CHAPTER THREE

THE FRAUD AND THE FLATTERER:
IMAGES OF ACTORS ON THE
COMIC STAGE

Stock characters are one of the features that differentiate Old Comedy from Middle and New Comedy most clearly. Whereas Aristophanes depicts recognizable public figures (Socrates, Kleon, Euripides, Agathon), Menander, Plautus, and Terence depict types (the Grouch, the Young Man in Love, the Sweet Young Thing). As scholars have noted, however, there are stock characters lurking in the background of many of Aristophanes’ other stage personalities. I am interested in two of these characters, who survive well into Roman comedy and

1 Socrates: Ael. VH 2.13, recounts that Socrates stood up in the theater of Dionysus during the performance of Aristophanes’ Clouds so that the foreigners who were present could figure out to whom the Socrates on stage was referring (and judge the likeness of the mask). Kleon: Knights 230–33; see Pickard-Cambridge (1988) 218–19, who recounts an ancient explanation for the disappearance of portrait-masks from Middle and New Comedy: the fear of offending any Macedonian ruler by any perceived caricature. Dover (1976) argues that portrait-masks would only have been feasible for public figures with unusual and distinctive features, using the analogy of political cartoons. He argues that the scholia are right in suggesting that a portrait-mask of Kleon was not attempted, not, however, because of Aristophanes’ fear of offending Kleon, but because of the regularity of Kleon’s features (16–24). Dover argues further that Socrates would have presented the mask-maker with the unique challenge of making a portrait of someone whose face already looked caricatured (26–8). On the mockery of real individuals in Aristophanes, see Storey (1998).

2 Pollux’s list of mask-types, even though much later than Menander, provides indirect evidence of the typology of character in New Comedy; see Green (1994) 154.

3 Hunter (1985) 8–9. As Green (1994) 37 notes, it is possible that Aristophanes was old-fashioned in his use of recognizable characters, or that we have an odd selection of his plays, because the evidence from terracotta comic figurines suggests that stock characters already existed by the end of the fifth century BCE. The “New York Group” of terracotta figurines, dating from the late fifth century, even shows features of Middle Comedy in its masks and characters: Green (1994) 63. See Wilkins (2000) on the cook, who becomes a stock character in Middle and New Comedy but, he argues, is present “in the wings” in Old Comedy.

extend even into other genres: the ἄλογον and the κόλαξ. The Fraud, or Impostor, or Braggart, and the Flatterer, or Toady, or (as he comes to be known) the Parasite, have a significance beyond their brief appearances onstage in which they trouble the hero: they can both be read as metacharacters, figuring the Actor. They come to stand for related negative stereotypes of the actor in society: that the actor lays claim to a position or a relationship that he does not merit, that he is, by one means or another, a social climber. The alazon represents the Greek world’s perceptions of actors, and the parasitus, those of the Roman world.

THE ALEAZON: THE ACTOR AS FRAUD

As various professions developed in the late fifth and early fourth centuries BCE – for example, medicine, banking, acting, oratory, philosophy – so did the problem of people impersonating professionals. One of the side effects of the proliferation of technical treatises on bodies of specialized knowledge was that anyone who could read could attempt to pass himself off as a member of a profession. It seems reasonable to assume that most people in ancient Greece would have preferred a “real” (i.e., highly trained) doctor to a “false” (i.e., thinly read and/or practically inexperienced) doctor. A good deal of anxiety arose in the fourth century over differentiating the genuine article from the impostor, as witnessed in philosophical texts from the fourth century. The sociologist Erving Goffman pinpoints one source of society’s anxiety about the impostor:

When we discover that someone with whom we have dealings is an impostor and out-and-out fraud, we are discovering that he did not have the right to play the part he played, that he was not an accredited incumbent of the relevant status... Paradoxically, the more closely the impostor’s performance approximates the real thing, the more intensely we may be threatened, for a competent performance by someone who proves to be an impostor may weaken in our minds the moral connection between legitimate authorization to play a part and the capacity to play it. (Skilled mimics, who admit all along that their intentions are unserious, seem to provide one way in which we can “work through” some of these anxieties.)

4 See, for example, Dean-Jones (2003) on individuals impersonating doctors beginning in the fourth century.

5 Goffman (1959) 39.
Thus the stock comic character of the *alazon*, the imposter or fraud, provides a window through which both the general problem of impostors and the specific problem of the actor as a professional imposter can be viewed.

We can trace the development of attitudes towards impostors in the texts of comedy and philosophy, as well as in the anecdotal tradition, from the fifth through the second century BCE. The *alazon* in Old Comedy tends to be a minor character, often with a “blocking” function, who claims a high status he does not deserve in order to gain something. Fourth-century philosophical texts that address themselves to the “problem” of the imposter tend to describe him as a theatrical dissembler, a fraud who is a threat to the social, moral, and ontological order. The anecdotal tradition humorously describes self-important actors of the fourth century humbled by their social superiors. In Greek New Comedy and Roman comedy the *alazon* narrows into the stock character of the braggart soldier,6 he is consistently held up to the audience’s ridicule. This progression of the stock character mirrors the development of the acting profession in the Hellenistic world: the actor aspires to a high position in Greek society and becomes stereotyped as greedy and arrogant.7 Exposing his true nature – his pretension, his ignorance, his corrupt motives – is the way to keep him from rising too high. This is the solution the Greek world offers to the problem of the imposter: to emphasize the gap between appearance and reality.

**THE ALAZON IN OLD COMEDY**
The *alazon* begins in fifth-century comedy as a negative type associated with sophists and public officials, but his qualities of pretension, deception, and foolish pride, his essential claim to know and be more than who

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6 Wilkins (2000) ch. 8 argues that the cook (*mageiros*) is an *alazon* character as well, and mentions in passing (402 n. 123) that the cook is sometimes likened to a comic actor, but does not pursue this line of inquiry. One might point out that the comic cook’s characteristic boasting about his prowess with ingredients is often left unproven; characters might eat the feast he has prepared at the end of the play, but the audience typically does not hear whether the food has lived up to its billing. In this way, we might see the cook as another potentially “fraudulent” *alazon* character, like the braggart soldier.

7 I do not suggest that this is the only way to read the stock character of the *alazon*; Lape (2004) passim, esp. ch. 6, offers an intriguing reading of the *alazon* as an allegory for Hellenistic kingdoms that threatened Athens’ self-image as an independent democracy in the Hellenistic period. It seems likely that the *alazon* resonated with audiences on a variety of levels.

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he really is, make him the perfect figure for the newly prominent actor of the fourth century and later. This is not to say that all *alazones* in comedy stand specifically and only for actors, but that they could always be read that way, in addition to standing for frauds in general. “The quack-doctor, a character who pretends to be what he is not, appears regularly as a comic type.”8 Diplomats are regularly *alazones* in comedy,9 and as we have seen, actors were sometimes diplomats in real life. Aristophanes’ *Achaimen* provides an early example of the *alazon* in the person of the Persian ambassador:

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... (Ach. 98–109)

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**AMBASSADOR:** Now tell the Athenians what the King told you to say, Pseudo-Artabas.

**PS-ARTABAS:** Shattershattergoldmatter.

**AM:** Did you get what he said?

**DICAEOPOILIS:** By Apollo, I did not.

**AM:** He says the King is going to send you gold.

**PS-A:** You no get gold, wide-assed Ionian.

**DI:** Woe is us! That’s pretty clear.

**AM:** What’s he saying now?

**DI:** What’s he saying? He says the Ionians are wide-assed if they’re expecting any gold from barbarians.

**AM:** No, he’s talking about “wide masses” of gold.

**DI:** What “wide masses”? You’re a big fraud [*alazon*]!
Sophists and priests are often called *alazon* as well in comedy. Characters who are called *alazon* in Aristophanes include the Athenian ambassadors and pseudo-Artabas in *Acharnians*, the soothsayer in *Birds*, Socrates and Chairephon in *Clouds*, Aeschylus (by Euripides) in *Frogs*, Paphlagon (Kleon) in *Knights*, and the priest (ἰερωκλῆς) in *Peace*. Greek theatre and society.” The connection between all of these occupational types – diplomats, priests, sophists, politicians, poets – is that they make their livings with words. Furthermore, they occupy positions of some authority. An authority based on mere words opened up a public figure to the suspicion that he was a fraud, that his special skill or knowledge consisted of pretending to do his job and benefit the people while actually profiting himself. Over and over again, Aristophanes’ *alazon* attempt to exploit their office or occupation for ulterior motives of personal gain, pretending to render a service as they try to cheat the hero. The ambassadors in *Acharnians* claim to have worked selflessly for Athens, describing as a “hardship” a diplomatic mission of leisurely luxury; Paphlagon (Kleon) in *Knights* sees himself as a loyal servant of the people, while the chorus reveals him to be a rapacious demagogue; Socrates and Chairephon are pompous hustlers in *Clouds*; Hierokles, the priest in *Peace*, tries to secure a share of the sacrificial meat for himself by “correcting” Trygaios’ sacrifice; the soothsayer in *Birds* spouts “prophecies” demanding that he be given new clothes, food, and drink; and in *Frogs*, Euripides argues that Aeschylus the *alazon* duped the simple audiences of yore with his imposing, robed figures who never spoke a word. “The outward show (πρόσχημα) of tragedy,” Euripides pronounces Aeschylus’ Niobe or Achilles (913) – but not, he implies, real tragedy.

