

THE POVERTY OF THE CLAUDII PULCHRI: VARRO, *DE RE RUSTICA* 3.16.1–2

‘In historical composition’, said Samuel Johnson, ‘all the greatest powers of the human mind are quiescent’. Perhaps so, but even if the historian must appear dull and plodding next to his more profound and shimmering brethren, the philologists and – of course – the literary critics, still he must be granted at least one virtue in plenty and that virtue is scepticism. Especially nowadays. While not quite yet ready to surrender his province to the meta-historians (who, not much believing in facts, have no real use for scepticism anyway), the historian continues diligently to scrutinize his sources with such wary Pyrrhonism as he can muster. He is especially suspicious of those ancients whose intelligence and whose literary gifts he most admires, hence the unrelenting distrust of authors such as Cicero and Caesar – and recently even such paragons of accuracy as Polybius. Still, a few authors have earned our unconscious credence, it would seem, merely by dint of their artlessness; we simply do not respect them enough to doubt them. A case in point: Varro’s *De Re Rustica*, a remarkable ensemble of three dialogues, a highly literary work, yet one whose obvious inadequacies have distracted readers from its attempts at literariness and consequently have led them to take its veracity for granted – even when it relates to items having little or nothing to do with agriculture. A brief passage in the third book of *R.R.* informs us, or rather seems to inform us, that what was perhaps republican Rome’s most illustrious family, the Claudii Pulchri, was reduced to poverty in the seventies B.C. in the aftermath of the death of the consul of 79 – evidence that has been accepted widely by modern scholars. In this paper I hope to show that there is no good reason for believing Varro’s Appius when he claims to have been pauperized by his father’s death and, furthermore, that to do so is to fail to appreciate the artistry and wry humour with which Varro has composed Book Three.*

I

Appius, Igitur relinquitur, inquit, de pastione villatica tertius actus de piscinis. Quid tertius? inquit Axis. An quia tu solitus es in adulescentia tua domi mulsum non bibere propter parsimoniam, nos mel neclegemus? Appius nobis, Verum dicit, inquit. Nam cum pauper cum duobus fraternis et duabus sororibus essem relictus, quarum alteram sine dote dedi Lucullo, a quo hereditate me cessa primum et primus mulsum domi meae bibere coepi ipse, cum interea nihilo minus paene cotidie in convivio omnibus daretur mulsum (3.16.1–2).

Let us first examine the passage that purports to convey evidence for Claudian poverty in the seventies. In Book Three, Q. Axis, a senator and a friend of Varro, and Ap. Claudius Pulcher, the consul of 54 and the censor of 50, who is a principal speaker in the dialogue, have several exchanges. In this one, Appius, who, owing to the pun inherent in his praenomen, has been designated to speak on the subject of beekeeping but who appears to be attempting to postpone his apiary dissertation by calling for a conversation on fishponds, is challenged by Axis: the latter asks whether Appius is intentionally avoiding the subject of honey since, during his youth, Appius never drank *mulsum* – wine mixed with honey – on account of his parsimony. Appius responds by describing the poverty that fell upon his family at the death of his father, the consul of 79, who passed away in 76: young Appius was left at the head of an embarrassed household; poverty compelled him to rely on the charity of

* References, unless otherwise indicated, are to *R.R.* All dates are B.C.

Licinius Lucullus, who married one of Appius' sisters without a dowry and who relinquished an inheritance in Appius' favour. Only owing to Lucullus' generosity, he continues, was he freed from the poverty that prevented him from drinking *mulsum* at his dinner parties – which were held almost daily and at which no guest was ever denied his mead of *mulsum*.

This passage is the sole evidence for the poverty of the Claudii Pulchri in the seventies – and, as I hope will be obvious, it is at the most summary inspection far from straightforward. The evidence of Varro's text, however, has been taken as gospel in biographical discussions of Appius Claudius or his siblings – or of Lucullus for that matter – by scholars of the calibre of K. W. Drumann, F. Münzer and J. van Ooteghem.¹ This Claudian poverty sparked surprise from Ronald Syme, and I. Shatzman, after a good deal of vacillation, attempted to rationalize Varro's evidence so that the Claudii Pulchri were not dirt poor, but perhaps strapped by the standards of the senatorial class, a fine attempt to salvage both the text and common sense but one which does considerable violence to the actual language of Appius' story.² Finally, and I cannot think of a better indication of the persuasive power of this text, even the vigilant author of *Clio's Cosmetics*, who has done so much to jettison the mythological baggage carried by the *gens Claudia*, states unequivocally that 'the story must be true'.³

Yet numerous difficulties haunt the standard interpretation of our passage. Evidence for Claudian wealth in the late first century is overwhelming. The Claudii Pulchri were certainly quite rich in the sixties: at the time of the *Bona Dea* scandal, for instance, even Publius, the youngest of the brothers, who had yet to hold a magistracy, was, according to Plutarch, conspicuous for his wealth (Plut. *Caes.* 9.1: *εὐπατρίδης καὶ πλούτῳ καὶ λόγῳ λαμπρός*).⁴ The eastern assets of the Claudii Pulchri have been examined in abundant detail by Elizabeth Rawson; their Italian possessions, at least for the seventies, are less well documented, but, were it not for Varro's passage, would be assumed to be of comparable plenitude. Indeed, as Shatzman has observed, accepting Varro's account entails believing that the consul of 79 was perhaps the sole Sullan lieutenant who failed to turn a handsome profit during the proscriptions.⁵

¹ K. W. Drumann and P. Groebe, *Geschichte Roms in seinem Übergang von der republikanischen zur monarchischen Verfassung* (Berlin and Leipzig, 1902), ii.319; F. Münzer, *Römische Adelspartien und Adelsfamilien* (Stuttgart, 1920), pp. 255f; J. van Ooteghem, *Lucius Licinius Lucullus* (Brussels, 1959), p. 44. Cf. W. C. McDermott, *AJP* 93 (1972), 93, for criticisms of Ap. Claudius pater that include his failure to maintain the family's fortunes.

