CHAPTER ONE

Form

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INTRODUCTION

"Ancient comedy" is a modern term covering a wide range of distinct varieties of "comic" (light) drama occurring in different periods and places throughout the ancient world. Ancient scholars since Aristotle have tried to define "comedy" more precisely (Arist. *Poet.* 2.1448a16–18; 5.1449a31–b9), despite numerous differences between these attempts: "comedy" is seen as a dramatic genre involving characters of lower status and presenting fictional stories.[1] In the Hellenistic period the Greek comic poet Antiphanes famously has a character distinguish between tragedy and comedy by saying that tragedy is blessed since audiences know the stories while comic poets have to invent everything (Antiphanes, fr. 189 K.-A.; English translation in Rusten 2011: 506–7). In terms of authorship, early Roman playwrights produced both comedies and tragedies; but from the time these genres had established themselves in Rome and in Greece, there was a separation between serious and light dramatic genres, so that playwrights only produced works of one type.[2]

This survey will look at the various forms of "comedy" in roughly chronological order. Such a structure implies a distinction between Greek and Roman manifestations as well as between the main historical and literary periods. For each phase the major varieties of comedy, their standard format (and deviations) as well as formal characteristics of key representatives will be mentioned. The overview will start with classical Greece (*c.* fifth century), when comedies performed at the regular Athenian festivals are attested for the first time, and then move to Hellenistic Greece (*c.* late fourth–third century), when the political situation and the format of comedy changed significantly. Afterwards it will

consider Republican Rome (*c.* 240–4), when comedy on the model of Hellenistic Greece was introduced and established at Rome, and conclude with the subsequent developments in the imperial period and late antiquity.

Throughout, it has to be borne in mind that more or less complete comedies only survive from four playwrights (Aristophanes, Menander, Plautus, Terence), each of whom was active in a different context. Since what survives from all other comic poets consists of *testimonia*, titles and fragments,[3] not all questions about the standard form of Greek and Roman comedy can be answered for sure; this applies particularly to issues of dramatic structure. Typical features have to be inferred on the basis of the extant dramas of a few representatives and corroborated by fragments of other playwrights. Still, it appears that some key features emerge as characteristic of the dramatic genre of comedy and remain constant throughout most of antiquity; others are more specific to particular periods and are abandoned, changed or replaced over the course of time.[4]

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CLASSICAL GREECE

According to Aristotle the origins of comedy are uncertain and less well known than those of tragedy (Arist. *Poet.* 3.1448a29–b2; 5.1449a38–b9). Later ancient scholars (apparently since Hellenistic times) distinguished three phases of Attic Greek comedy: Old, Middle, and New Comedy. This tripartite division of comedy ignores that the development was gradual, different styles overlapped, and it is problematic to posit sharp breaks in literary history. Still, there is no doubt that the main characteristics of comedy during the central sections of these periods differ from each other in form and content.[5]

In Athens the development of comedy is connected with its position at the regular festivals. The introduction of a comic competition at the Athenian Dionysia, the main festival for dramatic performances, took place early in the fifth century (486);[6] a few decades later (*c.* 440) comedy began to be also part of the festival of the Lenaea, the second festival including dramatic performances. At each of these festivals five playwrights produced their comedies in a dramatic competition.

For the classical period the main evidence for comedy, representing the phase of "Old Comedy," comes from the plays by the Athenian writer Aristophanes (*c.* 440s–*c.* 380s), as the works of his contemporaries only survive in fragments. Eleven plays by Aristophanes are extant; this represents about a quarter of his output, extending over almost all of his career (first performance at a festival: 427).[7] The textual evidence for that phase is complemented by vase-paintings.[8]

As in tragedy, originally, the presence of a chorus was an important constituent of a drama as reflected in official terminology (when "the archon [chief magistrate] grants a chorus" indicates the permission to perform a drama).[9] The

comic chorus (of twenty-four members) consisted of male citizens at the Dionysia and of citizens and resident aliens (metics) at the Lenaea. Accordingly, the structure of the plays was based on the interaction between the chorus and (male) actors (typically three). Characters in Old Comedy were mostly taken from everyday life or contemporary history, complemented by fictional, fantastic figures (with corresponding costumes and appropriate masks). Actors would wear costumes with padded stomachs and buttocks as well as phalluses.[10] The protagonist often embodies a middle-aged man or woman.

