Chapter 14

*Eunuchus*

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According to Suetonius (*Vita Terenti* 3), *Eunuchus* was Terence’s most successful play and garnered unprecedented revenues (see Gilula (1989b)) when it debuted in 161 BCE. *Eunuchus* is said to have enjoyed an encore performance that year at the festival of the Magna Mater on the Palatine. The ‘Great Mother’ or Cybele was an eastern goddess who was incorporated into Roman worship in 204 BCE. Her temple on the Palatine had been dedicated thirty years before the debut of *Eunuchus*, on which occasion Plautus’ *Pseudolus* was performed before it. Then, as in Terence’s heyday, a performance within the sacred precinct was limited to perhaps as few as ca 1,500 spectators (Goldberg (1998) 13-16), and the intimate confines encouraged close interaction between actors and audience.

A play featuring a eunuch—both a real and a suppositious one—among its characters was obviously appropriate to the festival context. Cybele’s priests were required to castrate themselves, and, once initiated into her eunuch priesthood, they wore women’s clothing. The eunuch priests were a visually distinct fixture in Roman cult, and it is possible that some of them were present at the performance of Terence’s play. Chaerea (the faux eunuch) draws attention to this connection between the play’s plot and the occasion of its performance when, immediately after raping Pamphila and still wearing the eunuch’s costume, he exclaims: *o festus dies!* (‘O festival day!’ *Eu.* 560). The
audience probably was much drawn to the ‘flashy outfit’ (683) Chaerea dons to impersonate the eunuch, as the costume represented a locus of sexual possibilities: so costumed, Chaerea is said to be attractive to both males and females (472-9, 686-7).

What, in addition to the alluring spectacle of ‘eunuch theater’, made this play so popular?

1. The Rape

Near the middle of the play (549), Chaerea, an eighteen year-old Athenian soldier/citizen-in-training or ephebe, emerges from the house of Thais, a prostitute and independent brothel owner living next door to Chaerea’s family. When the audience last saw Chaerea (390), he was wearing a soldier’s cloak (chlamys), and was equipped with a sword (machaera) and a hat (petasus, which also marks him as a soldier in the dress code of Greek and Roman New Comedy). He now wears the flamboyant costume he took from Dorus, an elderly eunuch intended as a gift to Thais from Chaerea’s brother Phaedria. With his family’s slave Parmeno, Chaerea devises a plan (365-90) to impersonate Dorus and thereby infiltrate Thais’ apparently all-female household and gain access to Pamphila, a beautiful sixteen year-old whom Thraso, Thais’ other suitor, had just presented to her. It was at this point that Chaerea had spotted Pamphila for the very first time and decided that he must possess her sexually (potiar, 362; cf. 320 and OLD s.v. potior 2c). As he exits from Thais’ house, Chaerea—his name suggests ‘joy’ in Greek—is obviously triumphant. The audience and Chaerea’s friend and fellow ephebe Antipho, who initially is eavesdropping, soon learn that he is celebrating his very recent rape of Pamphila inside. Donatus reports that Terence added Antipho to his Menandrian source play and thereby converted a long monologue to a dialogue here. Barsby (1999) 185
suggests that ‘Antipho’s ready acceptance of the morality of Chaerea’s exploit may serve to incline the audience in the same direction’, but one alternatively could argue that Chaerea’s eagerness to boast of his ‘exploit’ to his friend and Antipho’s shared indifference to the rape and its victim might have had the opposite effect for some audience members, as Sharon James point out in her essay in this volume.

Chaerea in effect delivers a ‘messenger’s speech’, a set-piece in ancient drama to describe unstageable events, that details the rape:

CHAE. She [i.e. Thais] told me not to leave her side and to make sure no man got near her,

And the two of us were ordered to stay alone together in the women’s quarters.

I nodded yes and stared sheepishly at the ground. ANT. Poor Chaerea! CHAE. ‘I’m off to dinner’,

She says, and takes some maids with her. Just a few of the newer ones Were left behind to tend to the girl. They start the preparations for her bath.

I encouraged them to be quick about it. As that’s happening,

The girl sits in her room looking up at a painting. The subject of it Was the story of how Jupiter shot a shower of gold into Danaë’s lap.

I started to gaze at it too. The fact that so long ago he had pulled off The very same trick made me even more excited:

A god had made himself into a man and secretly penetrated Another man’s roof, and a woman was tricked via a skylight!

And what a god it was: ‘He whose thunder rattles the lofty foundations of the sky’.
Could I, a mere mortal, possibly do the same? I could … and I did it gladly! (Eu. 578-91)

Nowhere else in extant ancient drama does a rape take place during the play. Rape is a standard plot element and precursor to marriage in New Comedy, but elsewhere it belongs to the play’s prehistory, where it most often occurs at night when the victim is attending a religious festival outside her home. The rapist, once discovered, usually blames alcohol for his act, and there is an understood sense that the festival atmosphere promotes such reckless behavior (for a typology of rape scenes in comedy, see Leisner-Jensen (2002)). The situation in Eunuchus is drastically different: it is daytime and Chaerea is sober (he and Antipho are about to attend a party); there is no religious festival or festive environment (save for that in the celebratory rapist’s mind (560)—to the contrary, Thais has taken what she believes to be secure measures to cloister Pamphila in the women’s quarters of her home; the rape is clearly premeditated (cf. Rosivach (1998) 46 and 169 n.131); and the audience has actually seen (though not heard) Pamphila (228-83), a factor which probably underscored to them not only her beauty, but also her youthful vulnerability.

