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TRUCULENTUS AND THE ABROGATION OF THE *LEX OPPIA*

Abstract: This article explores the timing of *Truculentus*' staging in the years following the abrogation of the *lex Oppia* in 195 B.C. to show how the consequences of that abrogation can be used as a blueprint to reconnect the comedy with issues that seem at first sight to be irreconcilable. The centrality of the female figure, embodied by the overwhelmingly powerful character of the prostitute Phronesium, reveals a distinctive preoccupation on the part of the Roman male audience with the new juridical privileges acquired by women. These new privileges not only deeply affected how patrimonies and inheritances were passed on from one generation to another; they also brought into question the traditional gender-coded approach to relations between females and males in Roman society. *Truculentus* tackles these issues and, rather than providing the audience with a set of solutions, unleashes the destructive power of the darkest of Plautine denouments.

Keywords: *Truculentus*, *lex Oppia*, Phronesium, Livy, prostitute

Truculentus is one of Plautus' most problematic comedies. Its textual condition is difficult and the play lacks a clear and gradual development of the plot, with no obvious relation between the title of the comedy and its main theme. Last but not least, the difficulties that commentators of various periods and cultural orientations have manifested in dealing with the apparent triviality of the comedy's themes have contributed to make *Truculentus* one of the most neglected among the Plautine comedies. The outcome of such multiple issues has been, on the one hand, a relative lack of scholarship concerning *Truculentus* (particularly so in comparison to the most celebrated pieces such as, for instance, *Pseudolus* or *Aulularia*), and, on the other hand, the sedimentation of a prejudice about this comedy that it is a 'failed' Plautine product or, at least, merely the fruit of the author's senile extravagance. The most recent scholarly trend sees in the comedy an anticipation of some motifs, which will later become canonical in satire, thus labeling *Truculentus* as a "satiric comedy" or "comedic satire".[1]

1) The definition was first used by P. Lejay, Plaute, Paris 1925, 110–111, but was then adopted by P. J. Enk, Plauti Truculentus, cum Prolegomenis, Notis Criti-

Though this definition certainly highlights some important features of the text, it is worth considering another type of analysis which is not only possible but necessary, lest we concede from the beginning that the *Truculentus* is both completely incoherent as well as unprecedented and abrupt. My proposed interpretative approach takes into account the uniqueness and originality of this comedy while at the same time outlining the presence of a strong ideological scaffolding lying beneath a merely apparent thematic incoherence. I maintain that the date of composition of *Truculentus* is the key to solving the puzzle. The specificity of the exact time when the comedy was staged corresponds to that of its themes and even of its alleged triviality.

The contiguity of *Truculentus*' staging to the years following the abrogation of the *lex Oppia* in 195 B.C. and, most importantly, the consequences of that abrogation can be used as a blueprint to reconnect what are, at first sight, moot issues that the modern reader encounters when confronting this comedy. I contend that the centrality of the female figure, embodied by the overwhelmingly powerful character of the prostitute Phronesium, is certainly part of the creation of a satiric character-type ante litteram. Yet, as such, Phronesium reveals a distinctive preoccupation of the Roman male audience concerning new juridical privileges acquired by women. Surely I do not aver that the prostitute here could function as a comedic alter ego for the free and honorable Roman *matronae*. This would be simply not tenable. Instead, what I am suggesting is that Phronesium's baffling personal and financial freedom could have conjured up, within the Roman male audience, specific preoccupations concerning the increased financial prerogatives and conspicuous expenditures of at least some free women. Livy's account of the debate concerning the abolition of the *lex Oppia* is germane to this issue and makes it possible to gauge the nature and intensity of such preoccupations. The new juridical privileges acquired by women at the beginning of the II century B.C. not only

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cis, Commentario Exegetico, Leiden 1953 (Vol. 1) 27, C. S. Dessen, Plautus' Satiric Comedy: the "Truculentus", PhQ 56, 1977, 145 and D. Konstan, Roman Comedy, Ithaca / London 1983, 142–164. Recently, W. de Melo, Plautus: Stichus. Three-Dollar Day. Truculentus. The Tale of a Traveling-Bag. Fragments, Cambridge 2013, 259 defined again *Truculentus* as a "play that foreshadows the work of Lucilius and Horace" and as a "Satire dressed up as comedy".

deeply affected how patrimonies and inheritances were passed on from one generation to another; they also brought into question the traditional gender-coded approach to relations between females and males in Roman society. *Truculentus* tackles these issues and, rather than providing the audience with a set of solutions, unleashes the destructive power of the darkest of Plautine denouements.

I. A problematic text

Truculentus' position in the final *quinterni* determined its pitiable condition. It occupies the place immediately preceding *Vidularia*, the very last comedy of the Varronian series, and the only one to have suffered a worse fate. The result is that 30 to 35 % of the text of *Truculentus* presents textual difficulties that could potentially affect our understanding of the comedy as a whole. Editors have managed to restore sense to quite a considerable amount of lines; nonetheless our ability to grasp the text is complicated by the lack of a gradual and somewhat predictable development of the plot. The *peripeteia*, which is to say the unfolding of the action according to expected and topical progression, does not occur, and the reader is left with a sense of only a partial completion of the action.

