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# Comedy, Violence, and Undergraduates

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## Comedy, Violence, and Undergraduates

Comedy is deeply rooted in the values and prejudices of society, and this is partly why it can be difficult for 21<sup>st</sup> century students to engage with ancient comedies. Combining Richlin's (2013) role-playing exercise with actual performances of Roman comedy encourages undergraduates to think about the comedies of Plautus through the eyes of an ancient Roman audience. Students must wrangle with the limits of what is funny, a more difficult task when the plays call for the staging of violence. Using productions by the 2012 NEH Summer Institute on Roman Comedy in Performance, the 2014 CAMP production of *Rudens*, and in-class performances by undergraduates, this paper will explore how the performance of violence elicits differing responses based on character dynamics, but also as a result of the social backgrounds of audience members.

According to McGraw and Warren (2010), humor emerges from violations of moral norms that are simultaneously perceived of as benign. Thinking about comedy, the status of characters becomes an important factor in determining whether physical abuse can also appear as benign. Marshall (2006) reminds us that status is negotiable. Similarly, Moore (1998) draws our attention to how the rapport characters build with the audience impacts their status, and so we have to think about a character's status in relationship to other characters and the audience at the moment of abuse.

Plautine pimps often occupy the lowest status in comedy. The staging of violence against the pimp in *Rudens* can be staged in a fairly unproblematic way. In the CAMP production of *Rudens*, two *lorarii* wield comically oversized clubs as they pummel the pimp. While not morally acceptable to beat freeborn individuals, a myriad of cues signal the benign nature of this abuse. The pimp's cartoonish fall, descending in three distinct increments to the ground, mark

the beating as unrealistic. The cartoonishly oversized clubs also contribute to the sense that no real harm is being done here, but we must also think about whether these props would be necessary to mark the violation as benign since the *lorarii* act on behalf of their master to punish a pimp who has enslaved freeborn women.

In the NEH production of *Persa*, none of the props used to abuse the pimp are unrealistic. The actions of the slaves are exaggerated, perhaps marking the violation as a benign one, but the presentation of the physical abuse is more complicated here. Unlike the pimp in *Rudens* who is beaten on the orders of a master, the pimp in *Persa* is assaulted by slaves acting of their own accord. We must think about whether it is okay for slaves to abuse a free man (cf. Saller (1994), 136) or whether this moment crosses the line, no longer allowing the violation to appear as benign. That line is informed by the audience member's personal background, as my use of Richlin's activity with undergraduates suggests. Audience members with servile experience are likely to focus on the freedom allotted these slaves during the play whereas the local magistrate may focus in on the violation of social status.

When teaching Plautus to undergraduates, I have required them to act out scenes. As I am about to teach this unit this year, I will have groups perform scenes from *Amphitryon*, *Captivi*, *Casina*, and *Pseudolus* which feature verbal, if not potential physical abuse in the staging, to see the way that groups seek to negotiate the moral violations posed by the scene. At the end of this unit, students will write reflections to explain why they made their staging choices, particularly with an eye to why they feel this would be the most effective staging of the scene for the Roman audiences they have pretended to be in watching other scenes.

The staging of violence challenges scholars to examine assumptions about characters and audiences. Violence done to cruel pimps may pass as good old-fashioned fun if the violation is

presented as benign, but factors can quickly complicate the picture pushing an audience to think about the point at which the violation ceases to be without consequence. Through live performance, we as teachers have an opportunity to challenge our students to think about the assumptions that audiences bring with them about what is and is not appropriate.

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