

CRUCIALLY FUNNY OR TRANIO ON THE COUCH: THE *SERVUS CALLIDUS* AND JOKES ABOUT TORTURE

HOLT PARKER

The University of Arizona

“Ego vero, inquit, omni de re facietius puto posse ab homine non inurbano quam de ipsis facietius disputari.” With this salutary warning by Caesar Strabo in Cicero’s *De Oratore* (2.54), I wish to pose the question: What’s so funny about crucifixion? Even the casual reader of Plautus must be impressed by the frequency and preponderance of jokes about the torture of slaves, the more so as this is a feature found very seldom in Greek New Comedy or in Terence.¹ There is a certain amount of slave beating in Old Comedy,² but nothing approaching the frequency, variety, and detailed vocabulary of torture that Plautus shows.³ As Barsby observes, “Whereas Plautus refers to the beating of slaves repeatedly ...and has an array of colourful expressions to describe it...by comparison the references to slave punishments of any kind in both Menander and Terence are few and unremarkable.”⁴ Duckworth goes to some lengths to minimize this strange and apparently distressing facet of Plautine comedy, and claims: “But the cunning slaves are in a minority and the instances of ill-treatment are extremely few.”⁵ This statement must be modified. There are no instances of the actual torture of slaves, on or off stage.⁶ If, however, Duckworth was referring to merely the threat of torture, then Erich Segal is certainly correct when he writes: “Torture is mentioned so often in Plautus that it may well be called an obsession—on the part of the playwright as well as his characters.”⁷

The large number of the threats of torture, and their failure to be carried out, has been frequently noted by scholars, yet they have offered little in the way of explanation. Legrand is merely indignant: “[Pseudolus’] impudence goes too far,

¹ Though not apparently Naevius, cf. *com.* 7, 8, 11 (where *tax pax* is onomatopoeic for the sound of blows), 93, the title *Stigmatias*, and unassigned frg. 15–17. So too, Ennius frg. 382. For threats in Terence, cf. *And.* 196–99, but contrast *Ad.* 159, 168–74, where the slave (Parmeno) delivers the beating to the pimp (Sannio).

² E.g. the parabasis to the *Peace* includes jokes about beating runaway slaves as part of the old fashioned material Aristophanes has banished (742–47), though he is not above using them in the prologue to the *Knights*; cf. *Wasps* 1292–93, and the one scene actually on stage at *Frogs* 616ff., where Xanthias and Dionysus are beaten together. Cf. the use of the term *μαστιγίας* at *Ar. Kn.* 1228, *Frogs* 501; even in Menander: *Dys.* 473, *Perik.* 134.

³ Among the many instances, *As.* 545–51 can be singled out as providing a detailed list, and *Epid.* 121, 311, 625–26, as providing various phrases for beatings. For a complete list, see Peter P. Spranger, *Historische Untersuchung zu den Sklavenfiguren des Plautus und Terenz*, 2 ed. (Stuttgart 1984) 84–86.

⁴ John Barsby, *Plautus: Bacchides* (Oak Park, Ill. 1986) 126 ad v. 365.

⁵ George E. Duckworth, *The Nature of Roman Comedy: A Study in Popular Entertainment* (Princeton 1952) 288.

⁶ The cases of blows on and off stage will be dealt with below. However, clever slaves are never even beaten for being clever.

⁷ Erich Segal, *Roman Laughter: The Comedy of Plautus* (Cambridge 1968) 140.

and I think a master...would have replied to such impertinent talk with a whip" and "Such misdeeds [as Epidicus'] call for punishment."⁸ Dunkin reverses the causality and pictures the Plautine slave as "a man driven to cunning by ill-treatment" and as "the victim of an oppressive capitalist system"⁹. Whatever one may think of the application of Marxist analysis to pre-industrial and indeed pre-capitalist societies,¹⁰ Dunkin plainly did not get the joke and was rightly and extensively criticized by Duckworth.¹¹ Duckworth himself is curiously unhelpful and merely says: "But such threats [as *Pseud.* 497–98] are primarily for humor and are seldom fulfilled," and "Angry threats such as these are not to be taken seriously. They are more useful in portraying the comic aspect of a young man's impatience or an old man's wrath than in throwing light on the relations of master and slave in antiquity."¹² Again, Duckworth is correct if he means that Plautus is not a reliable source for Roman social history. Yet to say that jokes are meant to be funny is not very illuminating. It is easy just to dismiss these as examples of Plautus' bad taste, the dead baby jokes of antiquity, and let them go at that. Yet, what things a society finds funny and why it finds them funny can be very illuminating, and the Roman jokes about torture clearly do more in the plays than merely aid in characterization.

Among those who have addressed the question at all, Erich Segal goes the furthest in providing a convincing answer. He emphasizes the Saturnalian aspects of Roman comedy, the freedom for a day from the normal constraints, and applies to this Bergson's idea of comedy as a *monde renversé*.¹³ Segal writes:

Part of the special pleasure which the Roman spectator derived from watching a rascally Pseudolous go unpunished was due, to a great extent, to his awareness of what would happen under normal circumstances...All the torture talk serves as a deliberate foil to emphasize what will *not* happen during today's comedy.¹⁴

This is certainly a partial answer. To restate Segal's thesis, the threats are there precisely in order *not* to be carried out. They remind the audience of the

⁸ Philippe Legrand, *The New Greek Comedy*, trans. James Loeb (London 1917) 240 and 455.

⁹ P. S. Dunkin, *Post-Aristophanic Comedy: Studies in the Social Outlook of Middle and New Comedy at Both Athens and Rome* (Urbana 1946) 86 and 104.