The suspicion of being an impostor was easily applied to actors as well, because their job, after all, was to impersonate. Plutarch, *Phokion* 19.2–3, recounts a story about a “prima donna” actor from the fourth century BCE: an actor playing a queen in a “new tragedy” refused to come onstage unless he was accompanied by a retinue of lavishly dressed attendants. The audience was kept waiting until the choregos pushed the

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10 See Dean-Jones (2003) 106 n. 27.
11 The Athenian victory-list inscriptions first record victors in the categories of “old tragedy” and “old comedy” in 386 and 339, respectively: Pickard-Cambridge (1988) 72. “Old tragedy” meant reperformances of plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides; “old comedy,” on the other hand, seems to have meant what Classicists call “New Comedy” – reperformances of plays by Menander and his contemporaries: Csapo & Slater (1995) 188.
12 Wilson (2000) 87 notes that this anecdote “has something of the air of an ad hoc moralising fabrication (how could a *khóris* be expected to produce a crowd of extras on the spot in the theatre?).”
13 For the Greek, see p. 73.
14 Cf. Plut. Mor. 21:2f.
conspicuous, revealing that he thought that he [Agesilaos] would initiate some friendliness with him. Finally he asked, “Do you not recognize me, O King?” And he turned his attention to look at him and said, “Aren’t you Kallipides the clown?” This is what the Spartans call mimes.15

Although this actor is not pretending to be anything but an actor, he is laying claim to a “celebrity” status to which his profession, in some peoples’ eyes, does not entitle him. In this sense, he is acting offstage like an alazon. In both the anecdote about the actor playing Phokion’s wife and the anecdote about Kallipides, the audience — whether it is a real theatrical audience or simply the reader — gets to delight in seeing self-important actors get put in their place. Whether we can trace this delight to fourth-century BCE audiences, and not just to Plutarch’s own milieu, is a question we must take up by looking at attitudes toward actors in other fourth-century sources.

PHILOSOPHICAL ATTITUDES

The philosophers of the fourth century were concerned with the alazon as well, linking him to acting in subtle ways. Plato’s depiction of Ion the rhapsode in the Ion is a portrait of a fraud so effective that he has deceived even himself; Ion thinks he has true knowledge of generality and navigation, simply because he recites passages of Homer describing fighting and sailing. His performance as a rhapsode is similar to acting: he modulates his voice to suit different characters’ recitatives, emotes the lines he reads, and wears a sumptuous costume. Thus Plato indicts all the dramatic arts by showing that even the practitioner of a less fully mimetic genre is a fraud, an imposter.

Aristotle discusses alazonia in detail, considering it to be a fault of excessive pretense.16 He covers all incarnations of the alazon: the boaster, the fraud, the pretentious person. In general, Plato tends to use the term alazon in discussions of those who pretend to be philosophers but really are not, while Aristotle uses alazon to describe boasters, such as those who pretend to be courageous but are really cowards. In both authors, the defining feature of the alazon is the pretense of having certain qualities in order to gain something. It is also the job description of the actor. The opposite of the alazon, Aristotle declares, is the sincere man (ὁ φιλαλήθης) (Nicomachean Ethics 1127b1–20). As we have already seen, sincerity is the vexed question haunting actors.19

Xenophon takes up the issue of the alazon in both the Cyropaidia and the Memorabilia. In the Cyropaidia, he makes a distinction between those who tell fictional stories to amuse their friends and those who lie, pretending to be what they are not or have what they do not in order to gain some advantage; the former are entertaining, but the latter are alazones (2.2.12). The Memorabilia gives an example of Socrates teaching virtue by negative example:

Ἐνθυμώμεθα γὰρ ἐπὶ, ἐὰν τίς μὴ ἦν ἀγαθὸς αὐληθής δοκεῖν βουλοιτο, τί ἦν αὐτῷ ποιητὴν ἐπιτρέπει ἄρα ἢ τὰ ἤχον τῆς τῆς ἁμαρτίας μετά τού ἀγαθοῦ αὐληθῆς; καὶ πρῶτον μὲν, ὦ ἢ ἔκεισθαι τις καὶ θάλατον μὲν ἀληθής οὐκ ἔχει, ὄρατον ἐκεῖσθαι τις καὶ θάλατον ἀληθῆς ἔχει; τί ἦν αὐτῷ ποιητής παρασκευασσθαι, ἢ ἐν τῇ ἐφορίᾳ ἐπιτρέπει ἢ ἔχει; καὶ τούτῳ ποιητῇ ἐπιτρέπει ἢ ἔχει καὶ ἀκόμη ἔχει; καὶ ἂν ἐπιτρέπει ἢ ἔχει, ἢ τούτῳ ποιητῇ ἔχει καὶ ἔχει τούτῳ ποιητῇ ἔχει. Ἡ οὖκ ἔχει αὐληθὴς κακός, ἢ τούτῳ ποιητῇ ἔχει κακός, ἢ τούτῳ ποιητῇ ἔχει πολλὰ μὲν ἔχει, ἢ τούτῳ ποιητῇ ἔχει μὴ ἔχει, ἢ τούτῳ ποιητῇ ἔχει μὴ ἔχει, ἢ τούτῳ ποιητῇ ἔχει. Ἡ οὖκ ἔχει αὐληθὴς κακός, ἢ τούτῳ ποιητῇ ἔχει κακός, ἢ τούτῳ ποιητῇ ἔχει μὴ ἔχει, ἢ τούτῳ ποιητῇ ἔχει μὴ ἔχει

(Mem. 1.7.2)

He said, if someone who isn’t a good flute-player wants to seem one, let’s consider what he should do. Shouldn’t he imitate the good flute-players in the things external to the art? First, since they wear fine clothes and travel with many attendants, he should do these things. Then, since many people praise them, he should furnish himself with many people to praise him. But he should never take any work, of course, or he will reveal that he is laughable and not only a bad flute-player, but also an impostor (ἀλαζῶν). And so, having spent a lot of money and not

15 Kallipides specialized in playing women of low character, according to Aristotle, who also states that Aeschylus’ actor Myrmicos called Kallipides an ape (Poet. 1461b26–1462a14). Aristophanes makes fun of Kallipides’ apparent tendency to play low characters and overact in a fragment from Women Who Pitch the Tents (Skeneis Kataklamnousai), PCG F.496: “Like Kallipides I am sitting on the floor-sweepings.” On Kallipides, see Braund (2000).

16 Eth. Nic. 1108a20; Eth. Eud. 1233b35.

17 Plato Resp. 6.486b, 6.490a; Euthyd. 2.83c. In Phil. 65c Socrates asks whether pleasure or mind is more akin to truth; Protagoras answers that mind is, and calls pleasure “the greatest of impostors.”


19 See chapter 2; Barish (1981) 111; Trilling (1972) 64–65 discusses Rousseau’s view of “the characteristic disease of the actor, the attenuation of selfhood that results from impersonation,” and compares it to Plato’s equally negative view of actors.
gained anything, and being disgraced in front of many people, how will he not spend his life laboriously, unprofitably, and ridiculously?

This bad flute-player is not really a flute-player at all: he is an actor playing the role of a flute-player and hoping not to be discovered. He wears the right costume, surrounds himself with fellow actors, and even recruits an audience, but he cannot do the job. Xenophon’s discussion of *alazon* makes the link between impostors and actors quite clear.20

Finally, rounding out the fourth century,21 Theophrastos’ *Characters* 23 concerns *alazon*, and it describes the *alazon* as someone who keeps up the pretense of being wealthy when he is actually poor. Over and over, the *alazon* tells lies and manipulates appearances in order to appear rich in front of people: he talks about his (nonexistent) shipping profits (2), his (imaginary) important connections in Macedon (3–4), his (fictional) assets (5–6). He makes a show of considering whether to buy an expensive horse (7). Although he rents a house, he pretends his family owns it, and pretends furthermore that he plans to sell it because it is too small for entertaining (9). As with Xenophon’s bad flute-player, he knows what the discourse and external trappings of his desired identity should sound and look like, although he lacks the essential qualities.22 Most tellingly, for our purposes, the *alazon* goes to the clothes-market and picks out a wardrobe that would cost two talents, and then scolds his slave publicly for not bringing any gold coins with him (8). This example highlights the theatrical nature of Theophrastos’ character-type: he enlists his slave as a synagnost in his performance at the market. As with all the philosophical accounts of the *alazon*, what Theophrastos focuses on is the discrepancy between appearance and reality which the *alazon* exploits. It is this discrepancy that makes anti-theatrical writers throughout the ages uncomfortable with theater.23 In an interesting connection to the previous chapter, Lane Fox notes that some people have seen Theophrastos’ *alazon* as supposed to represent Aeschines.