The language was initially rather expressive, including colloquialisms and vulgar phrases, coinages of words, some imitation of non-Attic dialects or ungrammatical and even nonsensical expressions to characterize "barbarians" as well as elaborate expressions in the style of tragedy. Because Old Comedy is rooted in contemporary Athenian society, there may be direct or indirect allusions to topical political issues and even explicit (frequently mocking) references to named individuals (*onomasti kōmōdein*). All ancient comedy was written in verse, and Old Comedy displays a rich variety of spoken and sung verses (including iambic, trochaic, and melic verses).

A play of Old Comedy often starts with a prologue setting the scene: frequently, at the start there is criticism of the current political and social conditions, and the protagonist comes up with an exciting idea of how to improve the situation. During the subsequent *parodos* the chorus enters. A sequence of episodic scenes follows, featuring various characters (including passages in which characters with different views argue against each other): in those discussions the initial idea may be supported or criticized. Most of Aristophanes' plays feature a choral section called *parabasis*, often around the middle of the play: this is a unique element in Attic Old Comedy, offering remarks outside the plot, in which the chorus may serve as a vehicle for the playwright's direct engagement with the audience.[11] The scenes after the *parabasis* might feature other characters approaching the protagonists because of the new regime they are trying to set up. The play concludes with an *exodos*, when the chorus and the characters depart after a final conversation. Generally, in the time of Old Comedy the dramatic structure of comedy is different from that of tragedy and is rather flexible and loose.[12]

In Aristophanes' late plays (*Assemblywomen* and *Wealth*) structural developments can be observed: the *parabasis* disappears or is drastically shortened, although the pieces still contain elements of metadrama and addresses to the audience. The role of the chorus and the *agōn* (argumentative discussion) are reduced. This is generally interpreted as an evolution towards "Middle Comedy," especially as Aristophanes' final two plays, *Aiolosikon* and *Kokalos*, produced soon after 388, are mythological burlesques without a chorus (16 and 13 fragments as well as *testimonia* in K.-A., vol. III 2; English translation of material on *Aiolosikon* in Rusten 2011: 281–3).

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Although the assumption of a strict tripartite division of the history of Attic Greek comedy has become problematic, and a gradual process is more likely, a core period of 380–350 can be identified in which what are regarded as typical characteristics of Middle Comedy can be seen most clearly, with transitional periods of twenty to thirty years on either side.[13] In Middle Comedy there is less evidence for the extensive use of the chorus, for the *agōn*, and for references to contemporary politics. The language is more refined and less exuberant. There is less metrical variety; for instance, the meter of the anapaestic tetrameter is not attested anywhere.[14] Typical characters of New Comedy, such as the slave, the cook, the parasite, or the soldier, appear, but are not yet fully developed. Comedies of this period are often based on comic and parodic versions of mythical plots.[15] Middle Comedy appears as less vulgar than Old Comedy, and actors no longer wear padded costumes and phalluses.[16]

In addition to scripted comedy following a plot there were various less formal types of comic performances from the sixth century all over Greece, though information about these comic forms is limited.[17] One of these was the Doric mime or "comedy," which seems to have appeared early in the sixth century. Pieces in that genre often presented farcical scenes from daily life or mythological travesty, including song and dance, without much emphasis on a plot. Early literary versions of such comic forms are the plays in verse by Epicharmus and the pieces in rhythmic prose by Sophron (fifth century).

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HELLENISTIC GREECE

After the classical period dramatic contests continued not only in Athens (with victory lists extending into the mid-second century), where a new phase in the development of comedy emerged, but they are also known for the third to the first centuries for other places in mainland Greece as well as some islands and cities in Asia Minor: in this time comedy spread beyond Athens, exported by traveling troupes of actors, the Artisans of Dionysus. Greek comic plays were also performed in the west, in Sicily and Italy.[18] Contrary to what used to be assumed, the plays shown there are less likely to have been of a local type, but rather Athenian in origin, though adapted to the changed performance conditions and audience preferences.

In addition to revivals of existing pieces new plays were produced, especially in Athens. These plays followed the style called "New Comedy," conventionally regarded as extending from the first production of a comedy by Menander (*c.* 342–*c.* 291) in 321 to the middle of the third century. The only play of this type to be preserved almost completely is Menander's *Dyskolos* (discovered in the twentieth century); in addition, there are substantial parts of several other plays by Menander.[19] Already in antiquity connections between "New Comedy"

FIGURE 1.1: Mosaic from the "House of Menander" at Mytilene (detail: scene from *Epitrepontes*, *c.* third century CE).

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and Euripidean tragedy were observed in the use of motifs such as *anagnorisis* ("recognition") (*Vita Euripidis*, *P. Oxy.* 1176, fr. 39, col. vii).