² R. Syme, *The Augustan Aristocracy* (Oxford, 1986), p. 17; I. Shatzman, *Senatorial Wealth and Roman Politics* (Brussels, 1975), pp. 51, 321 (esp. n. 236), 324. A helpful sense of the distinction between true poverty and the 'poverty' that Shatzman has in mind can be gained from S. J. Bastomsky, *G&R* 37 (1990), 37–43.

³ T. P. Wiseman, *Catullus and his World: A Reappraisal* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 22.

⁴ Schol. Bob. 85 (St.) dubs Clodius 'potentissimus homo' at the time of his trial, a designation which, if not an anachronism, probably refers to Clodius' clout stemming from his family's wealth and position, cf. W. M. F. Rundell, *Historia* 28 (1979), 303. A different view is taken by H. Benner, *Die Politik des P. Clodius Pulcher* (Stuttgart, 1987), pp. 44f.

⁵ Claudian wealth: T. P. Wiseman, *Clio's Cosmetics* (Leicester, 1979), pp. 125ff. (with further citations); id., op. cit. (above, n. 3), pp. 15–48; cf. Cic. *Fam.* 2.13.2. Eastern holdings: E. Rawson, *Historia* 22 (1973), 219–39; id., *Historia* 26 (1977), 340–57. Other holdings: Shatzman, op. cit., pp. 321–8; C. Wikander and Ö. Wikander, *Op. Rom.* 12 (1979), 11. Cf. also E. Rawson, 'The Ciceronian Aristocracy and its Properties', in M. I. Finley (ed.), *Studies in Roman Property* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 85–102; H. Pavis d'Escurac, *Ktema* 2 (1977), 339–55; N. Rauh, *Aevum* 1 (1986), 3–30; Ö. Wikander, *Op. Rom.* 16 (1987), 137–45. Shatzman on the anomaly of Ap. pater's (apparent) failure to profit from the Sullan proscriptions: op. cit., p. 321 n. 236.

Moreover, the point of Appius' confession is unclear: in a society that adamantly equated the good with the rich and well-born, stories of the Horatio Alger variety can hardly have held the same appeal they do for most Americans (and, recent events would indicate, most members of the modern Tory party).⁶ Humble origins were no recommendation in Rome, and families and individuals overwhelmed by debt were especially liable to censure.⁷ And it must be clear that the situation of Varro's Appius was not merely embarrassing but quite desperate, for, whereas an abstention from *mulsum* does not itself imply great want (inasmuch as *mulsum* was something of an indulgence), Appius' admission that he was forced to give his sister in marriage *sine dote* is quite telling.⁸ It has recently been shown by Robert Saller that Roman dowries among the elite classes, during the early Principate at least, were not ordinarily large (usually no more than the equivalent of a year's income) and often they comprised property holdings.⁹ The situation during the late republic is unlikely to have been otherwise, which means that, if Varro's account is true, Appius was pauperized indeed.

Yet appearances were important. The example of L. Mummius' daughter, a girl whose illustrious father's scrupulousness and generosity had left in such poverty that her dowry had to be constituted by the senate at public expense, suffices to demonstrate how important the dowry was for the reputation of a family in the senatorial class.¹⁰ In a later but not wholly irrelevant age, the younger Pliny, writing to a friend of relatively modest means (at least by Pliny's standards), stresses that a bride's condition must be 'secundum condicionem mariti' (*Ep.* 6.32) and urges him to accept Pliny's contribution to his daughter's dowry.¹¹ Even if, though it seems unlikely, F. W. Walbank is correct to suppose that there existed amongst patricians the custom of providing exceptionally large dowries, then, too, Clodia Luculli's

⁶ The ideology of the Roman aristocracy (with its predictable emphasis on wealth): P. A. Brunt, *The Fall of the Roman Republic and Related Essays* (New York, 1988), pp. 53ff., with further references.

⁷ W. Süss, *Ethos* (Leipzig and Berlin, 1910), pp. 245ff.; R. G. M. Nisbet, *Cicero in L. Calpurnium Pisonem Oratio* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 192ff. Debilitating indebtedness could reasonably be seen as representing want of *fides*, cf. Brunt, *op. cit.*, pp. 61ff. J. Hellegouarc'h, *Le vocabulaire latin des relations et des partis politiques sous la république* (Paris, 1963), pp. 532–4, collects numerous examples (under the headings 'Perditus' and 'Desperatus'). Cf. also R. P. Saller, *Phoenix* 38 (1984), 347.

Admittedly, poverty could be a subject of jocularly in suitable contexts, such as light verse, cf. G. Stampacchia, *Maia* 21 (1969), 326–35. The case of M. Aemilius Scaurus (cos. 115), who boasted of his modest patrimony in his autobiography (H. Peter, *HHR*² 1.185; cf. Shatzman, *op. cit.*, p. 263), is the exception that proves the rule so far as the Romans' attitude towards origins is concerned.

⁸ On *mulsum* cf. Colum. 12.41; Pliny, *N.H.* 14.85; A. Hug, *RE* 16.513f.; *TLL* 8.1579f. *Mulsum* could be prepared from a variety of wines and honeys, but ideally it should be concocted from the best of each, which made for an expensive beverage.