Although it is clear that the text that we have does not give us the full plot, here is the plot as we have it: on his way back from Lemnos, Diniarchus, an *adulescens*, finds out that his lover Phronesium has faked a pregnancy to make the soldier Stratophanes believe that he is the baby's father. Astaphium, Phronesium's servant, prevents Diniarchus from seeing his lover, unless he brings more gifts and money. For, while Diniarchus was in Lemnos, two young men have taken what once was Diniarchus' position with Phronesium. These are the soldier Stratophanes and the other wealthy *adulescens* Strabax, the latter having at his disposal a considerable amount of money to spend. Truculentus, Strabax' servant, has been chosen by the old master to supervise the young man's morality but, although he initially resists corruption, he is seduced by Astaphium, Phronesium's servant. The core of the comedy turns around the attempts of Diniarchus and Stratophanes to regain Phronesium's favors by means of gifts and donations. During one

of these trips around the courtesan's house, Diniarchus overhears Callicles, whose daughter he had previously raped and made pregnant, cross-questioning two servant girls about the disappearance of his daughter's newborn. Diniarchus, understanding that he doesn't have a way out, promises Callicles to marry his daughter and, realizing where the baby has gone, goes at once to Phronesium's to claim it. The prostitute manages to convince Diniarchus to leave the baby with her for one more day, to successfully bring her scheme against the soldier to fruition. The conclusion of the play consists of an altercation between the soldier and Strabax, both trying to win Phronesium's favors by promising her larger and larger gifts and donations.

This plot thus appears to be formed by a series of loosely stitched scenes, and looks like an almost picaresque gallery of images and insertions, not necessarily following one another in a functional manner. The traditional remedy for similar textual difficulties consists in trying to hypothesize what the Latin text could have been, on the basis of *Nea* models, which are also not extant but whose hypothetical structure can be inferred from what we have of Menander. But in the case of *Truculentus* even this solution does not seem to be an option. While in the past attempts have been made to identify possible models,[2] later studies, in particular Lefèvre's and Hofmann's, have agreed on the likely absence of a Greek model for this Plautine comedy. Even if we were to trust the results of older commentators such as Lucas, Grimal or Webster, all we would have would be a handful of fragments, more useful to acknowledge the contiguity of some themes among Plautus and his hypothetical predecessors, than to fill *Truculentus*' significant gaps.

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2) According to H. Lucas, Zum *Fretum* des Plautus, RhM 87, 1938, 188–190 there could be some possible thematic similarities between *Truculentus* and another lost Plautine work, *Fretum*, in which the allusion to the monsters Scylla and Charybdis would have been a metaphorical way to attack the prostitutes' voracity, and this comparison would have been present already in Anaxila's *Neottis* (fr. 22 PCG II 270). We are in the realm of mere hypotheses, since all we have of the *Fretum* is a very short fragment, with quite unspecific content. According to P. Grimal, A propos du Truculentus. L'antiféminisme de Plaute, Mélanges Marcel Durry = REL 47 bis, 1969, 85–98, at 91–4 the model for *Truculentus* could be Menander, on the basis of fragments 498 PGC, 580 PGC and 627 PGC CAF, while T. B. L. Webster, Studies in Menander, Manchester ^{2}1960, 149 proposes Philemon.

This is obviously no consolation, especially if, as in the case of our comedy, one must add to the pitiful state of the text's material condition the oddity of its apparently trivial topic, which has puzzled generations of ancient and modern commentators alike.[3] Furthermore, the lack of a clearly identifiable Greek model cannot provide what would have otherwise been precious information to better assess the development of the scenic action and its meaning. And yet our comedy does present one concrete advantage to aid the philologists' endeavor: its date of composition. Unlike many Plautine pieces, where one must look for scattered minutiae and hidden historical references, in the case of *Truculentus*, we benefit from a very explicit passage from Cicero, Sen. 50 which does not leave much room for an alternative chronology: *quam gaudebat bello suo Punico Naevius! quam Truculento Plautus, quam Pseudolo!*

Cicero's text deals with old age. According to Roman standards, the definition of *senex* applies to those sixty or more years old. The didascaly of *Pseudolus* indicates 191 B.C. as the year when the comedy was staged, some seven years before Plautus' death in 184 B.C. Thus, the end of the 190s or the beginning of the 180s must be taken as terminus post quem for the composition of *Truculentus*. Further, the comedy itself contains elements that confirm this chronology. The ablative absolute *victis hostibus* at v. 75 has been interpreted by Enk as an allusion to the end of the war against Antioch III of Syria, which is to say around the end of 190 B.C. or the beginning of 189 B.C.[4] At v. 486 Stratophanes, boasting about his military deeds as the cliché requires, refers to some *convicti et condemnati falsis de pugnis*. The expression has been taken as an allusion to the events of 190 B.C., when Cato the Elder violently attacked Quintus Minucius Termus in the oration *De falsis pugnis*.[5]

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3) See, for instance, G. Norwood, Plautus and Terence, New York 1932, 53: "[Plautus'] own favourite plays were the patchwork *Pseudolus*, the deplorable *Truculentus* and *Epidicus*. But that matters little: there is abundant evidence that he could not distinguish a fine play from a bad." For a synthetic collection of judgments see G. Broccia, Appunti sull'ultimo Plauto. Per l'interpretazione del Truculentus, WS 16, 1952, 157–158.

4) Cf. Enk (n. 1 above) 28.

5) Such is the abbreviation for *In Q. Minucium Thermum de falsis pugnis* = fr. 58 Malc[3]. Cato achieved his purpose, and Quintus Minucius Thermus did not obtain a triumph on the *Liguri*, because of his false victories over them. On this episode see P. Fraccaro, I processi degli Scipioni, Studi storici per l'antichità classica 4, 1911, 368–369.

Thus for the purpose of interpretation, we have a reasonably safe date of composition. Both vv. 75 and 486 seem to confirm 190 B.C. as terminus post quem. Enk postpones it by one year on account of the phrase *apud novos magistratus faxo erit nomen tuom* (v. 761), which he takes as an allusion of the ides of March of 189 B.C. when elections for new magistrates were held.[6] This date seems to be confirmed also by the word *manubiarius* of v. 880, possibly an allusion to the trial for peculation that Acilius Glabrio underwent in 189 B.C.[7] This seems therefore to be a more-than-likely candidate for *Truculentus*' date of composition. Such later time frame for the comedy is also confirmed by a general stylistic analysis of the *cantica* that are greatly privileged over the spoken parts which amount to only a third of the total.[8]

II. Phronesium's φρόνησις

The comedy's chronology is, as we have seen, relatively solid, based on both internal and external evidence, and can be used to try to make up for some of the other difficulties presented by the text. This chronological information is even more significant when combined with an in-depth analysis of the comedy's main character: Phronesium.[9] Now prostitutes are certainly typical characters not only for Plautus, but for much of the ancient comedic repertoire, and it is more precise to speak of different typologies of

6) Cf. Enk (n. 1 above) at 22–28.

