Plautus’ comedies gave Romans the freedom to “mock all that is Roman.”¹ The plays took the stringent Roman social hierarchy and strict Roman values and turned them on their heads. In the comedies, slaves control the action and prostitutes are noble and sought-after lovers. There are scenes in which slaves are able to trick and humiliate free men, and yet throughout the works slaves are demonstrated as subservient. The abuse of slaves, both physical and sexual, is often ridiculed in the plays. Similar language is used in the invective poetry of Catullus. Catullus scathingly, sexually, and socially insults and belittles his opponents through his poetry. However, when slaves in Plautus’ comedies make fun of each other for being sexually submissive or abused, it is not intended to mock and effeminate the slaves as is the case for those who are addressed in Catullan invective. Indeed, when we consider the humor of sexual violence in the plays of Plautus within the context of Catullan invective, we realize that Plautus is mocking the aristocratic Roman notion of what it means to be a man.

There are at least two stumbling blocks inherent to a comparison of Plautus and Catullus. First, it might be noted that many of Plautus’ plays are translations of various Greek plays; and second, that Plautus and Catullus were not contemporaries. But these objections can easily be overcome. Despite the fact that Greek originals Plautus worked off of have not survived, we can identify that Plautus has translated the humor and jokes into a Roman context. The plays contain references to Roman history, as well as puns and plays on words which can only make sense in Latin. According to Erich Segal, “there is one undeniable fact to be faced: Plautus made them laugh. And the laughter was Roman.”² We also know that Plautus was widely popular in Rome. Plays written by authors after his time were ascribed to Plautus in order to draw a greater crowd in the theater. Eventually, over 130 plays were attributed to him; the 20 plays that have come down to us were labeled as definitively Plautus in the late Republican period.³

And although Plautus composed his plays at the beginning of the 2nd century BC and Catullus wrote in the middle of the 1st century BC, it is possible to compare the attitudes of Catullus and Plautus due to the nature of Roman culture itself. The Romans believed that their culture had only degraded as time passed, and therefore constantly looked back in order to follow the *mos maiorum*, the acts of their ancestors.⁴ This created a rather

---

¹ Erich Segal. *Roman Laughter* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 39. All translations of Catullus are my own; all other translations are listed in the bibliography.
² Segal 1968, 7.
static civilization, in which very little change occurred within society and culture. The Romans themselves believed their res publica had existed in more or less the same state since 509 BCE. Therefore, there is sufficient congruence between their cultural contexts and the Roman nature of their literature to allow us to consider the values and societal implications of the works of Catullus and Plautus in conjunction, despite their temporal distance and different working methods.

This is not to deny the fact that that Plautus and Catullus wrote in two very different genres and for two very different audiences. Catullus wrote poetry intended for an upper class literary circle, to whom he addressed some of his poems, and who would appreciate his wit and truly elegant style. In Catullus’ poetry, though the abusive and sexual language can and is meant to be funny, the humor is more witty than truly comical. His loaded poems are meant for insult and demonstration of his literary talent rather than pure entertainment. Violence and sexual abuse is present mainly in Catullus’ invective poetry, in which his ill-treatment is directed towards other aristocratic males. Though Catullus’ poems can be aggressive and what we would call vulgar, they rise above the lower class genre of graffiti on account of their elegance.\(^5\) According to David Wray, this mix of abuse and literary sophistication exemplifies Catullus’ urbanitas, which turns this “poetic act of aggression into the performance of [the] ‘poetics of manhood.’”\(^6\) Thus, Catullus’ poetry itself is a manifestation of his masculinity.

