The Ancient History Bulletin

VOLUME THIRTY-THREE: 2019
NUMBERS 3-4

ISSN 0835-3638

ANCIENT HISTORY BULLETIN

Volume 33 (2019) Numbers 3-4

Contents of volume thirty-three

Numbers 3-4

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Laughing at Slaves: the Greek Comic Slave and the American Blackface Minstrel

Kelly L. Wrenhaven

Abstract: *Ancient Greek and American slave representations might not have an obvious association, however, similar categories of imagery can arise out of two societies that are disparate in culture, location, and time. In ancient Greece and the antebellum United States, laughter was used as a mechanism to distinguish between slave and free, outsider and citizen. Both societies produced comic theatre that portrayed a subset of male slave characters in ways that often appear strikingly similar. This article examines the popular, entertaining, and derogatory representations of male slaves that appear in Greek comedy and American blackface minstrelsy. These were the types of characters that were the most likely to draw laughter and, perhaps, derision. They also illustrate the negative stereotypes (or "stock" characteristics) typically attributed to male slaves and demonstrate some of the ways in which ancient Greeks and nineteenth-century Americans attempted to justify slavery.*

Keywords: *slavery, comedy, ancient Greece, United States, minstrelsy, blackface*

> "In all societies men tend to extrapolate from status to inherent character, to impute to individuals characteristics suited to their social roles."[1]

In both ancient Greece and the antebellum United States, laughter was used as a mechanism to distinguish between slave and free, outsider and citizen. Although laughter is a "highly sociable" vehicle that can create imagined communities of belonging, at the same time it can also be "violently divisive", since "in-jokes" are always made at the expense of an "out-group".[2] In the zero-sum, honor-based society of the ancient Greeks, where there could only be winners if there were losers, slaves were the ultimate losers whose lack of status meant that honor did not apply to them.[3] In his book on Greek laughter, Halliwell maintains that one of the chief purposes of laughter was to project "dishonor onto people or things perceived as shameful", and the Greeks arguably deemed slavery the most shameful thing of all.[4] In contrast to a slave, the most impoverished Athenian citizen knew that he was an elite in that "he could not be struck with impunity" and that he had political rights, not least the right to vote.[5] Even

[1] Jordan (1974) 87.

[2] Mercer (2016) 1.

[3] Patterson (1982) 87.

[4] Halliwell (2008) 244.

[5] Dover (1974) 39.

the barbarian Polyxena welcomed death rather than a life of dishonor as a slave, "for to live a dishonorable life is a great burden" (Euripides *Hecuba* 378). Moreover, in both the ancient Greek and American contexts, the conception of "outsider people" and their "collective degradation" simultaneously created a level of equality and honor amongst free people, or more specifically in American society, free *whites*.[6] One of the most infamous forms of pre-abolition American theatre was blackface minstrelsy, which in some ways reflects aspects of Greek comedy, particularly in its comic representation of slaves. Today blackface minstrelsy is typically viewed as an insidious, racist and outmoded form of leisure that played upon stereotypes of free and enslaved blacks for the entertainment and the communal cohesion of whites. Frederick Douglass described blackface actors as "the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens."[7] Nonetheless, by the mid-nineteenth century blackface minstrelsy had blossomed into a wildly popular national art form, particularly in the northern states.

This is not the place for an in-depth study of minstrelsy, which has been well served elsewhere.[8] What is of primary interest here is how comic theatre was used in both ancient Greece and the antebellum United States to portray a subset of male slave characters in ways that often appear strikingly similar. This article will examine the popular, entertaining, and derogatory representations of male slaves that characterize Greek comedy and American blackface minstrelsy, the types that were the most likely to draw laughter and, perhaps, derision.[9] These characters also illustrate well the negative stereotypes (or "stock" characteristics) typically attributed to slaves and demonstrate some of the ways in which ancient Greeks and nineteenth-century Americans attempted to justify slavery. My focus, then, is not upon the good or clever slave or, in the American context, the sentimental slave, a topic that necessitates its own separate analysis. While there are similarities, the sentimental slave is rather more challenging to discuss alongside the Greek evidence, largely because it

[6] Davis (2006) 135.