7) Cf. O. Musso, Sulla datazione del Truculentus di Plauto, SIFC 41, 1969, 135–138. W. Hoffmann, Plautus, Truculentus. Herausgegeben, übersetzt und kommentiert, Darmstadt 2001, 25 indicates the first months of 186 C.E. as the most likely date for the play, especially considering the mention of new magistrates at v. 761.

8) Cf. W. B. Sedgwick, The Cantica of Plautus, CR 39, 1925, 55–58; W. S. Anderson, Barbarian Play: Plautus' Roman Comedy, Toronto 1993, 122; E. Paratore, Anatomie Plautine: Amphitruo, Casina, Curculio, Miles Gloriosus, in: R. M. Danese / C. Questa (eds), Urbino 2003, 156 and J. Barsby, Some Aspects of the Language of Cistellaria, in: R. Hartkamp / F. Hurka (eds), Studien zu Plautus' Cistellaria, Tübingen 2004, 336.

9) On the central role of Phronesium see H. W. Prescott, Link Monologues in Roman Comedy, CPh 34, 1939, 1–23 and E. Lefèvre, Truculentus oder Der Triumph der Weisheit, in: E. Lefèvre / E. Stärk / G. Vogt-Spira (eds), Plautus barbarus. Sechs Kapitel zur Originalität des Plautus, Tübingen 1991, 175–200.

prostitutes as Fantham and Faure Ribreau[10] have lucidly shown by singling out at least two main categories of courtesans. On the one hand, Fantham identifies the 'good prostitute', naturally oriented towards forms of monogamy, or at least to exclusive relations with one customer. These women are portrayed as fundamentally kind and able to express genuine feelings. On the other, Fantham outlines the type of the greedy whore, able to transform prostitution into a trap in which to bankrupt male customers.[11]

Phronesium certainly belongs to the second category.[12] According to Fontaine the name Phronesium should be in fact Phrynesium, as reminiscent of the famous hetaira Phryne.[13] The dangerous charm and the beauty of this historical character are attested by numerous ancient sources. Furthermore, at lines 77–78a, Plautus exploits the potential amphiboly of our courtesan's name and suggests that Phronesium (or Phrynesium) be a transliteration from the Greek of the term φρόνησις. In contrast with Diniarchus and Stratophanes, the former not very much of a terrible commander (δεινός + ἄρχων), the latter not at all a glorious soldier (στρατός + φανός), she is true to her name[14] and, with her scheming intelligence (φρόνησις), she prevails over all male characters. While

10) Cf. E. Fantham, *Domina*-tricks, or How to Construct a Good Whore from a Bad One, in: E. Stärk / G. Vogt-Spira (eds), Festschrift für Eckard Lefèvre zum 65. Geburtstag, Hildesheim 2000, 287–299 (= Ead., Roman Readings. Roman Response to Greek Literature from Plautus to Statius and Quintilian, Berlin / New York, 2010, 144–156), in particular about the relation of the Plautine types with the Menandrean models see also A. Duncan, Performance and Identity in the Classical World, Cambridge 2006, 140–152. See also M. Faure-Ribreau, Pour la beauté du jeu. La construction des personnages dans la comédie romaine (Plaute, Térence), Paris 2012, 141–146.

11) As types of the first category one could mention Philanium in *Asinaria*, Selenium in *Cistellaria* or Philematium in *Mostellaria*. As for the "greedy whore" see Erotium in *Maenechmi* or Acroteleutium in *Miles Gloriosus*.

12) In his Onomasticon 4.153 Pollux describes the most "accomplished" type of prostitute with these words: τὸ δὲ τέλειον ἑταιρικόν, τῆς ψευδοκόρης ἐστὶν ἐρυθρότερον καὶ βοστρύχους ἔχει περὶ τὰ ὦτα.

13) Cf. M. Fontaine, Funny Words in Plautine Comedy, Oxford 2010, 21–29.

14) On Plautine names and their allusive meanings see G. Petrone, *Nomen / omen*: poetica e funzione dei nomi (Plauto, Seneca, Petronio), MD 20–21, 1988, 33–70 and Ead., La funzione dei nomi dei personaggi nella commedia plautina e nella tragedia senecana, in: L. de Finis (ed.), Scena e spettacolo nell'antichità. Atti del Convegno internazionale di studio, Trento, 28–30 Marzo 1988, Firenze 1989, 233–252.

we certainly have numerous examples of the second kind of prostitute manipulating her customers, especially inexperienced *adulescentes* like Diniarchus and Strabax, the set of values evoked by the resonance of the name 'Phronesium' and the term φρόνησις creates difficulties for interpreting her character. In book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1142a), Aristotle defines φρόνησις as part of λόγος and, while he stresses that this type of intelligence has to do with practical and contingent issues, he also systematizes it as part of the λογιστικόν. But here Plautus twists the canonical distinction of λόγος vs. μῆτις. For both men and women can use μῆτις as 'the ability to plot and scheme', but only males can attain that kind of higher rational comprehension and decision making process which makes them free and superior to women (Aristot. Pol. 1260a11). Admittedly, Phronesium's victories are nothing but plots against various customers, intended only to increase her gains. Her intelligence is pure μῆτις, yet her name conjures up a hierarchically higher type of intelligence, that kind of rational demeanor, which naturally belongs to males.