The philosophical writers of the fourth century, then, saw the *alazon* as a recognizable character-type: he is someone who pretends to be more or better than he is. While these writers imply that a discerning audience can see through the imposter, the *alazon* clearly knows enough about the status he desires to project so that he fools some people: “And he is clever at telling a fellow traveler on the road how he served under Alexander, and how Alexander felt about him, and how many jewel-studded drinking-cups he got as booty; and he argues that the craftsmen in Asia are better than those in Europe; and he says these things even though he’s never traveled out of town” (Char. 23.3). He is the enemy of true philosophy in Plato, the enemy of sincerity in Aristotle, the enemy of virtue in Xenophon, the enemy of “men of quality” in Theophrastos. He is always opposed to their goals, a “blocking character” in real life as well as onstage.24

*ALAZONES IN MIDDLE AND NEW COMEDY*

The fragments of Menander reveal the presence of several *alazones*. Fr. 746 K-T gives three lines of a Menander play:

σφάττε με, λεπτός γίνομεν’ εύστοχόντες:
τά σκώμαθα ὀλ’ ὁ πολιτεία ὁ κράτησις:
οίος δ’ ἀλαζών ἐστίν ἀληθής.

He slaughters me; I become thin in feasting.
What jokes, what military intelligence!
What an offensive phony (alazon) he is!

These lines sound like they are spoken by a parasitos, possibly in the parasite/braggart soldier pairing familiar from later plays (e.g., Terence’s *Eunuch*, Plautus’ *Miles Gloriosus*). Another “familiar” quality of these lines is the sense that they are spoken as an aside, like the asides of Plautine characters. If these lines are an aside, they only strengthen the idea that the *alazon* stands for the actor: the speaker metatheatre-calls attention to the *alazon*-character as someone who overacts. Brown wants to assign

20 It also makes clear one conception of acting with a long history (going back at least to Plato’s *Ion*). This view holds that acting is not a distinct activity with particular skills, like flute-playing; anyone can pretend to be a flute-player, but only flute-players can actually play the flute.

21 See Lane Fox (1996) 134–8 for a discussion of the traditional dating of the *Characters* to 319 and his arguments for a compositional range for the collection from ca. 325 to 310/09 BCE.

22 Lane Fox (1996) 142.

23 On the anti-theatrical tradition in general, see Barish (1981), especially ch. 1. On Theophrastos’ *Characters* as a “handbook of characterization” for comic playwrights of the fourth century, see Usher (1977); on the *Characters* as a combination of “philosophical classification and comic caricature” which provides an inverted "discourse" in Alexander’s Athens of how citizens should behave,” see Lane Fox (1996) 139–42, 155.

24 Given the ongoing concern of philosophy to legitimate itself, and later, of the different schools to differentiate themselves from their rivals, it is not surprising that the philosophical writers are at such pains to identify impostors. Cf. Plato, *Apology.*
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this fragment to Menander's Kolax. Fr. 520 K–T also seems to refer to an alazon:

πῶς ὁ μὴ φρονῶν
ἀλαζώνει καὶ ψόφος ἀληκτεῖ.

...everyone who doesn’t think
Is found out by his false pretension (alazoneia) and empty noises

Some scholars want to assign this fragment to Menander’s Kolax as well; Brown argues it could fit in any of several plays. Both fragments suggest that the alazon was already becoming more of a braggart than an imposter, a trend that becomes even more evident in Roman comedy. It is interesting to note, however, that Polemon in Menander’s Perikeiromene is a soldier but not, as we might expect, an alazon: “far less the braggart warrior than a jealous, lovesick youth.” This could serve as further evidence of Menander’s famous tendency to humanize and soften stock characters, or on the other hand as evidence that those stock characters are not altogether fixed by Menander’s time—at least, not fixed as they appear later in Plautus.

THE AЛАAZON AT ROME: THE MILES GLORIOSUS

The alazon proper makes a few brief appearances on the Roman stage, most recognizably as the quack doctor in Plautus’ Menacechmus who (mis)diagnoses Menaechmus I as insane. Another avatar of the alazon is the advocatus. There are three advocati in Terence’s Phormio who give confusing legal advice to the old man Demipho; he says after they exit, “I’m much more confused than I was before” (459). The quack doctor and the advocatus, like Xenophon’s false flute-player, try to pass themselves off as experts without having any real knowledge. Even these vestigial alazones tend to look like actors. For example, the advocati in Plautus’ Poenulus reply impatiently to a recapping of events:

Omnia istae scimus iam nos, si hi spectatores sciant;
herunc hic nunc causa haec agitum spectatorum fabula:
hos te satius est docere, ut, quando agas, quid agas sciant.
nos tu ne curassi: scimus rem omnem, quippe omnes simul
dedicimus tecum una, ut respondere possimus tibi.

(Poen. 550–54)

26 See the discussion in Brown (1992) 97 n. 18.

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We know all that already, if these spectators know it; we’re doing this play here now on their behalf: it’s enough for you to instruct them, so they’ll know what you’re doing when you do it.

Don’t worry about us: we know the whole thing, since we all learned our lines with you, so that we can reply to you.

These advocati also address the audience later on (597–9), explaining that they are using stage money but pretending (adsumulatibus) that it is real money. Even in metatheatrical Plautus, the alazon characters tend to be extraordinarily self-conscious.

Most of the time, however, the alazon appears in his Roman costume as a mercenary soldier. This transformation makes some sense: the impostor and the soldier are both mercenaries, in a sense, and their reputations both precede and exceed them. When the Greek alazon becomes the Roman miles, all that is left of his identity as a fraud is a blustering braggadocio which covers up his cowardice, and, at times, a preposterous vanity. The miles, like the alazon, has a tendency to act with words instead of deeds. The most famous example is Plautus’ Miles Gloriosus, which, we are informed in the prologue, is adapted from a Greek play (by an unspecified playwright) called Alazon. But there are also braggart soldiers in Plautus’ Bucchides, Curtulio, Epidicus, Poenulus, and Tusculumus, as well as in ‘Terence’s Eunuchus.

In general, Plautus’ braggart soldiers come onstage for brief scenes in which their boasting, and the other characters’ skeptical reactions to it, makes them look foolish. Stratophanes in the Tusculumus gives a metatheatrical description of his own stock character when he enters, pontificating on the tendency for soldiers to be braggarts (484). He claims to be a doer, not a talker, but of course, he acts on none of his blustering threats during the course of the play. Pygopolynices in the Miles Gloriosus differs from other braggart soldiers in degree, not in kind. The plot of the play has him not only fooled, as usual, but humiliated, beaten, and threatened with castration. One of his slaves, the tricky Palaesto, describes him as “dumber than a rock” (236), and his parasite Artotragus undercut the miles’ hyperbolic claims of military and sexual prowess with asides (1–78). The miles is a sort of stock character among the stock characters, someone so predictable and so hollow that he is an easy mark for his fellow characters.

28 On these advocati, see Moore (1998) 12–14.
Terence’s *Eunuchus* has the fairly standard pairing of a braggart soldier, Thraso, and his parasite, Gnatho. The soldier is a buffoon whose own boastful stories ironically suggest the manner of his ultimate loss of face in the course of the play.\(^9\) The parasite constantly undermines his fulsome praises of his master with asides to the audience describing his master’s true nature (see 420–21, 782–3). When Gnatho betrays his master at the end and transfers his allegiance to the heroes of the play, he describes Thraso as “silly, tasteless, stupid; he snores night and day; you shouldn’t fear him and the woman shouldn’t love you; you’ll drive him out easily when you want” (1079–80). On the Roman stage, the *alazon* winds up a victim not only of the hero, but of his own servant as well; the *kolax*, or *parasitus*, always shows him up for what he really is.

The *alazon* was an object of great concern in the fourth century, when the actor emerged as a potentially powerful figure in Greek society and concerns about fraud ran high. As the Artists of Dionysus became a distinct and recognized organization in the Hellenistic period, stereotypes about actors as arrogant frauds proliferated even as the actual “threat” posed by the actor seemed to diminish because of his clearly demarcated status. In second-century Rome, the actor was just another Greek mercenary or shyster, someone to be cut down a notch or two and put in his place. But Roman attitudes toward actors were crystallized in another stock character, the parasite, or flatterer, which had its antecedents in Greek comedy but found its fullest expression in Roman comedy. The flatterer aroused anxieties in Roman society on a par with the anxieties aroused by the fraud in Athenian society.

**THE KOLAX/PARASITUS: THE ACTOR AS FLATTERER**

The fourth century saw the rise of various professions, and with them, the emergence of fraudulent professionals and professional frauds. The fourth century was also concerned about flatterers. The flatterer created resentment in Athenian society, which, despite real economic differences among citizens, was ideologically committed to *isonomia* (equality before the law) as part of the democracy.\(^1\) But it was in the hierarchical, highly status-conscious society of Republican Rome that the flatterer was felt to be a distinct social threat. Accusations of flattery were another way in which anxiety about social mobility was expressed.

Plutarch’s *Moralia* contains a treatise called “How to Know a Flatterer from a Friend.” Although it was written centuries after the time period we are considering, it speaks to the ongoing concerns the ancients had about flatterers and parasites: that, far from being mere annoyances, they threaten the stability of the social order — and beyond that, the stability of the ontological order itself.