[7] Excerpt from the *North Star*, October 27, 1848. Quoted by Lott (1996) 3. Although the racist core of blackface minstrelsy needs little demonstration, a study of this genre is not, in fact, a straightforward, unilateral study of racism. While Anglo-American working class whites always dominated the genre there were also black actors who donned the blackface costume. Lott (1996) 5. Moreover, minstrelsy arose alongside abolitionism in both England and America and "was serviceable in discussing other issues, such as nationalism, labor, and class." Nowatzki (2010) 1.

[8] For a book length study, see Nowatzki's *Representing African Americans in Transatlantic Abolitionism and Blackface* (2010). For useful collections of essays, see Johnson's *Burnt Cork* and Bean, Hatch and McNamara's *Inside the Minstrel Mask* (1996). Eric Lott has also published a great deal on the subject of blackface minstrelsy. For an online database of American blackface minstrelsy in Britain, see The Juba Project: http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/~w3minstr.

[9] Although the vast majority of extant examples of Greek comedy are Athenian, similar comic representations of theatral art have been found throughout the ancient Greek world and beyond, including settlements in Magna Graecia, Asia Minor, southern Russia, and north Africa. For this reason, I use the term "Greek" comedy rather than "Athenian" comedy. For the distribution of comic genre terracottas, see Green and Handley (1995) 60. See Compton-Engle (2015) 5 and Bosher (2013) 197-208 for the relationship between images on Greek pots, comic genre terracotta figurines, and actual stage performance.

draws heavily upon Christian moral debates and abolitionist ideologies, neither of which existed in ancient Greece.[10]

Although Greek and American slave-societies were unique in a variety of ways, in line with all slave societies they also had much in common.[11] In both, comic slave characters were so popular that they even helped to spur a market of collectibles that persists to the present day, although the subtexts are often forgotten or ignored. While ancient Greek and American slave representations might not have an obvious association, similar categories of imagery can arise out of two societies that are disparate in culture, location, and time, with little obvious generic or direct influence of one upon the other with respect to depictions of slaves. In his seminal comparative study of slavery and "social death", Orlando Patterson concluded that slavery is an occurrence from the "social universe" and has spanned the globe from ancient to modern times, from the most primitive to the most civilized societies.[12] Although there will always be differences in the details, we should not be surprised if we find resemblances between depictions arising from two parts of the world where society was structurally dependent upon slavery. Moreover, it is a notable paradox that slavery has thrived in societies that have also held freedom as a core value and that the institution increased in importance and significance as democratic values grew more defined. The historical context in which freedom became important might even be connected with the rise of slavery. Raaflaub, drawing upon earlier arguments by Westermann and Finley, argued that in ancient Greece the concept of slavery likely predated a fully developed concept of freedom, which was perhaps taken for granted by elites until it was threatened by warfare or civil strife.[13] Certainly, in both Athens and in the antebellum United States slavery contributed to what became a marked ideological divide between citizens and slaves, or those with status and those without.[14] This divide was expressed in a variety of media, particularly the popular venue of the comic stage. It is especially evident in Old Comedy, a genre represented almost exclusively by the plays of Aristophanes. Prior to the advent of racial slavery, which finally solved the enduring problem of identifying "natural slaves", the Greeks produced imagery of comic slaves that attempted to justify the enslavement of certain people by constructing and reinforcing ethnic and other stereotypes, such as the lazy, senseless slave who was a suitable object of ridicule.[15] As Long concluded in his study of barbarians in Greek comedy, "the pulsing negative pole of treatment

[10] For a discussion of Greek representations of the "good slave", along with some comparative context, see Wrenhaven (2013a) 90-127.

[11] Genovese (1976) 4.

[12] Patterson (1982) vii, x.

[13] Raaflaub (2004) 36. It has been a virtual convention for classical scholars to see a sharp divide between freedom and slavery in ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, while status in Near Eastern contexts is usually assumed to have been a comparatively "blurred state of affairs". Lewis (2018) 14.

[14] Moses Finley described its "invention" in much the same way as the concept of slavery: "It is a concept which had no meaning and no existence for most of human history; it had to be invented finally, and that invention was possible only under very special conditions." Finley (1982) 119-120. While a hatred for the condition of slavery is evident in other ancient cultures, only the Greeks appear to have adopted "a high valuation of freedom", leading to "the creation of a concept of political freedom". Raaflaub (2004) 4 and note 17.