Most striking of all, Terence here meticulously guides his audience through the mental processes of a sexual predator simultaneously plotting and justifying his actions. There is a disturbingly post-modern and cinematic quality to Chaerea’s narrative of the rape here. Our first focus is on Pamphila as she sits looking up at a painting of Jupiter and Danaë on the wall of the room in which she has been left alone with Chaerea. In addition to having seen the sixteen year-old Pamphila onstage, the audience has learned from Thais that the girl is most likely a free citizen and has been raised by Thais’ mother as if
she were her own daughter (108-17): in the sexual code of New Comedy, Pamphila is a virgin and potentially eligible for marriage. Listening to Chaerea’s narrative then, the audience will figure Pamphila as naïve and innocently unaware of the painting’s implications for her own situation.

In the Greek myth, King Acrisius of Argos, fearful of an oracle proclaiming that his daughter would bear a son destined to kill him, sequesters Danaë in an underground chamber or tower. His prophylactic efforts fail in the face of Zeus, an inveterate sexual opportunist and shape-shifter, who penetrates Danaë’s cloister (and body) in the form of a shower of gold. Chaerea describes himself as simultaneously gazing up at the painting, and from it mustering the resolve to carry out his violent urge. He is especially excited at the prospect of pulling off a ‘trick’ (ludum at 587, a word which also denotes a ‘performance’; see Section 2) on a par with that of the sexually omnipotent Jupiter. In Chaerea’s mind at least, the traditional golden shower also somehow assumes anthropomorphic form (588), as happens in later wall paintings, in order to complete the rape. He regards Jupiter’s voluntary surrender of his divine status to enjoy his mortal victim (cf. the emphatic 589 mulieri) as a positive model for his own degrading transformation from male to eunuch. Chaerea’s emotional excitement at this point leads to an outburst about the god’s power in the form of an allusion to Ennius and possibly Naevius (590; see Sharrock in this volume). In perhaps the same vein that Chaerea had earlier characterized himself as a connoisseur of feminine beauty (565-6), so now he shows himself to be a devotee of lofty tragic poetry, which he invokes to rationalize his own desires. The contrast between Chaerea’s jubilant and rationalizing aestheticism here
and the primitivism of the violent act he describes himself as committing ‘gladly’
(lubens, 591) is disturbingly dissonant.

The rape itself is described with stark brevity and casualness. Elements in Chaerea’s
narrative such as the placement of Pamphila upon the bed and the bolting of the bedroom
door parody wedding ritual. Philippides (1995) 279 unconvincingly argues that these
nuptial motifs ‘mimimize to a considerable degree the violation as well as the detestable
feelings about it, since the rape takes place within the marriage frame’. Instead, the
reminder of marriage ritual at this moment emphasizes that Chaerea is describing a rape,
not a wedding, a distinction that New Comedy itself typically obscures in other plays (cf.
James (1998b) 40 n. 37). Pamphila is laid out on her bed by her attendants, one of whom
instructs Chaerea to fan her while they go off to bathe themselves (593-6). Chaerea
glowers (596) at this last charge; Antipho helps the audience imagine the scene more
vividly by interrupting Chaerea’s narrative to comment on the incongruity of a buff
ephebe (cf. 477) manipulating a small hand-fan (flabellulum, 598). It is from behind this
tiny fan that the faux eunuch then coyly peeks—thereby striking what presumably was
regarded as an effeminate pose—to confirm that Pamphila has fallen asleep before he
bolts the door (601-3). The slow-witted Antipho again interrupts Chaerea to inquire about
what he did next, and Chaerea ends his rape narrative by abruptly replying:

CHAE. An opportunity

Like that handed to me, brief and unexpected as it was, but so longed for! Do you
think I was going to pass it up? Then I would have been a eunuch for real!
(Eu. 604-6; Latin text in Augoustakis in this
volume)
Chaerea could not express his sexual attitude more bluntly: only someone less opportunistic and aggressive than a ‘real man’, e.g., a eunuch, would have passed up the chance to violate Pamphila. In his testimony to his fellow ephebe, Chaerea displays ‘a fully developed sense of masculine sexual privilege for Roman citizen men’, as James says in her essay. Modern audiences mostly cringe at the equation of ‘true’ masculinity and rape here, but was at least part of Terence’s audience likely to have felt something like our repugnance? Given the lack of evidence in the matter, modern scholarship mostly has asserted that, while some females in the audience might have identified with Pamphila’s trauma, male empathy for a female rape victim is a relatively recent modern phenomenon (e.g. Pierce (1997) 178). But it appears that Terence, through the play’s unprecedented emphasis on the immediacy of Pamphila rape, is provoking audience members, both male and female, to look at it from a fundamentally humane point of view.

Chaerea’s account of the rape thus ends with this assertion that he is only a pretend eunuch, and the two friends quickly turn to finalizing arrangements for a party they have planned with some fellow ephebes. Chaerea shows no shame for his behavior, but he is now much ashamed to be costumed as a eunuch, and fears being seen by the males of his family (610-12). They decide it is best for him to change clothes at Antipho’s. The scene ends with the ephebes pledging to find a way for Chaerea to ‘have’ her again (potiri at 614, the climax to the emphatic and striking alliterative sequence quo pacto porro possim at 613).