On the basis of the existing evidence, several differences from Old Comedy (as represented by Aristophanes) can be noticed: the complex and flexible structures of Aristophanes' comedies have been replaced by a sequence of five acts separated by four choral interludes. The choral parts tend to be marked by the word *chorou* in the manuscripts, indicating a choral song not necessarily related to the plot or written for a particular play and therefore not included in the text. There is hardly any interaction between actors and the chorus. Plots are no longer directly linked to contemporary Athenian politics and rather focus on domestic situations; they are often concerned with obstacles to love affairs and misunderstood identity, thus frequently centering around the experiences of a young man. The

characters come from a stock set of stereotypes (including young and old men, courtesans and slaves) with the corresponding costumes and masks.

Plots are generally constructed more tightly, and the three unities of time, place, and action tend to be observed.[20] The action is usually confined to a single day. Most of it happens on the stage, representing a street in front of houses. Events that must take place within one of the houses or elsewhere either fall between acts or are covered by monologues or dialogues on stage with someone reporting what they have seen ("messenger speech").

In line with the ordinary setting, poets mainly avoid the fantastic spectacles of Old Comedy as well as both the elaborate language of tragedy and the expressive style of Aristophanes. Instead they produce something close to the speech of everyday life, as far as possible within the poetic framework. As the chorus is less involved, New Comedy mostly consists of spoken dialogue and recitative (mainly in iambic trimeters and trochaic tetrameters).

The reasons for such changes can only be inferred and are manifold: they may have to do with political and social changes, with comedy becoming a Panhellenic phenomenon, with the practicalities of traveling troupes of actors, who would not be able to bring a chorus with them, and/or with a reduction of theatrical resources in times of limited funding. The more coherent plot structure was probably influenced by the format and the conventions of tragedy, so that this type of comedy could almost be called a tragedy with a happy ending.

While the plots are set in an ordinary domestic environment, the plays are not "realistic" in the sense that they depict the everyday experiences of contemporary individuals; what is shown is rather a theatrical construct appearing "realistic." Still, Menander must have depicted what could be seen as typical circumstances; otherwise Aristophanes of Byzantium could not have made the well-known remark about Menander and Life, asking which of them was imitating the other (test. 83 K.-A.; English translation in Rusten 2011: 631). The plays do pick up contemporary social issues, albeit in a more indirect way. The fact, therefore, that these plays could be seen to deal with general human issues made them more widely understandable and more easily transferable (e.g., Plut. *On Eros*, ap. Stobaeus 4.20.34).

In addition to "New Comedy," mime resurfaced in Hellenistic times, as a type of mythological burlesque or mythological travesty, documented in more literary form by the *mimiamboi* of Herodas (third century BCE) and as a more popular variety by papyrus fragments.

REPUBLICAN ROME

In ancient Rome scripted drama developed on the model of existing Greek drama from 240 onwards. In 240 the magistrates commissioned Rome's first poet,[21] Livius Andronicus (*c.* 280/70–*c.* 200), to provide a play or plays for the

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main religious festival (Cic. *Brut.* 72; Gell. *NA* 17.21.42; Cass. *Chron.*, p. 128 *MGH* AA 11.2 [on 239]).[22] The sources are not unanimous as to whether a comedy and a tragedy were performed on that occasion or only one of these. Even if a comedy was not part of this festival, the first proper "comedy" in Rome would have been shown shortly afterwards. While the light drama of the type written by Livius Andronicus is often called *comoedia* in the sources (especially earlier ones) and, accordingly, "comedy" in modern scholarship, it was a particular form of comic drama, based on Greek (New) Comedy, and is therefore called *fabula palliata* ("drama in Greek dress," named after the *pallium*, a typical Greek garment) by later grammarians, who arranged Greek and Roman dramatic genres systematically (e.g., Diom. *Ars* 3, *Gramm. Lat.* 1, pp. 482–91; Euanth. *Fab.* 4.1–3; Donat. *Com.* 6.1–2; on Ter. *Ad.* 7; Lydus, *Mag.* 1.40).

The plays of Livius Andronicus, like those of his immediate successors Naevius (*c.* 280/60–*c.* 200) and Ennius (239–169), who all wrote both serious and light drama, have only been preserved in fragments. Ennius' slightly older contemporary T. Maccius Plautus (*c.* 250–184) was the first Roman poet to concentrate on *fabula palliata*, and he is the first Roman playwright of whom complete plays survive. In fact, Plautus became so popular that numerous plays later circulated under his name (Gell. *NA* 3.3.11). Plautus was followed by Caecilius Statius (*c.* 230/20–168/7), whose work only survives in fragments, and then by P. Terentius Afer (*c.* 195/4–159).[23] Six plays by Terence have been preserved, which seems to be his entire output; thus he is the only Republican playwright whose complete oeuvre is extant. Soon after the time of Terence productions of new comedies started to decline; after the end of the second century hardly any new comedies were produced.