Thus the name of Phronesium is not only a *nomen* / *omen*, as it is always the case with Plautus; it also symbolizes a twist in the way genders are represented and coded. It is not a simple pun on the word φρόνησις; it is something conceptually upsetting. Phronesium acts according to her μῆτις, but her role within the comedy is of primary importance and, even if she does not really partake in true masculine λόγος, her behavior ensures and guides the deployment of the scenic action. If then Phronesium is, as she is, the dominant character, why isn't the play *Truculentus* given a name that suits it, or suits h e r? Rephrasing the question: why is Truculentus, a character of secondary importance, chosen to provide the comedy with its title? These questions represent the two sides of the same coin and, again, have to do with the twisting of gender-coded conventions.

If Diniarchus and Stratophanes are n o t true to their names, this is even more the case with Truculentus. This slave does not play the canonical part of the *servus callidus*, a role completely absorbed by Phronesium and her servant Astaphium. He is brutal at first, but the comedy shows his complete and abrupt metamorphosis, to the point of his own declaration: "I am no longer Truculentus" (v. 674). He is initially the play's harshest character and, if we trust his name, someone who refuses to be lured into the same

trap as the other male characters, but he will be made inoffensive by the second-order *malitiae* of Astaphium, Phronesium's slave. The story of Truculentus is in fact a story of becoming not-Truculentus. Because of this transformation worked by Phronesium via Astaphium, entitling the comedy *Truculentus* is tantamount to giving it a title that celebrates the courtesans' scheming intelligence, of which Phronesium is the most skilled representative.

Furthermore what we can observe is a scenic development, which follows a parallel course for free and servile characters. Diniarchus, Stratophanes and Strabax are seduced by Phronesium, while the *servus* Truculentus is made inoffensive by the *ancilla* Astaphium. The result is that all male characters, regardless of their social status, end up being defeated, and their narratological roles, including the crucial one of the *servus callidus*, depend on and are directed by the overwhelming presence of Phronesium.[15] Thus, Phronesium is, so to speak, a 'macro character', not a simple one. She absorbs and makes dependent upon her actions the movements and choices of all other characters. She is undoubtedly the center of gravity of the comedy. Her role cannot be in any way explained by simply underlining her connections with the canonical literary attributes of the 'bad prostitute', or by referring to the misogyny that permeates a great part of Latin literature. Her absolute victory corresponds to the absolute debauchery of all male characters. Phronesium is a *unicum* among the Plautine types of prostitute,[16] as no other plautine play attributes to any female character what is, undeniably, the role of main character.

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15) Cf. A. Duncan, Performance and Identity in the Classical World, Cambridge 2006, 149: "She [Phronesium] presents herself as an actor playing a role." In other words she absorbs the metatheatrical function usually belonging to the *servus callidus*. On this issue see also Lefèvre (n. 9 above).

16) Cf. D. Konstan, Roman Comedy, Ithaca / London 1983, 150: "To be sure, it is unusual for the girl herself, rather than a clever slave, for example, to play so large a role in conceiving and carrying out the deception, leaving her lover both mystified and without a part of his own to play in the intrigue." On the uniqueness of Phronesium see also E. Fantham, Women in Control, in: D. Dutsch / S. L. James / D. Konstan (eds), Women in Roman Republican Drama, Madison 2015, 91.

III. Saecli mores

At v. 13, right at the very beginning of the prologue, Plautus writes that Phronesium *huius saecli mores in se possidet*: our prostitute is herself a representation of the spirit of her times. This rather lapidary Plautine comment is a lens through which to further examine Phronesium, and link our interpretation of her to the almost-certain date of composition of *Truculentus*. If, with her specific features, this courtesan embodies the spirit of her time, and if the terminus post quem for the staging of the comedy was 189 B.C., what is it about those years that Phronesium represents so well? These years, the last years of Plautus' life (c. 254–184 B.C.), witnessed profound social changes within Roman society. And the next lines in *Truculentus* represent prostitutes crowding around the city's banks: "one could count more prostitutes than money scales" Plautus writes (v. 69), as if this image were to conjure up a disquieting association between eros and money. As Hemker writes: "*Truculentus* explores the connections among eros, the loss of the male self and economic destruction,"[17] linked by most commentators to the gradual penetration into Rome of *Graeci mores*. The resistance to this set of cultural changes is embodied by Cato the Elder, strenuous defender of the agricultural / patriarchal model in which proper women are silent, subaltern and enclosed within the space of the *domus*.[18] This is certainly true and Hemker rightly points out how Phronesium's complete confidence with money is already a sign of an upended reality, at least vis-à-vis expected gender-coded behaviors. Such cultural transitions are phenomena of longue durée, yet I maintain that we can pinpoint more specific reasons and events lying beneath the construction of Phronesium's character.

As early as 1902, Cook pointed out the presence of semantic reiterations within the Plautine comedies,[19] which Broccia followed up on to observe how *Truculentus* is dominated by terms

17) J. Hemker, Commerce, Passion and The Self in Plautus' Truculentus, PCP 26, 1991, 35.

18) Cf. F. Della Corte, Personaggi femminili in Plauto, Dioniso 42, 1969, 485–497.

19) Cf. A. B. Cook, Unconscious Iterations, CR 16, 1902, 146–158, and also F. W. Hall, Repetitions and Obsessions in Plautus, CQ 20, 1926, 20–26 and J. Blänsdorf, Archaische Gedankengänge in den Komödien des Plautus, Wiesbaden 1967, 245–247.

signifying possession (as for instance the verbs *habeo* and *posco*) and destruction (as signaled by verbs such as *pereo* and *perdo*).[20] This is particularly evident in the figure of Phronesium. Thus, the Plautine discourse is not just about the social risks of women enjoying too much freedom; rather it also points to a particular issue: women possessing stuff. Within this optic, Hemker is right to see the savage eros of *Truculentus* linked to a diminution of the male self. But that is because women move from the role of being possessed (materially and sexually) to that of possessing. Such a shift in values is not a mere literary invention; rather, it is the product of profound social and historical changes.