Despite Chaerea and Antipho’s complete indifference to Pamphila’s treatment, Terence makes sure that his audience learns how traumatizing the rape has been for her.
Two brief scenes follow the ephebes’ departure, in which Thais’ slave Dorias brings us up to date on recent events at Thraso’s house and Phaedria announces his return from the country (615–42). Pythias, a female slave of Thais’, with great animation and anger then rushes from her mistress’ house to reveal what she has just learned there:

   PYTH. Oh me oh my! Where can I find that contemptible bum? Where do I look? To think that he’d even dare such a thing! PHAE. (aside) Oh no, I’m afraid of what this means!

   PYTH. The scumbag! It just wasn’t enough for him to have his way with her! He had to rip up the poor girl’s clothes and tear her hair out on top of it all!

   PHAE. (aside) What? PYTH. Just give me the chance right now, and I’d swoop down on that criminal and scratch out his eyeballs!

   PHAE. (aside) Clearly there’s been some sort of disturbance in there while I was gone.

   I’ll go see. What’s the matter, Pythias? What’s the big hurry about? Who’re you looking for?

   PYTH. If it isn’t Phaedria, and wondering who I’m looking for! You and those lovely gifts of yours can just go straight to hell! PHAE. What’s the matter?

   PYTH. What’s the matter! That eunuch you gave us has created complete mayhem inside!

   He’s raped the girl the soldier gave to Thais as a present! PHAE. What are you saying?

   PYTH. I’m done for! PHAE. You’re drunk! PYTH. If this is being drunk, I’d wish that only upon my worst enemies!
DORI. Oh, Pythias, how can something so monstrous as this have happened?

PHAE. You’re crazy! How could a eunuch possibly have done that? PYTH.

Whatever he was, all the evidence clearly shows he did what he did!

The girl’s all in tears, and can’t even say what happened when you ask her.

(Eu. 643-59; Latin text in Augoustakis in this volume)

Thais herself later attests that Pamphila’s clothing is torn and she is weeping, and she ‘won’t say a word’ (820). While one could argue that Thais is concerned about the rape primarily out of self-interest (see Section 3), Pythias’ outrage and sympathy for Pamphila here is powerful. Whether she is Terence’s or Menander’s creation, and despite her gender and low status, Pythias’ reaction here indisputably is to show ‘that from the victim’s perspective rape is a terrible thing’ (Rosivach (1998) 49).

Since rape in New Comedy usually belongs to the play’s prehistory, Terence’s focus on the victim’s trauma in the moment is striking. Habrotonon, a prostitute in Menander’s Epitrepontes, similarly describes a (pre-play) rape victim as sobbing and in tattered clothes (487-90), but there the aim is to demonstrate that this was not a case of seduction (Pierce (1997) 166). But at this point in Eunuchus, Pamphila has not yet been revealed to be a free citizen, no potentially dishonored male guardian must be satisfied that she has not acted as a seductress, and Chaerea’s detailed description of his own act has left no possible doubt on that point anyway. Terence has gone out of his way to foreground Pamphila’s trauma to his audience. And because the rape takes place within the time frame of the play, pregnancy—and so legitimization of the rape through marriage and children—is not at issue either. Rather than following the New Comedy tendency to elide
(pre-play) rape and (post-play) marriage, Terence has subordinated all to a disturbingly vivid presentation of rape at the center of the play. While the typical New Comic rape followed by marriage between rapist and victim, may ultimately be about ‘the young’s man’s transition from youth to adulthood and his reintegration into society as a full member’ (Rosivach (1998) 49; see also James in this volume), Pamphila is more than just an instrument in that process. And in light of Terence’s treatment of the rape here, it seems dogmatic to conclude that ‘neither in drama, nor in our fragmentary evidence concerning real life, is any interest shown in the psychological trauma of a rape on a woman or girl’ (Pierce (1997) 178; for another counter-example to this claim, cf. Euripides’ presentation of Creusa’s anguish in Ion 859-965).

We have already noted that rape in comedy typically finds its resolution in marriage, provided the victim is a free person and so eligible for marriage with a male citizen. The situation remains complicated in Eunuchus until Pamphila’s free status is revealed and Chaerea drops the pretense of being Dorus the eunuch (and so a slave). When Chaerea, still dressed in his eunuch’s costume owing to Antipho’s parents being at home (840-2), faces Thais for the first time after the rape, he shows little concern as to the repercussions. After characterizing his actions to Thais as ‘nothing much’ (856), Pythias blurts out that he has in fact raped a virginal Athenian citizen (uirginem / uitiare ciuem, 856-7). Chaerea, still pretending to be the eunuch, replies that he believed he was only raping a ‘fellow slave’ (conseruam, 858). Thais at this point reveals that she knows his real identity, and asserts that his behavior was inappropriate (864-5), and would be so even if he were avenging some personal mistreatment at her hands (865-6)—which he was not. If audience members agree with the magnanimous Thais here, Chaerea’s initial
justification for the deception and assault on Thais’ household, i.e. exacting vengeance on
all prostitutes (382-5), will now seem specious and hollow. But while Thais could take
Chaerea’s assault on Pamphila as a personal offense against herself (as a male guardian
or slave owner might), she quickly turns to more pressing, pragmatic matters:

My goodness, now I don’t have a clue as to what I should do about this girl!
You’ve completely messed up all my plans,
And I don’t think I can return her to her family.
That would have been the right thing to do and was what I wanted,
So that I’d get some long-term advantage for myself, Chaerea. (Eu. 867-71)
The play at long last now reorients itself toward a more typical New Comic treatment of
rape. Regarding the rape and its aftermath, when Chaerea suggests that ‘maybe this
whole thing was the will of some god’ (875), spectators (and readers) may see his words
as sincerely ‘suggesting a higher divine purpose for the course of events’ (Barbsy (1999)
249) or as cynically referencing the role of Jupiter in the rape scene. Thais at any rate
decides to be conciliatory in accepting Chaerea’s claim that he acted out of love or
passion (causa … amoris, 878) rather than arrogance (contumeliae, 877) toward her. And
when he pledges to marry Pamphila (pending his father’s consent) once she is proven to
be a citizen (888-90), we find ourselves in familiar New Comic territory.