⁹ *CQ* 34 (1984), 195–203, esp. pp. 199–203. Cf. the cautionary remarks of Jane F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society* (London and Sydney, 1986), p. 101. The huge dowries listed by Shatzman, *op. cit.*, p. 53 (not all of which can be quantified) may be considered exceptional, though J. K. Evans, *War, Women and Children in Ancient Rome* (London, 1991), pp. 53ff., makes a good case for the dowry as an avenue for conspicuous display in the second century. It is perhaps worth mentioning that under normal circumstances the mother would be expected to contribute something towards a daughter's dowry, cf. S. Dixon, *The Roman Mother* (Norman, 1988), p. 216.

¹⁰ Pliny, *N.H.* 34.36. Discussion: J. K. Evans, *op. cit.*, pp. 59f.

¹¹ *Ep.* 2.4 represents a similar situation; this same letter also indicates the sort of shame attending a debt-ridden estate. For an excellent and concise discussion of dowry and related matters, cf. Gardner, *op. cit.*, pp. 97ff.

marriage *sine dote* would have been a distinct badge of shame.¹² And while it would have been intensely humiliating to give his sister in marriage *sine dote* in any case (because of the poverty implied thereby), one must not overlook the fact that such an arrangement would have been grossly unfair to Clodia Luculli herself, since the dowry, however modest, was vital (if no guarantee) for a woman's security both within marriage and especially in the event of a divorce.¹³ Furthermore, marriage without a dowry might have suggested concubinage to Roman sensibilities.¹⁴ For several reasons, then, there must have been a strong moral duty to supply a dowry,¹⁵ and it is strange to think that a Roman notorious for his Appietas would be willing to recall how at one stroke he tarnished his family's reputation and left his sister perhaps without her dignity and certainly without any security whatsoever. In other words, his reply to Axius admits not just to old-fashioned frugality (which one might infer from his personal abstention from *mulsum*), but to degrading poverty.¹⁶ This is an observation whose force must be intensified by the fact that by 50, which is the dramatic date of Book Three,¹⁷ Lucullus had divorced his Claudian wife amidst accusations of adultery and incest, slanders that most certainly echoed through the proceedings of P. Clodius' sensational trial for sacrilege.¹⁸ In short, Varro's Appius would seem to have little incentive to recollect Clodia Luculli's unfortunate marriage *sine dote*.

All of which ought to render Varro's tale unlikely or, if true, reporting it can only appear a hostile attack on the reputation of the Claudii Pulchri, a conclusion that must be deemed untenable.¹⁹ One might care to argue that Appius' prosecution of [A.] Terentius Varro in 74, which resulted in an infamous example of shameless bribery on the part of the accused, might have offered Varro an incentive to attack the memory of Appius Claudius.²⁰ But this is futile. The link, if any, between Varro and Appius' victim is indeterminable.²¹ In any event, the suggestion of a pejorative

¹² F. W. Walbank, *A Historical Commentary on Polybius*, iii (Oxford, 1979), p. 507 suggests a patrician custom 'of giving dowries of a size hard to meet out of liquid assets', but this seems by and large to be his inference from the clearly exceptional case of Sc. Aemilianus in 162 (Polyb. 31.26-8). The likely legal and social background to Polybius' account is provided by S. Dixon, *AJP* 106 (1985), 147-70, with further bibliography. In any event the absence of a dowry was associated with the circumstances of extreme poverty, cf. Plaut. *Aul.* 478ff.

¹³ J. F. Gardner, *CQ* 35 (1985), 449-53; id. op. cit., pp. 68f., 112ff.

¹⁴ A. Watson, *The Law of Persons in the Late Roman Republic* (Oxford, 1967), pp. 2-6; Gardner, op. cit. (above, n. 9), pp. 97ff.

¹⁵ A practical reason also suggests itself: the most common documentary proofs of marriage were *pacta dotalia*, cf. Gardner, op. cit. (above, n. 9), p. 49.

¹⁶ *Paupertas* (in the sense of simplicity and frugal living) was of course an old-fashioned Roman virtue, cf. Lucr. 1.165ff.; Sall. *B. Cat.* 12.1; Val. Max. 4.4.1; Vergil, *Georg.* 1.145f.; Hor. *Carm.* 1.12.37ff.; Sen. *Ep.* 87.41.

¹⁷ Not 54, which has been the normal view until recently and has lately been argued, with considerable ingenuity, by J. S. Richardson, *CQ* 33 (1983), 456-63. For the correct dramatic data see E. Badian, *Athenaeum* 48 (1970), 4-6 and J. Linderski, *Historia* 34 (1985), 248-54. S. Agache, 'L'Actualité de la Villa Publica en 55-54 av. J.-C.', in C. Pietri (ed.), *L'Urbs. Espace urbain et histoire Ier siècle avant J.-C.-IIIe siècle après J.-C.* (Paris and Rome, 1987), pp. 211-34 (esp. 213) follows Richardson.

¹⁸ Plut. *Luc.* 34.1; 38.1; *Caes.* 10.5; *Cic.* 29.3-4; *Cic. Mil.* 73. Charges of incest with the wife of Lucullus were used by the prosecution to blacken Clodius' character during the *Bona Dea* trial, cf. P. Moreau, *Clodiana Religio: Un procès politique en 61 av. J.-C.* (Paris, 1982), p. 168.

¹⁹ On this point Wiseman, op. cit. (above, n. 3), p. 22, must be correct.

²⁰ Cf. *Cic. Verr.* 1.40; *Clu.* 130. Further references: Broughton, *MRR* 2.97 and 102.