Τίνα οὖν δεί φιλάττεσθαι; τὸν μὴ δοκοῦντα μηδὲ ὁμολογοῦντα κολακεύειν, ἐν οὐκ ἐστὶ λαβεῖν περὶ τοῦτότισον, οὐδὲ ἀλλικεῖται σκίναν καταμετρῶν ἐπί δειπνον, οὐδὲ ἔρριπται μεθυσθεὶς ὡς ἔτυχεν, ἀλλὰ νηφεῖ τὰ πολλὰ καὶ πολυπραγμονεῖ καὶ πράξεων μετέχεις ὁδεῖται δειν καὶ λόγων ἀπορρήτων βουλεῖται κοινωνός εἶναι, καὶ διὸς τραγικὸς ἐστίν οὐ σατυρικὸς φιλίας ὑποκρίτη τοῦ δικαίου καθώς ὅσ' ἐγὼ γὰρ ὁ Πλάτων φησίν, ἔσχατης ἀδίκες εἶναι δοκεῖν δίκαιον μὴ ὑπάρχει, καὶ κολακεῖαι ἤγγειλέν χαλεπῆν τὴν λαυάδουσαν οὐ τὴν ὁμολογοῦσαν, οὐδὲ τὴν παίξουσαν ἄλλα τὴν στουδάδουσαν. (Mor. 50ε–φ)

Against whom, then, must we be on our guard? Against the man who does not seem to flatter, nor admits it; whom you can’t catch in the kitchen, nor is he caught measuring the shadows toward dinnertime, nor is he thrown out for being drunk when he meets you, but he will stay sober for the most part and he will meddle and think that he ought to be privy to your business and want to be in on your secret counsels; in a word, he who is a tragic actor of friendship, not a comic or a satiric actor. For, as Plato says, “It is the height of injustice to seem just while not being just,” and so the flattery which must be considered difficult to deal with is that which is hidden, not that which is openly avowed, that which is serious, not that which is meant as a joke.

The flatterer (*kolax*) exploits the gap between appearance and reality to his advantage; he insinuates himself into the affairs of rich men and benefits from pretending to have a status he does not. Plutarch contrasts the real-life flatterer in this passage with his depiction onstage in comedy, the *kolax* or *parasitus* who is monomanically concerned with eating and drinking at someone else’s expense. Yet the stock comic character of the flatterer is based on these “real life” anxieties about social climbers, as we shall see.

First, we will examine the *kolax* or *parastis* in Old Comedy and philosophy, and then we will turn to the development of the *kolax/parastis* of New Comedy into the *parastis* of Roman comedy. The *kolax* of Old Comedy is sometimes depicted as a political creature connected to

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\(^1\) Ober (1989) 74–5, for example, connects the ideology of *isonomia* with the institution of ostracism as a means for the *demos* to check the power of the elite.
demagoguery, sometimes as an uninvited hanger-on at symposia. Fourth-century philosophical texts connect flattery to political misrule; it is the mark of a power imbalance. The anecdotal tradition associates actors with the reign of Alexander, reinforcing this linkage between absolute power and flattery. In Middle and New Comedy, the _kolax_ begins to be called the _parasitos_, emphasizing his gluttony, but his association with acting and social mobility remains in evidence. In Roman comedy, the _parasitus_ is a dissembling, servile creature; he lies to his superiors in order to make a living. He becomes a figure for the actor in the Roman world. To minimize the threat that the professional liar poses, Roman comic playwrights tend to have the parasite comment to the audience in asides that expose not only the absurd pretensions of his patron but his own meretricious, bad acting.

**THE KOLAX IN OLD COMEDY**

Like the _alazon_, the _kolax_ became a stock comic character by the end of the fifth century. In Aristophanes’ extant comedies, references to the _kolax_ occur in a political context—usually with reference to Kleon. In Aristophanes’ _Knights_, Demosthenes calls Paphlagon (i.e., Kleon) a _kolax_ (419, 683, 1033), and in his _Peace_, the Chorus describes itself doing battle with a monster in a tanning-pit (i.e., Kleon) whose face was licked by a hundred _kolakes_ (756). It is interesting that Kleon is called a _kolax_ in one play—implying that he acquired his political power through flattery of more powerful politicians—and in another, he himself is depicted as the target of flatterers. It seems a politician could be called a _kolax_ at any point in his career. The title of Eupolis’ _Kolakes_ (fr. 172 K.-A) suggests that it featured a whole chorus of toadies, although the subject of the play is unclear.33

The _kolax_ was also characterized as a freeloading glutton, an aspect of his character which remained constant for several hundred years. A _kolax_ shows up in a mime by the fifth-century mime writer Epicharmus:

> συνδειτέον τῷ λῶντι, καλέσαι δὲ μίνον, καὶ τῷ γὰρ μὴ λῶσιν, κοῦδέν δὲ καλεῖν τηρεῖ δὲ χαρίς τ᾽ εἴμι καὶ ποιεῖν πολὺν γέλατα καὶ τὸν ιστιούντ᾽ ἑπανέκειν, καὶ καὶ τὰς ἀντίον τι λῇ τῆς λέγειν,

Epicharmus’ _Hope or Wealth_ fr. 35–7 Kaibel; quoted in Athenaeus 6.235e–236b.

33 Damon (1997) 11–14 provides a concise overview of the history of the terms _kolax_ and _parasitos_.


**THE FRAUD AND THE FLATTERER**

τῆς φυσικῆς τὸ σύνδειτέον τῷ λῶντι, καλέσαι δὲ μίνον, καὶ τῷ γὰρ μὴ λῶσιν, κοῦδέν δὲ καλεῖν τηρεῖ δὲ χαρίς τ᾽ εἴμι καὶ ποιεῖν πολὺν γέλατα καὶ τὸν ιστιούντ᾽ ἑπανέκειν, καὶ καὶ τὰς ἀντίον τι λῇ τῆς λέγειν.

Feasting with him who wishes, he only has to summon [me], and at any rate with the one who does not wish, he does not have to summon: I’m tasteful there and I create much laughter and I praise the man hosting the feast. And if someone wants to say something against him, I revile him and then I’m hated. And after devouring a lot and guzzling a lot I go away...

The _kolax_ here is already demonstrating a characteristic self-awareness in his discussion of the “role” he plays for his patron. We see here a connection between dissembling, servility, gluttony, and metatheatrical asides to the audience that will characterize the flatterer through the period of Roman comedy.

Nick Fisher has argued that the evidence from Old Comedy points to a widespread anxiety in fifth-century Athens that some aspiring politicians were using _kolakeia_, flattery, as a means of upward social mobility and political advancement. Fisher notes that the stereotype of the _kolax/parasitos_ took on a life of its own as a fourth-century stock comic character: no longer explicitly connected with politics, the _kolax/parasitos_ pursues food and drink to the exclusion of all other drives. As with the _alazon_, the _kolax_ on stage, I would argue, gradually came to represent the actor in society. The association between acting and flattery was already in the popular consciousness by the late fourth century: Aristotle (Rhetoric 1405a23) notes about actors that “Some call them ‘Dionysus-toadies’ (διονυσοκόλακας), but they call themselves ‘artists’ (τεχνικοίς Ἑρμής) (these are both metaphorical, the former disparaging, the latter the opposite).” In a later period, mime-actors, excluded from the Artis of Dionysus, would form their own union: the _Parasites of Apollo_.


38 Cappo & Slater (1995) 241, 371, 375 give inscriptive evidence for the existence of the guild. Cappo & Slater estimate the origin of the guild, or of ones like it, to have occurred in the second c. BCE, but note that most of the attestation for the guild
THE PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION

Plato, Aristotle, and Theophrastus all discuss the kolax as well as the alazon, often in the same passages on moral failings or character types. Plato deals with the kolax in several different passages of the Republic, usually in the context of tyranny. The tyrant, he has Socrates assert, is paradoxically a miserable creature, "enslaved to cringings and servitudes beyond compare," who must flatter the worst people in order to retain power (9.579e). In the Gorgias (466a), Plato has Socrates call rhetoric a branch of flattery (κολακεία). The flatterer and the courtisan are examples of evils that give temporary pleasure in Phaedrus 240b. Plato associates flattery throughout his work with tyranny, enslavement, and performative artifice. The presence of the kolax among one's followers is a sign that one has wandered from the path of true philosophy to false goals, or, as Plato might put it, that one is an impostor pretending to be a true philosopher.