But even when the formal engagement is announced by Chaerea (1036), it is
presumptuous to assume that all discomfort surrounding the foregrounded rape in
Eunuchus instantly dissipates in the cloud of a conventionally happy ending, and that no
one left the theater on the Palatine wondering about the prospects for a marriage whose
foundation is a violent sexual assault such as Chaerea’s (cf. Smith (1994) 31). Stripped as
we are of the spectacle of performance, it is useful to remind ourselves that Chaerea is probably still dressed as a eunuch (cf. 1015-16) when he makes this announcement. The eunuch’s costume, at which Chaerea feels so much shame (840-7), has become a visual emblem of the rape and Chaerea’s deception, and now even functions as an open signifier into which a viewer can read what he wants regarding sexual insecurities, ambiguities, and gender roles. After Thais and Chaerea reconcile, Thais invites him to wait for Chremes inside her house (894-5). Pythias objects on the grounds that he is likely to instigate more sexual violence there (896-904). Chremes is then spotted approaching and Chaerea begs Thais not to let Chremes see him in public ‘in these clothes’ (907). To this Thais wryly quips that he does have some shame (pudet, 907) after all, and Pythias adds, ‘He’s a true virgin’ (uirgo uero, 908), and so sardonically identifies him with his victim. Again, the question of what constitutes true masculinity is put forth for the audience to ponder. James (1998b) 45 goes so far as to argue that Terence ‘is presenting his own critique, in the female voices, of adult Roman masculine sexuality and its method of acquiring wives’.

2. Metatheater or Playing Eunuch

The notion of metatheater, generally used to describe a play’s theatrical self-reflexiveness (or competing, internal modes of theatricalization), has drawn much attention in recent studies of Roman comedy, especially in the case of Plautus, whose characters frequently broadcast their deceptive roles in terms of playmaking (see further Slater (1985) passim and Moore (1998a) 8-90; see also Germany and Vincent in this volume). While the notion of metatheater itself has fallen under some critical scrutiny (for objections to its
overextension as a fixed concept ‘that does not do justice to the fluidity and liminality which are inherent in the theatrical experience’, see Thumiger (2009) 53 and passim, it is still a productive lens through which to interpret Roman comedy. It is hoped that my restricted use of the concept of theatrical self-reflexiveness here within the context(s) of Terence’s play will be evident, and I do not mean to make broader claims for metatheater as a phenomenon divorced from the particulars of this performance (see further Christenson (forthcoming)). Though Terence’s prologues are clearly metatheatrical in that they are so focused on the criticism of his plays by his rival(s) and their reception by his audience (see Brown, Franko, Germany, and Sharrock in this volume), the plays themselves are subtle and restrained—again, Plautus is the implied point of comparison—in their exploitation of comic convention, the occasion and circumstances of performance, the role of spectators, etc., for humorous (or other) effects. Eunuchus, however, appears to be exceptional among the six extant plays in this regard (cf. Frangoulidis (1994)).

Chaerea’s impersonation of Dorus the eunuch is articulated in explicitly theatrical terms. Parmeno, whom Phaedria entrusts with delivering Dorus to Thais, first conceives of the plan to substitute Chaerea for the aging eunuch:

PAR. What’d you say if I said you could be that lucky guy? CHAE. How, Parmeno? Tell me! PAR. You could take his clothes. CHAE. His clothes? Then what? PAR. I could hand you over to them instead of him. CHAE. I’m listening. PAR. And say you were him. CHAE. Yes! PAR. And you could enjoy all the perks you were just saying he would:
Sharing meals together, spending time with her, touching her, fooling around together,

Sleeping close to each other. None of these women knows you or even knows who you are.

Besides, you’ve got the youthful looks to pass for a eunuch. (*Eu.* 369-75)

Parmeno’s repeated emphasis on costuming here is striking: in this plot, clothes will make the eunuch. Chaerea quickly assents, and tells Parmeno to take him offstage and ‘dress him up’ (*orna*, 377, a technical theatrical term). But before they exit, Parmeno, fearful of possible repercussions for his role in this plot, hesitates and claims he was only joking (378-81). Chaerea counters that their planned deception would constitute revenge against all prostitutes on behalf of their customers, and he frames this rivalry between greedy prostitutes and lovesick young men in terms of immediately recognizable comic stereotypes (382-3). But, as Barsby (1999) 155 notes, ‘in regarding Thais as a typical evil *meretrix*, Chaerea is reinforcing the tension between the stereotype and the actual character of Thais as presented in T[erence].’ Continuing in this theatricalizing vein, Chaerea quips: *an potius haec patri aequomst fieri ut a me ludatur dolis* (*Or do you think the thing to do is pull off some scheme at my father’s expense?’ 386). Chaerea here refers to what is probably the most common plot in New Comedy, whereby an *adulescens* schemes to fleece his father (*senex*) out of funds to finance his affair with a prostitute (*meretrix*). According to Chaerea, the latter scheme would redound to his discredit, whereas taking revenge against prostitutes would only be seen as poetic justice (387). Chaerea’s assertion that he is taking the moral high road here, we shall see, is fallacious and misguided. And in directly deceiving Thais rather than his father to obtain
Pamphila, he highlights that he (unlike the audience) is entirely ignorant of the fact that the *meretrix* is actually working in his long-term best interests in seeking to establish Pamphila’s free status. Chaerea thus from the start is exposed as a bumbling composer of comic scripts.