As for the emergence of the genre, the Roman *fabula palliata* takes its inspiration from Greek New Comedy. Greek New Comedy was familiar to playwrights working in Rome, as they all came from outside the city, mostly from southern Italy, where Greek theater flourished.[24] Parts of the audience may have also seen performances of Greek plays, for instance soldiers on military service, but there is no evidence for regular performances of plays in Greek at Rome.

Since *fabulae palliatae* are based on Greek models, there has been a considerable debate about the extent to which they are "translations" or "adaptations" and in what way their character is due to the Roman playwrights. Since some prologues mention the title of the Greek model or the name of its poet (e.g., Plaut. *Asin.* 10–12; *Poen.* 50–5; *Trin.* 18–21; Ter. *Andria* 9–14; *Eun.* 19–20; 30–4; *Phorm.* 24–8; *Ad.* 6–11), Roman *fabulae palliatae* have clearly been developed from Greek New Comedy plays, as produced by Hellenistic playwrights such as Menander, Demophilus, Diphilus, Philemon, and Apollodorus.[25]

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Moreover, the prologues reveal that Roman playwrights sometimes left out a scene when transposing a Greek play (e.g., Ter. *Ad.* 6–14) or included a scene or characters from another Greek play into their version of the main model by means of the process known as *contaminatio* (e.g., Ter. *Andria* 9–21; *Eun.* 30–3). Additionally, out of all the available Greek plays Roman poets made selections and adapted the chosen plays to the conventions of the Roman stage in form and content. Only in a few cases does a sufficient amount of comparative Greek and Roman material survive so that the practices of Roman poets can be identified: well-known examples are passages from Caecilius Statius' *Plocium* quoted by Gellius along with the corresponding passages from Menander's play of the same title (Gell. *NA* 2.23) and a section of Plautus' *Bacchides* (Plaut. *Bacch.* 526–61), for which the underlying Menandrean text (from the play *Dis Exapatōn*) has been revealed on a papyrus (*P.Oxy.* LXIV 4407).[26] These juxtapositions confirm that Roman poets retained some elements and changed others, including the names of characters, the dramatic structure, the metrical and linguistic shape, or the characterization of key figures. This suggests that what Roman playwrights created were "adaptations" rather than "translations."

In their versions the Roman comic poets kept the Greek, mostly Athenian, setting (Plaut. *Men.* 7–12). At the same time, they included explanations of Greek customs that might have seemed strange to a Roman audience as well as references to Roman sites or institutions (e.g., Plaut. *Merc.* 664–5; *Most.* 226; 746; 770; *Truc.* 690–1; *Stichus* 446–8). The mixture of features appropriate to Greek and Roman settings, their fictional elaboration and the insertion of metatheatrical remarks means that the stage action in *fabulae palliatae* does not present a coherent picture of a single society, but rather represents a fantasy world.[27] In such plays, therefore, actions and behaviors are possible that would not normally occur in real life in Rome, such as the dominating role of the slave or the undermining of the authority of the *pater familias*, and there is greater potential for entertainment.[28] Such a scenario does not entail that the stories in the plays are entirely irrelevant for Roman audiences: the experiences and situations faced by characters in the plays often mirror general issues of human interrelationships or address current societal issues even though the dramatic solutions are not always "realistic."[29]

Structurally, Roman poets abolished act breaks and choral interludes. Instead, they created a continuous action, with the music given to individual actors: a large proportion of lines were sung and recited to musical accompaniment rather than spoken. The preserved texts by the playwrights form a kind of "libretto." Composers provided the music; some of them are known by name (mentioned in the *didascaliae* [performance records]).[30] Also, while the number of actors simultaneously present on stage was restricted to three in Greece (at least in New Comedy), there could be four and occasionally five on the Roman

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stage. This flexibility enabled more dramatic scenes, such as two parallel dialogues or two groups of characters overhearing each other.[31]

In the typical plot of Roman *fabulae palliatae* a young man falls in love with a courtesan, who is in the possession of a pimp and/or desired by a wealthier rival, often a soldier. Therefore, the young man needs the help of his clever slave to gain possession of the girl and fight the opposition of his father to such a relationship. In the end the girl is usually recognized as the long-lost daughter of a respectable citizen, so that a proper marriage and a happy ending become possible. As the playwrights themselves acknowledge (e.g., Plaut. *Capt.* 55–62; 1029–36; Ter. *HT* 35–42; *Eun.* 35–41), such a structure means the involvement of a number of stock characters, such as the "running slave," the "angry old man," the "greedy parasite," the "shameless trickster," the "greedy pimp," the "good lady," the "wicked courtesan," and the "boastful soldier." Playwrights, however, make an effort to vary the plots within these parameters.