[15] Davis (2006) 34: "While slaves in antiquity could usually be recognized by clothing, branding, collars, and other symbols, the millennia-long search for ways to identify 'natural slaves' would eventually be solved by the physical characteristics of sub-Saharan Africans."

of barbarians is racial prejudice -- the raw intuition that the barbarian is inferior."[16] Certainly, stereotypes about slaves did not arise out of a vacuum. Ethnic and social prejudices helped to shape slave characters in Greek comedy much as racial and class prejudices helped to shape blackface minstrels.[17]

A challenging question when examining artistic representations is their relationship with the society in which they were produced. The extent to which Greek comedy, or any art for that matter, affected the audience's views on various subjects is difficult to discern due to thin evidence and the expanse of time. Although, as Slater wrote, Aristophanes' comedies are "rich in address to its audience and comments on the audience's behavior", it is difficult to determine the extent to which these were attempts to "reshape" the audience's response, rather than reflective of their actual response.[18] Yet, the themes that Aristophanes drew upon were certainly not unique to him. Considering that there was evidently a set of characteristics expected of comic slaves, it is likely that these reflected the prejudices and expectations of real slave masters; for instance, the ideas that slaves are puerile, untrustworthy, cowardly and prone to vulgar behavior are suitably reflected in the opening scene of Aristophanes' *Knights*, which has two slaves crying and complaining vociferously about their situation; one even gives himself courage by masturbating, and both end up drowning their sorrows in stolen wine (1-85). At first glance the blackface minstrel would probably not provoke comparison with Aristophanes' slaves, however, a closer look reveals that Greek comedy played upon the same types of ideas as blackface minstrelsy, such as the vociferous and physically comedic slave who looks and acts strikingly different from the audience members. While these figures are not exact parallels, both cultures sought to "other" slaves by attributing to them characteristics that set them apart from the values and expectations of the target audiences.

A major issue when conducting comparative research on the ancient and modern worlds is the vast disparity in the amount of extant source material. While it is difficult to quantify the extent to which Greek representations of comic slaves reflected ideas about actual slaves, there is plenty of evidence that there was a relationship between how nineteenth-century American playwrights represented slaves on the minstrel stage and how slaves, and more broadly black Americans, were perceived in society. Indeed, audiences sometimes believed that blackface actors were "actual Negroes", to the extent that the writers of the minstrel sheet music began the practice of "picturing blackface performers out of costume as well as in", and performers were sometimes mistaken for blacks by white audience members.[19] It is also noteworthy that in its early stages, "minstrelsy often depicted slavery negatively or elicited sympathy toward or identification with slaves".[20] This is evident, for instance, in the character of Jim Crow, who is not a buffoon, but clever and calculating. As the genre

[16] Long (1986) 162.

[17] See Wrenhaven (2013a) 48-52 for a discussion of the relationship between Greek views of slaves and environmental determinism. See also Wrenhaven (2011) 107-111.

[18] Slater (1999) 351.

[19] Lott (1996) 8.

[20] Nowatzki (2010) 3.

progressed over thirty years, however, it became increasingly formulaic in its "proslavery and racist" nature.[21]

We do not possess a comparable amount of material from Greek comedy to form a strong opinion about a thirty-year trajectory of slave representation in the genre, but it does appear that by the end of the fifth century B.C., many comic slave characters were beginning to settle into an essentially formulaic type of representation: the "other" who looks, acts, and / or speaks differently from members of the slave-holding class, is lazy, unrefined, dimwitted, and of course the butt of jokes (sometimes literally). As Bindman states, "a stereotype may be verbal or visual."[22] This, of course, does not mean that every slave character fit these criteria, but certainly enough did to elicit Xanthias' metatheatrical question to Dionysos: "Master, should I tell one of those typical jokes that always makes the audience laugh?" (Aristophanes *Frogs* 1-2).[23] Although there are clever and loyal slave characters in Greek comedy, Aristophanes' plays in particular include a number of representations of problematic slaves who provide much of the comic relief. While these slaves are not usually openly rebellious, they are frequently depicted as lazy (*Wasps* 2-15, 136, 395), complaining (*Wasps* 19-21, 38-40), bibulous (*Knights* 85-86; Waps 8-9), wise-cracking (*Frogs* 1-2), and thievish (*Knights* 101-102, 109-111; *Wasps* 449; *Peace* 14).[24] Even the comparatively sanitized and less vulgar slaves of later Greek comedy still exhibited typical characteristics, such as dim-wittedness, trickery, and meddlesome behavior. For instance, Daos in Menander's *Perikeiromene* has been described as "a busybody constantly on the alert for an opportunity to do some mischief, which will win him freedom."[25]

