic Lady* this theatricalization of life finds expression foremost in the Boy's lectures on plot construction following acts 3 and 4. This play is particularly marked by authorial self-reference, having been called in part "a biographical fable, reminding its audiences of Jonson's own prolonged engagement with the theatre, and concluding, like the principal action of the play itself, in a spirit of reconciliation."⁶⁰ If, as some believe, "Compass and Ironside both speak for Jonson,"⁶¹ the two are metatheatrical characters, standing in for the playwright as plot-constructors. In the second half of the play especially, Compass goes to work as a plotter, like a Plautine clever slave, prodding Silkworm into a duel with Ironside (3.4, 3.6), eavesdropping (4.4.9), and working

out everything to his advantage (gets the rich girl). The playwright, of course, injects himself into the play during the "Chorus" scenes, with the Boy voicing authorial opinions about comic plots. Plautus has a clever slave in *Bacchides* speak of another of his plays, "*Epidicus*, a play that I love as much as myself."⁶² Jonson's Diaphanous similarly speaks of "*The New Inn*, / Of Jonson's"⁶³ referring to Lovel's speech on true valor (*New Inn* 4.4.87–95). It is typical of the difference between these two playwrights that the *Bacchides* line is merely playful self-advertising, while Jonson is supporting a moral insight in one of his plays with a moral precept from another.

Characterization in Roman comedy has received an especially fine treatment by Marian Faure-Ribreau, who approaches the subject not from the standpoint of narrated development, as would be suited for novels, but of theatrical play, through the notion of metatheater. Today's more familiar moral or psychological approach views character as having the interiority of a real person—a view that, she says, may not even have existed at this time.⁶⁴ She adds that the moral approach fails to recognize that the *persona* (of *senex*, young lover, etc.) existed inside a *performance*; this is the character's "theatrical presence." Not merely a textual product, a Roman comic character is effectively constructed only when played by an actor on the stage.⁶⁵ And on the stage, the character emerges from a *persona* or role that is the object of an ongoing play of variation dependent on text and actor. I think this is akin to what we mean when we refer to Gielgud's Hamlet or Olivier's, or, more to the point, Roscius's Ballio, the thuggish pimp in *Pseudolus*.⁶⁶ Actor and character inhabit each other. Faure-Ribreau believes Roman comedies and their characters play wholly on theatrical convention, in an artificial Greek world, without reference to real Roman life. If so, then in close imitation of the Romans, Jonson was working an entirely different vein of comic drama from Shakespeare, the dramatist of interiority. And if so, he would have been delighted that the self-referentiality of his comic characters was consistent with the "laws" of Roman comedy that he knew, promulgated, and valued.

At about the same time Jonson returned to the stage with *The Magnetic Lady*, Milton wrote that, for an evening out, the cheerful

man might visit the theater,

If Jonson's learned sock be on,
Or sweetest Shakespeare, Fancy's child,
Warble his native wood-notes wild.⁶⁷

Perhaps Milton actually saw Jonson's play when it was, if rather briefly, "on" in London, at a time when the playwright was still "learned," if slipping into obscurity. Jonson had begun writing learned comedies—in Italy such imitations were indeed called *commedie erudite*—with an experimental imitation of Roman comedy, *The Case is Altered*. One reason he never claimed the offspring by including it in his *Works* may be that he realized scenes of *amor* in Roman comedy were not his thing. *Volpone* and *The Magnetic Lady* rise above *amor*, as it were, or at least bypass love as a distraction from the workings of true comedy.

University of Kansas

NOTES

1. Terence, *The Eunuch*, trans. Betty Radice, in *The Comedies* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 165, line 41. References to Terence in English are from this edition, while Latin quotations and line references are from *The Comedies of Terence*, ed. Sidney Ashmore (New York: Oxford University Press, 1908).