²¹ The difficulty of determining the relationships amongst the Terentii Varrones, a family which branched out quite a lot, esp. in the first century, is mentioned by F. Münzer, *RE* 5A.1. 676f.

representation is plainly contradicted by the treatment of Appius in the overall structure of Book Three, in which book he shares the principal spotlight only with L. Cornelius Merula.²²

Of course, it is possible to reconstruct hypothetical circumstances to explain Varro's conspicuously precise reference to the embarrassing conditions of Clodia Luculli's marriage. With the application of a bit of imaginative ratiocination something rather less drastic than outright marriage *sine dote* may be seen lying behind the story. For instance, one may safely assume that in the aftermath of Appius pater's death Clodia Luculli came under the *tutela* of her eldest brother, which would require his *auctoritas* for any payment of dowry on her part (since upon the death of her father she was, being of marriagable age, *sui iuris*).²³ Hence Appius' colloquial 'dedi', a reflection more of social practice than legal technicality.²⁴ Presumably, Clodia's dowry would come from her own property, either her inheritance, if Appius pater died intestate, or her legacy, if he had (as seems more likely) prepared a will in observance of the *Lex Voconia*.²⁵ Now it is eminently possible that Clodia's marriage to Lucullus had been arranged before her father's death (the match would have been a natural one), in which case Clodia's legacy would already have been earmarked as *dos*, which would technically pass into Lucullus' *dominium* upon their actual marriage.²⁶ In any case, it was certainly common for a daughter's legacy to represent her family's allocation for her dowry even if no betrothal had preceded her father's demise.²⁷ Amongst the elite classes legacies intended for dowries, as L. Boyer has illustrated with numerous examples culled from the *Digest*, were often liquid and were of course chargeable upon the heirs of the estate, which meant that for a large estate that had to be divided amongst several sons and daughters it might be difficult for some time even after the final estimation of the estate for the heirs to produce the cash required to settle the legacies.²⁸ In the case of the Claudii Pulchri, only one legacy, it would seem, required immediate settlement and that was Clodia Luculli's (though Appius' actual language, 'cum interea nihilo minus paene cotidie in convivio omnibus daretur mulsum', implies the passage of some time before affairs were settled with Lucullus). Perhaps Lucullus was willing to postpone the payment of Clodia's dowry or even to forgive it (though a dowry would have been constituted nonetheless and would have been subject to restoration should the marriage be dissolved); this would explain the phrase 'a quo [Lucullus] hereditate me cessa', which is plainly a gloss on 'sine dote dedi Lucullo'. Viewed along these lines, the Claudii Pulchri were, upon the more or less simultaneous execution of Appius pater's will and the arrangements for Lucullus' marriage to Clodia, caught merely in a cash crunch, which was eased by Lucullus' willingness to make special arrangements. If the negotiations regarding Clodia's dowry actually followed along these or similar lines, it would also explain

²² The significance of Varro's speakers in *R.R.* generally and the singular distinction of Appius, who is the most distinguished personage in the entire work, is discussed by J. Linderski, 'Garden Parlors: Nobles and Birds', in R. I. Curtis (ed.), *Studia Pompeiana & Classica in Honor of Wilhelmina F. Jashemski*, ii (New York, 1989), pp. 116ff. L. Cornelius Merula, significantly, was 'consularis familia ortus' (3.2.2).

²³ On matters relating to *tutela*, cf. Gardner, op. cit. (above, n. 9), pp. 14–22.

²⁴ S. Treggiari, *Echos du monde classique* 1 (1982), 34–44; Gardner, op. cit. (above, n. 9), pp. 41–4. On the gap between legal technicalities and ordinary speech in Rome, cf. Dixon, art. cit., 161ff.

²⁵ For a discussion of the *Lex Voconia* and its effects, cf. Gardner, op. cit. (above, n. 9), pp. 170ff.

²⁶ Discussion, with further references to the sources, in Dixon, art. cit., 158ff.

²⁷ Gardner, op. cit. (above, n. 9), pp. 109ff.

²⁸ L. Boyer, *RHD* 43 (1965), 333–408; also Gardner, op. cit. (above, n. 9), pp. 100 and 175f.

how Varro could expect his readers to have some familiarity with Appius' allusion: when Lucullus divorced Clodia, since he alleged immorality on her part, we can be certain that he made a claim for keeping some of the dowry (*retentio propter mores*); if he had been especially compliant in executing the dowry pact, he surely would have made it a strong point in his complaint against Clodia. Indeed, he might well have exaggerated his compliance into the claim that he had taken Clodia *sine dote*.

Thus one can attempt to infer a kernel of historical truth from Varro's text. And, one should note, this 'rationalization' of Appius' remarks comes very close to Shatzman's final suppositions regarding the financial condition of the Claudii Pulchri. Yet we cannot escape the fact that Varro's Appius actually recounts a quite different story. This brings us to the real puzzle. Since the degrading Claudian poverty described by Appius is incredible in the extreme, one must wonder why Varro introduced such a fiction. Or, even if one essays a plausible recuperation of the particulars of Clodia's marriage (such as the hypothesis offered above) in the hope of arguing for actual circumstances that were unexceptionable (if slightly irregular), one must still explain Varro's invention, the colour he has applied to events, in this passage. Put differently, is there a point to the exchange between Axius and Appius in the broader context of Varro's dialogue? To this matter we may now turn.