¹⁰ See the excellent survey and bibliography with special reference to the problem of slavery in T. E. J. Wiedemann's *Slavery: Greece and Rome, New Surveys in the Classics*, No. 19 (Oxford 1987), esp. 4–9 and notes. See also two articles in the special volume of *Arethusa* 8 (1975) devoted to *Marxism and the Classics*, David Konstan, "Marxism and Roman Slavery," 145–69, and Robert A. Padgug, "Select Bibliography on Marxism and the Study of Antiquity," 201–25, esp. 216–17. For the "Asiatic Mode of Production" specifically, see reff. in Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (Cambridge 1978) 99 note 2. Marx's own remarks in *Pre-capitalistic Economic Formations* (London 1964) do not encourage the pursuit.

¹¹ Duckworth (above, note 5) 31n, 217, 236n, 237n, 248, 250n, 258n, 274, 288, 289n, 323n; see index, s.v. Dunkin.

¹² Duckworth (above, note 5) 251 and 289; cf. Spranger (above, note 3) 48.

¹³ Henri Bergson, "Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic," trans. by Cloudsley Brereton and Fred Rothwell in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (New York 1956) 121. Segal also draws on C. L. Barber's seminal *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (New York 1963).

¹⁴ Segal (above, note 7) 144 and 147.

real world and the flouting of conventional practice. Yet, the main question has been left untouched. There are many aspects of normal Roman life and the life of slaves that could have served as a basis for comic reversal. Why is the torture of the slaves singled out and singled out so repeatedly? A further quotation from Segal may serve to isolate the areas in which his answer is inadequate:

But the most significant single feature of Plautine comedy is the very fact that the lowly slaves who are so readily tortured and beaten in real life can go "too far" with impunity. The licence to go "too far" is the essence of both the comic and the festival spirit. The most obvious (and most valid) reply to those who wonder why Plautus' rogues go unpunished is quite simply that the spectators wished it so.¹⁵

The question, however, remains: Why did they wish it so? An answer, I believe, involves examining two separate problems. The first question is why the threats are there at all, what comic purpose does the uttering of these threats of torture and crucifixion serve. The second is why, once the threats are made, they are not carried out. I want to bring to bear on each of these questions certain well known facts of Roman social history. I also intend to examine these two questions within a Freudian framework; not because I am convinced that Freudian psychology has discovered the eternal truths of the human mind, nor because I believe his analysis of humor is exhaustive and all-encompassing, but because it seems to me to offer the greatest number of valuable insights into the nature of humor and to delineate most clearly precise mechanisms of the comic.¹⁶

Let us consider the first question: Why are these threats of torture made at all? Segal has pointed out one factor: "Plautine comedy may be viewed as 'real Roman life' turned topsy-turvy."¹⁷ However, further insight can be gained. One principal source of comedy, as noted by Freud and others can be succinctly stated as, "We mock what we fear." An object of fear is brought forth from the dark places of the mind and exhibited in the full light of the sun, for everyone to see and jeer at, on the stage of the mind or of the city itself. There under the healing rays, it seems less terrible and because it can be surrounded by, and associated with, ludicrous objects or situations, it can be flouted and so rendered less dreadful. Freud, in distinguishing Wit, Comedy, and Humor (a distinction to which I will return shortly), defines Humor as "an economy of expenditure in feeling,"¹⁸ and notes, "Humor is thus a means to gain pleasure despite the painful affects which disturb it; it acts as a substitute for this affective development, and takes its place."¹⁹ That is, in Grotjahn's formulation, "Humor originates when painful emotions are stimulated and an attempt at suppression is

¹⁵ Segal (above, note 7) 144.

¹⁶ Here I am following Amy Richlin in applying certain elements of Freudian analysis to illuminate Roman Satire in *The Garden of Priapus* (New Haven 1983).

¹⁷ Segal (above, note 7) 141.

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious* in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. with an introduction by A. A. Brill (New York 1938). That Freud's theory of comedy depends on a peculiarly mechanical and Victorian view of psychic energy, as if emotions were analogous to hydraulic pressure, need not detain us, any more than the medical origins of Aristotle's notion of catharsis.

¹⁹ Freud (above, note 18) 797.

initiated but proves unnecessary."²⁰ Freud notes the ease of application of this idea to the grim jokes of *Galgenhumor*, and indeed most of his illustrations come from this field. In *Galgenhumor*, we are faced with a fearful situation. In anticipation, we prepare to rouse the emotions of pity for the victim and terror at the circumstances.²¹ However, at the last minute we are reprieved by the punchline, which deprecates and mocks the terrifying situation and shows the superiority (or at least indifference) of the person to the thing. A famous example is Wilhelm Busch's poem "Es sitzt ein Vogel auf dem Leim," in which the trapped bird, seeing the cat already on its way, decides to continue singing for the brief time it has. Busch, a master of *Galgenhumor*, whom Freud was very fond of quoting, concludes: "Der Vogel, schient mir, hat Humor." Perhaps the best formulation of this aspect of humor comes not from Freud but from Proust, who writes, "The things about which we most often jest are generally, on the contrary, the things that worry us but that we do not wish to appear to be worried by, with perhaps a secret hope of the further advantage that the person to whom we are talking, hearing us treat the matter as a joke, will conclude that it is not true."²² In our own society, one may note the sharp increase in recent years of "horror jokes" (tasteless jokes about AIDS, cancer, or terrorism). One of the reasons we all laugh (perhaps to our shame) at such jokes, is that they allow us to dispel some of our immense fear of random harm or death. Though these jokes are unsuitable to an academic journal, they will be of the greatest value to future cultural historians in showing exactly what things we were most afraid of, perhaps unknowingly.