According to Livy, Hist. 22.7.7, after the defeat at Trasumennus in 217 B.C., a throng of women mingling in the forum dared to flock to the Comitium and the Senate to call for magistrates. Furthermore, two years later, the cult of *Venus Verticordia* was established. This was "Venus the changer of hearts" among whose worshippers were certainly those matrons guilty of immoral conduct. Again, according to Livy, Hist. 25.2.9–10, some of these women were tried and sent to exile in 213 B.C. The Plautine image of the bad women's gathering presents similarities with the Livian account: both texts describe women dangerously assembling in public spaces and a substantial lack of masculine control over these situations; Plautus with the colorful image of the prostitutes crowding around the banks may have presented a caricature, *sub specie scorti*, of a real event that had created a sensation in Rome.

As Pomeroy observed,[21] the fact that, as we learn from Livy, women were sentenced to exile rather than being punished within the walls of their *domus* and, even more, the fact that they were tried in public and not by their male relatives, is accounted for by the lack of men in Rome during and after the second Punic war (and more generally throughout the period of the Punic Wars). It is the lack of males, temporarily absent to fight against Carthage or never to return, that determined a fundamental shift in the condition of women in Rome in the third century B.C.[22] In many cases

20) G. Broccia (n. 3 above) 151–153.

21) S. B. Pomeroy, Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity, New York 1975, 179.

22) On the demographic effects of Roman imperialism see K. J. Evans, War, Women and Children in Ancient Rome, New York 1991, praef. x.

they were the only living heirs of a given family. Not overnight, yet in a relatively short amount of time, the legal condition of Roman women changed and they came to dispose of a freedom unseen before.

With this increase in female financial independence, major juridical and cultural transformations were unavoidable. One of the most remarkable changes that we observe in the course of Republican history is the ability of women to inherit.[23] Consensual marriage made it possible for women to continue to be part of their father's family, thus becoming able to dispose of a personal inheritance at the moment of the father's death. Thanks to the *ius honorarium*, women gradually acquired the *bonorum possessio*, which is to say the possession of an inheritance, the ability to succeed to their husbands (even if they were not *in manu*) and, last but not least, the ability to succeed as *cognatae* (with *cognatio* being the female line of relatives). Further, the *lex Attilia* (approved around 210 B.C.?) directed a woman's tutor to administer her patrimony according to the very interest of the woman and no longer to simply avoid squandering the inheritance.

IV. The war of the sexes

The *lex Oppia* adds to this complex legal scenario.[24] Both its passing in 215 B.C. and its abolition in 195 B.C. correspond to important moments in the evolution of the Punic Wars. This sumptuary law was approved right after the disastrous Roman defeat at Cannae, and its repeal followed within a few years Hannibal's defeat in 201 B.C. Livy reports the alleged speeches pro and contra

23) Cf. E. Cantarella, Pandora's Daughters. The Role and Status of Women in Greek and Roman Antiquity, Baltimore 1987, 113–122.

24) The *lex Oppia* limited to half an ounce the amount of gold that each woman could possess, forbade women to wear dresses with purple trim and, with the exception of religious celebrations, to drive in carriages within a mile of Rome. The main ancient sources on this law are Livy, Hist. 34.1–8; Tacitus, Ann. 3.33–34; Valerius Maximus 9.1.3; Aulus Gellius 10.23 and 17.16; Orosius 4.20.14. Among the modern scholars who have specifically focused on the topic see M. Krueger, Die Abschaffung der lex Oppia, NJADB 3, 1940, 65–86; P. Culham, The *Lex Oppia*, Latomus 41, 1982, 786–793; I. Mastrorosa, Speeches «pro» and «contra» women in Livy 34, 1–7: Catonian legalism and gendered debates, Latomus 65, 2006, 590–611.

the abrogation of the law attributed respectively to Lucius Valerius and Cato the elder. These speeches reveal not only important information concerning the *lex* and Rome's legal history, but also the preoccupation about and the ideological debate on the social role of women at the beginning of the second century B.C. We should bear in mind that Livy, by making use of the argumentative technique of *in utramque partem disserere*, and, in the specific case of Cato, by omitting the extant formula normally used to refer to Cato's preserved orations, most likely reconstructs what the two different speeches must have been like, according to specific rhetorical paradigms, rather than reproducing them.[25] Thus, from a strictly philological point of view, what we have are not Cato's nor Lucius Valerius' actual words. Yet, for the purpose of our analysis, we shall consider the 'spirit' of those words genuine and try to assess what of this spirit is reflected in *Truculentus*. Surely the exact words do not belong to Cato, yet Livy thought that something similar may have been pronounced by the man, and the thematic and semantic nuances must reflect what Livy deemed the harsh moral principle of these early Republican champions may have been like.

We have already mentioned the initial image of the throng of prostitutes crowding around the banks and some possible similarities to the situation that Livy describes at 34.2.1. The historian had related something equally telling in Cato's oration just a few paragraphs earlier, at 34.1.5: *matronae nulla nec auctoritate nec verecundia nec imperio virorum contineri limine poterant.* It is interesting to notice how the excesses of women are interpreted as the direct result of the males' inability to restrain them and keep them within their canonically designated physical spaces. They ultimately depend on the inability of men to *retinere ius et maiestatem* (Liv. 34.2.1) and to exert their *imperium*. *Imperium* forms, together with *virtus*, the ultimate dyad defining Roman masculinity.[26] The excessive freedom of women is tantamount to an erasure of male *imperium*, a key component of male identity. Furthermore, not only males appear lacking their naturally gender-coded set of virtues but, according to Cato, women are organized in groups as if they

25) On this specific issue see Mastrorosa (n. 24 above) 592–593.
26) Cf. C. A. Williams, Roman Homosexuality, Oxford 1999, 145.

were an army (*agmen*),[27] and among their wildest desires is the celebration of their material prosperity symbolized by their parading on rich chariots in a scene reminiscent of a military triumph (*velut triumphantes*).[28] There is nothing more effective to portray a reality completely upended than women behaving in this warrior-like fashion.

