

Material Girls: Humor and Female Professional Seduction in Greek Literature and Culture

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1. Introduction: Body Business¹

Before the advent of gender studies and contemporary critical theory, classical scholars romanticized the upper echelon of ancient Greek courtesans, viewing them as intelligent, “liberated”, refined, and highly desirable women². Recently, however, researchers have recognized that our knowledge of such women relies almost entirely on macrohistoric evidence, written by literate, elite males and has, instead, concentrated largely on

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2 — Licht (Brandt 1932) and Hauschild (1933) on the social history of *hetairai* before gender studies and contemporary critical theory. Havelock (1955.42-49) on Phryne.

their portrayal as material commodities³. Drawing on feminist theory and critical studies, scholars have thus formulated new interpretations regarding their status. Inasmuch as commercial sex and erotic arrangements were defined within different levels of “promiscuity, payment, and emotional attachment or indifference” (Cohen 2006.95), recent scholarship has sought to demonstrate how courtesans operated within a socially marginalized, yet aesthetically and even educationally refined hierarchy, evident in a variety of Greek terms deployed to describe their social position(s), characterization, agency or subjectivity⁴. In antiquity, such studies conclude, sex-labor and agency were not distinguished from individual identity: sources suggest that prostitute (*porne*) or courtesan (*hetaira*) is a type of social identity and not simply a job⁵.

Paradoxically, however, the very exchange of emotions and bodies for material goods as commonplace in Greek humorous texts has been overlooked, in favor of simpler interpretations, related primarily to the characterization of female sex-workers⁶. The past misconception of a courtesan as *bona* or *mala meretrix*⁷ led scholars to oversimplify THEM as mere “stock characters”, and to neglect potential and more complex interpretations of relevant comic discourse⁸. For this reason, my discussion concentrates on the comic portrayal – popularized in post-classical Greek culture – of courtesans and prostitutes as professionals who transform themselves aesthetically and emotionally out of professional motives; it notes that their motivations are humorously castigated, and that they, themselves, construct an artificial self-image for profit. I argue that such humor targets not only the characterization of the courtesan/prostitute but also places emphasis on the commercial relationship between courtesan and client, thus creating a variety of comic situations in which information is communicated. Against this backdrop, this article focuses on how stereotypical gender identities and expectations are articulated by male authors in Middle Comedy and later repeated in post-classical literature. By applying current gender and humor theories to selected

3 — See Gilhuly (2007.59-94) and (1992.73-89), O’Higgins (2003.128-42), Foka (2012). New Comedy: Lape (2004.159-67). Characters and characterization in Old Comedy: Robson (2009.48, 55-7, 61, 69) and Ruffell (2011.394-6).

4 — Terminology is a heavily debated subject- a *porne* is nevertheless distinguished from a *hetaira* in antiquity in terms of hierarchy. My definitions follow along the lines of Davidson (1997, 2006), McClure (2003a.8-26), Miner (2003.19-37), Cohen (2006.98), and Gilhuly (2007.60). Regarding the refinement and education of a young Roman brothel slave, see Hallett (2011.172-4).

5 — See Glazebrook and Henry (2011).

6 — See Sidwell (2000.247-258) on stock characters in Middle and New Comedy.

7 — Recent, more nuanced interpretations regarding the presence of courtesans in Greek and Latin sources include Auhagen (2009), and to some extent (mostly concentrated on Terence) Augoustakis and Trail (2013), as well as Akrigg and Tordoff (2013).

8 — Oversimplification, see Segal (2001).

literary narratives of transactional relations, it elucidates the complexities of Greek social hierarchies.

Due to anachronistic receptions and misconceptions of ancient Greek social history, scholars concerned with gender have tended to interpret ancient concepts of gendered humor as primarily rigid, binary, misogynistic and patriarchal. Feminist scholars have often argued that laughing at women was meant to isolate them socially and to alienate them from civic processes⁹. Recent research, however, has delved more deeply into concepts of gender in both macro- and micro-history, and consequently concluded that these older interpretations suffer from historically restricted assumptions, the outcome of adopting hierarchically stratified categories of analysis¹⁰. The notion that female seclusion characterized gender relations in Greek antiquity is therefore currently considered an ideological ideal perpetuated by earlier male-dominated discourse, whereas earlier, binary oppositions (man-woman, citizen- non citizen etc) fail to describe and articulate societal dynamics in Greek culture adequately¹¹. Therefore, current gender theory adds further complexity to the nexus of gender and humor in antiquity.

According to Judith Butler, gender identities are primarily performative: that is, constituted by the recognition, creation, and performance of differing ways to interpret the body and physicality. Informed by the theories of Jacques Lacan, Butler's work claims that while the construction of identity is driven by imitation or linguistic citation of symbolic orders, the symbolic is simultaneously maintained through citational acts. She maintains as well that subverting the norm is possible by citing

9 — Cixous posits that our sexuality is directly tied to how we communicate in society. In "Le Rire de la Meduse" (1975), Cixous, like Simone de Beauvoir in *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949), traces gender conflict back into premodernity, specifically classical Greek times, citing Greek literature, performance and oral tradition as strategies used by phallogocentric societies to control women. By explicating the Greek myths of Medusa and Abyss, Cixous argues that laughing at women in the past enabled men to marginalize them socially and civically. In *Laughing with Medusa* (2006), Zajko and Leonard utilize feminist theory as a powerful tool of analysis for Greco-Roman culture; they maintain, moreover, that "The Classical Tradition", an umbrella term that includes both the reception of ancient culture and its influence on modern literature and thought, has effaced the boundaries that have fenced off traditional philology from the other humanities. Their volume goes beyond the contentions of Cixous in order to explore how classical myth has influenced the development of feminist thought, and correspondingly how Classical Studies can be interpreted within a feminist framework.

10 — For the status of women in Greece generally, see Katz (1992.70-97). Older studies include Zeitlin (1985 and 1991); Lefkowitz (1986); Blok (1987); Skinner (1986a and b, 1987), Wagner-Hasel (1988, 1989), Katz (1989), and Gould (2003.112-57). Cohen (2000) regards female seclusion as an ideological ideal perpetuated by male-dominated discourse.