For the Roman, the free slave was the most terrifying of oxymorons. Seneca quotes the famous proverb "totidem hostes esse quot servos" (*Ep.* 47.5),²³ and the speech Tacitus gives to Gaius Cassius, following the murder of Pedianus Secundus by one of his slaves, represents at least a portion of Roman sentiment (*Ann.* 14.44): "conluviem istam non nisi metu coercueris."²⁴ The Roman of Plautus' age had good reason to fear his slaves. Roman society had

²⁰ Martin Grotjahn, *Beyond Laughter: Humor and the Subconscious* (New York 1957) 18. Freud on humor has been neglected, and Grotjahn's work remains one of the most recent as well as clearest explications of the psychoanalytic theory of humor.

²¹ The extent to which Freud's theory of humor resembles a type of anti-Aristotelianism is notable. That is, Freud represents comedy and tragedy equally as agents for the purgation (*abreaction*) of the emotions of both pity and terror; see Freud (above, note 18) 797-803 and his 1927 article "Humor," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey with Anna Freud (London 1964) Vol. 21, 160-66. Comedy and tragedy differ not in their objects, i.e. the emotions they release, as they do for Aristotle (see Richard Janko, *Aristotle on Comedy: Towards a reconstruction of Poetics II* [London 1984] 136-51), but rather in the mechanisms they use to effect this release. Freud's comedy resembles Aristotle's tragedy. Both release pity and terror by means of pity and terror.

²² Marcel Proust, *The Captive*, trans. by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York 1981) 24 = Édition Pléiade III, 31. Cf. Suet. *Vesp.* 23.1.

²³ As do Festus (314L) and Macrobius (*Sat.* 1.11.13; following Seneca).

²⁴ See I. Kajanto, "Tacitus and the Slaves," *Arctos* 6 (1970) 43-60. K. R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire. A Study in Social Control* (Brussels 1984), argues that the Roman slave system amounted to an organized and systematic terror necessary to prevent wholesale revolt. However, for a more balanced view, see Hermann Strassberger, *Zum antiken Gesellschaftsideal* (Heidelberg 1976).

undergone and was undergoing profound changes. The facts are too well known to require more than a brief mention here. During Plautus' lifetime (c. 250–c. 184)²⁵, Rome was engaged in the First Punic War (264–241), the acquisition of Sardinia (238), the First and Second Illyrian Wars (229–28, 219), the Second Punic War (218–201), The First and Second Macedonian Wars (215–205, 200–196), and the War against Antiochus III (192–89), besides various wars in the north against Gauls of one tribe or another. Each of these conquests resulted in a massive influx of slaves, and the transformation of the Italian countryside by the rise of the *latifundia*.²⁶ Precise figures are not to be found, and scholarly estimates vary, but one may point to the long and detailed list of incidents given by Toynbee.²⁷ Erich S. Gruen's discussion may serve as an overview:

The spoils of war included the grimmest of commodities: human beings. The influx of slaves into Italy reached massive proportions in the third and second centuries. Total figures are impossible to come by, but there is no question that the era of the Punic Wars witnessed a sharp jump in the number of slaves imported; war and the activities of the slave mart kept the process going throughout most of the second century. The largest portion in the third century naturally came from the West, as war captives from Sicily, Spain, Africa, and Gaul. Fighting in the East, however, produced an increasingly large share during the second century.²⁸

Adding to the anxiety was the fact that “during the Hannibalic War, one in every two citizens of military age was mobilized...and that is inexplicable, indeed unthinkable, without the presence in the labour force of large numbers of slaves and of a well established system of slave labour.”²⁹ Even after the Second Punic War, the number and percentage of adult male citizens under arms and away from their homes or even absent from Italy for periods of seven years or more (Livy 40.36.10) continued almost unabated.³⁰

The absence of adult male citizens as soldiers and the massive influx of slaves made a rebellion a constant possibility. This possibility erupted into actuality on no less than four occasions during Plautus' adult life. The first we know of occurred in 217 (Livy 22.33.2), when twenty-five slaves were detected with the help of an informer in a conspiracy on the Campus Martius, and were crucified. Significantly, this is the first mention of crucifixion in the Roman historical record. In 198 (Livy 32.26.4–18 and Zon. 9.16.6), there occurred a slave insurrection at Sestia, fomented by Carthaginian captives. The notice in Livy is confused and it is not clear how far the rebellion spread or whether they

²⁵ For an evaluation of the evidence, see Martin Drury in *Cambridge History of Classical Literature* II (Cambridge 1982), 808–9.

²⁶ This is of course a historical and sociological problem of the greatest complexity. For detailed studies, see *in primis*, P. A. Brunt, *Italian Manpower 225 BC–AD 14* (Oxford 1971), H. Volkmann, *Die Massenversklavungen der Einwohner eroberter Städte in hellenistisch-römischen Zeit* (Mainz 1961), esp. 14–71, 110–118, and Hopkins (above, note 10) 8–14, 48–56, 99–132.

²⁷ A. J. Toynbee, *Hannibal's Legacy* (Oxford 1965) 171–72; cf. Brunt (above, note 26) 67 n. 2.

²⁸ Erich S. Gruen, *The Hellenistic World and the Coming of Rome* (Berkeley 1984) I, 295.

²⁹ M. I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (London 1984); cf. P. A. Brunt, *Social Conflicts in the Roman Republic* (London 1971) 18–19.