Some dramas diverge from the typical plot more than others, especially among the plays of Plautus, who seems to have stretched the boundaries of the dramatic genre. In *Amphitruo* Plautus goes furthest when, with a newly coined term, the play is defined as a "tragicomedy" (Plaut. *Amph.* 50–63) since it includes elements atypical of comedy and thus can no longer be defined straightforwardly as a comedy. The playwright's comments on this occasion reveal that the status of the protagonists was regarded as one criterion for defining comedy and tragedy respectively (as two gods, Jupiter and Mercury, are among the characters in *Amphitruo*), besides the nature of the plot (see e.g., *Captivi*).

As regards form, in modern editions *fabulae palliatae* are divided into a prologue (if there is one) and five acts each consisting of several scenes. This structure is due to Renaissance editors following a normative view of dramatic structure (Hor. *Ars* 189–90). Originally plays seem to have been conceived as a continuous sequence, structured by exits and entrances and the alternation of passages accompanied and unaccompanied by music.

The language of these dramas is the stylized idiom of the period; it seems "archaic" retrospectively as it differs from the classical Latin of Cicero and his contemporaries. Where there is a sufficient amount of text, it can be observed that male and female, older and younger characters each have specific linguistic peculiarities.[32] The meter for the spoken parts is the iambic senarius, in the free form of the Republican period (rather than the trimeter of Greek drama). Recitatives and arias include longer senarii, trochaic verses as well as anapaestic and Bacchic sequences. All meters other than the iambic senarius would be accompanied by music, and the musical patterns, inferred from the distribution of meters, can enhance the characterization or the structure of the plot. The meters and stylistic devices are similar to those observed in the fragments of contemporary tragedy while tone and vocabulary tend to be different.

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Beyond these general tendencies the two representatives of whom complete plays are extant differ from each other. For instance, Terence's style is regarded as less exuberant than that of Plautus—there is a larger amount of unaccompanied verse. In his plays the role of the clever slave is reduced and the characters seem more rounded, events are arranged so that surprise is maintained or increased, and he often has double plots (duality method). Therefore, it has even been argued that Terence is the exception in an otherwise coherent tradition of the *fabula palliata*.[33] But while Terence distances himself from some contemporaries (especially Luscius Lanuvinus), he places himself in the tradition of Naevius, Ennius, Caecilius Statius, and Plautus, relating his plays and writing style to this tradition (Ter. *Andria* 18–21; *Hec.* 14–27), and some features of his plays can also be found in Caecilius Statius. Thus it seems more likely that Terence develops the existing tradition, positioning himself in relation to it, rather than breaking with it.

Probably in the first half of the second century or even in the late third century BCE another variety of light drama appeared in Republican Rome, called *fabula togata* (occasionally *fabula tabernaria*) by later grammarians. This form of drama is named after the typical Roman garment of the *toga* and denotes comic drama set in Rome. It was developed according to the format of Roman comedies based on Greek models (*fabulae palliatae*); but in this version the plots were set in Rome. The only securely known representatives of the *fabula togata* are Titinius (*fl. c.* 200), L. Afranius (*fl. c.* 160–120) and T. Quinctius Atta († 77), whose works survive in fragments.

As for the outlook of the *fabula togata*, the commentator Donatus notes (Donat. ad Ter. *Eun.* 57) that generally slaves in *fabulae togatae* were not allowed to be cleverer than their masters (i.e., in contrast to *fabulae palliatae*), and the fragments suggest more attention to marriages, divorce, inheritance, and similar issues rather than extramarital love affairs. The development of this comic form might thus have been a reaction to the *fabula palliata* becoming more Greek and an attempt to reassert Roman values. On the other hand, Afranius says, and this is corroborated by other ancient sources (Cic. *Fin.* 1.7; Hor. *Epist.* 2.1.57), that he admired Terence and freely borrowed from any Greek or Roman writer who suited him, including Menander (Suet./Donat. *Vita Ter.* 7: Afr. *Tog.* 29 R.$^{2–3}$; Macrob. *Sat.* 6.1.4: Afr. *Tog.* 25–8 R.$^{2–3}$). This means that there was not necessarily a clear-cut distinction between *fabulae palliatae* and *fabulae togatae* in form and motifs.