11 — There are several scholars who criticize the binary structuralist view on women. Studies include: Josine Blok (2001.95-116), (2004.1-26), and (2005.7-40): against the old structuralist idea of women as prototypical non-citizens. Davidson (2006.31-4). Foka (2011.55 n. 11): binary oppositions are perhaps a poor way to describe the dynamics in society of several Greek *poleis*.

the law differently “in order to reiterate and co-opt its power” (Butler 1993.14) – for example, through the employment of satirical, parodic, and ironic practices. While gender theorists have generally failed to see comedy and laughter as a major opportunities for subversion¹², I seek instead to address and discuss the complexity in perceptions of gender and gendered behaviors in comic Greek literature. In this way, I aim to expose further the heterosexual norm that often rules our contemporary perceptions of gender in premodern cultures, and propose conceptualizations of gender in Greek antiquity that transcend rigid, binary paradigms.

In particular, I argue that in comic situations involving social interaction between female courtesans/prostitutes and male clients, emotions emerge as interpersonal events that seem to problematize *as well as* reaffirm individuals’ status and power. In these contexts, increases and decreases in both parties’ status or power generate specific emotions whose quality depends on patterns observed in these interactions themselves, unifying an otherwise fragmented experience for the audience/reader. The concept of Affect Control Theory, originated by Heise (2007) proposes that social actions are designed by their agents to create impressions that befit sentiments informing a given situation. Emotions are transient physical and subjective states depending on the current impression of the emoting person, as well as on the comparison of that impression with the sentiment attached to that person’s identity. As such, emotions are signals to self and others not only about the individual’s identity in the situation, but also about the individual’s understanding of events in the situation.

The humorous interactions that provoke emotions as such vary chronologically and geographically, as well as in detail, yet all reflect common perceptions regarding courtesan-client interactions. Rather than solely targeting women, these scenarios inform the audience/reader of power positions among the individuals involved via the medium of humor. As humor is primarily an act of communication (see Ruffell 2011.28) between audience (or reader) and author (via performance or text), comic discourse is a key medium through which aspects of popular morality are made public. It will be argued that recurring (popular) comic themes in post-classical antiquity reflect upon social issues by conceptualizing bodies and their physical and emotional labor¹³. Due to insufficient information about the plots of the works featuring these scenes, this article attempts a thematic narrative analysis of single jokes that are often isolated from their original narrative context. Although these episodes represent a variety of comic genres, one nonetheless observes an abundance of running jokes based on interactions and transactions between

12 — Pailer (2009.8).

13 — Term coined by Hochschild (1983) referring to pretense of emotions in service jobs.

courtesans and clients, where the latter are not necessarily present but whose involvement can still be implied. Profit is indeed the motivation for aesthetic and emotional transformation by the courtesans; such transformation in turn results in deception and seduction of their clients who seem to be the actual butt of the joke rather than the prostitute or courtesan character *per se*. In this context, humor affects or aims to affect the perception of prostitutes and courtesans by the audience or reader as well as to provide social commentary regarding client deception and commercial erotic relationships. Humor is then used as both a defense and justification mechanism for commercial erotic arrangements as well as a medium for serious social debate.

2. Courtesan Portrayals

a. Manipulating Beauty

The portrayal of the courtesans as an artificially manipulated body motivated by profit is a commonplace in Greek literature. Abundant primary source material suggests that long speeches on aesthetic modifications might have been conventional humorous features of comedies depicting courtesans¹⁴. However, I would argue that the humor in these portrayals is not necessarily restricted to their obsession with cosmetics and aesthetic modifications. Instead, I focus on a number of isolated jokes where courtesans seem to use their physical attributes, appearance and beauty (artificial or natural) in order to provoke desire, deceive or even manipulate male characters. A fragment by Alexis is a striking example of portraying physical modifications as part of the courtesan's work description. Yet these bodily changes are not simply restricted to her appearance but also involve the realm of emotional pretense that can result in client deception:

τυγχάνει μικρά τις οὔσα· φελλὸς ἐν ταῖς βαυκίσιν ἐγκεκάττυται...
κοιλίαν ἄδρᾶν ἔχει· στήθι' ἔστ' αὐταῖσι τούτων ὧν ἔχουσ' οἱ κωμικοί·
ὀρθὰ προσθεῖσαι τοιαῦτα τοῦνδυτον τῆς κοιλίας.

ὥσπερ εἰ κοντοῖσι τούτοις εἰς τὸ πρόσθ' ἀπήγαγον... ἂν δὲ μὴ χαίρηι
γελῶσα, διατελεῖ τὴν ἡμέραν ἔνδον, ὥσπερ τοῖς μαγείροις ἃ παράκειθ'
ἐκάστοτε, ἢ νίκ' ἂν πωλῶσιν αἰγῶν κρανία, ξυλήφιον.

μυρρίνη ἔχουσα λεπτὸν ὀρθὸν ἐν τοῖς χεῖλεσιν· ὥστε τῷ χρόνῳ
σέσηρεν, ἂν τε βούλητ' ἂν τε μή.

14 — See Anaxila's *Neottis* fr.22, in which a character assumes that resemble fabulous monsters, or Plaut. *Poen.* 210, in which the speaker, a courtesan, states that the cost and labor of beauty-maintenance are comparable to maintaining a ship. Aesthetic modifications for the sake of client deception is also a leitmotiv in Lucian (*De Meretr.* 11.3 and 12.5).

A girl is short; cork's attached to her shoes [...]. She's fat: they have some comic actors' chest pieces, and by attaching this at a right angle, they use them as poles to separate clothing from belly [...]. And if she doesn't like laughing, she'll remain inside all day with this piece of myrtle wood, like what the butchers always have when they sell goat's heads, stuck between her lips. So eventually she grins, like it or not (fr.103 K-A).

The title *Isostasion* means perhaps "equal to her weight" (in gold?), and is clearly a comedy that deals with the courtesan-profit nexus¹⁵. This fragment targets courtesans who engage in various aesthetic transformations in order to improve their appearance¹⁶. The verbs used throughout the passage are mostly active (not middle voice), indicating that these women are not enhancing themselves on their own; rather, they are advised and assisted by a pimp or panderer¹⁷. In the passage, courtesan bodies undergo a certain kind of aesthetic transformation for profit. Their transformation into an outward "false self"¹⁸ is, however, not only physical. The punchline is here placed at the end of the sentence for further emphasis (Attardo et al, 1994) and clearly indicates one form of pretentious emotional behavior: smiling. Its semantic script trigger is based on contradiction (Raskin, 1985: 114-7) that operates on two levels. On the one hand, courtesans represent themselves as satisfied with their current circumstances, thus masking their real feelings. By concealing negative emotions they resemble individuals whose behavioral performances are analyzed by Hochschild's theory of emotional labor: like flight attendants in the 1960s, these girls are meant to smile without necessarily feeling happy. The fragment underscores that concealing emotions is part of their profession¹⁹.