Chaerea’s eagerness to be cast as Dorus, and so to assume the role and costume of a eunuch, would have had special resonance with Terence’s audience. In the Roman moral tradition, actors were branded with *infamia*, which carried with it formal public disgrace and forfeiture of certain citizen’s rights as penalty for their willingness to display themselves onstage:

> Acting was seen as the inversion of fighting, its antithesis. Actors accomplished nothing … Actors were dissemblers, people who pretended to be what they were not. They were praised precisely for their ability to deceive. These were not the qualities desirable in a Roman soldier … Actors were neither soldiers nor full citizens. Acting was essentially ‘unRoman’, essentially ‘other’. (Edwards (1993) 102)

Participating in a deceptive assault such as that planned by Parmeno and Chaerea against Thais and her household is hardly the task of the aspiring citizen-soldier. In Roman comedy, trickery of this type is almost always carried out by slaves, not citizens of high status (Duckworth (1952) 160-75; see Karakasis in this volume). To conservative males in the audience especially, Chaerea would seem far too ready to trade in his soldier’s costume for the eunuch’s colorful, and probably effeminizing and orientalizing garb.

From Chaerea’s perspective, the play-within-the-play (cf. Phaedria’s characterization of Chaerea’s impersonation of Dorus as a ‘play’, *fabula* at 689) is an enormous success, at least initially. We have already seen his elaborate self-congratulations upon
successfully infiltrating Thais’ household as Dorus and committing the rape. Parmeno similarly congratulates himself for his direction of the plot, and goes so far as to (erroneously) ascribe a moral lesson to the internal play:

I’m back to see how Chaerea’s managing things.
If he’s handled his affairs expertly, by the almighty gods, Parmeno is in for some much deserved glory!
To downplay the fact that without any fuss or financial Outlay I made possible what’s usually
A very difficult and expensive affair
(seeing as the girl belongs to a greedy prostitute)—
There is this additional achievement I think I especially deserve a prize for:
I found a way for a young man to learn
All about the character and customs of prostitutes at an early age,
So that this newfound knowledge might inspire his eternal hatred of them! (Eu. 923-33)

Parmeno’s brash assumption that he deserves a prize (id uerost quod ego mi puto palmarium, 930) specifically recalls the palma of victory awarded in Roman dramatic contests (so Barsby (1999) 258; Manuwald (2011) 88). Parmeno had initially appeared to be assuming the stock New Comedy role of ‘clever slave’ in aiding and directing Chaerea’s ruse, and bombastic self-celebration such as his here is characteristic of the seruus callidus. But it is now clear to a seasoned audience of Roman comedy that he lacks the perspicuity of a controlling playwright/director figure such as Plautus’ Pseudolus: the situation regarding Pamphila is far more complicated than Parmeno
assumes; Thais is not a typically greedy comic prostitute, and, far from hating her, Chaerea has just declared his affection for her (882) and in his exuberance even deemed her *his* ‘patron’ (887); and Chaerea’s father will soon express his disapproval that his son knows anything at all about prostitutes at his young age (986)!

The self-deceived Parmeno not surprisingly will get his comeuppance for his mismanagement of the show. Just before Parmeno enters in self-celebratory mode here, Pythias informs the audience of her intent to exact vengeance on him:

> Oh, look! Our fine friend Parmeno is approaching.
> Just look at him strutting about! So help me gods and goddesses,
> I believe I’ve got just the thing to torture him to my satisfaction!
> I’ll go in and make sure about her identity,
> And then I’ll return to scare that lowlife to death! (Eu. 918-22)

Pythias’ revenge plot takes the form of another comic set-piece: a fictive messenger’s speech delivered by a distraught female who describes violent and tragic events as going on inside one of the stage houses in order to deceive an antagonist (943-70; cf. Pl. *Cas.* 621-719). In her account she successfully convinces Parmeno that the young man he passed off as eunuch (949) is facing physical torture in Thais’ house for his sexual transgression against a free citizen of a distinguished Athenian family. She pretends not to know that the young man is Chaerea, in order to force Parmeno to give up his young master—a violation of the clever slave’s code—first to herself (962) and then to Chaerea’s father, who eventually learns of the entire plot from Parmeno (982-96). At complete odds with the ever-bold and defiant ethos of the clever slave, Parmeno even insists to Chaerea’s father that he was not the instigator of the plot (988; cf. Pl. *Mos.*
916). Parmeno attempts to puff himself up again by asserting that Chaerea’s father (now rushing into the house) will seize the opportunity to punish Thais and her household because they are prostitutes (998-1001), but nothing of the sort happens. Pythias returns to report that Chaerea has suffered the indignity of being seen in the eunuch’s costume by his father (1015-16), and that Parmeno has been made a laughingstock inside. As she pointedly summarizes, *at etiam primo callidum et disertum credidi hominem* (‘I actually used to think you were a very clever fellow’, 1011), where *callidus* emphasizes Parmeno’s utter failure to win the day as the clever slave in charge of an internal play. Pythias’ thorough humiliation of Parmeno here—and the audience’s presumed enjoyment of it—also implies some identification with her condemnation of the rape as an act worthy of punishment.