Due at least in part to their role of providing comic relief, slave characters were exceedingly popular and can be found in almost every extant Greek comedy. They had roles ranging from major characters, such as Xanthias in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, to narrators, such as the two slaves at the beginning of *Knights*, to silent characters and prop movers.[26] In this way, comedy reflected the classical Greek city-state in the ever-presence and usefulness of slaves. Greek audiences must have come to the theatre expecting to see the amusing slave, much like American audiences expected to see the amusing black slave character when they attended a blackface minstrel show. Judging by the relatively large number of surviving terracotta figurines in comic costume, many Greeks appear to have collected slave characters, much like Americans collected blackface dolls and cast-iron "jolly man" coin banks with gaping mouths.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Bindman (2016) xiii.

[23] Although Xanthias is in some ways atypical (e.g. he is braver and stronger than his master through much of the play), Aristophanes makes it clear that there are characteristics typically applied to slave characters. Aristophanes favored role reversals, and Xanthias' atypical qualities are surely meant as a foil to his master Dionysos. See Wrenhaven (2013b). Compton-Engle, in line with other commentators, calls the role reversal between Xanthias and Dionysos "a kind of comic preterition, in which he (Xanthias) claims to be above such low devices but exploits them to full advantage nevertheless". Compton-Engle (2015) 105.

[24] Olson (2011) 67.

[25] MacCary (1969) 283.

[26] The fragments of Old Comedy attest to the wide-spread of use a variety of slave characters, although the "empowered comic slave" might be an innovation of Aristophanes. Sells (2013) 110.

Both American and Greek comic theatre produced slave characters that helped to justify the subjugation of certain people by emphasizing and exaggerating their differences, dehumanizing them by making them appear too silly and harmless to pose any real threat to the master class and, more broadly, to the status quo. In the American context, the happy, naturally musical and entertaining caricatures of African slaves are found in many genres, including advertising, and continued to be popular well after abolition, when many people yearned for the "good ol' days" of slavery. Similarly, judging by the extant terracotta figurines and pot paintings showing comic scenes from ancient Greece, the slave character was very popular with audiences and, by the fourth century B.C., increasingly collectible.[27] Of course, the Greeks never yearned for the "good old" days of slavery since they never conceived of abolishing it. If they had, the caricatured slave might have become even more popular, perhaps like Aunt Jemima, the slave mammy character who was popularized only after abolition.[28]

Another point of comparison is the costume of the comic slave and the blackface minstrel. Even before the Greek or American actors opened their mouths, they made a strong visual impression that drew a glaring contrast between themselves and the audience members. For the Greeks, the comic slave's "otherness" was expressed by the grotesque costume, with its huge, trumpet-like mouth and distorted, bulging eyes, red hair, outsized belly, rump, and phallus.[29] Although varieties of the grotesque costume with exaggerated, non-ideal features were probably worn by most of the actors of Old Comedy and can be seen in Greek art as early as the fifth century B.C., by the fourth century B.C. "the facial features of the traditional comic mask became markers of social inferiority".[30] Furthermore, the *exōmis*, or "short, belted tunic", appears to be standard for the comic costume and is particularly suitable for working people (the poor and slaves) due to the movement that it affords.[31] By the fourth century B.C., the period of New Comedy, slave characters "retain their grotesque shape", while most of the other characters gradually lose the padding and oversized phallus.[32] That said, the fact that free characters could also wear the grotesque costume in no way minimizes the characteristics attributed to slaves, but effectively amplifies them. By associating slavish characteristics with

[27] For a discussion of comic genre terracottas, see Wrenhaven (2013b) 132-135.

[28] There are several studies on the use of slave images in advertising. See, for instance, M. M. Manring's *Slave in a Box: the strange career of Aunt Jemima* (1998).