Aristotle discusses kolakeia as another fault of excess, like alazoneia (Eud. Eth. 1233b3). In his discussion of the "great-souled man" in the Nicomachean Ethics, he defines flattery and flatterers as inherently servile (Eth. Nic. 1125a). The great-souled man is immune to flattery, but "most men like flattery (κολακεία), for a flatterer (κολακεύω) is a friend who is your inferior, or pretends to be so, and to love you more than you love him" (Eth. Nic. 1159a15). Aristotle distinguishes between friendship and flattery thus (Eth. Nic. 1173b30): "And the fact that a friend is different from a flatterer (κολακειας) seems to make it clear that pleasure is not a good, or that there are different kinds of pleasures; for the friend is thought to associate with someone for their benefit, while the flatterer is thought to associate with someone for pleasure, and this is a reproach for the latter.

dates from the empire. On the exclusion of mime-actors from the Artists of Dionysus, see also Pickard-Cambridge (1988) 302; Bieber (1961) 84. Parry and Parry's study of the English medical profession in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provides an interesting comparison with the hierarchy of prestige with the Artists and the Parasites. The three types of medical practitioners in England in the later eighteenth c. were, in descending order of prestige, physicians, surgeons, and pharmacists. Each had its own guild: the Royal College of Physicians, the Royal College of Surgeons, and the Worshipful Company of Pharmacists. The Royal College of Physicians controlled access to the profession, and to its own organization especially; quite successfully, fighting off significant Parliamentary reform for decades; they were even able to enlist the assistance of the Worshipful Company of Pharmacists in reforming by turning the pharmacists against their rivals from below, the druggists and chemists. See Parry and Parry (1976) pt.II. ch. 6, esp. 104–8.

9 9.575e, 9.579a, 9.579e; see 7.538a–b for an analogy in which flatterers and wealthy adoptive parents keep a boy from learning the truth.

THE FRAUD AND THE FLATTERER

but they praise the former because he associates with people for other purposes." As with the alazon, the kolax has an ulterior motive in his pretense. As he distinguishes among different men in the Nicomachean Ethics, so Aristotle distinguishes among different governments in the Politics; flatterers are pleasing to many in a democracy, but their presence is a sign of misrule. In the kind of democracy where demagogues hold sway, flatterers are honored and the mob controls the better classes; this situation is analogous to the power that tyrants and their toadies hold in a tyranny (Pol. 1292a15–20). Demagogues are the flatterers of the people (Pol. 1313b35–40). This definition calls Aristophanes' Kleon to mind strongly. The flatterer is a sham friend (Pol. 1371a20), that is, one who plays the role of a friend. The connection of flattery with demagogues and orators, who are themselves often compared to actors, highlights the performative nature of this false identity.

Theophrastos' Characters 2, which must have been written soon after Menander's Kolax, is concerned with kolakeia. The flatterer is the sort of man who tells his patron that everyone is praising his virtues (at the flatterer's suggestion), and asks, "Are you taking it to heart how people are looking at you?" (2) He picks lint off the patron's clothes and grey hairs out of his beard (3), reassuring him that his hair is still dark for his age. He shushes everyone for his patron's jokes and overreacts to the punchline, stuffing his cloak into his mouth "as if he can't contain his laughter" (4). He showers his own children with presents and affection in front of his patron (6). He shows compliments on his patron, saying that his foot is more symmetrical than the cobbler's shoes (7), his wine and food luxurious (10), his house well laid-out, his farm well cultivated, his portrait a perfect resemblance (12). The flatterer also waits on his patron obsequiously, halting everyone until he has walked by (5), announcing his visit to his friends (8), running his errands in the women's market (9), offering him a blanket at the dinner table (10), even snatching the cushions from the slave in the theater and placing them on the seat himself (11). The last sounds so much like Aeschines' denunciation of Demosthenes (3.76) that it might be directly alluding to that passage. All of this flattery is performed in front of other people as well as the patron, for added impact — and, I would suggest, because the kolax is acquiring a more and more theatricalized status. He is thought to ham it up in "real life" as well as on the stage.

It is no coincidence that Athenian writers in the later part of the fourth century are concerned with the flatterer. Athens came under Macedonian rule by the time Theophrastos wrote the Characters. The political
context of very unequal power relations was thought to encourage flattery. Thus the philosophical writers take pains to identify and describe the flatterer, so that the undeserving might not receive more than their fair share in the new social order.\(^{40}\) It is also not surprising, then, that with the Macedonian conquest of Athens and the rest of Greece, we find a cluster of anecdotes about actors flattering Alexander. First, there is the joke that began to circulate which played on the common nickname for actors, “Dionysus-toadies” (Διονυσσάκας): Alexander enjoyed actors so much and surrounded himself with so many of them that people began to call them “Alexander-toadies.”\(^{41}\) (The joke is itself also a piece of flattery, since it compares Alexander with Dionysus.) Then there are the accounts of incidents such as the one in which a comic actor performing for Alexander inserted a line requesting ten talents into one of his speeches; Alexander supposedly laughed, and paid him.\(^{42}\) This incident might seem at first to be the opposite of flattery, since it looks like a brazen demand for wealth. It is important to remember, however, that as early as Epicharmus, the kolax was a person who provided entertainment, usually at meals, and who expected in return some sort of material reward. A clever kolax would entertain Alexander by surprising him: a request for a huge sum of money is funnier than one for a modest amount of money, or for a free meal. But the request also manages to flatter: after all, it points to Alexander’s singularly enormous fortune, and thus his unique — even godlike — potential for generosity. Alexander’s favorable treatment of actors, or in other words, his rewarding of flattery, is depicted as the new mode for politics.\(^{43}\)

THE KOLAX/PARASITOS IN MIDDLE AND NEW COMEDY

The kolax, as he became common on the Middle and then the New Comic stage, slowly acquired a somewhat different identity and a new name: the παρασίτης, or parasite, who flatters his social superiors in return for free meals.\(^{44}\) Alexis fr.262 K-A calls the same character kolax and parasitos in consecutive lines, indicating that the terminology is not entirely fixed in the fourth century.\(^{45}\) Many Middle Comic plays use the term kolax. Diphilos fr.23 K-A describes a kolax upsetting everyone with his malicious talk. Menander wrote a play titled Kolax, and his Eunouchos and Theophorumene contain kolakes.\(^{46}\)

In Menander’s Theophorumene, someone (apparently an old man, possibly named Kraton) talks about how bad modern times are:

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ἀνθρώπος ἐν δ' ἡ χρυσής, εὐγενής, σφόδρα γενιαῖς, οὐδὲν ὄψεις ἐν τῷ νῦν γένει.
πράττει δ' ὁ κόλαξ ἀριστα πάντων, δευτέρα
ὁ συκοφάντης, ὁ κακοπήθης τρίτα λέγει,
ἔν οὖν γενέσθαι κρείττον ἢ τοὺς χείρονας
ὁρᾶν ἔπαιτο ζώντος ἐπιφανέστερον.
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(fr.1 Körte 223 Kock, l.14–19)

But a man who is good, well-born, and very Noble, is no use in this current age.

The flatterer (kolax) does best of all, the informer
Is next, and the malicious man is third.
Better to be an ass than to see inferior people
Living more notably than me.

The anxiety about social mobility is clear in this passage: the powers that be apparently reward flatterers and informers, while nobody takes any notice of the koloi kagathoi anymore. If we consider that this passage comes from approximately the same time period as Theophrastos’ Characters, then we see that the stock character of the flatterer gained added resonance in a time when the political power structure had been radically altered and when real actors were amassing huge fortunes.

Menander’s Dyskolos and Sikyonios have characters called parasitoi, rather than kolakes, and some of these parasitoi resemble their Roman descendants in the way they “coach” other characters in deception. The fragments of the Sikyonios contain a scene in which a parasite, Theron, is

\(^{40}\) For an interesting recent account of some of the ways in which Athens attempted to maintain its democratic ideology (in the fictional world of the comic stage, at least) in the face of Macedonian occupation, see Lape (2004).

\(^{41}\) Athenaeus 12.539.

\(^{42}\) Plut. Vit. Alex. 29.3.

\(^{43}\) See Lape (2004) 58, 64 on flattery as a mode of political survival for Hellenistic Athens under Macedonian control.

\(^{44}\) For a more detailed analysis of the evolution of the kolax/parasitos, see Wilkins (2000) 71–86.

\(^{45}\) Some scholars have argued that this fragment is evidence of the moment of transition between the two terms, while others disagree: see the discussion of this controversy in Brown (1992) 99 n. 25; see also Wilkins (2000) 74, Lane Fox (1996) 140. Others, like Fisher (2000) 372–3, see this as evidence that the two terms (and others) were both in use throughout Old, Middle, and New Comedy. Tylawa (2002) provides a detailed history of the Greek background of the parasite/flatterer, beginning with Homer.

\(^{46}\) On Menander’s Kolax, see Tylawa (2002) 96–100.
bribing an old man to act as if he is Kichesias, and to claim that the girl
Philoumene is his daughter. Apparently, the irony of the scene is that the
old man really is Kichesias and that he really is the father of the girl, and
that the parasite is unaware of it.

KICHESIAS: Oýk eis tón ðlêbrôn.

THÉRÔN: µelethos i̮s̮êa.

KI: ἀποφειµεν;

OI: ὁµοιοῦν; Κἰχησίαν σὺ τοιοῦτον ὑπέλαβες ἔργον ποίησις ἤ λαβεῖν ἄν παρὰ τίνος ἀργύριον. ὁδίκου πράγματος, Κἰχησίαν;

KI: Ἐκαμβωνίδην γε τὸ γένος: ἐν γε ἄρ’ ὑπέλαβες; τούτου με πράξαι μισθὸν αὐτοῦ, μηκέτι ὅν ἔλεγον ἀρτί.