Furthermore, courtesans are likened to the heads of slaughtered animals. Food imagery then is deployed for comic effect: the mouth-laurel is reminiscent of the wood that butchers use to keep a slaughtered animal's teeth on display, indicating its health²⁰. The joke rests on a paradoxical image: women are likened to meat for consumption. The commodification of prostitutes by likening them to foods is also evident in Latin comic

15 — If one assumes that -ion is the securely attested hypocoristic suffix that is peculiar to women's proper names, probably through the influence of the noun *korasion* (little girl) See Fontaine (2010.24 and n.39) also: cf. Phoenicium in *Pseudolus* and the discussion of her name by Hallett (2011).

16 — Geoffrey Arnott (1996.273-83).

17 — Foka (2011.61-4).

18 — Hochschild (1983.187) refers to the term "false self" to describe bodily (aesthetic transformations in the passage) and emotional labor (forced smile).

19 — Hochschild (1983.12).

20 — For the use of animal imagery in the descriptions of courtesans see Foka (2011) 51-80. Cf. Ar. *Eq.* 375-81; Olson (2007.341-2). On the use of cosmetics to improve appearance (lines 7-18; cf. Ar. *Ec.* 878; [Lucian] *Am.* 39; Philostr. *Epist.* 22; Plaut. *Poen.* 210, *Truc.* 272).

texts, specifically Plautus *Pseudolus*²¹. There, in the pimp Ballio's monologue (130-230) the word *pulmentum* (anything eaten with bread- here translated as morsel) is specifically used to describe prostitutes. The pimp Ballio's suggestion of seasoning these morsel- women with oil is used to salacious effect. Similarly, in Alexis' *Isostasion* fr. 103 K-A (discussed above) the ludicrous imagery of the courtesans as meat for consumption alludes to the kind of work that they perform and verbally enhances their portrayal as commodified edibles.

The language in the fragment from Alexis' work permits additional interpretations; Their sexual activity is by definition non-casual and therefore this remark carries an additional layer of meaning that is responsible for generating laughter (Raskin and Attardo, 1991: 299). Aside from commenting on the aesthetic modifications of the courtesans, the fragment is in fact a comment on the demands posed by clients, and ON how (panderers?) seek to meet their expectations for the sake of profit. The fragment in fact not only characterizes courtesans as greedy but also comically refers to emotional and physical trends within the 'courtesan market'. The deception of clients in this passage is implied via a discussion of specific aesthetic transformations. The end result of aesthetic modifications is an increase in exchange value, specifically and designed to meet client demands via a visual and emotional manipulation of their choice of courtesan.

Throughout Greek discourse, the beauty of women who follow the profession of selling their bodies seems to incorporate emotionally manipulative powers beyond the client-courtesan sphere. One example is the courtesan Phryne, whose great allure and beauty were legendary by the Hellenistic period and accorded great prominence in comedy²². In Lucian's *In Praise of Demosthenes*, the phrase "to Phryne's doors" is used quasi- proverbially to conjure up associations of the ruination of young Athenian men (Lucian *Dem. Enc* 12). Phryne's physical beauty and its persuasive powers are attested by Plutarch: "when the orator saw that she was about to be condemned, he led her into the middle of the room and ripping off her clothing, displayed her chest. When the jurors saw her beauty, they acquitted her" (*Moralia* 849e). A (potentially humorous) version of the same story is also told by Posidippus in his comedy *Ephesia*

21 — Pl. *Ps.* 220 *pulmento*: the word refers to anything eaten with bread, a sauce, condiment, relish (fruit, vegetables, salt, flesh etc.) see: App. *M.* 4, p. 146, 2; 9, p. 227, 19; 10, p. 244, 44; Just. 3, 3, 7. It also refers to food in general: Plaut. *Ps.* 1, 2, 84; id. *Aul.* 2, 4, 37: "laboribus empta," Hor. *Ep.* 1, 18, 48: "in singula pulmenta", into separate portions, bits, id. *S.* 2, 2, 34. áin, excetra tu? quae tibi amicos tót habes tam probe óleo onustos, num quoípiam est hodié tua tuorum ópera conservórum nítidiusculúm caput? aut num ipse égo pulmento utór magis únctiusculó? sed scio, tu óleum hau magni péndis, vino té devincis.

22 — Fontaine (2010.24-6).

(Ath. 13.591e-f; 13 K-A), where she appears as “the most illustrious of all courtesans of the prior generation [...] clasping the hands of the jurors pleading for her life”. In Hermippus (F68=590d-e), she is fashioned as a mirror image of Aphrodite in order to convince the jurors. Reportedly, the courtesan was the model for both the *Aphrodite Anadyomene* of Apelles (whom Plautus mentions at *Epidicus* 626 and *Poenulus* 1271) and the *Aphrodite of Cnidus of Praxiteles*. Part of the joke, then was that Phryne’s manipulative beauty and/or actions were accompanied by a certain amount of emotional effort (clasping hands and begging, for example). Herodas *Mimes* 2.65ff is sometimes thought to lampoon her trial as well²³. In this context, one needs to note that Phryne’s physical assets do not result from an aesthetic modification, yet she engages in the emotional effort of pleading in order to convince the juror. Through her actions, then, Phryne is commodified. Beauty, sexual availability, and femininity can potentially generate (fair or unfair) emotions of sympathy and pity. Comedians identified comic potential in the persuasive power of beauty, whether natural or artificial.

In comedy, one can observe the repetition of the reverse image, one that reconfirms the importance of a courtesan’s visual representation in her profession; the association between declining beauty and loss of manipulative power is commonplace in both Greek and Latin literature (Hor. *Epode* 8 and 12 as well as *Ode* 1.25, 3.15, 4.13)²⁴. The courtesan Lais is described by the comic poet Epicrates (*Antilais* fr. 3 K-A-Ath. 570 c-d) as a commodity who lost her professional capacity once her beauty was demolished by time:

ἐπεὶ δὲ δόλιχον τοῖς ἔτεσιν ἤδη τρέχει τὰς ἀρμονίας τε διαχαλαῖ τοῦ σώματος, ἰδεῖν μὲν αὐτὴν ῥαῖόν ἐστιν ἢ πτύσαι· ἐξέρχεται τε πανταχόσ’ ἤδη πιομένη, δέχεται δὲ καὶ στατήρα καὶ τριώβολον, προσίεται δὲ καὶ γέροντα καὶ νέον· οὕτω δὲ τιθασὸς γέγονεν ὥστ’, ὃ φίλταται, τὰργύριον ἐκ τῆς χειρὸς ἤδη λαμβάνει.