II

Varro is not the only author from antiquity whose literary reputation rests primarily on works we no longer possess. Whatever merits we profess to find in the fragments of the *Menippean Satires* or the *Logistorici*, one may safely say that the literary attributes of Varro's extant and continuous prose writings have proven, if not quite elusive, then certainly little appreciated. One need only consider the severe judgement of Ed. Norden – or of St Augustine.²⁹ However, while the reader with a fondness for Varro must (like all partisans of a particular author) take pains to avoid the error of overestimating the writer's accomplishment in *R.R.* – for undeniable inadequacies can be detected – nonetheless, H. Dahlmann's enthusiastic treatment of the literary merits of *R.R.* deserves more attention – and acceptance – than it has received.³⁰ Varro, as Dahlmann points out, was the first agricultural expert to cast his work in the form of a Latin dialogue, an Aristotelian dialogue at that, which suggests (and was probably motivated by) *aemulatio* with Ciceronian treatises. While Cicero may be said to have won the palm, Varro unquestionably deserves credit for his careful composition in *R.R.*'s various framing episodes, for his animated if amiable dialogue, for his sensitivity to setting and, what has too often been ignored, for his success in characterization.³¹

R.R. comprises three distinct and self-contained yet nonetheless interrelated dialogues. Their relationship is most apparent in their content, since the ensemble of

²⁹ Ed. Norden, *Die Antike Kunstprosa* (Stuttgart, 1958, repr. of the 2nd ed. of 1915), i.194ff; Augustine, *Civ. D.* 6.2.

³⁰ H. Dahlmann, *RE Suppl.* 6.1172ff., esp. 1186–94.

³¹ Literary treatments of *R.R.* include: R. Hirzel, *Der Dialog* (Leipzig, 1895), i.533ff.; J. Heurgon, *Varron, Économie rurale, livre premier* (Paris, 1978), pp. vii–lxxxv (a convenient introduction to *R.R.* generally); E. Noë, 'I proemi del *de re rustica* di Varrone', *Athenaeum* 55 (1977), 289–302; A. Cossarini, 'Unità e coerenza del *De re rustica* di Varrone', *Rendiconti dell'Accademia Scienze dell'Istituto di Bologna* 65 (1976/77), 177–97; A. Traglia, 'Le *Res Rusticae* di Varrone come opera letteraria', *Cultura e Scuola* 94 (1985), 89–97; Linderski, art. cit. (above, n. 22), pp. 113ff. – all with further references. Varro's style: J. Heurgon, *RPh* 34 (1950), 57–71; E. Laughton, *CQ* 10 (1960), 1–28.

A recent, excellent discussion of literary technique in Ciceronian dialogues is provided by J. F. G. Powell, *Cicero. Cato Maior de Senectute* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 1–23.

the dialogues, as their prefaces make clear, provides a complete and rationally organized exposition of agricultural science. But the books have more in common than crops and chickens, or even the mere fact that Varro is a participant in every conversation. Throughout the book run the common Roman themes of luxury, modern extravagance and the frugality of the past.³² Varro's humour, especially his fondness for punning, is well known, and it is a commonplace that the dryness of Varro's work is relieved by his frequent resort to laughter.³³ Jokes, however, while important to the dialogue, are not the only means by which Varro invigorated his text. The dialogues, especially the first and third books, are enlivened as well by dramatic touches: Book One opens with a casual conversation over a map of Italy displayed in the Temple of Tellus; it ends with the grim report that the priest of Tellus, for whom the assembled company was waiting, has been murdered in a case of mistaken identity. The discussion in Book Three takes place in the Villa Publica during the aedilician elections of 50 and is interrupted by news that someone has been arrested for tampering with the ballot box. A second interruption comes later when Appius, who is represented in his role as augur, is summoned away by the presiding consul. The book concludes with the announcement of the successful candidates, at which time the participants in the dialogue abandon their leisure to return to the duties of public life.³⁴ And finally, most enlivening of all, is Varro's success at characterization. Here, as Dahlmann observed, Varro perhaps excelled Cicero himself. For Varro's characters – and not only the central speakers in the work – are, while not so palpable as Plato's, nonetheless quite vivid and, in a sense, realistic.³⁵ For example, C. Fundianus, Varro's father-in-law, a character in Book One, is a stern old man with old-fashioned literary tastes who, as one would expect, sincerely champions the *mos maiorum* and trenchantly criticizes contemporary luxuriousness (3.2.5–9). In his moralistic inclinations he foreshadows, as we shall see, the posture assumed by Appius Claudius in Book Three. In addition to embracing the regimen of the past, Fundianus admits to requiring his afternoon nap (3.2.5) and complains of troubles with his feet (3.2.26). Nor is Fundianus the only 'decorative character', as Dahlmann dubs them, in *R.R.*³⁶ In Book One we also meet C. Agrius and P. Agrasius, men who, despite their names, know nothing of agriculture whatsoever (cf. e.g. 1.12.2). Indeed, Agrasius is a publican (1.2.1)! One thinks of Horace's famous second epode.³⁷

³² Cf. Noè, art. cit. (with abundant references), who also points out some of the imperfections in the overall design of *R.R. Luxuria* is also a principal theme of the *Men. Satires* and can be detected in the *Logistorici* as well, cf. Dahlmann, op. cit., 1271f.; M. G. Morgan, *Mus. Helv.* 31 (1974), 125.

³³ Schanz-Hosius, 1.573; Heurgon, *RPh* 34 (1950), 57f.; R. Martin, *Recherches sur les agronomes latins et leurs conceptions économiques et sociales* (Paris, 1971), p. 218; E. Laughton, 'Humour in Varro', in J. Collart (ed.), *Varron, grammaire antique et stylistique latine*. Sarbonne Études 15 (Paris, 1978), pp. 105–11; Traglia, art. cit. 93ff.; Linderski, art. cit. (above, n. 22), pp. 115ff.