[29] I am assuming that the costume worn by slave characters in the plays of Aristophanes and other contemporaneous fifth-century comic poets is similar to or the same as that which is depicted on fifth and fourth-century pots. There is one late fifth-century pot that shows figures who appear to be actors changing into (or out of) the grotesque costume (Attic *chous*, St. Petersburg, Hermitage State Museum, 1869.47=HGRT 45 fig. 184, PHV2 no. 6). This costume is also depicted on several fourth-century pots and in terracotta sculpture. For further discussion of Greek comic costume, see most recently Compton-Engle's *Costume in the Comedies of Aristophanes* (2015). For a discussion of depictions of actors on Athenian pots, see Csapo (2010) 23-29. See also Wrenhaven (2013b); Rusten (2006) 39 n. 10; Foley (2000); Stone (1981).

[30] Hall (2002) 144.

[31] It is also noteworthy that in pot-painting the *exōmis* (a short and belted tunic worn over one shoulder) seems to have been worn mostly by the more active characters, namely slaves and other working men, both of whom were presumably lower class characters. This garment was especially good for ease of movement, which is fitting for workers and for the most active of characters. See Compton-Engle (2015) 61.

[32] Compton-Engle (2015) 5-6, 41.

free people, such as old men, pimps, the poor, and in some cases possibly aristocrats and statesmen, ancient authors could vilify and disparage certain categories of people, conflating them with slaves and demoting them, at least socially, to the level of slaves (conversely, by attributing "free" characteristics to slaves, such as cleverness or bravery, the slave character could act as a foil for his master who ideally should be better than his slave). Moreover, by having free men, or even gods, wear the grotesque costume, the author could express both the liminal stages of ritual and theatre and also question the contrived nature of status itself. This is expressed well in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, where the god Dionysos and his slave Xanthias not only switch costumes, they also switch characteristics, as seen when Xanthias dons the costume of Herakles and in doing so becomes braver than his master (498-503, 589). By the middle of the play, however, Dionysos retakes his rightful roles as master and god, while Xanthias, having fulfilled his comedic and narrative functions, fades into the background.

Similarly, even though the blackface costume did not always signify a slave, it expressed characteristics associated with slaves, such as ethnic difference, wide-eyed dimwittedness, and excessive, ill-controlled behavior. An unnaturally wide, red or white-painted mouth characterized the blackface minstrel, along with white-ringed eyes set into a cork-blackened face topped with a wig of wooly black hair. Although these features were meant to represent black people, the unnaturalness of this costume is betrayed by the fact that black actors also wore blackface makeup and wigs. Of course, visual exaggeration can be explained within the context of stage performance. It is noteworthy, however, that both the Greek and the American visages were almost frightening in their distortion and expression, thus illustrating, consciously or subconsciously, the unsettling paradox between light-hearted humor and fear of the "other". It has been noted that blackface minstrels inspired "a certain terror as well as great affection".[33] The rest of their bodies were also exaggerated and designed to garner immediate attention and laughter. A huge belly and rear and a massive dangling red-leather phallus characterized the Greek comic costume. The American minstrel typically wore either the loose and distressed clothing of the stereotypical rustic "stage plantation Negro", or the oversized, ill-fitting, brightly colored clothing of urban slaves or free blacks, both of which evoked the type of clothing worn by clowns of the same period.[34]

Although there is no consensus regarding the exact origins of either Greek comedy or blackface minstrelsy, there is some evidence that both had roots in a variety of performance forms, from street prose to religious ritual. The large phallus, belly, and buttocks of the Greek comic costume perhaps originated in the ancient ritual of the Phallic Procession in honor of the god Dionysos. The padded bellies and rumps can be seen as early as the sixth century B.C. on komastic pots (*kōmos* is a general term used for festival performances or group celebrations, perhaps drunken and involving worship of Dionysos).[35] By the traditional beginning of Greek comedy (486 B.C.), the grotesque costume seems to have been associated primarily with the

[33] Bean, Hatch, McNamara (1996) 12.

[34] Nathan (1996) 35. The blackface minstrel was partly founded in the "clown of the English pantomime and the clown of the American circus". Bean, Hatch, McNamara (1996) 10, 12.