The play appropriately closes with a subtle metatheatrical flourish. Working on Thraso’s behalf, Gnatho strikes a compromise (1083) with Phaedria and Chaerea that will allow the soldier to continue to enjoy Thais’ company. Gnatho then makes one final query: *unum etiam hoc uos oro, ut in uostrum gregem / recipiatis* (‘I have one additional request: let me join your clique’, 1084-5). On one register of speech, Gnatho is asking that he be included in the group of characters whose post-dramatic existence is to be centered around Thais and her house. But the word *grex* is also the technical term for a troupe of actors, and so Gnatho is also subtly marking the tendency of comedy to include—and the inclusion of Thraso and Gnatho is quite jarring here—rather than exclude members of its cast in the final comic society projected at the play’s end, a point made by Aristotle: ‘… [in comedy] the most bitter enemies in the plot, such as Orestes and Aegisthus, walk off as friends in the end and nobody is killed by anyone’ (*Poetics*
Such arbitrarily harmonious endings may signal formal closure, but they do not necessarily prevent theatergoers from having dissonant thoughts at the end of a challenging comedy such as *Eunuchus*. All the blatant (meta)theatricalization surrounding the central rape plot again raises questions that apply to everyday life (all the world’s a stage) as well as to the theater, e.g., ‘what is masculinity?’. Is the latter merely a role a young male assumes by adopting a prescribed mode of dress or set of cultural attitudes, or is there something more fundamentally human(e) at stake?

3. The Hooker with a Heart (and a House full) of Gold

The central character of *Eunuchus* is Thais. In marked contrast to the male characters around her, Thais is in full control of her emotions and has carefully conceived goals that she achieves by the play’s end. She is a twenty-something (527) foreigner living independently in Athens and supporting herself and her household through prostitution. She thus is not eligible for marriage with an Athenian citizen, and, lacking a male guardian, finds herself in a socially and legally vulnerable position (see also Packman in this volume). Terence’s earlier presentation of the prostitute Bacchis in *Heauton Timorumenos* (163 BCE) had offered a sympathetic glimpse of the social realities of prostitution (esp. *Hau*. 381-95), though her character was not as fully developed as Thais’ in *Eunuchus* (on Bacchis, see Lefèvre in this volume).

The opening scene of *Eunuchus* (46-80) might well have (mis)led Terence’s audience to assume that Thais is a conventional comic hooker: avaricious, manipulative, unencumbered by human feelings such as love, free of social values, such as loyalty, and forever on the prowl for a potential customer with deep pockets. There Phaedria, true to
the stereotype of the lovesick *adolescens*, laments what he sees as Thais’ hot and cold attitude toward him and the fact that, despite his awareness of his paralyzing situation, he nonetheless feels compelled to pursue her. His trusty slave Parmeno is present to provide a sympathetic ear and perhaps a plan, if necessary. Thais emerges from her house, and the cause of Phaedria’s most recent protestations is revealed: she had shut Phaedria out from her house the previous day (83) and he now assumes the worst. In what substitutes for an expository prologue (99-143), Thais proceeds to explain her motivation in excluding Phaedria, as Parmeno, at this point confidently playing comic interloper and aspiring clever slave, casts doubt (101-6, 121-3, 129) on what she says: namely that Phaedria’s rival Thraso has obtained a girl (Pamphila) who was raised by Thais’ mother as if she were her own daughter and whom Thais regards as a sister; that, as an infant, Pamphila, actually the daughter of an Athenian citizen, had been abducted by pirates and purchased by a merchant who gave her to Thais’ mother; and that after Thais’ mother died, her brother sold Pamphila back into slavery. Though Thraso has made known his intention to give the girl to Thais as a gift, he is currently withholding her, ostensibly out of fear that Thais will dump him for Phaedria once she receives her gift (140-1). Thais then reveals to Phaedria her plan regarding Pamphila:

Now I have many reasons, my dear Phaedria,

For wanting to take the girl away from him.

First of all, she’s virtually my sister. Second, I might be able

To reunite her with her family. I’m alone here,

And I don’t have any friends or relatives, Phaedria,

And that’s why I want to win some allies by doing a favor like that.
Please help me here! It’d make it so much easier

If you’d let the soldier be my leading man here

For the next several days. No response? (Eu. 144-52)

Thais’ motives are complex, arising as they do out of both affection for her quasi-sister and pragmatic self-interest. The further revelation that she needs Phaedria to absent himself from her house so that she can resolve matters with Thraso sends Phaedria back into fits (152-71). But by the scene’s end, Thais gently persuades him to follow her plan, and he departs with a profound demonstration of romantic love that recalls later Roman love-elegy (for the emotional and intertextual import of Phaedria’s expression of love here, see Konstan (1986) and Sharrock (2009) 226-32):

Do I want anything else?

Yes! That when you’re with the soldier your heart is elsewhere.

And that you love me and want me day and night,

Dream about me, long for me, think about me,

Hope for me, have pleasant thoughts about me—and be completely mine!

Be my soul just as I am yours! (Eu. 191-6)

At this point, given the mercenary stereotype of the comic courtesan, the audience may suspect that they have only witnessed a masterful manipulation of Phaedria by Thais. But after Phaedria and Parmeno exit, Thais remains on stage and muses:

Oh dear! Maybe he doesn’t put much faith in me

And gauges me by the character of the other women here.