³⁴ For the importance (and inventiveness) of Varro's settings, cf. Linderski, art. cit. (above, n. 22), pp. 115ff.

³⁵ Dahlmann, op. cit. 1189ff. Cf. also Linderski, art. cit. (above, n. 22), pp. 114ff. Varro's gift for characterization is unfairly underrated by Traglia, art. cit., 91, though he is by no means the first to do so.

³⁶ Dahlmann, op. cit. 1191 ('dekorativen Personen'). These adornments, Dahlmann notes, are lacking in Book Two.

³⁷ The names of Varro's interlocutors almost invariably involve some sort of pun ('The dialogue is a festival of puns and jokes' as Linderski, art. cit. [above, n. 22], p. 114 puts it). This allows Varro to indulge his proclivity for word-play, yet it should not for that reason be supposed that his characters are unhistorical, cf. Linderski, *ibid.*, p. 116.

Of the three dialogues, perhaps the liveliest is Book Three. This dialogue, as has been mentioned, is set during the elections of aediles in the year 50, a portentous year from the writer's perspective (in view of the civil wars, in which Varro was a participant, that were initiated in the following year), and it was also the year of Appius Claudius' censorship – the last censorship of the Roman republic. The action begins with Varro and his friend from Reate, Q. Axius, a senator probably of quaestorian rank, ducking into the Villa Publica to escape the heat of the sun.³⁸ There they find Appius, who is (true to his historical character) conscientiously playing his part as augur, waiting in readiness should his services be required.³⁹ Appius, fittingly for an expert augur, sits in the midst of a flock of friends, Cornelius Merula ('blackbird'), Fircellius Pavo ('peacock'), Minucius Pica ('magpie') and M. Petronius Passer.⁴⁰ All of which sets up Axius' first and humorous address to Appius: 'will you admit us into your aviary, where you sit amidst your birds?' Now while no one would go so far as to describe this passage as hilarious, one must nonetheless admit – and admire – the charm of the moment. And that is precisely the point of Varro's sense of humour.

We must not overlook the appropriateness of the *mise en scène*, the Villa Publica.⁴¹ As the site of the Roman census (3.2.4), it was a wholly appropriate venue for the censor Appius. Indeed, although Appius' actual censorship is not mentioned explicitly in Book Three, Varro has through his choice of setting made Appius' office a constant part of the backdrop for the entire dialogue. Furthermore, setting Book Three in the Villa Publica created the opportunity for the participants to discuss the various senses of the word *villa*: Appius responds to Axius' initial greeting with an eructative reminiscence of his recent visit to Axius' elegant Reatian villa, where he had enjoyed a sumptuous repast of fowl: 'Ille [Ap.], Ego vero, inquit, te [Axius] praesertim, quouis aves hospitales etiam nunc rector, quas mihi apposuiisti paucis ante diebus in Villa Reatina...' (3.2.3). He then goes on to contrast Axius' country estate with the Villa Publica. The latter, having been constructed by the ancestors, is 'frugalior ac melior' than Axius', not least because it is the common property of the Roman people and because it serves the needs, not of an individual, but of the *res publica*. Such old-fashioned rectitude recalls Fundianus in Book One, who likewise was critical of new-fangled overly fancy villas. It also recalls the actual public posture assumed by Appius during his censorship, a pose which drew the disgust of the thoroughly modern Caelius Rufus, but not necessarily all other Romans (since one might properly expect a degree of moralism in a Roman censor).⁴² The pretensions of Appius' speech, however, are immediately challenged by Axius, who points out to Appius how superior to anything in all of Reate are the splendid furnishings of the

³⁸ A Ciceronian literary device (cf. *De Or.* 3.18; *Leg.* 1.14; *Macrob.* 6.4.8), as Linderski, art. cit. (above, n. 22), p. 115, observes.

³⁹ Appius' religiosity is well known: e.g. *Cic. Fam.* 1.9.25; 3.4.1; *Div.* 137.

⁴⁰ It is reasonable to assume, as does Linderski, art. cit. (above, n. 22), p. 117, that the ornithologically named gentlemen in Appius' 'aviary' were *domi nobiles* cultivated by the grand patrician.

⁴¹ The Villa Publica: S. Platner and T. Ashby, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome* (Oxford, 1929), s.v.; J. van Ooteghem, *LEC* 34 (1966), 340–5; G. Tossi, *Atti dell'Istituto Veneto, Classe di Scienze Morali, Lettere ed Arti* 135 (1975/6), 413–26. Agache, art. cit., surveys the various political themes linked to the Villa Publica in the fifties (though certain of her particular interpretations of the period's coinage and of *R.R.* are highly dubious).

⁴² Caelius' disapproval: *Cic. Fam.* 8.12.1–2; 8.14.4. Granted Appius' partisanship, a severe census may nevertheless have been felt necessary at the time, cf. A. E. Astin, *JRS* 88 (1988), 30ff.; W. J. Tatum, *CPh* 85 (1990), 36–40.

Villa Publica itself,⁴³ which provokes a smile from the censor ('Appius subridens'), who then confesses with obvious irony: 'Since I do not know what a villa is, I should like you to instruct me, lest in my ignorance I blunder, for I want to buy a villa around Ostia from M. Seius' (3.2.7). Varro's Appius, plainly, is aware of the potential for humour lurking in his censorious posture, and he is alert to the tactic of irony.⁴⁴

This is the first of several exchanges involving Axius and Appius. For, while the latter has lofty pretensions, those of the former are quite mundane, if not downright gritty. Axius is thoroughly obsessed with making money: he is upset when he learns that Seius' villa is more profitable than his own (3.2.12ff.), he positively sputters when he hears of the profits to be made from a proper aviary (3.2.15); and he insists that Merula inform him not of the agricultural techniques of his ancestors, but of contemporary ones, since they are plainly more profitable (3.4.1; 3.5.1). Axius' greed is alluded to several times by several speakers including the narrator but especially by Appius: at 3.2.18 Appius jokes that Axius will feast Merula only if one of his fowls should actually turn up dead; at 3.5.8 Appius comments on Axius' eagerness to turn a profit; and at 3.16.9 he twits Axius for being bored by science and engaged only by profits.⁴⁵ It is in the context of this jocular contest that our passage must be understood.