Since she’s now running the long distance race in years and she’s losing her figure... She goes out everywhere to drink and accepts any coin of any size; and she has sex with anyone of any age, she has grown so tame (*tithasos*)... my dear friends (*philai* – female friends) that she now takes money from a man’s hand.

Lais features in several comedies as rapacious, charging the exorbitant fee of one thousand drachmas²⁵. The aging Lais is demoted to the status

23 — Herodas *mim.* 2.65ff is sometimes thought to lampoon her trial as well: see Fontaine (2010.25).

24 — See Cokayne (2003.113-52) on sexuality and old age in Rome.

25 — On Lais see: Tim. *FGrHist* 566 F 24 ap. Ath. 13.588c; Paus. 2. 2.5; Plut. *Nic.* 15.4.

of a brothel slave: her exchange value decreases. The plot perhaps dealt with the replacement of Lais with Antilais. The fragment is a discussion among women, as is indicated by the word "*philai*" in the last line. It displays the dynamics within the courtesan community: a beautiful and young Lais is admired within her collegial collective, unlike her older, disdained image. Potential clients are implied here rather than described or named. Lais' behavior is explained via a twofold animal-related portrayal. The antithetical imagery of a young, powerful predator whose older self is weak suggests that age and appearance are among a courtesan's professional skills. The punchline of the joke is based on contradiction and opposition of these skills (Attardo and Raskin, 1991: 301). A young Lais is socially powerful and opposed to her aged, weaker, submissive image. In another source, Lais appears to dedicate gifts to Aphrodite as her beauty is demolished by time. According to Julianus, Lais hates witnessing her wrinkles, signs of aging. She detests the bitter reproach of her mirror and dedicates it to Cytherea (Aphrodite), "to receive this disk, companion of my youth, since your beauty does not fear time" (Julianus, *Anth. Pal.* 6.18, cf. 19-20).

The popularity of the "Aged Lais joke" is an indication of how humour holds valuable information about the societal construct of courtesans, focusing on issues of aging and decline of physical appearance²⁶. The aging courtesan is an actively employed literary trope²⁷. Claudianus describes an aging courtesan as cloaking her breasts in a "counterfeit splendor" (*Anth. Pal.* 9.9). No longer a vision of sexual pleasure, the body of the aging prostitute evokes mortality and death. The lusty hags²⁸ of Aristophanic comedy are similarly represented. The body of an aged courtesan is no longer a symbol of pleasure. The beauty OF courtesans declines with age, and their status and value are decreased as a consequence. The aging bodies of courtesans are gruesomely funny precisely because they are deprived of the seductive power they once possessed.

Paraphrases and variants of this same joke, then, use the aesthetic modifications (natural or artificial) of courtesans/prostitutes towards a specific comic goal, which emphasizes the centrality of their appearance for their profession. Although their language, narrative strategies and situations differ, there is certainly a thematic similarity shared by these

Brought to Corinth (Stratt. fr. 27; Anaxandr. fr. 9.1-2). Also: McClure (2003a.63-76). Neils (2000.206). She is mentioned in other comedies too; Ar. refers to her in *Plut.* 174, where he explains that she stays with Philonides due to the money he offers her. Philetaer. Fr. 9.4: Lais "died while having sex".

26 — Note the similarity with "Chuck Norris jokes" in which the actor is portrayed with paradoxical imagery reflecting his strength and masculinity (Chuck Norris uses tabasco for eye drops).

27 — McClure (2003a.117).

28 — Older women in comedy: Henderson (1987.105-29).

jokes: they all target courtesan- client interactions and are based on the same logical mechanisms that are dictated by the appearances of courtesans as well as the emotional labor involved. Overall, running jokes focusing on aesthetic transformation and client deception are related to the visual element of the commercial sex experience. They express an awareness of the importance placed upon women's physical attractiveness in this occupation; their bodies have an exchange rate that increases or decreases, measured by visual means. Aesthetic transformation is therefore identified as part of their occupational role, perhaps following popular demand, comically analogous to their earnings. The popularity of this recurring joke reflects how these women's identity is vulnerable to clients' approval.

However, clients are also targeted for being susceptible to these women's enhanced assets, an indication of more complex power structures. On the one hand, the hierarchy of a patriarchal society is evident as females are subjected to men's visual affirmation. On the other hand, there is a reversal of the existing social order: men are able to be convinced and manipulated. In Bakhtin's study of Rabelais, comedy is said to portray the reversal of the social order so as to reconfirm it: in Greek comedy, commercialized sex grants females the power to attract, convince, and manipulate men even though both inhabit a stereotypically conceived patriarchal society²⁹. These jokes about manipulative female courtesans, then, could serve to destabilize the cultural assumptions of their audiences by displaying male anxiety over power structures in the socio-sexual sphere. Internal hierarchies among courtesans are also recognized and exploited in these jokes: attractive courtesans are on top of their collegial hierarchy because of their demand in the sexual market. Yet day-to-day gender norms are not necessarily subverted through humor in the relations portrayed between courtesans and clients. The comical shift in power roles implies a subversion of gendered power only to reassert courtesan-ship as an institution where appearance and behavior are translated into economic currency.

b. A Courtesan's Guide to Emotional Labor: "Feeling Rules"

Aside from aesthetic transformations, recurring comic themes further elaborate the concept of emotionally dictated behavior within courtesan-client interactions. Outside the sphere of comic discourse, a good courtesan is defined as a professional who masters speech and conversation³⁰;

29 — Bakhtin (1984).

30 — McClure (2003b.265-9). On the refinement and education of Roman courtesans as part of their training see the extensive discussion by Hallett (2011.172-196) on the emotionally exploitative letter "by" the *meretrix* Phoenicium in Plautus *Pseudolus*.

when successful, she possesses good manners and soft ways (X. *Mem.* 3.11.10):

Ἐν μὲν δῆπου, ἔφη, καὶ μάλα εὖ περιπλεκόμενον, τὸ σῶμα ἐν δὲ τούτῳ ψυχὴν, ἣ καταμανθάνεις καὶ ὥς ἂν ἐμβλέπουσα χαρίζοιο καὶ ὅτι ἂν λέγουσα εὐφραίνεις, καὶ ὅτι δεῖ τὸν μὲν ἐπιμελόμενον ἀσμένως ὑποδέχσθαι, τὸν δὲ τρυφῶντα ἀποκλείειν, καὶ ἀρρωστήσαντός γε φίλου φροντιστικῶς ἐπισκέψασθαι καὶ καλὸν τι πράξαντος σφόδρα συνησθῆναι καὶ τῷ σφόδρα σοῦ φροντίζοντι ὅλη τῇ ψυχῇ κεχαρίσθαι.