At Truc. 170 Astaphium utilizes a trope describing the fate of the *amator*, which she also draws from the repertoire of warfare: *amator similest oppidi hostilis* and at v. 171 she adds: *quam primum expugnari potis* [*est*]*, tam id optumum est amicae*. The *amator* is compared to the enemy's city, and the best option for the *amica* is to conquer it. This way of conceptualizing the relation between *amator* and *amica* is perfectly coherent within the Catonian image of women seen as an *agmen* ready to celebrate a triumph. Furthermore, at v. 223, Astaphium declares that: *piaculumst miserere nos hominum rei male gerentum*, to then add, a few lines later, at v. 230: *quin, ubi nil det, pro infrequente eum mittat militia domum*. These lines are remarkable because they link two of the themes analyzed so far: namely women actively dealing with financial matters and their metaphorical representation through tropes of warfare. There is no mercy for a man unable to administer his patrimony, which is why he should be dismissed like a soldier from his *militia*. Again some of the Catonian preoccupations seem to be here voiced and conflated: first, a woman acting like a military commander shows no signs of mercy and decides to dismiss a negligent soldier, thus demonstrating at once her fitness to command, and, second, her familiarity with money. Phronesium and her *ancilla* Astaphium act like fellow soldiers. At v. 714 f. Astaphium invites her *domina* to unsheathe (*promere*) her charm (*venustas*) in order to ruin (*perdere*) the man, while she will stand outside, vigilant like a guard (*praesidebo*). Again, as we have just seen in Cato's oration, the warfare metaphor referred to women and their nasty meddling in matters related to money are presented as the same, and their conflation crucially symbolizes the upended relations between males and females.

27) Cf. Livy, Hist. 34.2.
28) Cf. Livy, Hist. 34.3.

V. Wild beasts

In his speech against the abolition of the *lex Oppia* in Livy, Cato portrays women as a danger, and, resorting to his rhetorical expertise, he selects vivid metaphors to convince his audience. At Livy, Hist. 34.4.20 we find one of his most daring comparisons, when he likens the effects of the abolition of restrictions to curb women's excesses to the savagery of wild beasts unchained: *Et hominem improbum non accusari tutius est quam absolvi, et luxuria non mota tollerabilior esset quam erit nunc, ipsis vinculis sicut ferae bestiae inritata, deinde emissa*.

The text of *Truculentus* displays similar imagery. The third act opens with Strabax's monologue, in which the young man informs the audience of a visit he just received. A man came to the farm, looking for his father, in order to pay a debt concerning some sheep. Strabax collected the money on behalf of his father, and now he is very tempted to spend the entire amount on Phronesium's services. This is when the metaphor is introduced as the young fellow declares that (vv. 654–5): *Ego propere minas / ovis in crumina hac ⟨huc⟩ in urbem detuli.* This line functions to link *minae* and *oves*. Money and sheep are the same thing because money represents the direct gain from the selling of the sheep. At vv. 656–7 this identity is brought to its extreme consequences as we read: *Fuit edepol Mars meo periratus patri / nam oves illius hau longe apsunt a lupis.* Here Plautus plays on the double entendre of the term *lupa*, which can mean simultaneously "she-wolf" and "prostitute". The fact that the sheep, which are metaphorically money, are not far from the she-wolves, which are also metaphorically prostitutes, signifies the young fellow's intention to spend the amount he just collected on sexual amusements. What the reader visualizes is a flock of sheep being attacked and devoured by she-wolves. The concept artistically expressed by Plautus is ideologically comparable to the image evoked by Cato (better of Cato, through Livy). The theme of the danger coming from women and typified by the metaphor of the wild beast is attached by both authors to the problem of female luxury and thirst for gain.

Such greediness we find also at vv. 568–9: *meretricem ego item esse reor, mare ut est / quod des devorat, ⟨nec dat⟩is umquam abundat.* The simile here is between a prostitute and the sea, yet the presence of the verb *devorare* may suggest that *mare* is a met-

onymic allusion to a marine monster.[29] Through the comparison to the voracious sea, Phronesium is portrayed as a wild creature, thus here we could possibly see this as another allusion to the striking Catonian image of the untamed wild beast freed from its chains. The Catonian preoccupation for the overall consequences of such debauchery on Roman society are echoed by Diniarchus' slave Cyamus who, at v. 574, a few lines after the above, adds that: *privavit bonis, luce, honore atque amicis*. Such a climax extends the range of consequences from the single patrimony to society, symbolized by the cardinal values of *honos* and *amicitia*. It is not only the prostitute that is represented as a wild beast; her house is also described as a monstrous being. At vv. 350–1 Phronesium's door is pictured like a marine vortex, which swallows everything, and Diniarchus hesitates to enter. At 352–3 Phronesium, noticing his reluctance, scorns the young man by accusing him of fearing that the door bites: *num tibi nam, amabo, ianua est mordax mea / quo ire intro metuas, mea voluptas?* The image of the biting door resonates with the motif of the swirling and swallowing vortex, while at the same time eliciting, once again, the fundamentally monstrous nature of Phronesium. Furthermore there are anthropological studies that have explored the figuration of the brothel's gate as a simulacrum for the archetypal fear of the *vagina dentata*.[30]

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29) Though we are in the realm of pure speculation, according to Lucas (n. 2 above) there may have been thematic similarities between *Truculentus* and the no longer extant Plautine *Fretum*. The latter apparently contained various allusions to the theme of the courtesans' voracity typified by descriptions of Scylla and Charybdis. Such comparisons could have been already present in *Fretum*'s Greek model, possibly Anaxilas' *Neottis* (fr. 22 PGC II 270). Unfortunately this hypothesis cannot be substantiated.