In its own terms, our passage is clearly meant to be absurd. Appius opens as if to give an appropriate reply to Axius' query concerning the patrician's youthful *parsimonia*.⁴⁶ The final sentence, however, which relates Appius' constant fêting of guests – at which no one was denied *mulsum* – suffices to demolish all that precedes it, to render Appius' youthful abstention a mere pose, a fact that ought from the start to have halted anyone's taking this passage seriously. But self-contradiction is not the only thing ridiculous about Appius' remark. His assertion that he was rescued from poverty by the generosity of Lucullus ought also to arouse our scepticism. Lucullus' wealth – and his avarice – were proverbial.⁴⁷ And throughout *R.R.* Lucullus is constantly invoked as a paradigm for extravagant, ostentatious luxury: to Fundianus, Lucullus' villas are a bad sign of the times (1.2.10), and in Book Three he is cited, amongst other things, for the richness of his fishponds, both at 3.3.10 (with another

⁴³ There is a minor confusion here. Appius clearly contrasts the Villa Publica with Axius' estate (3.2.3). However, Axius' response ('Tua scilicet, inquit Axius, haec in campo Martio extremo utilis et non deliciis sumptuosior quam omnes omnium universae Reatinae?') has been interpreted by some to refer to a magnificent villa in the Campus Martius owned by Appius himself. It is more natural to take the phrase in reference to the site in which Appius is actually sitting, the Villa Publica itself, cf. J. Linderski, *Parola del Passato* 35 (1980), 272f. (with further bibliography). (Even if 'Tua' should be taken with extreme literalness and in consequence the reference be to a property of Appius' and not the Villa Publica, Axius' retort still has the effect of deflating Appius' pretensions.)

⁴⁴ The tension between fealty to ancestral frugality and the need for status-affirming display – each of which was in its own way a traditional value – was a real one in the late republic and one that surfaces elsewhere; cf., for instance, Cicero's contradictory statements regarding magnificent architecture (*Off.* 1.138f.; *Leg.* 3.30). On this problem see the excellent treatment by A. Wallace-Hadrill, 'The Social Structure of the Roman House', *PBSR* 56 (1988), 43–97 (esp. 44ff.).

On Roman villas, cf. A. Carandini *et al.*, *Settefinestre: Una villa schiavistica nell'Etruria romana*, Vol. 1, *La villa nel suo insieme* (Modena, 1985); H. Mielsch, *Die römische Villa. Architektur und Lebensform* (Munich, 1987). The importance of the villa for self-representation: A. Leen, *AJP* 112 (1991), 229–46.

⁴⁵ For Axius' acquisitiveness, cf. also 3.7.11; 3.16.10–11.

⁴⁶ Appius begins '... cum pauper ... essem relictus'; cf. Porphy. ad Hor. *Ep.* 2.2.119: 'paupertas etiam honestae parsimoniae nomen est'.

⁴⁷ Plut. *Luc.* 33.3f.; 38–41; *Synk. Cim. et Luc.* 1.5. In his *Life*, Plutarch strove to underplay Lucullus' luxury, cf. S. C. R. Swain, *JHS* 90 (1990), 143ff.

complaint about modern ostentation) and 3.17.9, where the description of these ponds is the final item to be discussed in the entire dialogue.⁴⁸ At the risk of placing too much significance on fishponds, it is precisely at the point in the conversation when Appius is poised to talk about fishponds that Axius interrupts to tease Appius again for his posture of old-fashioned frugality; that is, at the very point in the exposition where the opulent Lucullus would have been a central object of discussion, Axius brings up Appius' *parsimonia*.⁴⁹

Naturally there were patrician houses that lapsed into eclipse – hence the potency possessed by aspersions of bankruptcy or poverty, a pattern of abuse that left its traces in ancient biography.⁵⁰ However, outside this passage there is not the slightest hint of Claudian decline in the late republic. Quite the contrary.⁵¹ And, as we have seen, invective has no place in Varro's depiction of Appius. A different pattern is much more pertinent: Appius' youthful situation, as he describes it, finds its best parallel not in political vituperation but in New Comedy. Appius is cast as the poor-but-honest brother struggling to secure the position of his sister, while yet maintaining the family's pride: in the *Trinummus* of Plautus, Lesbonicus, despite his poverty, is absolutely unwilling to marry his sister to Lysiteles without a dowry;⁵² in the *Dyskolus* of Menander, Gorgias is determined to pay Sostratos a dowry, as Knemon had instructed him to do, and when Kallipides presses him to keep his farm intact, Gorgias yields most unhappily.⁵³ By invoking this literary pattern, Varro's Appius exchanges his frugal and censorious role for that of a helpless and needy (but proud nonetheless) *kyrios* of the popular stage. Thus by means of irony and exaggeration he successfully diverts another of Axius' humorous darts at his public persona. When a scion of the Claudii Pulchri, who were as we have observed conspicuous in the late republic for their wealth and family pride, represents himself along these obviously comic lines, especially when the warm and wealthy benefactor is Licinius Lucullus, who by the year 50 had divorced his Claudian wife amidst accusations of adultery and incest, all in an exchange of wit that is one of a series of jocular exchanges between Axius and Appius, it seems to me difficult to deny that Appius' brief tale was meant to provoke a laugh from the reader before he turns to the earnest dissertation on beekeeping. Appius' resort to irony does him no disgrace: as Aristotle put it, irony is something rather gentlemanly. Or if we must have a Roman authority, there is none