And inside your body, you have a soul that teaches you what glance will please, what³¹ words delight, and tells you that your business is to give a warm welcome to an eager suitor, but to slam the door upon a player... if he is eager in his suit, to put yourself at his service with your whole soul (Xenophon *Memorabilia*. 3.11.10).

In this discussion, Xenophon's Socrates reveals to Theodote a reflective path that allows her to come to terms with her occupation and assume responsibility for her professional life, specifically the significance and the dialectics of meeting the male gaze. This understanding has a liberating effect according to Socrates. She should not understand herself as an object of desire but as an active agent in a complicated human interaction³².

Xenophon lists what he considers appropriate emotional responses in the courtesan-client liaison: he describes a situation where professionalism involves emotional labor and is manifested via body language (pleasing glance, warmth) and verbal interaction (warm welcome). In other words, he determines *feeling rules* (term coined by Hochschild 1983) by which people identify appropriate emotional behavior in a situation. Feeling rules are similar to a script, describing the correct response for courtesan-client situations. It is unclear in the passage whether these are part of the courtesan's training or are simply defined generally as good manners.

In comedy, specific feeling rules are, for the most part, defined as proper manners and comically exaggerated to a paradoxical "virginal" sphere of imagery. In Eubulus, for example, a courtesan's manners during a dinner party are reminiscent of "a virgin from Miletus" (*Kampylion* F 42 K-A). The words in this passage are a pitch from an unidentified character commenting on a courtesan of unknown status (prostitute?), praising her for her disciplined, polite eating³³. In likening her to a virgin, he makes

31 — Also known as display rules Ashforth and Humphrey (1993).

32 — See Lev Kenaan (2008.94).

33 — Control of eating is reminiscent of Lucian's contemporary concerns, e.g., philosophers and politicians Gilhuly (2007.80). Note though that earlier Sem. fr. 7 West: 44-47: female excess appetite is likened to a drab.

an interesting allusion, commingling table manners with sexual expertise and experience. Again, the punch line relies for its effect on an opposition and a comic paradox. The courtesan, a woman whose identity is defined by her sexual activity, [comma] appears to be something she is not: a sexually inexperienced girl. Similarly, in Epicrates, a client narrates his experience with a female panderer and a *porne*:

Τελέως μ' ὑπῆλθεν ἡ κατάρτος μαστροπός, ἐπομνύουσα τὰν
Κόραν, τὰν Ἄρτεμιν, τὰν Φερρέφατταν, ὡς δάμαλις, ὡς παρθένος, ὡς
πῶλος ἀδμής· ἡ δ' ἄρ' ἦν μυωνιά
<ὄλη>.

The damned pimp took me completely, swearing by the Maid, by Artemis, by Pherrephatta that the girl was a heifer, a virgin, an unbroken filly. In fact she was an utter mouse nest (*Chorus* fr. 8 K-A).

This joke is similarly premised upon connections of antithetical character traits. The prostitute is described by the panderer as a virgin via animal imagery, specifically equating her with undomesticated young animals. Toward the end, the client delivers the punchline, stating that despite her representation as virginal by the pimp, the woman was in fact a mouse nest. The representation of the girl in this way by the fragment affects the audience's understanding of the girl through comic contrast: the man expects a virgin but his companion is in fact anything but a sexually inexperienced girl; the humor calls attention to the panderer's exaggeration and indeed misrepresentation in trying to make his commodity seem more attractive. In this fragment, however, the speaker voices disappointment when he describes the girl as a mouse nest. While meaning of this comment is not entirely certain, it is still understandable. Mice are considered undesirable creatures in early and late antiquity³⁴. The girl is described as a nest of rodent pests in opposition to a young domestic animal, perhaps alluding to her sexual behavior beyond the domesticated sphere of marriage³⁵.

The first reported description of the prostitute comes from the mouth of a female *mastropos* (panderer), yet mediated via the client's words and written by a male poet. The second characterization is presented by the client who is presumably a man. Their portrayal communicates information. The panderer uses the word *Kora*, a Doric version of *Korē*, a young

34 — See Levinson and Levinson (2009) 137-44 on pests and their control in the ancient world.

35 — Olson (2007, 346-7) suggests several possible explanations. The expression could mean that the girl was as sexually active as a female mouse; furthermore, one could observe that mice build nests in burrows that do not belong to a single mouse, but different mice will go in and out. The term could therefore indicate that the girl has had too many sexual companions, or was not clean.

girl who is often identified with Persephone. She refers to Pherrephatta, the classical Attic form for Persephone (Ar. *Th.* 287). The *mastropos* is swearing to Persephone for a purpose: she is the daughter of Demeter who has been violently taken away from her mother by Hades. The tale of her violent descent into the world of the dead is often regarded as a myth that depicts the change of a daughter into a wife, the turning point from childhood to marriage. Artemis is mentioned as well, further enhancing the association of the girl with concepts of virginity: Artemis is the mistress of beasts in the *Iliad* (21.470) and beyond, often depicted as an adolescent girl who is pure, unmarried and hunting in the wild; Nausicaa is compared with her in the *Odyssey* (6.102-09). Furthermore, Artemis is referred to here for another reason: young girls at the age of marriage dedicated their childhood garments and toys in the sanctuary of Artemis Brauronia, in order to earn her favor and survive childbirth. They were called *arktoi* (she-bears), another explicit animal assimilation to virginity, associated with the civic concerns and the city.

In both examples, the virgin-prostitute nexus is a paradox: it creates *comic surprise*. Paradoxical surprise or displacement is a common comic phenomenon in many jokes, specifically one-liners (Raskin 1985.42, 107-14). The absurdity in the literary representation of a virgin courtesan stems from the complex and customary relationship between courtesans and their clients: men are aware that their occupation involves much sexual activity and multiple sexual partners. These jokes then arise from the disillusioned perception of courtesans by clients who discover they are not “pure” as well as the paradoxical service demands made by clients themselves.

In addition to paradoxically likening courtesans to virgins, Lucian depicts “feeling rules” as dictated in connection with training. He portrays a mother educating her daughter on hetairic professionalism, i.e., how to keep more and rich customers³⁶:

Crobyle: ...Why, you will earn a great deal being attentive to nice young men... Like Lyra... by dressing elegantly and being amiable and cheery with everybody. She does not giggle at any little thing... instead, she only smiles. She treats the men shrewdly, but without double-crossing them... When she is paid to assist at a banquet, she takes care not to get drunk... and she does not stuff herself with food like an imbecile... never guzzles her wine, but drinks slowly, quietly, in gentle little sips... That is why everybody appreciates her... In bed, she bears one thing in mind – to win the man and make a steady lover of him. That is why everybody speaks highly of her... (Lucian *De Meretr.* 6.3).