Plautus, on the other hand, wrote comedies for the vulgus, the slaves and commoners who would watch his comedies.\(^7\) In his entertainment for commoners and slaves, we see a mockery of the aristocratic culture and especially of the notion of virility. At least half of Plautus’ surviving plays contain jokes about the sexual submission of slaves.\(^8\) Since the audience for these plays was the lower class—those who were themselves inferior and likely abused physically and sexually—it is important to understand how much reality the plays convey. Although Romans were extremely concerned with their own sexuality, they had no concern for the sexual desires of their slaves. Slaves were property and would be forced into whatever sexual category their masters desired, typically that of the passive object in intercourse. An important aspect of Plautus is not only slaves’ assertion of their power, but an assertion of their own sexuality. There was a Roman stereotype of the adult man who both sexually submissive and preferred to be the passive sexual object, a cinaedus. It can be conjectured that there would have been no real social fear of the cinaedus since he was not seen as a threat; and there also must have been some form of pathic sub-

---

7 Richlin 2005, 21.
culture in Rome, and therefore individuals who identified with the taboo label of *cinaedus.* Romans imposed this label, imposed this sexuality, upon their slaves and Plautus helps us to understand to what extent the slaves truly identified with this notion.

Of course, when analyzing the sexual rhetoric in their works and how they catered it to their audiences, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of the cultural and sexual norms of Roman society. Roman social structure was defined by wealth and, while each rank had specific meanings and honors, the ultimate distinction between a Roman citizen and a slave was protection. In a social context this meant protection from sexual penetration and in a legal context protection from physical beatings and torture. For example, to contrast the Roman attitudes: a Roman citizen was free from violence by any Roman magistrate, while the evidence of a slave was only trusted in court if it was given under torture. In the Roman mind, physical abuse and sexual penetration were both forms of corporeal assault and were viewed as equivalent offenses.

Roman society was not just a dichotomy of man/woman, patrician/plebian, freedman/slave, and so on. The social hierarchy, as we can see in these works of literature, is intrinsically tied to a sexual hierarchy. At the top are the *viri,* the “men.” At least in his invective, this concept of a *vir* was the standard Catullus believed all Roman men should follow. These are not simply anatomical “men.” Being a Roman *vir,* apart from conferring wealth and virtue, meant being beyond the threat of violence and abuse similar to the previous notion of guaranteed safety of the body. In a purely sexual manner, it meant being the superior, active player in all sexual relationships, the “impenetrable penetrator.” Rome did not define sexual relationships in modern homosexual/heterosexual terms, but in terms of active/passive. For a *vir* to play the passive role in any sexual relationship was humiliating, and in the eyes of the Romans it reduced him to the status of a woman or slave. According to Holt Parker, there are “exactly three things [a man] can do sexually: he can penetrate someone (male or female) in the mouth, anus or vagina.” Romans attached no stigma to the dominant partner in what we would define as homosexual activities; indeed, as long as his partner is not a freeborn citizen, male-male relationships were a demonstration of true

---

12 Walters 1997, 39.
13 Walters 1997, 30
masculinity.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, one of the worst insults, the worst reputation to have was that of the aforementioned \textit{cinaedus} – a willing anal receiver. In literary tradition, a \textit{cinaedus} would be characterized by effeminacy, a strolling gait, pretty hair, etc.\textsuperscript{17}

These attitudes are readily apparent in Catullus’ works. His love poems have earned him the reputation of being a great love elegist. However, his invective poetry is anything but tender. Catullus himself resolves this paradox best in Poem 16: “nam castum esse decet pium poetam/ ipsum, uersiculos nihil necesse est” (For the sacred poet ought to be chaste himself, his verses do not have to be). Perhaps this inferiority complex arises from his status as an outsider in Rome—perhaps, since he was from Verona, “he is determined to show himself as cool and supercilious as any aristocrat born on the Palatine.”\textsuperscript{18}

Poem 16, addressed to his friends, Furius and Aurelius, is indeed a direct assertion of his masculinity:

\begin{verbatim}
Pedicabo ego uos et irrumabo, 
Aureli pathice et cinaede Furi, 
quid me ex uersiculis meis putastis, 
quod sunt molliculi, parum pudicum.
nam castum esse decet pium poetam 
ipsum, uersiculos nihil necesse est;
quid tum denique habent salem ac leporem, 
si sunt molliculi ac parum pudici, 
et quod pruriat incitare possunt, 
non dico pueris, sed his pilosis 
qui duros nequeunt mouere lumbos. 
uos, quod milia multa basiorum 
legistis, male me marem putatis?  
pedicabo ego uos et irrumabo.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{16} Walters 1997, 54. 
\textsuperscript{17} Corbeill 1997,118. 
\textsuperscript{18} Skinner, 2005, 217. 
\textsuperscript{19} Cat. 16: I will ass- and face-fuck you both, 
Faggot Aurelius and buttfucked Furius, 
You who think that I’m a pussy 
Because of my delicate verses. 
For the sacred poet ought to be chaste 
himself, this is not necessary for his verses; 
Verses which then have wit and charm, 
If they are delicate and not at all chaste 
And when they can incite an itch, 
And I don’t speak for boys, but for 
Those hairy old men who can’t get their dicks up. 
You, because you read of my thousand kisses,
Furius and Aurelius had been mocking Catullus for his tender love poems. Catullus characterizes himself as the hyper-masculine poet, writing verses which are *salem ac leporem*, witty and elegant. He will violate Furius and Aurelius for their slight to his masculinity, which seems the proper action to take. While Catullus insults most others as being *pathicus* or *cinaedus*, in the case of Furius and Aurelius he is going to physically impose these labels on them himself. The verbs *pedicabo* et *irrumabo* mirror *pathice et cinaede*, the latter labels being the direct result the two first person verbs. These verbs are not only sexually but physically degrading as they contain senses of violence, rape and penetration. Like slaves, Furius and Aurelius are not given a choice about their sexuality; Catullus is giving assigning them a pathetic sexuality that would befit a slave. Thus Furius and Aurelius are not *viri* - they are in actuality sex objects, and the opposite of *viri - pueri*.

In poem 33, Catullus again uses the word *cinaedus* as an insult in one of his harsher invectives. This piece is a mockery of an aristocratic male, Vibennus, whose son Catullus labels as a *cinaedus*, and moreover as a prostitute, claiming that he attempted to sell his body, albeit unsuccessfully.

O furum optime balneariorum
Vibenni pater et cinaede fili
(nam dextra pater inquinatiore,
culo filius est uoraciore),
cur non exilium malasque in oras
itis? quandoquidem patris rapinae
notae sunt populo, et natis pilosas,
fili, non potes asse uenditare.20

Catullus understands that the most effective way to insult an enemy is by means of attacking his sexuality. Vibennius has demonstrated a lack of morality and dignity by his thieving, and consequently does not deserve to be a Roman *vir*. Catullus automatically translates this into a lack of masculinity, which manifests itself not only in Vibennius, but also in his son. In labeling them as pathics, Catullus is both degrading their masculinity and increas-

---

20 Cat. 33: Oh most talented thief of the bathhouses,
father Vibennius, and buttfucked son,
(for the handy father is more foul,
and the son more voracious with his asshole),
why not go into exile on miserable shores
Since the thieveries of the father are popular knowledge
And that hairy ass, son, are you not able to sell it for a penny?
Catullus is placing Vibennius’ son at the level of one of the stock characters in Plautus’ comedies - a young male sex slave. In Rome, free boys were considered objects of desire, but it was not acceptable for a man to act upon that desire. This poem also hits upon another serious preoccupation of Roman men- the end of adolescence, when a man was still young, perhaps unable to assert his sexual masculinity, but too old to acceptably be a puer delicatus.\textsuperscript{21} Catullus is implying that Vibennius’ son has not matured, and seeks to remain in his young, effeminate state, as a sex slave would in order to continue as long as possible in such a profitable occupation.

The following interaction between slaves and a pimp from Plautus’ Persa highlights the positions of slaves as objects of domination. However, since Plautus has inverted the social rules, the slave Toxilus is making fun of the pimp, Dordalus, by offering him as a cinaedus to another younger slave, Paegnium.