³⁰ For figures, see Brunt, 424ff., and Hopkins (above, note 10) 31–35 and Table 1.1 (p. 33).

were successful in capturing Sestia. The rebellion was crushed, the slaves fled and some two thousand were executed. Remnants of the conspiracy then attempted to seize Praeneste. They also were defeated and some five hundred executed. There was considerable alarm at Rome. Patrols of the streets and prisons were increased and the captives were loaded with chains specified as weighing not less than ten pounds. Two years later in 196, there was a slave rebellion in Etruria (Livy 33.36.1–3). Again the text is lacunose, but the conspiracy required a full legion to subdue it, and the leaders were whipped and then crucified.³¹ Finally, in 185 there was a rebellion among the slaves of Apulia, where the shepherds had taken to banditry (Livy 39.29.8–10). Some seven thousand were condemned to death, though many escaped.³²

It is against this background that the jokes about torture in Plautus must be seen. For all the laughable freedom of a disobedient Tranio or Pseudolus, the vast number of references to punishment constantly remind the audience of the absolute power of life and death it holds over these slaves. Further, it is the clever slaves themselves who say these comfortable words to the audience.³³ The *servi callidi* go out of their way to point out that they were punished yesterday (e.g. Sosia, *Am.* 446; Libanus, *As.* 551; Leonida, *As.* 564–65; Sagaristio, *Per.* 270–71) and will be tomorrow (e.g. Tranio, *Most.* 1178; Chrysalus, *Bacch.* 361–62). It is only today, while the Saturnalian spirit reigns, that they hope to get off.³⁴ A particularly fine example of the slaves comforting the audience with reminders of the power it holds over them is *Cist.* 785: “qui deliquit vapulabit, qui non deliquit bibet.” This excellent bit of metatheatricity has been taken, perhaps uncritically, as indicating the servile status of all actors. While there is evidence that some actors at least in Plautus’ time may have been citizens or freedmen, the point of these lines and the assumption that underlies them is unchanged.³⁵ The troupe of actors consists of slaves and their master

³¹ For the events of 198 and 196, see M. Capozza, *Movimenti servili nel mondo romano in età repubblicana* (Rome 1966). For a discussion of the problems of interpretation, see A. B. Bosworth’s review of the above, *JRS* 58 (1968) 272–74.

³² For banditry as a sociological phenomenon and its relation to slavery, see Weidemann (above, note 10) 49; J. Vogt, “Zum Experiment des Drimakos: Sklavenhaltung und Räberstand,” *Saeculum* 24 (1973) 213–19 = *Sklaverei und Humanität. Ergänzungsheft* (Wiesbaden 1983) 28–35; M. Fuks, “Slave War and Slave Troubles in Chios in the Third Century B.C.,” *Athenaeum* 46 (1968) 102–111.

³³ Segal (above, note 7) 141: “Few critics have noticed that even the characters within the plays are themselves cognizant of the real-life situation. By harping, as they do repeatedly, on the beatings that they intend to inflict or hope to avoid, they are acknowledging the everyday standards of right and wrong.”

³⁴ Again, rightly emphasized by Segal, 161.

³⁵ Thus, Margarete Bieber in *The History of the Greek and Roman Stage* (Princeton 1961) 161 writes, “As the actors were often slaves, they could be made subject to strict discipline and were even beaten if they did not perform satisfactorily,” citing *Cist.* 785. Duckworth warns, “It is unwise to stress a jesting passage unduly,” (above, note 5) 75. However, since these lines occur outside the fictive setting of the play, neither can they be simply discounted. Duckworth (*ibid.*) points to the honors given the *collegium poetarum* as indicating non-servile status of the least some actors, but this rests on Festus and similar late testimonia and proves nothing for Plautus’ age. W. Beare hedges: “The very fact that actors were organized into a troupe under a dominus suggests something not far removed from slave status,” *The Roman Stage* (3. ed., London 1964), 167. See

can beat them or not, according to how well they have acted. Thus, the splendid paradox where an uppity slave may be punished for not acting enough like an uppity slave, if it so please (or fail to please) the audience.

Two points need to be made about crucifixion specifically, as the culmination of the gamut of possible tortures. Crucifixion is not just another of the punishments with which a slave is threatened, which include other ways of being put to death.³⁶ It is the *supplicium servile*, par excellence (cf. Tac. *Hist.* 4.11).³⁷ Barsby, citing some of the instances of wholesale crucifixion, writes, "But these are cases of slave rebellions, not of domestic misbehavior, and it must be doubted that crucifixion was a real-life punishment for domestic slaves in Plautus' day."³⁸ There is no doubt that the jokes about crucifixion are intended as exaggeration. The *senex iratus* huffs and puffs, but then a few lines later lets the slave off.³⁹ However, there is equally no doubt that behind these jokes lay a definite and hideous social reality. Until very late in the Christian era, the law placed few restrictions on the punishments that a master might inflict on a slave.⁴⁰ For public contractors, we have a very precise decree specifying the details of crucifixion of condemned slaves.⁴¹ There is no evidence for Plautus' own day for the crucifixion of domestic slaves, since the historians were only infrequently interested in household matters. However, for a period only shortly thereafter, Cicero's *Pro Cluentio* (185) vividly describes Sassia's torture, mutilation and crucifixion of her slave doctor, Nicostratus.

Secondly, crucifixion is a specifically Roman punishment. It is not mentioned in Menander and is virtually unknown in the Greek world, where it was never used as a slave punishment.⁴² The Romans picked it up from the Carthaginians (Polyb. 1.11.5, Livy 22.13.9) and, as was pointed out, applied it first to rebellious slaves. Crucifixion is therefore another of the illusion-breaking Roman references and practices with which Plautus decorates his

also, E. J. Jory, "Associations of Actors in Rome," *Hermes* 98 (1970) 224–53 and N. Horsfall, "The Collegium Poetarum," *BICS* 23 (1976) 79–95. Good evidence that at least one actor on the stage was of citizen status is the inference from *Bacch.* 213–15 that Titus Publius Pellio, the manager, acted the part of Epidicus; see Barsby (above, note 4) 115 ad loc. This, however, does not change the fact of *Cist.* 785, whose only possible reading is that the *caterva histrionum* are slaves.

³⁶ Tranio, e.g., is threatened with being burned alive and whipped to death (*Most.* 1114, 1167–68).

³⁷ But as John Crook points out not confined to slaves: *Law and Life of Rome, 90 B.C.–A.D. 212* (Ithaca 1967) 273; cf. Cic. *II in Verrem* 5.161–64. See M. Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World* (London 1977) passim.