36 — For humor in Lucian and Athenaeus and their relationship to fifth-century comedy, see Sidwell (2000.136-52).

The gist of Crobyle's professional advice is that her daughter's behavior should be artificial and not natural, matching the customers' demands. She recommends a role model, Lyra, whose emotional responses and feeling rules are carefully constructed to imply sexual exclusivity and cultural refinement; she is thereby embodying her customers' desire. The refinement of Lyra suggests that Corinna is vulgar (Gilhuly 2007.78), and thus has to redefine herself behaviorally, similar to a modern GFE: *the girlfriend experience* generally involving more personal interaction than a traditional call girl or escort offers; it varies widely from person to person, however. There is a focus on not just having sex, but also having more of a comprehensive experience in order to become an attractive commodity³⁷. One could argue that the newly initiated courtesan is comically objectified and passive, whereas her mother and Lyra appear dominant, facilitating male desire. However, there is comic ambiguity in this instance. Both Corinna and Lyra are treated as commodities to some extent. Lyra has the name of an object: the lyre is a musical instrument, often used at symposia. Corinna's father is said to have been a smith, and after his death his tools are sold for two minai, double the money Corinna earns on her first job appointment. Body and tools, then, are comically assigned values "relative to one another"³⁸.

As we see from the case studies above, both experienced and inexperienced courtesans were assumed and expected to perform emotional labor, constructing an artificial style of behavior based on specific feeling rules in order to accommodate each individual client, though perhaps considering the needs of the trade market generally, or even educated to do so. Indeed, pleasant flattery, kissing, and soothing of the client are mentioned as professional duties in other examples as well (Ephippus *Empole* fr. 6 K-A= Ath. 13.571f and Machon 198= 578c). Similarly, in a tale Greek in its setting but written and performed in Latin, one can observe such an example of the courtesan who is educated to be manipulative via control of emotions. As Judith Hallett has discussed, in Plautus' *Pseudolus*, Phoenicium's letter to her lover reveals a similar image of Hellenistic Greek prostitution, viewed through a fictionalizing Roman lens, employed by both the labor and management of Ballio's imaginary brothel. The words attributed to Phoenicium in her correspondence with her elite young male lover Calidorus, and the words he places in the mouth of the play's title character, Calidorus's slave Pseudolus, "prove her an apt, and successful, pupil of the controlling, linguistically inventive, materially obsessed and socially astute brothel keeper" (Hallett 2011.173). Ballio's brothel could be then regarded an "educational institution", a rhetorical

37 — See Ditmore (2006.240).

38 — Gilhuly (2007.70) on *banausos* as a degrading occupation.

site that imparts the skills of effective speaking and writing to the courtesans so they may interact with literarily educated customers for the sake of profit. In Plautus' comedy, verbally talented brothel keepers catering to a lettered clientele, in ancient Rome as well as Greece, may have provided models of public communication for the female and male slaves under their legal control and in their sphere of influence.

Literacy, and specifically the acquisition of elite male modes of expression, as is the case with Phoenicium's letter, may have functioned as a valuable social commodity for those who enslaved female prostitutes, as well as for these enslaved workers themselves (Hallett 2011.174-5). Overall, Phoenicium's letter in Plautus' *Pseudolus* clearly points towards a comic preoccupation with courtesan behavior. Perhaps the humor in these examples is tinged with irony: (artificial) emotional behavior was willingly adopted by courtesans in order to attract customers and retain them. Desirable behavior on their parts is characterized by management of feeling that is sold for a wage, an exchange value that drops or rises according to a client's needs. In the comic sphere, carefully constructed expressions of feeling by courtesans serve to generate laughter, yet they are, in effect, producing a reflection of reality by mirroring the pretense of emotions in accordance with specific feeling rules as a part of the job.

The medium of comedy, then, helped to portray and popularize the interactions within courtesan-client spheres. Comic courtesans are in fact depicted as adopting specific feeling rules in order to achieve power and control over clients and thereby, if they succeed, they create a transactional relationship based on client manipulation. Comic narratives then, highlight that the process of altering emotions can vary, to extend that any attempt to determine whether the comic aspects are subversive or normative itself adds further complexity to the analysis. The performative potential of a courtesan's feigned emotions, however, reflects social hierarchies in post-classical Greek antiquity further. An actor playing the role of a courtesan was perhaps required to perform emotions on stage. We cannot be certain about the specifics of an actor's performance, but there must have been two different levels of acting through which the job of the actor merges with the job of the courtesan. The overlap of emotions by both actors and characters then further reflected the occupational realities of the courtesans. Perhaps an exaggeration of emotions, or even a very obvious pretentiousness would enhance the joke and social commentary further.

3. A Trick for Trade? Proverbial Greed, Public Awareness and Humor

The proverbial greed of courtesans has been discussed by scholars as a commonplace topic in comic Greek literature, associated with the stereotypical image of the courtesan as dramatic stock character³⁹. Discussions of the *mala meretrix* and its opposite, the *bona meretrix* as character types implicitly group these women into binary categories based on their differing moral characters. Following Auhagen (2010), Augoustakis and Trail (2013) I would like to move beyond the concept of the “good” or “bad” courtesan. Ancient authors beginning with Plutarch and modern studies both associate a courtesan’s moral value with her financial motives, as perceived by men. Similarly, studies of the Roman *meretrix*, for example, seek to determine whether any of the courtesans in Terence might be termed good or equivocate over the benefit of any moral labels in this context or accept the rhetorical value of moral labels⁴⁰. The concept of the good and bad courtesan is thus more indicative of the function played by social class and ethics in judging such women than of their gender and sexual behavior.

In this context, I would like to examine four examples of the greedy courtesan in Athenaeus and one attested in Lucian, arguing that these depictions represent such women as performing a culturally determined gender role. I maintain that courtesan-client humor is neither solely limited to a negative portrayal of courtesans as greedy, nor is it exclusively focused on discussions against prostitution *per se*. Instead, such humor targets *excess* as a negative attribute of courtesans as well as a motivation for client manipulation⁴¹. Female greed is highlighted in Athenaeus’ book 13 BY a quotation from Antiphanes’ *Farmer*. There, one of the characters states that a courtesan is a calamity and a ruin to her keeper, who is glad to nourish such a pest (Ath. 13.567d). The assimilation of the courtesan to a pest encapsulates her character: she is portrayed as an entity financially dependent on her male client. Similarly, the client is portrayed negatively because he is content to sustain (and therefore oblivious to his

39 — Arnott (1996) lists the following examples lines 1-3; cf. Men. fr. 185; Machon 333; Lucian *Dial. meretr.* 7, 15; Alciphron 4.9, 15; Plaut. *Asin.* 512; *Truc.* 22, 533, 90).