THÉRÔN: τοῦ τίνος;

KI: Κἰχησίας

OI: Ἐκαμβωνίδης γε πολὺ σὺ βέλτιον λέγεις, νοεῖν τι φαινεῖ τὸν τύπον τοῦ πράγματος. ὁὐτός γενοῦς καὶ σιμὸς εἰ γὰρ ἀπὸ τύχης καὶ μικρός, οἷον ἔλεγεν ὁ θεράπτων τοῦ.

KI: γέρων δὲ εἰμὶ γέγονα.

OI: πρόσθες θυγατέριν;

"Ἀλῆθεν ἀπολέσας ἐναυτοῦ τετραετές Δρόμωνα τ’ ἄικτην."

KI: ἀπολέσας.

OI: εὑ πᾶν.

KI: ἀρτπασθὲν ὑπὸ ληστῶν ἀνέμησας πάθους τὸν ἀθλίον με καὶ θηρασὶ ἑκτράσι ἔμι.

OI: ἄριστα, τούτου διαιρύπαντε τὸν πρότον τὸ τ’ ἐπιδιακρίνειν. ἀγαθὸς ἀνθρώπων σφόδρα.

(Sik. 343–60)

KICHESIAS: Go to hell!

THÉRÔN: You’re being difficult.

KI: Wont you leave me

And be damned? Did you actually think that Kichesias

would do

This sort of thing, or take a bribe from someone?

This evil deed? Kichesias?

THÉRÔN: Yeah, you of the race of Skambonides. All right then;

you follow me?

Take your pay from me for this, and not

For which I mentioned earlier.

KI: For what?

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THÉRÔN: For being Kichesias Skambonides. You say it much better.

You seem to understand this kind of matter.
You become him; you’re snub-nosed, fortunately,
And short, just like the servant described him.

KI: I have become the old man that I am.

THÉRÔN: Add that you lost

Your daughter from Halai when she was four years old,
Along with Dromon, a servant.

KI: I lost her.

THÉRÔN: Excellent!

KI: She was stolen by pirates; you have reminded me

Of my wretched suffering and of my pitiable child.

THÉRÔN: Great! Keep up that sort of thing

And weep over it. [Aside] He’s a great guy!

This scene reveals the histrionic quality of the parasitos, who “directs” his “actor” just like one of Plautus’ later metatheatrical slaves. It also portrays the parasitos as a scheming, lying scoundrel, someone so well versed in dissembling that he is willing to coach and bribe others to lie in support of his stories.47 He is, in a certain sense, a professional actor.

THE PARASITUS AT ROME

The kolax/parasitos of Greek New Comedy made a few appearances in his Greek name: Naevius wrote a Colax, and plays titled Colax were also attributed to Plautus and Libernus. Naevius’s Colax was probably modeled on Menander’s play by that name; fr.1 “seems to show that the soldier there compared himself with Hercules in dialogue with the parasite.”48 The character became standardized, however, as the parasitus of Roman comedy (see Plautus’ Bacchides, Captivi, Curculio, Epidicus, Menæchmi, Miles Gloriosus, Persa, Stichus; Terence’s Eunuchus, Phormio). The parasite’s standard attribute was his desire for a free meal; he often appeared alongside a patron (sometimes a braggart, miles gloriosus type49);

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49 Pace Segal (1996) xxiii and others who, following Aristotle’s categories and not stage usage, see the eirôn as the opposite — and therefore the fitting “partner” — of the alazon. The eiron, the “ironic man,” makes himself out to be less than he is, just as the alazon claims to be more than he is (Ar. Eik. Nic. 1108a20; see Theophrastos 1), and could thus serve to deflate the alazon’s boasting. But understatement is not as common a comic strategy in ancient comedy as overstatement, for fairly obvious reasons, and the deflation usually occurs in asides to the audience by the parasite, who continues...
see *Bacchides*, *Miles Gloriosus*, *Eunuchus*) who would provide that meal in exchange for flattery or useful services. The prologue of Terence's *Eunuchus* defends the poet from the charge of lifting the braggart soldier and parasite pair from Naevius' and Plautus' *Colax*, saying he borrowed them from Menander's *Kolax* instead (19–34). Whatever the source, it is clear that they were a fairly standard pair.

Plautus' parasites are a richly metatheatrical lot. In arguing her thesis that "in Plautine comedy we are constantly invited to see a play about a play," Frances Muecke notes that "if all dramatic characters are to a certain extent actors-as-characters, Plautus privileges characters who are primarily actors. In general these are cunning slaves or parasites...." A quick survey of Plautus' parasites will reveal the great extent to which they serve as figures for the actor. One interesting aspect of this stock character is the extent to which he is depicted not just as an actor, but as a *bad* actor; where the Greek solution to the problem of the impostor was to emphasize the gap between the *alazon*’s appearance and reality, the Roman solution to the problem of the parasite was to emphasize his overacting. In each case, this approach served to reassure the audience to feign admiration for his master. The parasite, that is, may reveal the *miles* to be an empty braggart, but he himself continues to engage in theatrically overblown flattery and declarations of hunger. The *eiron* is not a figure for the actor in society in the way that the *alazon* and the *kolax/parasitus* are; if he even occurs onstage, he might be rather a mouthpiece for society's criticism of actors. For an especially schematic parody of the *alazon* and the *eiron*, see Fishlov (1993) 98–117, which contends that the two are essential to the functioning of comedy, although the only ancient play he discusses is the *Miles Gloriosus*, and he does not identify an *eiron* figure in it.

50 Muecke (1986) 224–5

51 Muecke (1986) 224–5 argues that the actor thematized here is not "the real Roman actor... but the fictitious actor whom Plautus has written into the play... representing the element actor in the complex notion of actor-as-character." I would argue that while references to actors and acting in a play always fictionalize the actor to some extent (just as no reference to "the poet" in an Aristophanic parasis is purely and transparently autobiographical), the parasite in Roman comedy does have something to say about real Roman actors.

52 McCarthy (2000) 202 describes Plautus' parasites as "so similar as to almost to merge into a single character," a character that is defined by his "willingness to say anything or praise anyone for a meal," his "flexibility," and his "opportunism." McCarthy reads the parasite as "a useful figure through which naturalistic comedy can poke fun at the weaknesses of farce" and as a figure for the comic playwright (202–03); it is also possible to read her description of his essential nature as a useful figure for Plautine comedy to poke fun at actors.

that they could detect the social climber, rather than being taken in by him.

The parasite in the fragments of the *Bacchides* is unnamed. At one point, he calls himself his patron's "bodily covering" (*illus sum integumentum corporis*, 601). Damon discusses this line as evidence that there exists an unusually good "fit" between parasite and patron in this play, but I would argue that this unnamed parasite represents the norm, not the exception. For the parasite to describe himself as a "covering" suggests both a literally parasitic relationship and the sense that the parasite is in essence a covering, a costume, a role. He may or may not "really" agree with his patron's motives and opinions, but he always acts as if he does.

Ergasius is the parasite of Plautus' *Captivi*. In the first lines of his opening monologue, he tells the audience that "the youths have given me the nickname Whore [Scorto], because I'm usually present at their banquets unbidden" (1–2). The equation of the parasite with a whore suggests another register for Roman views of actors: not only are they parasites, but they are whores as well. In a later monologue, the parasite "auctions" himself off to the lowest bidder (179–81). His asking price: one dinner. He gets no takers, however, and complains later that everyone is conspiring not to laugh at his stories or feed him anymore (460ff.). When he enters with good news for his master, he says he will never have to *supplicate* another man again (770) and then announces he will do the running-slave routine to deliver the news. He revels in the thought of never having to do his act for anyone again – except, of course, his master.

In *Curculio*, the parasite Curculio is the hero, working as the tricky slave instead of serving the *miles* or another patron. As the metatheatrical tricky slave, he "directs" the *adulescens* in a plot to fool the *miles* and get the girl. His first appearance onstage is a melodramatic, over-the-top

53 Damon (1995) 79, citing *Peniculus* as a Plautine parasite who "refused" to fit himself to his patron's desires.


55 On the prostitute as another figure for the actor in Greek and Roman comedy, as well as in Roman society, see ch. 4. On Ergasius as a whore, see McCarthy (2000) 182–3.


rendition of the “running slave” set-piece, in which he announces he’ll faint if he goes without food any longer (309). Later on, he denounces pimps and bankers in general (494-511), almost as if he is talking about the stock characters of “pimp” and “banker.” When he comes onstage by himself after stealing the girl, he begins his speech with “An old dramatist, so I’ve heard, once wrote in a tragedy that two women are worse than one...” (591). Curcillo’s metatheatricality even extends to the level of disembaling that he is the parasite of one man in order to get money for his real patron to use: “the parasite plays the role of a parasite.”

Most curiously in this play, a character called “choragus” (“producer” or “stage manager”) comes onstage between “acts” and delivers a substantial metatheatrical monologue on the characters in the play and “bad characters” in contemporary Rome. In a fascinating conflation of “real life” and dramatic character, the choragus notes Curcillo’s trickery and assumes that he has already stolen the company’s costumes (463). This parasitus is a rogue on stage and off, he tells the audience – as if the actor playing the parasitus is a rogue himself, or more precisely, as if the parasitus is the actor.