2. See especially Eleanor P. Lumley, *The Influence of Plautus on the Comedies of Ben Jonson* (New York: n.p., 1901); William Edward Sellin, ed., *The Case is Altered*, *Yale Studies in English* 56 (1917); E. P. Vandiver, Jr., "The Elizabethan Dramatic Parasite," *Studies in Philology* 32 (1935): 411–27; George Duckworth, *The Nature of Roman Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952); David McPherson, *Ben Jonson's Library and Marginalia: An Annotated Catalogue*, *Studies in Philology Texts and Studies* 71.5 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974); John Mulryan, "Tradition and the Individual Talent: Shakespeare's and Jonson's Appropriation of the Classics," *Ben Jonson Journal* 10 (2003): 117–37; Raphael Lyne, "Volpone and the Classics," in Garrett A. Sullivan et al., eds., *Early Modern English Drama: A Critical Companion* (Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 2006), 177–88. Of the critical books on Jonson that pay heed to Plautus and Terence, especially useful is Anne Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

3. Peter Happé, intro., Jonson, *The Magnetic Lady, The Revels Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 31. This edition is the basis for quotations and citations from this play, though before submitting this article I managed to consult Helen Ostovich, intro. and ed. *The Magnetic Lady, in The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, 7 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 6: 391–542.

4. *Eunuchus* (3.5), p. 191, lines 583–89.

5. Jonson, *Volpone* 3.7.221, in G. A. Wilkes, ed., *The Complete Plays of Ben Jonson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 3: ix–120. Quotations from Jonson, except *Magnetic Lady*, are from this edition.

6. *Eunuchus* (3.5), pp. 191–92, lines 592, 600–03.

7. The *paraclausithyron*, or lover’s song to the mistress’s closed door, enters Roman literature before love lyrics, in Plautus’s *Curculio*.

8. *Eunuch* (3.5), pp. 191–92, lines 583–606.

9. John J. Enck, *Jonson and the Comic Truth* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957), 129.

10. *Eunuch*, pp. 196, 180, lines 685–89, 357.

11. Sander M. Goldberg, *Understanding Terence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 115.

12. David Konstan, “Love in Terence’s *Eunuch*: The Origins of Erotic Subjectivity,” *American Journal of Philology* 107.3 (1986): 369–93, explicitly avoids using “romantic” when referring to love in antiquity, but sees a kindred feeling in the play’s tension between love and necessity (391, n. 52). *Volpone* starts to show symptoms of approaching old age in his monologue of 5.1.

13. On *Volpone*’s age see William W. E. Slights, “The Play of Conspiracies in *Volpone*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 27.4 (1985): 369–89: “His attempt to replay the lusty young hero [with Celia] ... simply makes *Volpone* look awkward and foolish.”

14. *Volpone*, 3.1.7–33.

15. *Eunuchus* p. 182, line 393.

16. *Volpone*, 2.4.1, 3–5, 7.

17. *Paradise Lost* 9.467, in Milton, *Complete Poems*, ed. John Leonard (London: Penguin, 1998).

18. Stephan Zweig, *Volpone, eine lieblose Komödie* (Berlin, 1925).

19. *Eunuchus* 307. The Latin, “prorsum oblitus sum mei,” means “I’ve completely forgotten myself.”

20. *Eunuchus*, p. 218, line 1084.

21. R. L. Hunter, *The New Comedy of Greece and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 42. Perhaps Robert G. Hunter, in *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), should have credited Roman comedy with a place in this development.

22. *Eunuchus*, p. 214, lines 1025–30.

23. I follow Happé (see n. 3) in the spelling of Loadstone's name.

24. N. J. Lowe, *Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), calls *Truculentus* "the most demonstrably amoral of Plautus's plays" (112). Joachim Camerarius, in his edition of Plautus, says he considered not including the play because of its offenses to morality. See Ekkehard Stärk, "Camerarius' Plautus," in his *Kleine Schriften zur römischen Literatur* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2005), 287–98 (295, n. 58).