⁴⁸ For *aedificatio* as a traditionally recognized vice, cf. Wallace-Hadrill, art. cit., 44f. Further references to Lucullus' luxury: 1.2.10; 1.13.7; 3.2.17; 3.4.3. Cf. also Cic. *Off.* 138f.; *Leg.* 3.30; Vell. Pat. 2.33.4; Nicolaus, *FGrHist* 90 F 77ab; Pliny, *N.H.* 35.118; Plut. *Cato Min.* 19.8; *Pomp.* 2.12; *Marius* 34.4. Lucullus' opulent Tusculan villa is discussed by van Ooteghem, op. cit. (above, n. 1), pp. 183ff.

⁴⁹ In fact, the discussion of fishponds – and Lucullus – will be postponed until Appius and Merula depart to congratulate their successful aedilician candidate (3.17.1).

⁵⁰ Thus Plutarch's (inaccurate) treatment of Sulla's youth (*Sull.* 1–2), cf. L. E. Reams, *AJAH* 9 (1984), 158–74.

⁵¹ 'There was no epoch in Rome's history but could boast a Claudius' (R. Syme, *The Roman Revolution* [Oxford, 1939], p. 19). From Varro's perspective, who published *R.R.* in 37 (in his eightieth year, cf. 1.1.1), the consul of 38 (namely Ap. Claudius C. f. Pulcher) was proof enough of the continuity of Claudian clout. On the Claudii Pulchri during the triumviral period and the early Principate, cf. T. P. Wiseman, *Roman Studies* (Liverpool, 1987), pp. 42–56; R. Syme, op. cit. (n. 2, above), pp. 148f. (a critique of Wiseman). The formidable impediments to a family's continuous political success are discussed in K. Hopkins, *Death and Renewal* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 74ff.

⁵² *Trinum.* 690ff.; whether this aspect of the plot is due to Plautus or Philemon is unimportant here since Varro will have expected his readers to recognize the literary pattern be it Greek or Latin. Cf. also Euclio in *Aul.* 220ff., who (owing to the demands of self-respect) is opposed to marrying his daughter to Megadorus, who is rich.

⁵³ Men. *Dysk.* 828ff.

better than Cicero's Atticus, who in the *Brutus* describes irony of the type here instantiated by Appius as witty and elegant.⁵⁴ In short, Appius' response to Axius' needling is urbane, sophisticated and most entertaining.

Moreover, it is wholly appropriate to Varro's learned wit. Varro's scholarly familiarity with drama is too well known to require elaboration here, and the extent to which Varro infused all his writings with allusions to the theatre has recently been subjected to exhaustive study by A. Pociña Perez.⁵⁵ Consequently, Appius' employment of a comic motif in his exchange with Axius should occasion no surprise. And if T. P. Wiseman is even only partly correct in his argument for especial Claudian patronage of the theatre during the lifetime of Appius and his siblings, then we may see here another instance of Varro's marked concern to tailor the subject-matter of a character's discourse to his historical personality.⁵⁶

Thus probability and literary appreciation conspire to deny the literal veracity of Appius' admission of his youthful poverty. Whatever the historical particulars of Appius' adolescent finances or of Clodia's endowment, they are irrecoverable from this passage owing to its extreme literariness. One has to do with an ironic fiction crafted to reprise *R.R.*'s steady theme of *luxuria* and to continue the comic contest between the relatively earthy Axius and his more elevated patrician friend. In short, it is a fine specimen of appropriate humour. That this has not been fully recognized hitherto is largely due to the perhaps understandable neglect paid to the artistic aspects of *R.R.* as well as to our certainly understandable hunger for every possible fact that we can pluck from the ancient record. But, however delicious the rags to riches story of an Appius Claudius may be, we should not swallow it. Varro's text provides no evidence for Claudian poverty in the seventies. And however quiescent the mental powers of the historian, they are not quite so fainéant as to tolerate the confusion of Varro's literary inventiveness with genuinely historical data.⁵⁷

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⁵⁴ Arist. *Rhet.* 3.1419b (for further discussion of Aristotle's conception of irony cf. P. W. Gooch, *Phoenix* 41 [1987], 95–104); Cic. *Brut.* 292ff. Jokes about one's own conceits, including jokes regarding money and the lack of it, were not uncommon in the refined versification of the 'neoterics', cf. Stampacchia, art. cit.

⁵⁵ Schanz-Hosius 1.563ff.; A. Pociña Perez, 'Varrón y el teatro latino', *Durius* 3 (1975), 291–321.

⁵⁶ The Claudii Pulchri and the theatre: Wiseman, op. cit. (above, n. 3), pp. 26–38; Wiseman's focus is on Clodia Metelli and Clodius Pulcher, but I do not gather that he would exclude Appius. The relevance of a character's personality to his lines: Linderski, art. cit. (above, n. 22), 114ff. Varro went to great pains (including a recherché Sabine pun in the name of one of Appius' companions) to guarantee Appius' appropriateness in his dialogue, cf. Linderski, *ibid.*, 116f. and 124.

⁵⁷ I am very grateful to Jerzy Linderski for sharing with me his views on this paper. This is not to implicate him in any of my arguments or their conclusions.