³⁸ Barsby (above, note 4) 126.

³⁹ To Legrand's apparent personal dissatisfaction, "Slaves guilty of all sorts of rascality are usually pardoned or forgotten...contrary to justice," (above, note 8) 455.

⁴⁰ Even then it is only certain specific modes of punishment (such as being sold to fight wild beasts: *Dig.* 18.1.42, 48.8.11) that are interdicted. Constantine upholds the right of a master to beat or whip to death a slave in the course of just punishment (*Cod. Theod.* 9.12.1). We find Hadrian upholding the *SC Silanianum*, whereby all slaves under the same roof where their master has been killed must be executed (*Dig.* 29.5.28; cf. Tac. *Ann.* 14.44, cited above).

⁴¹ *AE* 1971, no. 88.

⁴² Hdt. 9.120 is a rare exception. See Barsby (above, note 4) 126.

ostensibly Greek stage.⁴³ This feature plays an important role in the functioning of the plays. The scene is Athens, the misbehavior of the slaves is Athenian, for which they ask the indulgence of the Athenian license. So, Stichus' famous lines (*St.* 446–48):

atque id ne vos miremini, hominis servolos
potare, amare atque ad cenam condicere:
licet haec Athenis nobis.⁴⁴

Cf. Donatus' famous comment on Terence *Eun.* 57: "Concessum est in palliata poetis comicis servos dominis sapientiores fingere, quod idem in togata non fere licet." As Williams notes, "In *fabulae togatae* Roman poets created a form of literature in which the slave-role was not merely a burlesque or a vehicle of boisterous comedy, as it normally is in Plautus,⁴⁵ but may have had a more serious nature. This will have been forced on the poets by the fact that in writing *togata* they had to forgo the unreal world of the imagination, in which *palliata* operated, for a real and Roman world."⁴⁶

But the punishment of the slaves' misbehavior is distinctly and markedly Roman. Greek slaves might be beaten, even sent to the mills,⁴⁷ but only Roman slaves were crucified. At Athens slaves may live it up, but at Rome they'll have to live it down. The crucifixion jokes, therefore, confirm the Roman audience in its sense of superiority and power. They serve to remind the audience of the servile nature of the characters, as well as the actors who perform them, and of the absolute and everyday nature of the power that the audience wields over them.

Turning now to the second question: Why are these threats then never carried out? Why isn't the slave, who disrupts the social order, who humiliates and cozzens the *senex*, whipped off the stage? Again, it would be possible to give a simplistic answer, that torture on the stage just isn't funny. Theopropides can no more hit Tranio than Ralph in the television series *The Honeymooners* can hit Alice.⁴⁸ But this is clearly inadequate, as it does not address the problem of why these particular unfulfilled threats are funny. The Romans had no objections to public torture and execution in everyday life, much less mere beatings and only the mimesis of beatings at that. Nor did Romans of a later age object to actual crucifixion on stage (*Suet. Cal.* 57). The question remains, why is beating an uppity slave not funny?

It is important first to note that not all threats are unfulfilled and that beatings on and off the stage do in fact occur in Plautus, and second to note who does get beaten. In the absence of stage directions, it is impossible to be certain how realistically the language in these plays was interpreted, but as examples of

⁴³ On this aspect of Plautus, usually avoided by Terence, see Duckworth (above, note 5) v, 136, 272, 298–99, 385; Gordon Williams, *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry* (Oxford 1968) 285–95.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Cas.* 67–78 and the frequent joke of *pergraecari, congraecari*.

⁴⁵ The primary exception, of course, is the *Captivi*.

⁴⁶ Williams (above, note 43) 295.

⁴⁷ For beatings, see note 2; for the mills, cf. *Men. Her.* 3.

⁴⁸ The comparison is frivolously made, but instructive. Ralph's constant threats of domestic violence are only funny because the audience knows they will never be carried out and that Alice's calm irony in the face of her husband's blowhard bluster will continue unabated. Yet we have no objection to physical, even violent, comedy as such and enjoy watching Punch and Judy or the Three Stooges bash each other about the head and shoulders.

slapstick one can point to Sosia (*Amph.* 370ff.), the exchange of blows by Olympio and Chalinus (*Cas.* 405ff.), and perhaps Milphio (*Poen.* 351).⁴⁹ Others are Labrax (*Rud.* 656–62, 868–84), Dordalus (*Per.* 809ff.), and Pyrgopolynices (*Mil.* 1402). The characters then who actually do get beaten are the good (i.e. cowardly or stupid) slaves, and the pimps and braggarts, that is, the enemies of the *servus callidus* and the *adulescens*. These are the figures whom Northrop Frye calls “blocking characters” and whom Erich Segal terms “agelasts.”⁵⁰ It is these figures who are not integrated into society, who like Malvolio, refuse the cakes and ale. For these characters, who refuse or pervert the blessings of the libido, punishment is fitting. It is right that at the double wedding which ends *Much Ado About Nothing*, Benedick should say of Don John, the bastard, “Think not on him till tomorrow: I’ll devise thee brave punishments for him” (V.iv.129–30).

There is a deep connection therefore, as Frye and others have pointed out, between punishment and reintegration into the social order. It is simple to say that comedy as a genre requires a happy ending with a reconciliation. This clearly applies to the *servus callidus* in Plautus, since the social order is not disturbed, or rather, is disturbed only momentarily. The plays end, often due to the very machinations of the slave, with marriage and legitimate children, the son and the father in harmony again, and the slave still a slave. In Plautus, the clever slave acts out of good will for the young master, and from sheer love of mischief (e.g. *Epid.* 348). As Segal correctly notes, “Contrary to a widely held notion, the clever slave does not even desire manumission.”⁵¹ Out of all the Plautine slaves, only a handful gain their freedom, a significant difference between Broadway and Rome. They are the clever Epidicus, to whom Periphanes enthusiastically grants his manumission unasked for; the loyal Messenio in the *Menaechmi*; the dumb but lucky Gripus in the *Rudens*; and in that play of remarkable reconciliation, with its Greek Romance setting, the clever Trachalio who even gets the girl Ampelisca.