25. Helen Ostovich, "The Appropriation of Pleasure in *The Magnetic Lady*," *SEL* 34 (1994): 425–42 (427).

26. *Ibid.*, 429.

27. "Iam non sum truculentus," *Truculentus*, in Plautus, *Comoediae*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1905), 2: line 674. Latin quotations and all line references for Plautus are from this edition. The slave *Truculentus* has, like the other males in the play, lost his identity to love.

28. *Truculentus*, in *The Complete Roman Drama*, trans. George E. Duckworth, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1942), 2: 134. As with all female roles in Plautus's time, the speaker here was male.

29. Happé, 29; Ostovich, ed. and intro, *Magnetic Lady*, 399, mentions possible sources involving undiagnosed pregnancies in commedia dell'arte scenarios.

30. Ann Jennalie Cook, *Making a Match: Courtship in Shakespeare and His Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 118, 144.

31. *The Magnetic Lady* 4.3.27, 30–32. There just may be an indecent barb in Keep's calling Polish "My lady's stroker" (4.4.4). Happé's note on this line says the word may originate in the Latin *palpator*. That word, however, derives from the verb *palpo*, which can mean masturbate. See J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 208. In *EMO* Carlo Buffone recommends a hot-house as "your only physic. Let a man sweat once a week in a hot-house, and be well rubbed and frothed with a good plump juicy wench . . ." (Wilkes ed., 4.3.65–67)

32. E.g. C. F. T. Brooke, *The Tudor Drama* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1911): "From Plautus and Terence the English comic writers learned to refine their native buffoonery by the cultivation of a more intellectual species of wit enriching the clownage of the plebeian by the addition of those laughable characters and incidents which arise amid more complex

societies" (150–51). Early source-hunters saw Plautus simply as a translator of lost Greek comedies, a received idea overturned by Eduard Fraenkel, *Plautinisches im Plautus* (Berlin, 1922).

33. In France, DuBellay thought comedy had been "usurped" by the medieval farce: *The Defense and Enrichment of the French Language* (2.4) in Richard Helgerson, ed. and trans., *The Regrets ... with The Defense and Enrichment of the French Language* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 376.

34. G. G. Trissino writes in *La Poetica*: "The moral type is that in which morals are most prominent, as in the *Hecyra* of Terence, and the ridiculous is that in which jokes and ridiculous things prevail, as the *Menaechmi* of Plautus." Alan Gilbert, ed., *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden* (1940; rpt. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962), 225. Hence Sidney's "comedy of laughter" and "comedy of delight" (*Defence of Poesie* in *ibid.*, 451–52).

35. G. K. Hunter, *John Lyly: The Humanist as Courtier* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 13. The Erasmian scholar Pierre Mesnard speaks of the "baptism" of culture in *L'essor de la philosophie politique au XVIe siècle*, 3d ed., *De Petrarque à Descartes* 19 (1969) 87.

36. Alan Dessen, *Jonson's Moral Comedy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 10–12. David Riggs discusses morality-play influence in *The Alchemist* in his *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 170–75.

37. Happé, 19, while cautioning against the reading of any Jonson play as a moral essay (38).

38. *Volpone*, dedication, xiv. On the moral dimension in Jonson's literary thought, see Stanley Stewart, "Jonson's Criticism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ben Jonson*, ed. Richard Harp and Stanley Stewart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 175–87, esp. 175–77.

39. Elder Olson, *The Theory of Comedy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 78.

40. Marie Delcourt, *Plaute et l'impartialité comique* (Brussels: Renaissance du livre, 1964), 7.

41. *The Alchemist*, in the Wilkes edition, 4.1.2–5.

42. Erich Segal, *Roman Laughter*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 14. Cf. the theatrical director Leo Aylen: "New Comedy is not about anything." *The Greek Theater* (Rutherford NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985), 302.