In language, style and meter *fabulae togatae* seem to follow the general conventions of Republican drama. Vocabulary and ways of expression are rather straightforward, embellished with the common stylistic figures of early Roman poetry such as alliteration, asyndeton, or enumeration. As regards topics and *dramatis personae*, *fabulae togatae* present characters common in *fabulae palliatae*, such as slaves, parasites, pimps, courtesans, music girls,

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nurses, or twins. Yet they also feature wives and husbands as well as members of the extended family.

Another group of characters, distinguishing *fabulae togatae* from *fabulae palliatae*, consists of representatives of various professions or craftsmen, such as fullers or hairdressers. Such personnel contribute to locating plots in everyday life. Correspondingly, there are references to domestic chores, topics such as the contrast between life in the city and in the country, the problem of luxury, decadence, and changing traditions, religious customs or differences between Romans and other Italic peoples as well as Greeks. Some of these issues may be reactions to the situation in contemporary society, since the conclusion of the wars against foreign enemies had brought unprecedented wealth to Rome and also forced Romans to confront other ways of life and to engage with people from different countries.

Assumptions on the dramatic structure of *fabulae togatae* can hardly be made in view of the relatively small number of fragments surviving for each play, particularly in the absence of guidance by a known standard plot or a mythical story. What can be inferred is that plays opened with prologues and continued with monologues and dialogues of characters—there is no evidence for the presence of a chorus.

In addition to *fabulae palliatae*, adapted from Greece, and *fabulae togatae*, established in Rome on the Greek model, the range of Roman comic forms included varieties that emerged in Italy and then came to Rome, where they were developed and became literary.[34]

The *fabula Atellana* is a form of light drama named after the Oscan town of Atella in Campania, where it was first performed according to ancient tradition (Diom. *Ars* 3, *Gramm. Lat.* 1, pp. 489.14–90.7; Euanth. *Fab.* 4.1); it probably came to Rome in the third century BCE.[35] Pomponius was regarded as the inventor of a new dramatic genre despite a (non-literary) tradition before him (Vell. Pat. 2.9.6). Pomponius (*fl.* 89) was a contemporary of Novius (*fl. c.* 85–80): these two writers represent the literary *fabula Atellana* in the early first century. The *fabula Atellana* was apparently a kind of burlesque popular farce, regarded as crude, rustic, and old-fashioned and considered to be a short, impromptu performance. *Fabulae Atellanae* seem to have been performed as "after-pieces" (*exodia*) from some point in the Republican period onwards (e.g., Cic. *Fam.* 9.16.7; Suet. *Tib.* 45).

The protagonists in *fabulae Atellanae* were mainly taken from a fixed repertoire of stock characters with invariable features, the so-called "Oscan characters" (*Oscae personae*: Diom. *Ars* 3, *Gramm. Lat.* 1, p. 490.18–20). Extant titles and fragments of literary *fabulae Atellanae* as well as *testimonia* point to at least four stock figures, who share a degree of gluttony, clownishness, and foolishness: Maccus, the fool and stupid clown (Apul. *Apol.* 81.3; Diom. *Ars* 3, *Gramm. Lat.* 1, p. 490.18–20); Bucco, the foolish braggart (Apul. *Apol.*

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FIGURE 1.2: Phlyax scene (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Apulian_bell-krater_phlyax_scene_MAN.jpg).

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81; Plaut. *Bacch*. 1088; Isid. *Etym*. 10.30); Pappus, the foolish old man (Varro, *Ling*. 7.29); Dossennus, the cunning trickster and/or glutton (Hor. *Epist*. 2.1.173; Sen. *Ep*. 89.7).

In line with the stupidity and foolishness of the characters, the language in the surviving fragments is rather unsophisticated. If an imperial source is significant, *fabulae Atellanae* could include Greek verses just as *fabulae palliatae* sometimes do (Suet. *Ner.* 39.3). Some of the preserved titles of plays are Greek, and the fragments include Greek names. Nevertheless, the fragments also show the typical stylistic features of early Roman drama, such as examples of alliteration, assonance, *figura etymologica*, witty statements, wordplay, and puns. In terms of metrical shape, the same meters seem to have been used as in other dramatic genres (mainly senarii and septenarii). *Fabulae Atellanae* apparently had coherent plots: "Atellana intrigues/complications" (Varro, *Sat. Men*. 198 B.: *tricae Atellanae*).

Corresponding to the variable character of this dramatic genre, extant titles and fragments point to the existence of different variants: a significant proportion of known plays are based on the "Oscan characters." These could apparently appear in various guises and situations, whereby their characteristics

may be ridiculed. They can be shown foolishly unable to cope with particular circumstances, or there might be a drastic contrast between their characteristics and those required. Plays are set in an everyday environment and feature low-life situations; some represent family affairs, rural life and a primitive rustic atmosphere. Some titles are reminiscent of tragedy and might be travesties of mythological stories or parodies of tragedies. A further group of *fabulae Atellanae* is formed by pieces with Greek titles recalling *fabulae palliatae*; these may have been either adaptations or parodic reactions.