However, why should the clever slave be the one reunited and reintegrated into Roman society? His plots have not been directed only against the outsiders, the blocking characters, but against the father himself. Duckworth says, “The slaves who lie and cheat, on the other hand, do not actually undergo punishment. Of course, when the intrigue is directed against a pompous soldier or a rascally *leno*, the slave’s machinations have the approval of the other characters and the sympathy of the spectators. Such trickery is successful and there is no question of punishment. It is different when the *senex* is the object of the deception.”⁵² Yet, the clever slave still goes unpunished even when he plots against the father. The reason for this is clear: the *senex*, of course, is also a blocking character, standing between the young man and his desires, sometimes a rival for the object of his desires. It is the slave who “unblocks” him, and who for exactly that reason has the approval of the other characters and the sympathy of the spectators.

⁴⁹ The carrying off of Menaechmus I (*Men.* 996ff.) is in a different category.

⁵⁰ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton 1957) 163–69. Segal (above, note 7) 70, borrowing an uneuphonious term from Meredith, who borrowed it from Rabelais, who borrowed it from Cicero (*Fin.* 5.92; cf. *Tusc.* 3.31), who borrowed it from Lucilius, who got it from the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (2.200).

⁵¹ Segal (above, note 7) 164; see also 165–69.

⁵² Duckworth (above, note 5) 288.

The reasons for our sympathy with the *servus callidus* are well illustrated by Aristotle. In analyzing the superiority of the plot of tragedy to that of comedy, Aristotle argues from an impossibility (*Poet.* 13; 1452a11–13):

The second best, which is called first by some, is the plot which has a two-fold plot, such as the *Odyssey*, and ends in opposite ways for the better (βελτίοσι) and for the worse (χειρόσιν) people. It only seems to be the first because of the weakness (ἀσθένειαν) of the theater; for the poets follow the audience, acting according to their wish (κατ' εὐχὴν). But this is not the pleasure of tragedy, but rather the characteristic of comedy: for there those who are the greatest enemies (ἐχθιστοί) in the story, such as Orestes and Aegisthus, become friends at the end, go off and no one is killed by anybody.

If the reconciliation of slave and master is not an impossibility, it is because they are not dire enemies (ἐχθιστοί). If the audience wishes (κατ' εὐχὴν) for Tranio to be forgiven at the end of the *Mostellaria*, it is because he is one of the better people (βελτίοσι). If we find him humorous, it is because we find him worthy of, and superior to, our sympathy (ἀσθένειαν). Most importantly, the reason we find the *servus callidus* sympathetic, is because he is in large measure a figure for the *adulescens* himself.

Again, certain well known facts of Roman social history can aid in supporting this idea. Unlike slavery in the Americas, no outward sign of race distinguished slave from free in Rome or Greece. Slaves were not even distinguished by dress.⁵³ On the farms, sons and slaves were brought up side by side, performing the same tasks. They differed less in their present circumstances than in their expectations. Several pieces of anecdotal information contribute to this picture. Plutarch records how even Cato the Elder had his wife suckle and raise the slave children together with their son "so as to encourage brotherly feelings in them towards her own son."⁵⁴ Gaius Cassius (Tacitus *Ann.* 14.44) spoke of "slaves, born in the same fields or houses, and who received right from the start affection for their masters."⁵⁵ Seneca, on an inspection tour of one of his country estates, sees a decrepit doorkeeper, who reminds him that they were brought up together, calling himself Seneca's *delicium* 'playfellow' (*Ep.* 12.3).⁵⁶

In particular, the relation between son and *paedagogos* was particularly close, and even the law acknowledged its special nature. So Gaius (1.19) recognizes as a just reason for manumission a man freeing his natural children, a sibling, a foster child (*alumnus*), a slave girl for marriage or his *paedagogos*, thus placing this relationship on a par with other familial ties. Cf. 1.39 where the relations of father, mother, *paedagogos* or "someone who has been brought up with him" are reasons for manumission before the age of thirty or by a

⁵³ Lest they see how numerous they were, according to Seneca (*Clem.* 1.24); cf. App. *BC.* 2.17.

⁵⁴ *Cato Major* 20.3, translated by Ian Scott-Kilvert, *Plutarch: Makers of Rome* (Harmondworth 1965) 141. For his view on the treatment of slaves, see Plut. *Cat. Major* 4.4, 21; *Cato Agr.* 2.

⁵⁵ See above, and note 24. He said, however, that the intentions of even these slaves were rightly held suspect by the ancestors.

⁵⁶ "at ille 'non cognoscis me?' inquit. 'ego sum Felicio, cui solebas sigillaria afferre. ego sum Philositi vilici filius, delicium tuum'." This makes no impression on Seneca, despite his professed sympathy for slaves (*Ep.* 47, etc.), except to remind him of how old he's getting.

master under the age of twenty. The relation between the *servus callidus* and the *adulescens* in Roman Comedy is that of an anti-pedagogue to his charge, (as it were, a *paedo-par-agogos*). The slave is the young man's confidant, advisor, friend and especially his factotum. It is significant that the only slave explicitly to be identified as a *paedagogos*, Lydus in the *Bacchides*, is a blocking character, a spoilsport in the eyes of father and son alike. Like Oxford Moral Tutors, he is a figure of fun. The clever slave, on the other hand, is responsible for ruining the son, leading him astray, allowing him to satisfy his desires, though always at the son's own command (cf. the accusation by Theopropides at *Most.* 1117 f.). Indeed son and slave reverse position. The *adulescens* makes himself over to the slave as if he were a slave, since he is already a slave to love, leaving the *servus* to run the show (e.g. *Rud.* 1265–66, 1280, *Most.* 407, *Poen.* 145–46, 447, *Ps.* 119).⁵⁷