43. *Truculentus*, vol. 2, line 305 (my trans.): "nihil mirum (vetus est maceria) lateres si veteres ruont."

44. N. J. Lowe, *Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 66.

45. John Barsby, ed., *Plautus, Bacchides* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1986), 140. Cf. Victor Castellani, "Plautus versus Komoidia: Popular Farce at Rome," *Themes in Drama* 10 (1988): 53–82: "the Roman playwright also often – and cheerfully – sacrificed the *sympathy* his characters could have had for, at most, a kind of rooting interest" (61).

46. Andrew Stott, *Comedy* (London: Routledge, 2005), 41.

47. G. K. Hunter, "Comedy, Farce, Romance," in A. R. Braunmuller and J. C. Bulman, eds., *Comedy from Shakespeare to Sheridan* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1986), 27–52 (37). Comparing Jonson's comedies with Shakespeare's "in the farce mode" (*Err., Wiv., Shr.*), Hunter argues that the difference "lies in the restriction Jonson's plots impose on Jonson's individuals" (37).

48. Alice Rayner, *Comic Persuasion: Moral Structure in British Comedy from Shakespeare to Stoppard* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 155.

49. Lawrence Echard, *Prefaces to Terence's Comedies and Plautus's Comedies*, intro. John Bernard. Augustan Reprint Society, 129 (Los Angeles, 1989), a7v.

50. Larry Gelbart, "Why Sondheim and I Plundered Plautus," *Guardian*, website, 6 July 04. See also the program for the National Theatre's 2004 revival of *Funny Thing*. This musical plunders Plautus's *Miles Gloriosus*, *Mostellaria*, and *Pseudolus*.

51. Lionel Abel, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), 60.

52. *Casina*, trans. Duckworth 1: 860. On metadrama in Plautus see Gina Petrone, *Teatro antico e inganno* (Palermo, 1983); N. W. Slater, *Plautus in Performance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); and Timothy Moore, *The Theater of Plautus* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998). I try to avoid imprecise uses of the term as criticized in Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, "'Metatheatre': An Essay on Overload," *Arion* 10.2 (2002): 87–119.

53. Petrone, 64: "Tutta intera la commedia ... può leggersi come una meditazione sul teatro e sui suoi artifici, di cui le battute 'metateatrali' sono le punte emergente."

54. Alison Sharrock, *Reading Roman Comedy: Poetics and Playfulness in Plautus and Terence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 140.

55. Erich Segal, *The Death of Comedy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 163.

56. Richard Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 28.

57. G. K. Hunter, "Comedy, Farce, Romance," 38.

58. C. N. Manlove, "The Double View in *Volpone*," *SEL* 19 (1979), rpt. in Harold Bloom, ed., *Ben Jonson's Volpone, or the Fox* (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), 83–96 (92).

59. From Richard Cave et al., eds., *Ben Jonson and Theatre: Performance, Practice, Theory* (London: Routledge, 1999): Andrew Gurr, "Prologue: Who Is Lovewit? What Is He?," 5–19; Cave, "Acting in Jonson: A Conversation with John Nettles and Simon Russell-Beal," 58–65 (62).

60. Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 419.

61. Barton, 298; see also Happé, 37–38.

62. *Bacchides* 214: "Epidicus, quam ego fabulam aequae ac me ipsum amo" (my trans.).

63. *Magnetic Lady* 3.6.92–93.

64. Marian Faure-Ribreau, *Pour la beauté du jeu: La construction des personnages dans la comédie romaine* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2012), 15.

65. *Ibid.*, 13–14.

66. On Roscius's preference for the role see Elaine Fantham, *Roman Readings: Roman Responses to Greek Literature from Plautus to Statius* (Berlin and New York: DeGruyter, 2011), 290, citing Cicero's oration *Pro Roscio*.

67. Milton, "L'Allegro," lines 132–34, in *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Leonard (London: Penguin, 1998). A date of 1631–35 seems likely.