40 — For a discussion and a deconstruction of the concept of the *bona meretrix* see Auhagen (2010). For an inspiring explanation (with reference to Terence but also Menander to some extent) see Augoustakis and Trail (2013) especially chapter 4 on gender and sexuality on the marginality of courtesans and others. See also Akrigg and Tordoff (2013.175) on an attempt to morally define the *meretrix*.

41 — See previous work on excess and courtesans, particularly for vase painting in Mitchell (2009.62-71). See also references and discussions on excess and courtesans in oratory in Lardinois and McClure (2001), McClure (2006), Davidson (2006), and Spatharas (2009.99-120).

own situation by sustaining) a primarily economic, materially draining transactional relationship.

A fragment surviving from the comedy *Neaira*, by Timocles (fr. 25), makes reference to the greed of the real-life courtesan Phryne. A man appears to be lamenting his fate, stating how he “first loved Phryne when she was but a gatherer of capers, but now that she is rich he is excluded from her doors” (13.567d-e). The joke here is centered around Phryne’s extravagant, almost proverbial, wealth (see also Ath 13.591e). Humor in this passage derives from a self-contradictory portrayal of Phryne as both poor caper gatherer and rich courtesan at different times in her life. The author implies that once Phryne became wealthy she perhaps did not need the client (speaker) any more. In both examples, courtesans are portrayed as sustaining transactional relationships with men rooted in material goals: their personal interactions are motivated by and result in profit rather than “real” emotions. The narrative is not critical of prostitution but to the material excess associated with it. In both instances, the male client is humorously portrayed as either disillusioned and content or aware and unhappy.

Along similar lines, authors often comically associated courtesans with the divine embodiment of Wealth. The allegorical figure of a wealth-god seems to have been a comic trend. By 388 BC there was a fairly well-established tradition of comedies centered on the contrast between wealth and poverty⁴². The god often appears blind and surrounded by females who sell their bodies. For example in the *Orestautocleides*, by Timocles, “veteran” courtesans – Nannium, Plangōn, Lyca, Phryne, Gnathaena, Pythionice, Myrrhine, Chrysis, Conalis, Hierocleia, and Lopadium – sleep around an old, wretched Ploutos (Ath. 13.567e-f). Some of these courtesans are mentioned by Amphis in *Curis*: “Wealth truly seems to me to be quite blind, since he never ventures near this woman’s doors, But haunts Sinope, Nannium, and Lyca, and others like them, traps of men’s existence. And in their houses sits amazed, never departing” (Ath. 13.567f)⁴³. The allegorical figure of a blind Wealth god works as a comic metaphor for money. The allegory needs to be decoded by the audience on some level⁴⁴. A blind personification of Wealth is commonplace in Greek comedy, often used as a metaphor for unfair distribution of

42 — Sommerstein (2001.8).

43 — All three names – Sinope, Lyca and Nannion – are attested as female names (*Lexicon of Greek Personal Names*, 4 vols., Osborne M. J. and Matthews E.(eds.)); moreover, Sinope is identified as a Corinthian *hetaira* in the scholia to Aristophanes’ *Wealth*, 149. τυφλὸς ὁ Πλούτος εἶναι μοι δοκεῖ, ὅστις γε παρὰ ταύτην μὲν οὐκ εἰσέρχεται, παρὰ δὲ Σινώπῃ καὶ Λύκᾳ καὶ Ναννίῳ ἐτέρας τε τοιαύταισι παγίοι τοῦ βίου ἔνδον κάθητ’ ἀπόπληκτος οὐδ’ ἐξέρχεται.

44 — On decoding allegory in comedy: see Ruffell (2011.187), who discusses Freud’s typology of jokes in this context.

money⁴⁵. The allegorical figure of a blind Wealth-cum-prostitute⁴⁶ was a popular comic image, denoting material excess or unfair earnings, a negative representation of both (real-life) courtesans and their clients. The recurring comic image produces social commentary, since such interactions are indirectly criticized through imagery that alludes to transactional relationships resulting in unfair distribution of money.

Similarly, in Lucian (*De Meretr.* 6.2), when Crobyle persuades her daughter Corinna to become a *hetaira*, her initial plan is for them to sustain themselves financially after her husband Philinus dies. To make her scheme more attractive, she brings forward the example of the previously mentioned Lyra, comically elevated in the eyes of the young courtesan. For Lyra is represented as maintaining four maids and dressed in gold, an indication that she leads a luxurious life, far beyond simply sustaining herself. The comic subtext here is that mother and daughter are not merely intent on sustaining themselves but are after wealth and an affluent lifestyle. Courtesans are, in this instance, comically represented as professionals, primarily concerned with a large margin of profit. But clients are also targeted for their willingness to support courtesans' greed.

Athenaeus quotes Xenarchus' comedy *Pentathlum* to warn potential customers about the charms of courtesans. Xenarchus reproaches these men in the following lines, advising a Thessalian man to prefer women in brothels over exclusive, vain *hetairai*:

δεινά, δεινὰ κοῦκ ἀνασχετὰ
 [...] ἐπὶ τοῖσι πορνείοισιν, ἃς ἔξεσθ' ὁρᾶν
 εἰληθερούσας, στέρν' ἀπημφιεσμένας,
 γυμνάς ἐφεξῆς τ' ἐπὶ κέρως τεταγμένας·
 ὧν ἔστιν ἐκλεξάμενον ἢ τις ἥδεται,
 [...] αὐταὶ βιάζονται γὰρ εἰσέλκουσί τε
 τοὺς μὲν γέροντας ὄντας ἐπικαλούμεναι
 πατρίδια, τοὺς δ' ἀπφάρια, τοὺς νεωτέρους.
 καὶ τῶνδ' ἐκάστην ἔστιν ἀδεῶς, εὐτελῶς,
 μεθ' ἡμέραν, πρὸς ἐσπέραν, πάντα τρόπους.