I can say with absolute certainty and honesty

That I haven’t lied to Phaedria and
No man is closer to my heart than he is.

Everything I’ve done here I’ve done for this girl.

I really think I’ve just about found her brother now,

And he’s a quite distinguished young man.

He’s arranged to come see me at home today.

I’ll go inside and wait for him to arrive here. (Eu. 197-206)

As characters in ancient drama do not seem to deliberately deceive audiences in monologues, Thais here reveals herself to be a hooker with a heart of gold (a type familiar from film and literature, and found in many genres and cultures), in so far as she has genuine feelings of affection for Phaedria, is truthful with him, and wants to help Pamphila for the not entirely selfish reasons she has revealed. Thais thus defies the comic stereotype—referenced in her monologue by ‘the character of the other women here’ (198)—whereby only mercenary motivations are construed as valid for the meretrix mala (cf. 37). Thais’ plot to allow Thraso to temporarily play ‘leading man’ (priores partis, 151) at her house and to isolate Phaedria interestingly never develops, as the latter’s resolve to stay in the country is short-lived (629-42). Her inability here to seize control of the play in the manner of a clever slave further distinguishes her from more conventional comic prostitutes, such as Phronesium in Plautus’ Truculentus.

The play’s plot is instead driven by the competitive gift-giving of Phaedria and Thraso, with both of whom Thais maintains longstanding relationships, though these differ greatly. With the clueless, braggart soldier Thraso, we see Thais behaving more in the manner of the stereotypical prostitute: as she deems necessary, she flirts with him (454-5), tolerates his bluster (741-2) and cowardice (785), or ignores him altogether
But we never witness Thais engaged in sustained manipulation or exploitation of Thraso (unsympathetic as he is) onstage, as her main interest in him lies in securing and liberating Pamphila. Furthermore, the final arrangement whereby Thraso is to avoid expulsion from Thais’ life by financing her relationship with Phaedria, while consistent with the ethos of the stereotypical meretrix, is arranged by the male characters apart from Thais.

Male characters almost universally assume that Thais is predatory and untrustworthy, as Parmeno and Phaedria do in the two first scenes. Pamphila’s brother Chremes completely misconstrues Thais’ inquiries about his family, and supposes that she might be launching some (metatheatrical) plot to assume Pamphila’s identity: ‘Why would she keep asking these things unless she plans to impersonate / My lost little sister? How shameless is that?’ (524-5). As we have seen above, Parmeno foolishly persists in believing that Thais is the standard meretrix mala of comedy and that he has taught Chaerea a valuable lesson about prostitutes. All these presumptions about Thais’ character only increase the audience’s sympathy for her, as they understand the true situation regarding both Phaedria and Pamphila. They thus will probably agree with Thais’ own assessment of her character to Chaerea: ‘You didn’t imagine I was so without human feelings / Or so naïve that I don’t appreciate the power of love’ (880-1).

Though the rape of Pamphila had temporarily threatened her plan, Thais ultimately achieves (or exceeds) all her aims: Pamphila’s free status is proven, she is to be reunited with her family, and she will marry an Athenian of high status. Thais receives the protections she hoped to gain (1038-9) and will be able to continue her relationship with Phaedria, for whom she holds genuine affection. Though Thais (along, perhaps, with
Pythias) rises above her male counterparts in the cast as the play’s strongest and most ethically compelling character, she is absent from the stage for the play’s last seven scenes (910-1094) and does not participate in the final deliberations among Gnatho, Chaerea, and Phaedria about Thraso. Critics have been troubled by the compromise, which most benefits Phaedria (1073-80) and presumes that Thais will continue her relationship with Thraso without her express consent. And the proposed triangulated relationship with Phaedria and Thraso, based partly on affection and partly on financial expedience, cannot easily be reconciled with any modern notion of romantic love. But for all its discomfitures, the ending of *Eunuchus* is realistic. Marriage between Thais and Phaedria is impossible; Thais will continue to earn her living as a prostitute; and social realities dictate that her life will (still) be controlled by men of higher status:

The agreement disposing of Thais without consulting her may not be fair to her from our point of view, but Terence’s audience probably felt a sense of closure in it, that the proper order of society had been in the end restored. (Rosivach (1998) 122)

This ending does not of course diminish Thais’ status as a compellingly complex character or Terence’s accomplishment in investing an old comic stereotype with new life. Nor does it preclude the possibility that some audience members left the theater questioning ‘the proper order of society’ in this instance.

4. The (Out)cast(s) of Characters: Soldier and Parasite

In the prologue, Terence asserts that, while his main source play is Menander’s *Eunouchos*, he has taken the roles of the parasite and the soldier from Menander’s *Kolax*, ‘The Flatterer’ (30-4). He thus specifically denies his rival’s charge that the characters
have been ‘stolen’ from previous Roman comedies by Naevius and Plautus (23-6). It is unclear exactly what is at stake in these polemics, and why Terence is willing to admit that he has ‘contaminated’ two Greek plays but flatly denies borrowing from his Latin predecessors. Perhaps as a result of Terence’s assertions about the source of these characters’ roles, much critical energy has been spent on determining the function of Thraso and Gnatho in *Eunuchus*. How exactly does this farcical pair figure in *Eunuchus* and ‘what [it] has to say’ (45)?