Another form of light drama that went through a pre-literary phase in Italy before it became literary is the mime, called *mimus* or *planipes* (mainly in more technical contexts).[36] Mime appears to have been one of the last Republican dramatic genres to become literary: this happened only at the very end of the Republic with the two poets Decimus Laberius (*c.* 106–43) and Publilius Syrus (*fl.* 46–43).

Comments on mime by later ancient writers are mainly critical, since they regarded this dramatic genre as low and vulgar and looked down upon its crude and frivolous aspects (e.g., Cic. *Fam.* 7.1.1; *Rab. post.* 35; Ov. *Tr.* 2.497–500; Gell. *NA* 2.23.12; Macrob. *Sat.* 2.1.9). In particular, performances of mime were considered obscene, since women played the female roles and mime actresses could appear naked or strip nude at the end of performances.

Literary mimes, though, could have meaningful and well-phrased content. Seneca highlighted that there was much in Publilius Syrus' mimes that could or should be said in comedies and tragedies or even in philosophical treatises, while he was aware that the same plays included low jokes (Sen. *Ep.* 8.8; *Dial.* 6.9.5; 9.11.8). The preserved *sententiae* of Publilius Syrus confirm the presence of popular-philosophical, sententious elements; some fragments show that mimes could feature topical political comment.

From this range of topics and the remaining longer fragments it is clear that mimes not only presented erotic farce, but must also have had plots and dialogue. They could apparently open with prologues distinguished from the subsequent action (Macrob. *Sat.* 2.7.2; 2.7.4). When Isidore claims that the plot (*argumentum*) was announced prior to the performance (Isid. *Etym.* 18.49), he might refer to expository prologues.

Although there were Greek forerunners and earlier simple forms in Italy, ancient writers dated the introduction of pantomime in Rome to 22. According to Lucian it reached a more developed stage in approximately the time of Augustus (Lucian, *Salt.* 34).[37] This view reflects the traditional date assigned to a change from pantomimic dances, already present in Rome, to pantomime proper. Pylades from Cilicia (who also wrote a treatise on pantomime) and Bathyllos from Alexandria are credited with "developing the Italian style of dance," the former representing the solemn and serious "tragic" and the latter the light-hearted "comic" variety (Ath. *Deip.* 20d–e). Modern scholarship has

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inferred that pantomime in Rome might go back to the late 40s. Pantomime developed into a dominant dramatic form in the imperial period, supported by the emperor Augustus and his successors.

The Roman pantomime is a type of dance by an actor (*pantomimus* or *histrio*), accompanied by music. Dancing, singing, and instrumental music were distributed over several performers (Hieron. *Ab Abr.* 1995, 22 BCE [p. 165c Helm]); the dancer concentrated on representing character and emotions. In its eventual form pantomime differed from the Greek precedent and earlier Roman versions, for instance, by an increased musical component and by the substitution of a choir for a single accompanist. The serious variety seems to have been the more common one.

IMPERIAL PERIOD

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At the end of the Roman Republican period there was a proliferation of forms of light dramatic performances, and they carried on into the imperial period,[38] while the production of new *fabulae palliatae* and *togatae* came to an end. No proper *fabulae palliatae* were written after the death of Turpilius († 104/103),[39] though the genre continued through revival performances of old plays, recitations, and their reading as school texts. Scattered performances of pieces of other dramatic genres also occurred: there was a revival of Afranius' *togata* play *Incendium* in the time of Nero (Suet. *Ner.* 11.2). At the end of the first century CE Juvenal mentions recitations of *togatae* among those of works in other literary genres (Juv. 1.3), yet it is not clear whether he uses the term *togatae* in the sense of "Roman comedies" or "Roman plays." The early principate knew performances of Atellanae (Suet. *Tib.* 45; *Ner.* 39; *Galb.* 13), which might have been revivals; famous parts seem to have been known to audiences and were exploited for topical references.

Interest in classical drama revived in the archaizing period of the second century CE: the emperor Hadrian (r. 117–138 CE) is said to have organized performances of dramas of all genres in the ancient style in the theater, in addition to representations at dinner parties (SHA *Hadr.* 19.6; 26.4).