In Plautus’ Menæchmi, the parasite Peniculus also works on a metatheatrical level, orchestrating two eavesdropping scenes (463-465, 570-572), revealing other characters’ pretenses in asides (193, 608), and commenting on his own role as an actor. When he enters the stage at one point, his patron Menaechmus says, “You couldn’t have come at a better time for me”; Peniculus replies, “Yeah, it’s my habit; I know every convenient turning point” (139-40). He might as well say, “I like to enter on cue.” At another point in the play, Menaechmus asks Peniculus, “What do you say?” Peniculus’ quick-witted response is “Whatever you want – that’s what I say and unsay” (160). Peniculus makes clear the performative and disembelling nature of the parasite’s role.

The bragging soldier Pyrgopolynices in Miles Gloriosus employs a parasite named Arrotogus. This parasite appears only in the opening scene, in which he plays the flatterer to his patron while exposing his empty lies and preposterous vanity in asides to the audience. When the soldier asks the parasite to help him remember a particularly worthy deed, the

parasite “recalls” that he blew away legions with a single breath. The soldier modestly notes,

PYRGOPOLYNEICES: istuc quidem edepol nihil est.
ARTOTROGUS: nihil hercle hoc quidem
praet alicui dicam – quae tu numquam feceris.
peituorem hoc hominem si quis viderit
aut gloriarum pleniorem quam ille est,
me sibi habeto, ego me mancipuo dabo;
nisi unum, epityra ester insanum bene.

(MG 19-24)

PYRGOPOLYNEICES: By Pollux, that was nothing.
ARTOTROGUS: By Hercules, it was indeed nothing.

(to audience) If anyone knows a man who’s more of a liar
Or fuller of boasts than this guy is,
He can have me, I’ll give myself to him for sale,
Except for one thing: I eat this guy’s olive spread like crazy.

A moment later, the parasite is again betraying his master’s vanity, and his own exaggerations, when he claims the soldier smashed an elephant’s leg to bits:

PY: nolo istae hic nunc.
AR: ne hercle operae pretium quidem
mih i t narrare tus qui virtutes siam.
venerat creat omnis hasce aerumnas: auribus
peraudienda sunt, ne dentes dentiant.
et admendandum quisquid hic mentitur.

(MG 31-35)

PY: I don’t want this story now.
AR: Indeed, by Hercules, it isn’t worth the effort
For you to recount your excellence to me who knows them.

(to audience) My stomach creates all these troubles: these things must be heard
To the bitter end by my ears, so that my teeth get some grinding.
And so I have to agree with whatever this guy lies about.

Arrotogus makes it quite clear that his relationship with Pyrgopolynices is mercenary; he would “sell himself” to anyone else who could offer

61 On this speech, see Moore (1998) 131-9, who notes that the Roman types the choragus describes are made into comic stock characters.
him a meal. He aids and abets the soldier’s lies in order to eat. He is the original starving actor. After this scene, Pyrgopolynices’ tricky slave Palaestrio is the one who appears on stage with the miles, flattering his vanity while leading him into the trap he has schemed. It is interesting to note the difference in the way that they each interact with the soldier: Artotogus speaks to the audience much more, while Palaestrio simply plays along with the soldier’s false idea of the situation, with only an occasional aside to another character. The parasite works to establish the outrageousness of the soldier’s self-image at the beginning of the play, creating a sense of amused condescension in the audience which other characters can later exploit.

The aptly named Saturio is the parasite of Persas. He enters, as the parasite usually does in Plautus, to give an opening monologue about his profession alone on stage (53–80). Unlike many Plautine comedies, however, the parasite has an active role in the plot: he dresses his daughter up as a Persian captive in order to help the heroes foil the pimp — and in order to get himself a meal, of course. Typically, though, he is an expert in coaching others in dissembling. When he reenters with his daughter in costume, he makes sure she is prepared:

SATURIO: scis nam tibi quae praecipe?
VIRGO: omnia.
SA.: et ut vi suspensa fueris?
VI.: docte callo.
SA.: et qui parentes fuerint?
VI.: habeo in memoria.

(Persa 379–81)

SATURIO: Do you remember what I’ve taught you?
GIRL: Everything.
SA.: And how you were stolen?
GI.: I understand perfectly.
SA.: And who your parents were?
GI.: I’ve got it memorized.

As is also the case in Terence and writers of New Comedy, as noted by Damon (1995) 183; see Captivi, Persas, Stichus; Eunuchus. This habit suggests the metatheatrical tendencies of this character, as well as his extreme predictability as a stock character; his features are very clearly established. It also suggests that Plautus was confident that the parasite character could “hold” an audience all by himself on stage; the stock speech, full of hyperbole about the misery of hunger and complaints about making a living by wheedling meals out of other men, must have been thought extremely funny.

His daughter, ironically, is a paragon of virtue and does not wish to play a part in this deception (uercum insinulari nolo, “I don’t want to dissemble the truth” (358)) because she fears it will ruin her marriage prospects. Saturio reassures her that all men care about is her dowry and that she will have one: a “hamper full of books” (392) that are full of Attic witticisms. It is a laughably unimpressive dowry, and an appropriate one; Saturio will have his daughter read up to play her wife’s role, just as he rehearses witty remarks for his patrons. He, of course, performs the role of the outraged Persian father beautifully.

The parasite in the Stichus is named Gelasimus, and in his opening monologue he says, “if anyone’s looking for a laughable man I am for sale along with my entire costume” (171–2). He explains the origin of his name and his identity:

Gelasimio nomen mi indidit parvo pater,
(propet pauperiem hoc adeo nomen repperit)
quid indi iam a pulillo puero ridiculos fui,
eo quia paupertas fecit ridiculos forem;
nam illa artis omnis perdocus, ubi quem attigit.

(Stich. 174–8)

My father gave me the name Gelasimus when I was little
(Because poverty made me be laughable),
Because ever since I was little, I’ve been laughable.
I got this name because of poverty,
For poverty teaches all the arts to him whom she takes hold of.

Poverty has made Gelasimus a professional humorist, or in other words, a comic actor. Like Ergasimus in the Captivi, he announces jokingly that he is auctioning himself off for a meal (195–233). He is understandably distressed when he is told that his long-absent master has returned home with fabulous wealth — including a whole crew of witty parasites (388).

Interestingly, the girl manages to avoid lying during much of her conversation with the pimp, using dramatic irony to mislead him with ambiguous statements. She does give a false name (Lucris), though, and she reassures Tossilus in an aside, “Be quiet, I’ll take care of it as you wish” (taceas, curabo ut voles, 610). Rei (1998) 95 links the girl’s reluctance to dissemble to the tendency for free women in Roman comedy not to engage in any “tricky slave”-like behavior; they are kept from being associated with actors. McCarthy (2000) 146–52, however, argues that the girl as well as the parasite is play-acting in this scene, although the girl exhibits ambivalence about participating in theatrical deception. See also Hunter (1983) 126.
This lie about rival parasites spurs him to go home and prepare his wittiest remarks for his patron’s homecoming (464–7). He does end up providing entertainment for his patron, but as the worried butt of the patron’s teasing threats not to feed him anymore.65

While Terence has a reputation for tweaking stock characters counter to type, in order to surprise his audience,66 Terence’s parasites share most of the standard attributes of comic parasites: a propensity for metatheatrical “coaching” of other characters in deception, a desire to expose the lies of their patrons. Terence’s Eunuchus presents a parasite, Gnatho, who is so adept at flattering that he says he has offered lessons to a less fortunate parasite that he met earlier that day (232–33). Just like Theron in Menander’s Sikyonios, the “coaching” ability of the parasite reveals how much of an act he regularly puts on. As Gnatho continues his self-praise, he thinks of opening a school for parasites, much like the schools that philosophers found (261–4). This sounds like an allusion to the philosophical tradition’s writings on kolakeia, alazonia, and other character faults, though of course we cannot be sure. Gnatho’s description of his own flattery sounds, in fact, very much like Theophrastos 2.2 and 2.4. Speaking of patrons in general, he says,

quidquid dicitur laudw; id rursum si negat, laudw id quoque;
neget quis: nego; ait: aio; postremo imperavi egomet mihi
omnia adsentari. is quaestus nunc est multo uberrimus.

(Eun. 251–3)

Whatever they say, I praise; if they go back and deny it, I praise that too;
if someone says no, I say no; if he says yes, I say yes; in short, I’ve
ordered myself
to agree with everything. This occupation is the most lucrative by
far, these days.

While he may think of himself as an excellent actor, the audience sees that he is a consummate faker.