\begin{verbatim}
Toxilus. Vin cinaedum novom tibi dari, Paegnium?
    quin elude, ut soles, quando liber locust hic.
    hui, babae, basilice te intulisti et facete.
Paegnium. Decet me facetum esse, et hunc inridere
    lenonem lubidost, quando dignus est.
Toxilus. Perge ut coeperas.
Dordalus. Perii perculit me prope.
Paegnium. Em, serva rusum.
Dordalus. Delude, ut lubet, erus dum hinc abest.
Paegnium. Viden ut tuis dictis pareo?
    sed quin tu meis contra item dictis servis
    atque hoc, quod tibi suadeo, facis?
Dordalus. Quid est id?
Paegnium. Restim tu tibi cape crassam ac suspende te.
Dordalus. Cave sis me attigas, ne tibi hoc scipione
    malum magnum dem.
Paegnium Vtere, te condono.
Toxilus. Iam iam, Paegnium, da pausam.
Dordalus. Ego pol vos eradicabo.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{22} Plaut. Pers. 5.2.805-820: Toxilus. Say, Paegnium, want a new partner? This is a place of freedom. Hey, what a come-on! Watch those hips!
Paegnium. They’re worth the watching. I’m no amateur – I’d love to play with Dordalus. He’s a pro too.
Toxilus. Keep it up kid.
Cinaedus is sometimes translated here as “partner,” but in fact has a much more demeaning sense, our equivalent of “fag” or literally, “a buttfucked one.” In actuality, Paegnium, a slave whose name means “plaything” or “darling” is the cinaedus, not Dordalus. In this role reversal Toxilus justifies Paegnium’s need for a cinaedus with “quando liber locust hic,” which is to say, “It’s a free country, do what you want.”

This brings up an essential word in Roman rhetoric, libertas. The notions of freedom, liberty, free speech, etc. were all contained in this word. Here, Plautus is laughing at those who value their “land of the free,” yet force others to do their sexual bidding. Paegnium surprisingly rejects having the desire to penetrate a cinaedus, which according to Roman culture was an act that would have increased his masculinity. Paegnium, a slave, asserted his own sexual desires, something that Roman aristocrats overlooked and rejected. In this way, Plautus demonstrates a role reversal, where slaves not only have power, but they have sexual feelings and emotions which are reserved traditionally for viri.

The ancient Roman male is supposed to dominate everyone and everything. Inherent to Roman society, however, is the reality that there will always be one man superior to another. Therefore, a Roman’s masculinity can always be called into question; it is not a status bestowed upon birth, but an “achieved state.” In Catullus’ poem 52, not even Julius Caesar is free from his biting lines. Insulting Julius Caesar, and then claiming the lines as one’s own, was a bold move in the Late Republic. Catullus simultaneously degrades Caesar and Mamurra and affirms himself as a vir.

Pulcre conuenit improbis cinaedis,
Mamurrae pathicoque Caesariique.
nec mirum: maculae pares utrisque,
urbana altera et illa Formiana,
impressae resident nec eluentur:
morbosi pariter, gemelli utrique,
uno in lecticulo erudituli ambo,

Paegnium. How do you like that, pimp?
Dordalus. Hey, damn it all, he nearly knocked me over!
Paegnium. Once more, with feeling.
Dordalus. You – you little bastard, so play your games, as long as your master’s away.
Paegnium. That’s what I’m doing – just what you tell me to. But now it’s your turn to take advice from me.
Dordalus. What’s that?
Paegnium. Find a strong rope and go hang yourself.
Dordalus. Keep your hands off, or I’ll thrash you black and blue with this cane of mine.
Paegnium. I give you permission, try it.
Toxilus. Ah, that’s enough of that Paegnium.
Dordalus. I’ll wipe out the bloody lot of you.
This poem places Caesar and Mammura, his close associate, in almost every role with a negative sexual connotation in Roman society. Not only are they both *cinaedii*, but Mamurra is a *pathicus*, and they even go after *puellulae*, little girls, which was illegal. In the same tone, his poem 29, addressed to *cinaede Romule*, is also understood to refer to Julius Caesar. The validity and impetus for these poems can perhaps never be known, but what we can take from them is that these acts were deemed embarrassing and unacceptable. Catullus, by labeling Caesar and Mamurra as submissive, equates them with slaves. What are they slaves to? Each other perhaps. We have existing rude solider songs discussing Caesar’s sexual relationship with the King Nicomedes, implying sexual depravity, but also a subservience to him outside of the sexual realm. This is probably what Catullus is trying to show here, that Caesar and Mammura are not ruled by themselves, but by their desire. Desire is characterized here as sexual, but is probably meant to parallel their political ambitions or greed. We do know that Caesar forgave Catullus for his insults to his reputation, which suggests that we ought not to interpret Catullus as some form of upper class graffiti artist, but, “following Caesar’s lead, we ought to regard Catullan polemic as blond and imaginative rather than mean-spirited.”