However, there is one aspect in which son and slave were most alike and this called forth comments from the Romans themselves.⁵⁸ Son and slave were equally under the absolute power of the father, the *patria potestas*, which extended to the power of life and death (*ius vitae et necis*). It follows therefore, that a large number of those watching the *Mostellaria* might be under the *potestas* of the father. As Crook comments, "This lifelong power over children, however extraordinary it might seem (and it did to the Romans), was a reality and we must not water it down...In private life it mattered nothing that you might be forty years old or married or consul of the Roman people; if you were *in potestate* you owned nothing, whatever you acquired accrued automatically to your paterfamilias...One might well wonder how such a society can possibly have worked."⁵⁹ Son and slave both had independence of action only under the legal fiction of the *peculium*. Wiedemann sums up the theory that underlies this equivalence of son and slave:

The slave was someone who had lost, or never had, any rights to share in society, and therefore to have access to food, clothing, and the other necessities of physical survival. Typically this was because a slave had been on the defeated side in a war... Consequently the enslaved captive 'belonged' to the individual who had refrained from killing him...The fact that he was alive at all was something the slave owed to the master who deigned to maintain him as a member of his household. The emotions he was expected to feel towards that master were loyalty and gratitude. Any children the slave might have would inherit this dependence: they would only be alive at all because the head of the household chose to bring them up, feed, clothe, house, and train them, rather than let them die (of course he had a similar right to let his own new-born children live or die).⁶⁰

This fact directs us to another aspect of Freud's analysis of jokes. While Humor results "from an economy of expenditure in feeling" (affect), Wit results "from an economy of expenditure in inhibition" (repression).⁶¹ Freud uses the

⁵⁷ See Duckworth (above, note 5) 238–39, 249–51.

⁵⁸ Gaius 1.54–5, calls it uniquely Roman: "fere nulli alii sunt homines qui talem in filios suos habent potestatem qualem nos habemus."

⁵⁹ *Law and Life*, (above, note 37) 109; see also his article, "Patria Potestas," *CQ* 17 (1967) 113–22.

⁶⁰ Wiedemann (above, note 10) 22.

⁶¹ Freud (above, note 18) 803.

famous three person analysis of how aggressive impulses are masked by wit.⁶² Grotjahn summarizes Freud's model:

Aggressive [what Freud calls "tendency"] wit gives us a new way of admitting dangerous aggression to our consciousness—but it has to be done in cleverly disguised form. The first person, the one who makes the joke or perceives the idea, attacks the second person, the butt of the joke. The wish to attack is temporarily repressed, pushed down into the unconscious where it is disguised by the wit work.⁶³ In order to test whether the work of disguising the aggressive tendency was successful, the first person has to tell his witticism to a third person. The one who has conceived the joke cannot himself laugh, because he is too close to the original aggression and the feeling of guilt about it. The third person, to whom the witticism is told, is only a listener and judges only the disguise of the underlying aggression. This third person becomes guilty only in so far as he is a witness of the aggression but not a participant. He is safely removed from guilt...Hostile jokes lift repressions and open up otherwise inaccessible sources of pleasure.⁶⁴

Freud notes the particular targets of wit:

Tendency-wit is used with special preference as a weapon of attack or criticism of superiors who claim to be in authority. Wit then serves as a resistance against such authority and as an escape from its pressure. In this factor, too, lies the charm of caricature, at which we laugh even if it is badly done simply because we consider resistance to authority a great merit.⁶⁵

Grotjahn points out that the disguise is not only a necessity, it is the essence of wit:

Aggressive wit is a streamlined outlet of stimulated, then inhibited, and finally released aggressive energy. An aggressive idea is aroused, then removed from consciousness to unconsciousness. There it is disguised and may enter consciousness again. If the disguise is successful, the aggression passes the censor, escapes further repression, and may be consciously enjoyed. The sudden release of energy no longer needed for repression is laughed off...In "misfired" witticisms the disguise slips and allows the tendency to show; then the censor punishes, and feelings of embarrassment, shame, disgust, or guilt result...The better the disguise, the better the joke.⁶⁶

In Plautus, it is not the aggression that is disguised, but the aggressor. The Plautine slave can profitably be viewed as a theatrical device for splitting the son and so preserving the psychic peace of the audience. The slave, ironically,

⁶² The starting model for Freud is a man telling an aggressive dirty joke, where the tendency is libidinous and the victim, the second party, is a woman. The presence of a third party necessitates the disguising of the original desire towards sexual violence.

⁶³ This similarity to the dream work is the starting point for Freud's analysis, and forms the first part of the book.

⁶⁴ Grotjahn (above, note 20) 11.

⁶⁵ Freud (above, note 18) 699.

⁶⁶ Grotjahn (above, note 20) 13–14.

can do things the son cannot. It is the slave who carries out the libidinous desires of the son, who dupes, detains, defies, deceives, deflates, and destroys the father. It is he against whom the father turns all his wrath, leaving the son untouched.⁶⁷ Cf. Epidicus' rhetorical question to Stratippocles (*Epid.* 139–40): "Men piacularum oporet fieri ob stultitiam tuam / ut meum tergum tuae stultitiae subdes succidaneum?" ("Is it right that I should be the expiation for your stupidity, that you can offer my back as a substitute because of your stupidity?"). The son is thus left untouched by guilt. He can defy his father's wishes for his marriage, think impious thoughts (e.g. *Ps.* 122, *Bacch.* 505–8, *Truc.* 660–62, *Most.* 229), even desire his father's death (*Most.* 233–34),⁶⁸ but emerge forgiven by his father. His character is illuminated by Freud's remarks on the Comic,⁶⁹ specifically the Comic of Naïveté:

The naïve originates when one puts himself completely outside of inhibition, because it does not exist for him; that is, if he seems to overcome it without any effort. What conditions the function of the naïve is the fact that we are aware that the person does not possess this inhibition, otherwise we should not call it naïve but impudent, and instead of laughing we should be indignant... The condition of the naïve consists in the fact that one person should have the inhibitions which the other lacks. It is the person provided with the inhibitions who understands the naïve, and it is he alone who gains the pleasure produced by the naïve.⁷⁰

The Plautine *adulescens* is naïve in his monomaniac pursuit of the girl. He has no inhibitions at all, and we in the audience can enjoy vicariously his evil wishes against his father and his ultimate triumph, while protected from guilt by our own sense of superiority.⁷¹ Likewise, the Plautine *servus* is monomaniac in his pursuit of trickery as an end in itself. He too has no inhibitions, and we vicariously enjoy his evil deeds against the father.⁷² As Grotjahn remarks, "The naïve person will not feel guilty and will cause no guilt feelings in the onlooker because the effect is unintentional."⁷³ However, it is the impudent slave

⁶⁷ E.g. Nicobulus, *Bacch.* 408ff.; Periphanes, *Epid.* 389ff.; Theopropides, *Most.* 1108ff.

⁶⁸ Cf. Naev. *com.* 95. This fragment is quoted by Donatus, ad *Ad.* 519–20, to point out the un-Plautine mildness (or in a harsh mood one might say insipidity) of Terence's young men.

⁶⁹ Freud defines the comic as resulting from "an economy of expenditure in thought" (above, note 18) 803. That is, thought processes, logical arguments, the completion of idioms, as well as the natural sequences of actions, movements, etc., are suddenly interrupted. Since, the Comic, in Freudian terms, will be found primarily in such things as stage business (details of acting, physical slapstick, etc.) and in wordplay (riddles, interruptions, the general Plautine exuberance of language), it is not my concern in this paper.

⁷⁰ Freud (above, note 18) 763 and 765.

⁷¹ It is here that Freud subsumes the older ideas of the comic as a perception of our own superiority and another's inferiority. Plato, *Phil.* 47–50, Arist. *Poet.* 1449a, Cic. *de Or.* 2.58, Hobbes *Leviathan*, I.6, etc.

⁷² Cf. David Konstan's remarks in *Roman Comedy* (Ithaca 1983) 19: "This authority [*patria potestas*] doubtless causes the children some anxiety, which may have been relieved in some measure by the spectacle of stern old men tweaked and outwitted by youths and slaves and marginal members of society." It is not the youths, however, who outwit the stern old men and the children can enjoy the spectacle only if they identify with the slaves who do.

⁷³ Grotjahn (above, note 20) 16.

who allows the youth to be naïve, by removing the intentionality. It is the slave who acts, plans, intends, does, and so takes on (and takes away) all the guilt that would have fallen to the son.

To the son falls the important task of interceding for his *alter ego* with his father. That the slave is "pardoned far too readily"⁷⁴ has frequently been noted and morally censured. What is less often noted is that the son, or someone acting on his behalf, arranges for that pardon. Son and slave are pardoned together. Thus Callidamates intercedes for Tranio on behalf of Philolaches (*Most.* 1154ff.), Bachis for Chrysalus on behalf of Mnesilochus (*Bacch.* 1182ff.), Stratippocles for Epidicus (721 f., though off-stage). The son's intercession for the slave is an even more marked feature of Terence.⁷⁵ Thus Pamphilus intercedes for Davos (*And.* 955ff.), Clitipho for Syrus (*Heaut.* 1066–67), and Aeschinus for Syrus (*Ad.* 960, with aid from Demea). The most remarkable case is the *Captivi*, a play that requires a separate paper, where of course the slave is the son.

Thus the non-punishment of the slave is humorous to the audience, on two different counts. First, the threat of punishment arouses pity, because the audience sympathizes with the clever slave, who wishes to rebel against the established authorities. The pity proves needless, however, for the slave is indifferent to the punishment and successful in his rebellion. The threats also arouse anxiety, again because the slave is incurring the guilt for enacting the wishes of the audience, but the anxiety is suddenly released when the punishments are removed at the wish of the *adulescens*. Secondly, the fears of the audience are obviated as soon as they are stimulated. The slave's rebellion is never on his own behalf. Even his freedom of action is always in the service, and for the pleasure, of his young master, recapitulating the relation of slave-actors to audience. The slave's actions are hemmed in and controlled by the very threats of punishment that provide the audience with a source of humor.

It is possible to be even more Freudian than I have been here. Following observations in his later work, in particular the 1927 article "Humor,"⁷⁶ it would be possible to cast New Comedy as a large scale psycho-drama, where the son plays the role of "Ego," reconciling the father as "Superego" to the demands of the slave, "Id." But I do not believe that this approach would materially help us to understand why we laugh at and with Tranio, or the more restricted problem of why Roman Comedy is so saturated with gruesome jokes about crucifixion.

Thus the *servus callidus* allows the audience to have its *dulcia* and eat them too. The audience can identify with the young man, who is allowed to step outside of the power of his father, even to make the Oedipal wish for his father's death, yet incurs no guilt and is reunited in the proper order of family and property. That guilt is displaced onto the slave, who satisfies the son's anarchic and libidinous desires, yet is always controlled by the threat of punishment, but remains unpunished. Power is mocked, but mollified. Desire is satisfied, but without cost. The wish for rebellion is indulged, but the fear of rebellion is pacified.

⁷⁴ Duckworth (above, note 5) 289; an entry in the index at 495.

⁷⁵ Rightly noted by Duckworth, 289.

⁷⁶ See above, note 21.