Greek comedy also survived in the Roman Empire, both in performance and in literary imitations by aristocrats. In the eastern part of the Greek world performances of comedies are attested at least until the beginning of the third century CE. For the second century CE, for instance, the Greek orator Aelius Aristides attests in the speech *Against Comic Mockery* that comedy was still written and performed at the Dionysia in Smyrna in Asia Minor.[40] In the late first century CE Plutarch regarded Menander's comedies as suitable entertainment at a dinner party (Plut. *Mor.* 712c). A large number of papyri with texts by Menander and allusions to his plays in Greek authors of the early Roman Empire survive; the playwright was definitely popular in that period, presumably as an object of study.[41]

There are numerous ruins of theater buildings and festival schedules from the imperial period. The Greek geographer Pausanias (second century CE) even doubted whether a place without certain basic amenities including a theater could be called a "city" (Paus. 10.4.1). At the same time there is hardly any evidence of newly written comedies (and tragedies) in the traditional form. A handful of names of comic writers is attested for both Greece and Rome for the first century CE, though no texts survive. Revivals of old works continued a little longer, but no productions of complete plays can be verified from the third century CE onwards.[42]

An intriguing reference to writing fresh comedies occurs in a letter of Pliny the Younger at the end of the first century CE (Plin. *Ep.* 6.21): he mentions that he listened to a Vergilius Romanus reading a comedy of his written on the model of "old comedy." Since Pliny goes on to say that the same writer had previously composed comedies able to compete with Menander, Plautus, and Terence, it is unlikely that he means a "comedy in the traditional style," but rather a comedy in the format of Greek Old Comedy. While this comedy would no longer be performed and may have differed from Aristophanes' plays not only in the language, it is noteworthy that there was still interest in such Greek comedies.

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LATE ANTIQUITY/EARLY CHRISTIAN PERIOD

Theater was still an element of public life in the late antique and early Christian period: many extant theater buildings were erected or refurbished during this time. Performances in those venues seem to have included revivals of all sorts of plays, particularly of mimes and pantomimes. Theater only lost its financial and organizational basis with the end of the Roman Empire: for the western part the conquest by the Langobards in 568 CE can be regarded as the endpoint; in the east the Council in Trullo (Constantinople) in 692 CE prohibited any form of theater.

In the immediately preceding centuries comic drama was no longer a productive genre, but the fact that the texts of some authors were still being read and the theater as an institution was a subject of discussion among Christian writers shows its continuing importance. The only new comic drama dating to that period, probably a reaction to reading the plays of Plautus and Terence, is the anonymous piece *Querolus sive Aulularia* from the early fifth century CE.[43] The play is based on Plautus' *Aulularia*, though the plot is different in details, written in rhythmic prose and in language reminiscent of early Roman comedy.

Christian writers[44] regarded the theater as a venue for moral and physical debauchment, deemed involvement in performances as inappropriate for Christians because of the theater's close links with pagan religion and felt that dramas portrayed bad behavior. Still, Greek and Roman comedies that had

become school texts (especially those by Menander and Terence) continued to be read. Christian writers who wrote extensively against the theater include Tertullian in *De spectaculis* (*c.* 200 CE), Novatian in *De spectaculis* (*c.* 250 CE) and Augustine (354–430 CE) in several works, among them *Confessiones*, *De civitate dei* and *De doctrina Christiana*.

CONCLUSIONS

This overview of the development of Greek and Roman comic drama from the beginnings to late antiquity demonstrates that this type of drama was a constant element of literary, cultural, and social life throughout the period while its form evolved: the range of types of literary comic drama increased, and varieties that had come into existence earlier developed further. At least from the third century onwards there was interaction between Greek and Roman varieties.

Throughout, comedy was regarded as closer to everyday life than tragedy: even though comic settings are stylized and not "real," most comic forms feature ordinary (or fictional) characters; the human problems addressed are relevant to the audience. The stories may be displayed in a down-to-earth domestic environment or in more fanciful surroundings. Language and meter may be restrained or more exuberant and playful. As for the main form of comedy, one can observe a development in Greece from the more flexible shape of Old Comedy with its partly fantastic plots to the stricter format of New Comedy, mainly taking place in a domestic setting. Republican Rome adapts New Comedy; yet, initially, tragedies and comedies are written by the same playwrights, and the less rigid form and the unrestrained use of language are more reminiscent of Old Comedy. Over the course of the Republican period Roman comedy becomes more reticent and begins to adopt a more regular structure, a process also to be observed in the evolution of Roman tragedy.

In late antiquity Christian writers were critical of ancient comedy. However, the fact that some versions of comedy addressed general human problems in everyday settings and displayed refined language ensured that comedy continued to be read and was able to exert an influence on the shape of later European drama.

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