Phormio is the parasite in Terence’s Phormio. As is often the case with Terence, he has drawn his characters in this play somewhat counter to type. Phormio is not as hungry and wheedling as the parasite in a Plautine play, but works more as the tricky slave, conceiving a scheme to help the

65 Moore (1998) 13 notes that Gelasimus’ overexplanation of the plot to the audience also marks him as an actor-figure.

THE FRAUD AND THE FLATTERER:
IMAGES OF ACTORS

The alazon crystallizes negative stereotypes about actors in the Greek world, while the kolax/parasitus represents the actor in the Roman world. The alazon is a pompous, pretentious official of some sort, someone with some authority who is at base a fraud. This makes sense in a culture that nominated famous actors to serve on prominent embassies.68 Athens, moreover, was for at least a time a radical democracy; every citizen was eligible to hold many of the city’s positions of power and importance on the basis of an annual lottery, and this must have meant that some officials were seen as unqualified for their positions, at least by some people. The parasitus, on the other hand, has no authority at all; he is a scheming mooch who is tolerated for his entertainment value, which derives in part from his declarations of misery. This makes sense in a highly hierarchical culture in which actors were socially despised and, by the early Empire at the latest, legally infames,69 a culture that empowered magistrates to strike actors with impunity, off or on stage.70 Both the alazon and the parasitus, then, embody anxieties about social mobility, but for very different societies: the alazon tries to rise from the middle toward the top in a nominally equal society, while the parasitus tries to rise from the bottom toward the respectability of the middle in a strongly stratified society.

The philosophical writers’ snobbery hints at anxiety about social mobility as one source of the hostility toward the figure of the alazon. Despite the democratic institutions of Athens, there was a lingering sense

68 See Demosthenes 18, 19; Aeschines 1, 2, 3; Pickard-Cambridge (1988) 279.
69 Cornelius Nepos Preface s; Ulp. Digest 3.2.2.5.
70 Suet. Aug. 45, 3 states that Augustus limited magistrates to striking actors during the ludi and within the theater, as opposed to the earlier law which did not limit this power. See Plaut. Cist. 785.
of what we are tempted to call class distinctions, revealed in the use of expressions like καλός κ’ ἄγαθός to describe wealthy, educated men. 71 Actors were one group of men who were able to move up the economic ladder because of the tremendous fees the stars could demand. 72 Since most actors in Greece were freeborn men 73, this entailed a rise in social status as well, despite lingering attitudes that valued only landed wealth. 74 The anecdote recounted earlier about Agesilaos and Callipides, despite its Spartan setting, demonstrates this kind of old aristocratic snobbery quite clearly. The alazon is the perfect target for this kind of snobbery and anxiety, for he always tries to pass himself off as higher in status than he really is. 75

The parasitus, on the other hand, represents the changed status of the actor at Rome: he is a shabby, poor, fawning creature who makes his living off the rich by his quick-witted dissimulating. Although he is constantly acting, he fools no one. He feeds on Rome’s indulgence of him. Thus Plautus’ parasites overact, hammering up their hunger; they are signaling their status as dependents, as social inferiors, both to their patrons onstage and to the audience. The alazon and the parasitus serve as vehicles for Greek and Roman anxieties about social mobility, but the parasitus plays an additional role in the Roman cultural unconscious: he embodies Roman anxiety about drama.

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71 Ober (1996) 5–6, 18, 21, 25–6, 127–8, takes pains to uncover the assumptions of most historians of Classical Athens that the aristocratic elite “really ruled” the demos, but he does not dispute the existence of such an elite. On καλός κ’ ἄγαθός, see Dover (1976) 41–5 for cautionary notes on a simplistic search for the term in Attic writers in order to ascertain their “class consciousness”: after all, as he points out, no one at Athens would have willingly admitted to not being καλός κ’ ἄγαθός.

72 The fourth century BCE witnessed an explosion in top actors’ incomes: see Plut. Alex. 29, [Plut.] X Out. 844b, Aulus Gellius. NA 11.9; FD III 5.3.67. As already noted, top actors could become political players by serving on embassies.

73 The Artists of Dionysus did not admit slaves; see Garton (1972) 171.

74 The status of bankers in fourth-century Athens provides an interesting comparison to the status of actors. Many bankers started out as slaves to other bankers, then inherited the business, and were manumitted when the master died. Often these slaves amassed astronomical fortunes and served as major benefactors to the city, as in the case of Phormion – yet Apollodorus, in Demosthenes 45.71–2, still sneers at Phormion’s servile background. Wealth alone, it seems, could not make someone καλός κ’ ἄγαθός. See Cohen (1992) 82–90.

75 Baker (1992) finds that Shakespeare’s plays avoid having characters plan or desire to disguise themselves up the class ladder. This to her suggests the existence of a taboo, which Shakespeare observed by self-censorship.

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76 This is not to deny the existence of native Italic dramatic forms, such as the Atellan farce, nor their influence on Plautus at least; Lowe (1989) posits that the Atellan character of the glutton Dossenus had a major influence on Plautus’ depictions of parasites. I think it is safe to say, however, that despite the existence of Atellan farce and other “subliterary” native dramatic forms, the fabula palliata in the period of Plautus and Terence was presented as a Greek import brought to Rome: Greek characters, Greek settings, and in Terence’s case, explicit discussion of Greek plays as sources. The issue is much more complicated, of course, but the fact that drama was divided into “Roman” (topia) and “Greek” (palliata) genres, and the degree to which playwrights played self-consciously with “Romanizing” the palliata, is significant.

77 See Bieber (1961) 161; Duckworth (1994) 65–6. Donatus ad Eunuchum 57 states that it was forbidden to depict Roman slaves as cleverer than their masters, which would not only help “explain” the settings of Roman comedies in Greece but would also speak clearly to Roman anxieties about their own slaveholding society.


79 Macrobr. Sat. 2.7.2; cf. Livy 25.12.12–13; see Gruen (1992) 186 n. 12.
this story, but the hint lingers that drama is a seductive distraction from
duty. These anecdotes betray a concern that drama does not give anything
back to those who pay to produce or watch it, or worse, that watching
it takes away something: one’s military power, one’s sense of duty, one’s
dignity, one’s very Romanitas. If the parasitus is the actor, then from a
certain perspective, the actor is a parasite.

Drama was not only seen as a potentially corrupting luxury product;
it had the added problem that it was not a tangible “product” at all.
From a literal-minded point of view, one does not leave the theater
with anything more than one had when one entered; in fact, if tickets
were not subsidized, then one left the theater literally poorer for the
experience. Symbolically, the parasitus eats his host’s dinner and gives
him nothing in exchange but words. The parasitus is almost always
the butt of humor in order to allay these anxieties, and when he is not, as
in Phormio, he is performing the selfless service of tricking one master
in order to serve another. The parasitus also performs the function of
exposing liars, especially the miles gloriosus but also himself, as a means
of allaying anxiety about the way theater deceives the audience. Even
Terence’s parasites give themselves away in asides. The parasite’s job, in
a sense, is to betray: he betrays the miles to the audience, revealing him
to be a blustering fool; he betrays him to the other characters; but he
also betrays himself to the audience with his metatheatrical asides and
monologues. With these betrayals, he reassures the Roman audience that
they can see through any con job, any acting.

Ghiron-Bistagne suggests that in the Classical period in Greece at least,
the actor was always a “stranger” or “foreigner” (étranger) because of the
extensive travel required by the profession. During the Hellenistic era,
members of the Actors of Dionysus were granted safe passage to any city
and personal immunity from hostile action, and they may have enjoyed
freedom from military service in their home states. It is interesting to
consider the fact that

... the guild, from its inception, could and did behave like a state,
appointing not only administrative (prytaneis) and financial officers

(oikonomoi) but even ambassadors — thus emphasising its supra-
and international status — and official delegates (theoi) to the major
festivals. The artists therefore enjoyed a unique and indeed anomalous
constitutional and legal status. On the other hand, its was still formally
a religious organization, with priests acting as executives, dedicated to
the worship of Dionysus. The guild celebrated Dionysia as their main
feast day, with the usual procession, feasting, drinking, and sacrifice.
The guild itself had its own laws and protocols (diaphragmai); officers were
appointed usually annually by the technitai, though the actual executive
positions varied greatly with place and time. In the world organization,
the chief officers were the archon, secretary, and legal expert, and a
chief priest, who was priest of Dionysus and of the emperors at the
same time. In a sense, actors really were “diplomats” in the Greek world, sent on
missions by their extra-national union. The actor as alazon makes sense
in terms of international politics as well as within the dynamics of a play.

In the Roman world, actors, like parasites, were entertainers hired by
rich men. One of their tasks was to defuse Roman anxieties about the
decreptive nature of theater, in particular anxiety that the socially inferior
actor would be able to put one over on his socially superior audience. By
betraying his ridiculous master and his ridiculous self to the audience, the
parasite does a reassuringly bad job of dissembling. In the next chapter,
we will see how another stock comic character — the hetaira, or meretrix,
or prostitute — serves as a figure for the actor in a different way: the actor
as an object of desire. And in chapter 5, we will see how one Republican
Roman actor was able to rise above his theatrical role as a parasite and his
parasitical role as an actor to become a member of the equestrian class.

repeatedly demand freedom from taxation and the right to wear crowns, purple robes,
and gold. The Artists of Dionysus seems to have been formed after the death of
Alexander; see Ghiron-Bistagne (1976) 164, Caso & Slater (1995) 239. Pickard-
Cambridge (1988) 281-2 dates its foundation to between 294 and 279 BCE.