If Julius Caesar, the conqueror, writer and statesman was not a true Roman man, who was?

Much of the humor in Plautus is directly derived from this notion of the ideal Roman man. In addition to his virtus, a Roman man was wholly preoccupied with his dignitas and gravitas, both of which were based on typical aristocratic and societal norms. The following passage is from Plautus’ Curculio, “The Weevil,” which contains advice from the slave Palinurus to Phaedromus, a free youth.

Palinurus. Nemo hinc prohibit nec vetat,  
quid quod palam est venale, si argentum est, emas.  
nemo ire quemquam publica prohibit via;

---

25 Cat. 52: It is coming together beautifully for those disgraceful buttfucked ones  
Caesar and Mammura the faggot  
No wonder: the stains are equal for both,  
One urban and the other Formian,  
And retain an imprint that cannot be washed off,  
They are equally debauched, and both are twins,  
Both are experienced in one little bed,  
Nor is this one a more voracious adulterer than that one  
They are allied rivals even for little girls.  
It is coming together beautifully for those disgraceful buttfucked ones.  

26 Skinner 2005, 218
Palinurus is mocking the social mores of Roman society in which everyone is off limits; it is impossible to “love anyone you like.” What wasn’t “private property” was “whatever’s for sale.” Though Palinurus here is referring explicitly to prostitutes, a Roman man had to “purchase” all his sexual partners. Even marriages were treated as contracts between families and were mainly political alliances. A man’s wife became, similar to a slave, his property. Other viable sexual options were purchased slaves or rented prostitutes. Thus, as long as the Roman man is operating within these approved sexual spheres, he is always in control of his sexual partners, dominating what becomes simply his own property. The passage also demonstrates the Roman notion of the purchased partners’ the lack of sexuality. The Roman man can love anyone he likes, but whoever he chooses is forced to submit, regardless of his sexual desires and inclinations, to love the Roman man.

An example of Plautus’ reversal of this Roman sexual hierarchy is present in his comedy *Persa*. The scene takes place at the end of the play, in a typical scene where the pimp has been defeated and is getting beaten up.

Simply stealing the pimp’s money and beating him up is not enough. He has to be humiliated. His ass is pinched, he is physically threatened, and he is labeled as a pathic. In this way the pimp is reduced to the status of the very slaves who are beating him up. Though we could take Paegnium’s comment that his ass has been abused far more than their pinching as a sign that Dordalus is truly a *cinaedus*, it is more likely here that this is a simply a joke. As in the previous quote from *Persa*, Paegnium is making fun of Dordalus by ascribing his own position and treatment to him. Because he is not protected from beating and penetration, Dordalus is no longer a Roman citizen and therefore he no longer has that level of dignity and morality.

In the above passage, Plautus has completely reversed the system of the roles of

---

27 Plaut. Pers. 5.2.846-850: Dordalus. What do you mean? Hey, ow! Hit me again like that and I’ll fix you!
Toxilus. But you’re the one we’ve fixed and are still fixing.
Dordalus. Stop that! He pinched my ass!
Paegnium. There, there, my friend.
It’s been through lots before this.
slaves and citizens. Dordalus is the very opposite of what the typical Roman citizen should be: he is immoral, greedy and generally repulsive. The slaves, though perhaps not extremely laudable characters, have good intentions and end up the beneficiaries at the end of the play. Plautus is mocking the notion of domination in that the pimp who thinks he controls his slaves is really at their mercy, and by the end of the play he is even less of a man then they are.

An even more complete social reversal takes place in *Pseudolus*, in which the slave Pseudolus usurps the power not of the low class pimp, but his own master, and the master is in debt as well as at the mercy of the slave. Pseudolus has managed to trick the pimp and obtain the prostitute-girlfriend for his master’s son, the *amans et egens*.