[35] For a discussion of the possible origins of Greek comedy, see Rusten (2006). Csapo (2010) 11: "A *komos*, in the literature of the classical period, is usually a drunken choral procession, frequently involving costumes and musicians, and closely, though not exclusively, associated with Dionysus."

most vulgar and slavish characters, which were typically but not always slaves.[36] The costume certainly came to emphasize characteristics that the Greeks associated with slaves, such as ugliness, ethnic difference (e.g. red-hair), and a general lack of self-control expressed by the outsized body parts.[37] Although a late source, the Hellenistic grammarian Pollux describes a number of slave masks used in Old Comedy, one of which has red hair and is called the "Leading Slave" (*Onomastikon* 4.149). Traces of red paint can also be found on the heads of some terracotta comic slave figurines.[38]

Minstrelsy might have ritual origins in the African trickster, the Jim Crow-type figure, and might also be linked with the "blacked up devil figures" of western European carnival and folk traditions, which were crystallized by the Americanized "callithumpians", who were typically young male rioters in blackface wearing wild costumes.[39] The cosmopolitan settings of both Athens, the home of Greek comedy, and the waterway cities and ports where American minstrelsy originated likely helped to give rise to the genres and, more specifically, to the amalgamation of characteristics and "otherness" expressed by these lowly and strange but always entertaining figures. In both contexts, moreover, these types of characters were a form of catharsis and could be used as mechanisms to mock society's betters, which resonated with their popular audiences and doubtless helped lead to their strong and lasting appeal. Indeed, one anonymous Athenian, whom scholars often refer to as the Old Oligarch, characterized Greek comedy as a tool of the citizenry (*demos*), who used it to mock the noble and powerful (Pseudo-Xenophon *Constitution of Athens* 2.18). Slave characters sometimes stood in for famous generals and statesmen, such as slaves A and B in Aristophanes' *Knights*, who were probably based on the generals Demosthenes and Nikias, and the Paphlagonian slave who was based on the caustic statesman Kleon. Indeed, what better and more innocuous figure to bring attention to the classism of society and critique current events than one who stands so far outside of it: the slave? The relatively large number of representations of the Greek comic slave, in various media from terracotta figurines to pot painting, expresses the appeal of such characters for the Greeks and later the Romans, who preserved elements of the costume in their own comedies and art.[40]

Similarly, Cockrell describes the Jim Crow routine, the most famous and foundational of blackface performances, as "more than anything … a political animal" and blackface itself as "a transgressive mask enabling comment, criticism, or advocacy of social and political change."[41] This is reflected also by the music, especially in the earliest stages of the genre, which was transgressive and unsettling, characterized by noisy, unharmonic, and repetitive sounds, and

[36] Aristotle claims that Greek comedy was founded in the ritual of the Phallic Procession (*Poetics* 1449a2-14). For a discussion of this and other possible origins of comedy, see Rusten (2006).

[37] Wrenhaven (2013b) 135.

[38] E.g. Terracotta figurine of a seated comic slave. Attica, 350-325 B.C. London, British Museum 1879,0306.5. For a study of barbarians in Greek comedy, see Long (1986).

[39] Johnson (2012) 5-6; Cockrell (1996) 168 and (2012) 62. For a thorough monograph-length study of Jim Crow, see Lhamon (2003).

[40] For further discussion, see Wrenhaven (2013b).

[41] Cockrell (1996) 167 and (2012) 62.

the words "disjointed, generally nonnarrative, and unrealistic."[42] While the elite viewed the performances as a straightforward play on the "deservedly unfortunate "[black]", worthy only of a novelty laugh or two", it said something quite different to those on the fringes of society.[43] Due in no small part to the many ways in which it could be interpreted, blackface minstrelsy was exceedingly popular at the time, and its influence is still with us. Far from disappearing after abolition, minstrelsy stood at the epicenter of nineteenth-century American and transatlantic entertainment and resonated in many forms of media, from children's cartoons and toys to advertising, candy, and even to radio, where the minstrel's songs and speech were disseminated over the airwaves. To this day, blackface memorabilia, often classified as "black Americana", remains popular with some collectors, and television and movies continue to subject black people to the same types of stereotypes for laughs.[44]

Comparisons might also be drawn between the movement and speech of the Greek comic slave and the blackface minstrel. While we do not have the benefit of seeing the Greek productions as they were originally performed, images of ancient comedies and cues in the plays imply that the slave characters were very active on stage.[45] Green argues that although quick movements likely characterized comedic performance from its earliest days, by the fourth century B.C. "it is only slaves who continue to run. For others it becomes improper behavior."[46] Images on pots show characters in grotesque costume running, pushing or pulling (or being pushed or pulled). This kind of action is also preserved in the plays, where slave characters are sometimes portrayed as out of breath or rushing on or off stage to assist their masters. At the outset of Aristophanes' *Knights*, two slaves even consider running away from their master at top speed (19-26). Conversely, sometimes masters complain that their slaves are too slow, which implies that slaves were expected to act quickly to fulfill their requests. For instance, in Aristophanes' *Birds* Pisthetairos repeatedly complains that his slave Manes is slow and lazy, with which the Chorus agrees, calling him "exceedingly slow, like an ass" (1328; see also 1317, 1323-4, 1327, 1335-6).