45 — The first known comedy that referred to (perhaps featured?) the wealth-god was Epicharmus' *Hope* or *Wealth*, of which nothing is known apart from the fact that it included a full-scale portrayal of what later would become the fixed comic type of the parasite. See further Lowe (1998.161-70). For socio-political hierarchy and the poetics of parasitism see Whitmarsh (2000.304-15). Epich. frs. 34-5 come from a speech by a parasitic character and fr. 37 is addressed to him. The character addressed as "Plotos" [*sic*] in Epicharmus is not, however, the parasite. For the similarities between courtesans and parasites, see Davidson (2006).

46 — A comparable image of money (or rather lack of money) personified is found in Menander referring to poverty, who sits with one of the play's characters (*Dysc.* 209-11). Amphis and Athenaeus place him next to greedy *hetairai*. Plutos here is described as a blind man who sits only nearby *hetairai*. Presumably he is rich enough to afford such pastimes.

It is a terrible and intolerable evil [...] there are most beauteous damsels in the brothels, whom any man may see standing all willing in the full light of day [...] showing their naked charms [...] for these gay girls will ravish you by force, and drag you in to them; if old, they'll call you their dear papa; if young, their darling baby; and these a man may fearlessly and cheaply amuse himself with (Ath.13. 24.569a-d).

Both courtesans and clients are criticized in this passage, since not only the professional availability of these women but also the male susceptibility to their charms are not favorably viewed. The almost fatherly advice includes quotations from *Pannuchis* and *Nannium*, by Eubulus again (or Philippus) (Ath.13.568a-f and Ath.13. 569a, respectively). The advice here is certainly to seek value for money. Its recommendations do not exclude buying pleasure, but rather urge the addressee to seek it at a lower cost. Clients on all occasions are made aware that persuasion by seduction is within the job description of female courtesans, and that the price is part of the deal.

More indirect warnings concerning courtesans portray them as ruthless, and involve mythical imagery. A passage in Athenaeus (Ath. 13.558a-e) describes such well-known courtesans as Phryne, Sinope, and Plangon by comparing them to mythical monsters. The perils of encountering the Chimaera, Hydra, Scylla, and Charybdis are cited to characterize the attitudes of renowned *hetairai* towards their clients. Once again, the running joke makes comic capital of the relationship between the courtesan and the customer, who is portrayed as a victim of her overpowering charm. The passage includes an allusion to Phryne's extravagant wealth, as does Ath. 13.567d-e. The audience here is clearly expected to decode the joke and its references to Greek literature, specifically Homer and Plato. Toward the end, the author summarizes all the vices displayed by courtesans by comparing the courtesan collective to the sphinx of Thebes. He then employs the sphinx as a comic metaphor, making no reference to the tale of Oedipus, to imply that courtesans are enigmatic, incomprehensible, and destructive. The joke escalates to a straightforward punch line: "the most treacherous beast is the harlot". The client-courtesan relationship is thus commented on, not necessarily in the most positive way through the medium of humor.

In theoretical discussion, humor – especially its institutionalized forms – is very often identified with criticism of fixed social rules and contemporary conditions⁴⁷. Humor therefore functions here as a way of highlighting popular social issues, specifically the commercialization of sex and bodies in exchange for currency. By representing courtesans as

47 — See Billig (2005.199-235) for a survey on theories of rebellious and disciplinary humor.

rapacious and greedy, and viewing them through the lens of commercial arrangements, authors succeed in discrediting courtesan-client liaisons. Humor consequently operates as a defense mechanism (Vaillant 1977). An overt expression of courtesans' greed might have been distressing to an audience, among which there might be potential customers for such women. The idea of financial greed as the motivation for a constructed self and mode of behavior would, therefore, aim to affect the audiences' perception of commercial sex as primarily a transactional relationship based on artificial social behavior.

4. *Conclusions*

Since classical antiquity, there has been a constant optimization and an increasing valorization of a discourse on sex. Its analytical approach was meant to illuminate the multiple effects of desire itself: displacement, intensification, reorientation, and modification⁴⁸. This discourse on sex has been accorded value because it is assumed to reveal the private "boudoir-self" of a particular individual, and because it also communicates information on social behavior(s). Against this backdrop, we should view courtesan-related humor as primarily an act of communication in antiquity between audience (or reader) and performance (or text) which illuminates aspects of ancient popular morality as well as the social dynamics between gendered identities and hierarchies.

In comic discourse, humor indeed reflected popular social sentiments and male anxiety, and perhaps affected the morality and ethical discipline of its audience as well. In Middle Comedy and beyond, the courtesan/prostitute appears as a character, a reference, a title, yet always in relation to the client character. The two of them are interrelated and define one another. If we go beyond simplistic moralistic discussions concerning the "good" or the "greedy" courtesan, we find that prostitute-client humor reveals important facts about the commercialization of sex. In such erotic liaisons, the element of transaction is defined by the service itself. Appearance counts as much as behavior. A good professional is defined by both of these two traits. The artificiality of appearance and behavior is indeed criticized by male authors more so than the trade itself. Dramatic performance perhaps offered a good medium to address such issues. It is easy to imagine the art of acting emotions in an exaggerated manner in order to underline the fact that they fake. Furthermore, by portraying courtesans as materialistic professionals, comic authors perhaps succeeded in discrediting courtesan-client liaisons, or at least communicate not-so-favorable sentiments to the audience.

48 — Foucault (1984: 23).

In terms of social commentary, representations of these liaisons are marked by a reversal of both power and social hierarchies. In the comic sphere, women in this category, although largely treated as commodities, seem to exhibit the potential to exert agency and power over males when they are comically portrayed as professionals. The aesthetic and emotional transformations they undergo in order to achieve a wealthy lifestyle are recurring jokes. Mind control through the positive reinforcement of certain kinds of behavior results from the actions of the manipulator toward her victim: be it praise, charm, the feigning of innocence, superficial sympathy, or forced facial expressions such as laughs and smiles⁴⁹. The motivations of such women are also clear in the texts. They strive for personal gain as well as feelings of power and superiority in social interactions. Men are also ridiculed, however, because they fail to see these transformations and the manipulation that ensues. They thus serve as negative paradigms of social behavior; they compose part of the joke equally as they are tricked by artificial emotions and appearances.

The comic representations of courtesan-client interactions depict common human experiences and display social categorizations and gender identities. Most important of all, they reveal the social impact of the relationship between transactions and emotions, where true, natural feelings are clearly distinguished from artificial emotions, with the former considered more favorable than the latter. Agency, humor, and power games among lovers are then displayed and rendered problematic through humor, so that the audience can observe the socially uncomfortable nexus of emotions and transactions, as well as the actual consequences of this nexus.

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49 — Simon (2010); Braiker (2004).

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