The appearance of one or both of these buffoonish characters in no less than seven scenes could seem to some extent ‘inorganic’, and primarily intended to provide comic relief (and to effectively make the play more Plautine) in what is mostly a serious drama. But this seems largely untenable in that so much of the play’s conflict is built around the competition for Thais between Thraso and Phaedria, and what this reveals about her character. Thraso is instrumental to the plot in his fortuitous purchase of Pamphila and his even more fortuitous decision to give her as a gift to Thais (New Comedy abounds in such improbable coincidences). Gnatho is essential in that he skillfully manipulates Thraso into pursuing Thais, though it is obvious that she dislikes him. Gnatho is also the consummate actor—always flattering, deceiving and manipulating Thraso, and improvising as necessary. He even manages to convince the terminally gullible Thraso that Thais’ reception of his gifts is proof of her love for him when he urges the soldier to use Pamphila to make her jealous:

THR. That would be the right strategy, Gnatho—if she actually loved me.

GNA. Seeing as she’s quite eager for your gifts and loves them,

She’s been in love with you for quite a while, and for some time now you’ve
Been able to yank her chain without much effort. She’s afraid you’ll get mad at her and transfer the bounty she now receives elsewhere.

THR. So true. I hadn’t thought of that myself.

GNA. Nonsense! You just hadn’t applied your gifted intellect to it.

If you had, you would have put it so much better yourself, Thraso! (Eu. 446-53)

Gnatho thus deprives Thraso of what could have been for him a rare moment of insight. And when Thais, preoccupied with discovering Pamphila’s true identity, has had her fill of Thraso, Gnatho skillfully obfuscates the situation to placate him:

THR. What now? GNA. Oh, let’s go home. She’ll come back to you soon enough on her own, and begging. THR. Think so? GNA. I’m absolutely sure of it. I’m an expert on how women think. When you want them, they reject you; but when you reject them, they want you. THR. Right. (Eu. 811-13)

And Gnatho, as we have seen, is the pivotal figure in the negotiations with which the play concludes.

Some critics (e.g., Goldberg (1986) 120-2) have argued that the unifying theme of Eunuchus is in fact self-interest, and that all the main characters are striving, often at cross-purposes, to achieve their own selfish ends. No character better illustrates this dedication to the service of his own ends than the opportunistic parasite Gnatho. In his opening monologue, Gnatho claims that he has raised the art of flattery to unprecedented levels of success (247-53). Parmeno is eavesdropping on Gnatho here, and so largely undermines his claims to novelty in his asides (254, 265), but the fact remains that Gnatho survives by successfully manipulating Thraso. As Gnatho initiates the play’s final
compromise, he openly proclaims his creed and encourages Chaerea and Phaedria to follow suit:

Stand a little ways over there, Thraso. (to Phaedria and Chaerea)

First of all, I’d really like the both of you to understand

That whatever I propose to do here is proposed primarily out of self-interest.

But if it benefits you as well, you’d be stupid not to do it. (Eu. 1068-71)

The brothers are convinced of the utility of Gnatho’s plan to allow Thraso to bankroll Phaedria’s affair with Thais, and that Thraso will provide them with ‘bounteous laughter’ as he is served up as comic fodder (1087). Gnatho has already secured a grant of free meals for life at Thraso’s house (1058-60) in exchange for his role in seeing that the soldier is included at Thais’. It is hard to imagine a more cynical and self-interested closing comic banquet than this one (cf. Pepe (1972) 142).

5. Conclusion

In the figure of the eunuch, variously seen by audience members as disgusting, decadent, ambiguous, or alluring, Terence found fertile ground to reevaluate norms of sexuality and gender. While state officials closely monitored exotic cults such as Cybele’s and carefully controlled the theater itself, the temporary stages of early Roman theater could still serve as open, interrogative and even transgressive spaces. Though we must always be vigilant about not eliding differences between ancient and modern sexual ideologies, much of the appeal of Eunuchus in Rome of 161 BCE was no doubt owed to Terence’s provocative challenge to widely-held cultural assumptions about sexual morality. In addition to exploring such issues as transvestitism, transgendering, and sexual
dominance, *Eunuchus* challenges comic convention and features surprising and nuanced characterization. It perhaps comes as little surprise that the play was so popular in 161 BCE, and continues to captivate readers today.

**FURTHER READING**

Barsby’s excellent edition and commentary on *Eunuchus* (1999) provides a starting point for any investigation into the play. The fullest treatments of the play and its central issues, including sexuality and gender, are Konstan (1986), Smith (1994), Dessen (1995), James (1998b), and Rosivach (1998) 46-9, 117-22). Packman (1993) examines the traditional reluctance of scholarship on Roman comedy to deal directly with rape; Kraemer (1928) and Rand (1932) typify the tendency of older scholarship to brush off Chaerea’s rape as a youthful indiscretion. Pernerstorfer (2009) is the most recent contribution towards establishing the precise relationship between Terence’s play and his lost Menandrian original. Saylor (1975) argues that the opposition between calculation and planlessness is highlighted in the play, and that the latter, in contrast to the norms of New Comedy, prevails in *Eunuchus*.

Fantham (1975) provides an overview of the depiction of women in New Comedy against what we know about Athenian women’s social roles in everyday (Hellenistic era) life. Brown (1993) surveys issues pertaining to love and marriage in New Comedy; Harris (1990) debates Athenian legal issues associated with rape, seduction, and adultery. Scafuro’s important study (1997) examines how legalistic disputes are settled in Greco-Roman New Comedy, including those related to rape. Lape (2001) identifies the influence of Athenian democratic ideology on the shaping of rape plots in Menandrian
New Comedy (and so in Roman adaptations such as *Eunuchus*). On modern performances of the play, see Gamel’s discussion in this volume.