Simo. Quid ego huic homini faciam? satin ultro et argentum aufert et me inridet?
Pseudolus. Vae victis.
Simo. Vorte ergo umerum.
Pseudolus. Em.
Simo. Hoc ego numquam ratus sum fore me, ut tibi fierem supplex. heu heu heu.
Pseudolus. Desine.
Simo. Doleo.
Pseudolus. Ni doleres tu, ego dolerem.
Simo. Quid? hoc auferen, Pseudole mi, aps tuo ero?
Pseudolus. Lubentissimo corde atque animo.
Simo. Non audes, quaeso, aliquam partem mihi gratiam facere hinc argenti?
Pseudolus. Non: me dices avidum esse hominem nam hinc numquam eris nummo divitior; neque te mei tergi miseret, si hoc non hodie ece-cissem.²⁸

²⁸ Plaut. Pseud. 1316-1324: Simo. What am I going to do with him? He intends to take my money and publicly humiliate me as part of the bargain.
Pseudolus. Woe to the vanquished!
Simo. I never thought I’d be brought so low, on my knees before you! Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!
Pseudolus. Now cut that out!
Simo. Just think how I suffer!
Pseudolus. I’m thinking how I’d be suffering if you weren’t.
Simo. You really intend to take this from your own dear master?
Pseudolus. With the greatest possible pleasure.
Simo. Oh now, dear Pseudolus. Do please let me keep some of it for myself.
Pseudolus. No way! Call me a greedy cheeky Greeky slave, but you’ll never get a penny. How much mercy would you have shown my hide and backside, if I’d failed today?
Pseudolus contrasts his treatment of his master Simo with the way he has and would have been abused and beaten. Thus the viewer understands that Simo, supposedly a *vir*, the dominator and abuser of Pseudolus, is not truly so masculine. Earlier in the play, Simo’s role as the *pater familias* is undermined when his son Calidorus encourages Pseudolus to try and steal the money he needs from Simo. Though Pseudolus does not have to resort to this, he nevertheless is successful; Simo has lost a bet, and as a result his ever important dignity. Simo is the one who has to beg for mercy— he is physically on his knees before Pseudolus. He has completely relinquished his *dignitas* to a slave and, in essence, his masculinity. Though there are no explicit sexual aspects of this interaction, one’s power and station is his sexuality. Therefore, if Pseudolus has physical power over Simo, it can be assumed he also has sexual power and dominance.

The passages from Plautus have demonstrated a pervasive theme in which the powerful man, the typical penetrator, is actually at the mercy of the penetrated. Roman slavery was intensely fluid, since it was not (theoretically) based on race or ethnicity, and by some change in fate any free man could become a slave and any slave could be freed. This theme is present throughout Plautus and refers to the aforementioned Catullan notion that a Roman man’s masculinity was by no means stable and birth-given. As is shown in Pseudolus, one’s masculinity, one’s dominance, and thus reputation and perhaps even freedom can easily be lost. Plautus is showing us that the superior Simo could easily be the penetrated Pseudolus. Even though Simo, demonstrated by his beating of Pseudolus, has gone to great lengths to assert his masculinity, it has been in vain.

The poems of Catullus, and indeed most of our literature from ancient Rome, demonstrate Rome as a rich man’s world. The “Rome” we know represents the lifestyles and values of a small percentage of men. Plautus could be seen as a way to understand Roman society outside of the Forum. While Catullus is no Cicero, he attempts to describe the characteristics which a Roman man should have. More importantly, Catullus demands that others demonstrate these characteristics in his own time. His invective poetry highlights those mores that a Roman man should follow and thus sheds light on what was proper. Plautus brings to our attention the dark side of such a culture - a downtrodden underclass that is more than willing to laugh at itself. Through an inversion of society, he shows us a lower class eager to see an upper class based on domination, righteousness, and *gravitas*, fall and suffer humiliation; Plautus deconstructs what it means to be a Roman man.

---

29 Verstraete 1980, 230
Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:

Parrish Wright Masculinity in Catullus and Platutus