30) For an overview of the anthropological motif of the *vagina dentata* cf. R. Gessain, "Vagina dentata" dans la clinique et la mythologie, Psychanalyse 3, 1957, 247–295; W. Elwin, The Vagina Dentata Legend, BrJMedPsychol 19, 1968, 439–453; W. Lederer, The Fear of Women, New York 1980, 35–40; J. Rait, The vagina dentata and the *Immaculatus Uterus Divini Fontis*, AAR 48, 1980, 415–431; S. B. Ross, Die Vagina dentata in Mythos und Erzählung: Transkulturalität, Bedeutungsvielfalt und kontextuelle Einbindung eines Mythenmotivs, Bonn 1994. Fontaine (n. 13 above) 208–210 traces back the literary motif of the *vagina dentata* to Greek comedy and, about *Truculentus*, he notices how while at Truc. 350–351 Phronesium's door is defined with the plural *fores*, at Truc. 352–353 the same door is termed with the singular *ianua mordax* to which the meaningful possessive *mea* is added.

Diniarchus' hesitation to enter the toothed door of the prostitute's house prefigures his financial and physical ruin, and tells the reader much about Phronesium.

VI. Dona et mores

If the voracity of women is demonstrated both by Cato and Plautus through the imagery of the wild beast, *Truculentus* echoes another Catonian theme from Livy's account of his speech against the abrogation of the *lex Oppia*: gifts. According to Livy, Hist. 34.4.6–7, Cato, in order to praise the virtue of ancient *mores*, recounts an episode from the war against Pyrrhus a century before. The king, through his ambassador Cinea, tried to tamper with the loyalty both of men and women by means of bribes (*animos donis temptavit*). Right after the narration of this historical episode Livy, Hist. 34.4.9 resorts to the application of the *comparatio legum*, a canonical resource recommended by technical manuals:[31] *quid legem Liciniam excitauit de quingentis iugeribus nisi ingens cupido agros continuandi? quid legem Cinciam de donis et muneribus nisi quia uectigalis iam et stipendiaria plebs esse senatui coeperat?* Here Cato compares the timeliness of the *lex Oppia* and its necessary preservation to previous laws that had proved in the past equally important and effective, specifically the *lex Licinia* and the *lex Cincia*. The former was a ruling (*rogatio*) prohibiting anyone from occupying more than 500 *iugera*. The latter was a plebiscite preventing lawyers from being compensated after pleading a case; the *lex Cincia* was precisely *de donis et muneribus*. Both laws had to do with the curbing of excessive greed and appetite.

And indeed, the semantic field of gift-giving permeates the entire *Truculentus*. The theme is topical and very much present in the source tradition of the Graeco-Roman world. As Rauh[32] points out, through their ability to exact payments from wealthy males, ancient sex-workers acquired reputations as rapacious and predatory. Even so, what is remarkable in *Truculentus* is not the presence

31) Cf. Mastrorosa (n. 24 above) 602 n. 44.

32) Cf. N. K. Rauh, Prostitutes, Pimps, and Political Conspiracies, in: A. Glazebrook / M. M. Henry (eds), Greek Prostitutes in the Ancient Mediterranean, 800 BCE – 200 CE, Madison / London 2011, 206.

of this trait, but the centrality of it. If we divide up the comedy into scenes in which various male characters interact with either the *ancilla* Astaphium or with her mistress Phronesium, each episode is a moment in which gifts are traded. In this comedy, all basic human interactions are negotiated as exchanges. The first scene of the first Act contains an almost 'programmatic' monologue of Diniarchus on prostitutes and gifts. Through the metaphor of fishing, Diniarchus compares the lover to the prey and the prostitute to the fisherman. The capture of the lover / fish corresponds to his financial ruin, signified by a climactic accumulation of gifts: from cloaks, to vases, to Greek trunks, cf. vv. 53–7.[33]

Later on, at vv. 309–11, the slave Truculentus contrasts the detrimental practice of gift giving with the frugality of the ancient *mores*, thus restating the centrality of the Catonian ideals of *parsimonia* and *duritia*. At vv. 441–5, the conclusion of the fifth scene of the second act, Diniarchus' monologue presents a parody of the *fides coniugalis*.[34] In it, the reciprocal trust between husband and wife is substituted and mocked by a mutual bond derived from sharing the details of a crime (the stealing of the baby boy that Phronesium has just confessed to Diniarchus). Phronesium and Diniarchus have indeed become partners (in crime), and the seal to this upgrading in their relationship is again signified by gift giving.

The sixth scene of the second act sees the arrival of Stratophanes, who is back from war. The audience knows that Phronesium is about to trick him with the story of her fake pregnancy. The soldier tries to gain the favor of his *amica* and he does so presenting numerous gifts. The poor man is unsuccessful and immediately overcome by Cyamus who, at the beginning of the seventh scene, presents Phronesium with rich donations on behalf of his master Diniarchus. In the second act, the sixth and the seventh scenes are built according to a principle of gift-accumulation. If this crescendo of material goods was brought on stage and occupied most of the *scaena*, the audience must have been overwhelmed.

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33) *Aut periit aurum aut conscissa pallula est / aut empta ancilla aut aliquod vasum argenteum / aut vasum ahenum antquom aut lectus sculptilis / aut armariola Graeca aut aliquid semper est / quod praestet debeatque amans scorto suo.*

34) *egone illam ut non amem? Egone illi ut non bene velim? / me potius non amabo quam huic desit amor. / ego isti non munus mittam? Iam modo ex hoc loco / iubebo ad istam quinque perferri minas, / praeterea opsonari dumtaxat mina.*

Finally, after Diniarchus is called out of the gift competition on account of his fatherly responsibilities, the very end of the comedy will coincide with a fight between Strabax and Stratophanes, in order to determine who has the right to enjoy Phronesium's favors, on the basis of the quantity of gifts offered. At v. 948, Strabax epitomizes the situation with an almost aphoristic statement: *melius te minis certare mecum quam minaciis*.

One more detail concerning the denouement of the comedy requires our attention. Rauh has commented on[35] the ability of the most talented prostitutes "to entice wealthy citizens and young aristocrats into an underclass world of sex establishments where they came in contact with social inferiors". Though prostitution was an ordinary component of a Roman male's daily life, regardless his status, the various types of interactions occurring inside the brothel nonetheless often elicited concerns of social nature.

Such concerns became particularly strong towards the end of the Republic,[36] but are already present in classical and Hellenistic source tradition, and Plautus may allegedly been familiar with it. In particular, aside from the famous case of Aspasia, many Athenian politicians communed with *hetairai* and, later on, Hellenistic monarchs often associated with courtesans and installed them as royal consorts.[37] This phenomenon alarmed the political elite that considered it a menace to the overall harmony of the social fabric. As Aristotle, Pol. 2.1269b32–4 wrote: "For what difference is there between a rule of women and a state in which women rule the

35) Cf. Rauh (n. 32 above) 208. On this topic see also T. J. Gilfoyle, City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex 1790–1920, New York 1994, 224–250 and N. K. Rauh / M. J. Dillon / T. D. McClain, *Ochlos Nautikos*: Leisure Culture and Underclass Discontent in the Roman Maritime World, in: R. L. Hohlfelder (ed.), The Maritime World of Ancient Rome: An Exploration of New Research on Subjects Relating to the Maritime Life of Rome and its Vast Empire, Ann Arbor 2008, 234.

36) The history of the late Republic presents several instances of 'conspiracy paranoia' attached to sex-trade laborers. This is the case with the courtesan Praecia and her role in the political relation between P. Cornelius Cethegus and L. Licinius Lucullus in the year 74 (cf. Plutarch, Luc. 6.3–4), or more famously with the social milieu that both Cicero, Cat. 2.10, 4.17 and Sallust, Cat. 13, 14, 24 describe as close to Catiline, in order to suggest that his conspiracy coalesced in a brothel environment.

37) According to Athenaeus 13.558e the famous hetaira Phryne is credited with an exceptional ability to dominate her wealthier clients, thus accumulating enormous riches.

rulers?" This remark strikes home for his similarity with a proverbial Catonian invective. Plutarch, Cat. 8.4 credits Cato with the following words: ἄνθρωποι τῶν γυναικῶν ἄρχουσιν, ἡμεῖς δὲ πάντων ἀνθρώπων, ἡμῶν δ' αἱ γυναῖκες.[38] Cato's indignation seems to be voiced and mocked in *Truculentus*. Phronesium's brothel welcomes all types of men. The *adulescens* Diniarchus, the soldier Stratophanes, the slave Truculentus and Strabax, the young son of a wealthy farmer, are all the same when under Phronesium's sexual spell. They no longer act like *viri*, but they appear to be completely subservient to their urgent need to enjoy the courtesan's favor. One after another all male characters abase themselves and grant Phronesium complete control over them, and this is indeed the representation of an upended world where men are controlled by women.

One of the reasons why Cato was against the abrogation of the *lex Oppia*, and tried to strengthen his argument through a comparison to the *lex Licinia* and the *lex Cincia*, was precisely that all these legal measures aimed at maintaining social harmony, which was firstly intended as the control of males over females. The aim of these laws was to avoid excessive concentration of wealth. In this respect it has been suggested that the public demonstration orchestrated by the Roman matrons to support the abrogation of the *lex Oppia* would not have been possible without the tacit assent of their husbands, who had therefore turned their wives into political sponsors, or maybe these wives had turned their husband into passive spectators.[39] That is because Roman men, after the defeat of Hannibal, wanted the ability to make public display of their wealth and political power through the luxurious adornments of their wives. Cato feared that this competition in wealth could potentially unbalance the social order. Thus his opposition to the abrogation of the *lex Oppia* pursued a double aim. On the one hand he wanted to defend the traditional idea of womanly modesty and the need for women to be subservient to males. On the other, by preventing the wealthier men from using their wives as a means to make a show of their power, he tried to defend the Republican social cohesion among the various classes of citizens. Clearly, *Trucu-*

38) "All other men rule their wives; we rule all other men, and our wives rule us."

39) Cf. Pomeroy (n. 21 above) 180 and Culham (n. 24 above) 791.

lentus stages a show of what would be Cato's worst fear: a world where women have uncontrolled power and dispose of excessive wealth.

In conclusion, *Truculentus*' situations and themes only appear to be mismatched, but in reality share a common thematic scaffolding. This coherent background emerges when we link the comedy's relatively certain chronology to an analysis of the major contemporaneous social changes involving Roman society at the end of the second Punic war. A thorough comparative textual analysis of key themes present in both *Truculentus* and Cato's speech against the abrogation of the *lex Oppia* makes visible a series of gender-coded anxieties generated by women's newly acquired privileges and their increased juridical abilities. Phronesium embodies these anxieties, triumphing over all male characters and celebrating her absolute victory at the end of the comedy. Both texts, as we have seen, share a coherent repertoire of images that conjures up specific social anxieties and reveals a common cultural background. Plautus' use of upended military tropes with women playing the leading roles, and his subversion of gift-giving – a fundamental and male-directed social mechanism – all combine to render this dark fantasy, which in the eyes of the most conservative strata of Roman society of the time was already dangerously close to reality. In fact, legal countermeasures to the dread figured here by Phronesium were soon adopted. In 169 B.C., some twenty years after the staging of *Truculentus*, the *lex Voconia* was passed, prohibiting those who owned properties valued at 100.000 asses from making a woman their heir. Women's financial abilities were once again curbed. Thus, the definition of *Truculentus* as a "satiric comedy" is certainly apt, but it is worth examining the whole historical scaffolding which sustains it to see how Phronesium, though a type and a literary persona, nonetheless greatly resonates with a very specific Zeitgeist.

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