The harried and harassed slave contrasted with the self-controlled movements expected of the leisured class. The Greeks associated slow, controlled movement with moderation, or *sōphrosunē*, which was in turn connected with the leisured wealthy, who did not have to labor for a living. Moreover, Greek writers generally disdained frenetic, out-of-control movements for their perceived lack of purpose. For instance, Aristotle notes in his *Poetics* that Mynniskos had called his fellow actor Kallipides an "ape" because he "went too far" (1461b34-35). While many scholars have understood this as a reference to the actor's exaggerated gestures and over-acting, Csapo argues that the criticism relates more to "imitating actions that are best not

[42] Cockrell (1996) 174.

[43] Cockrell (1996) 174.

[44] A search for "black Americana" on ebay.com yielded more than 36,400 items, many which are clearly reminiscent of blackface (accessed on June 19, 2017). The perpetuation of this imagery is also notably explored in Spike Lee's movie *Bamboozled* (2000). For the persistence of blackface imagery in the modern world, see Johnson (2012) 1-17; Maurice (2012) 191-222.

[45] By the Roman period the running slave became a stock slave character, the *servus currens*. For more on the slave in action, see Wrenhaven (2011) 101-103.

[46] Green (2002) 111.

imitated at all", namely those that imitate the movements associated with vulgar people.[47] Aristotle's reference here is to tragedy, but these opinions can also relate to comedy, which associated frenetic, sometimes purposeless, movements with the low class characters, the very same who wore the grotesque costume.

Frenetic movement also characterized the blackface minstrel. Similar to Greek comedy, much of this movement involved singing and dancing, which were fundamental to the genre.[48] In its earliest form, blackface minstrelsy was probably intended to mimic African slave culture, which preserved the "black gestural charisma" found in many African societies.[49] Winter observes that Africans had come to America "conditioned physiologically and psychologically to elaborate, legalistic tribal ritual and the extrovert, centrifugal community ring-shout."[50] One Virginian critic referred to blackface entertainment as "buffo negro songs" (the word "buffo" is a reference to the comedic element of the performances).[51] As the genre progressed, however, "the adapted Negro techniques of performance which had been taken over grew vague and sloppy" and the songs and dances became increasingly formulaic and expressive of slave ideology.[52] Lott has described the minstrel's body as "out of control", which Johnson clarifies as only being *shown* out of control, since the actor was usually a white man in blackface, and thus in control of the performance.[53] Something similar might be said of the Greek comic slave, whose body was often out of control, yet also controlled by the master and by the citizen who was playing the part.[54] The importance of the dancing black slave to minstrelsy is expressed early on by the song Jim Crow, which was based upon an African folk tradition about a clever talking crow named Jim. The song had long been sung by slaves, but it was made famous by the wild and popular performance of the white entertainer Thomas D. Rice, who wore blackface and sung lines like: "I'm so glad dat I'm a niggar / An don't you wish you was too / For den you'd gain popularity / By jumping Jim Crow." The most popular lines

[47] Csapo (2010) 118-119.

[48] Although singing was also a major part of Greek theatrical performance and is found in Old Comedy, it was not as central to the genre as it was in blackface minstrelsy. For a study of singing actors in ancient drama, see Hall (2002) 3-38.

[49] Lhamon (2012) 19.

[50] Winter (1996) 223.

[51] Quoted by Cockrell (1996) 164.

[52] Winter (1996) 225.

[53] Eric Lott *Love and Theft* (quoted by Johnson, 2012, 79, in Burnt Cork); Johnson (2012) 79.

[54] Although little is known about the status of classical Greek actors, it is generally believed that they were free men who enjoyed a certain amount of respect for their profession (or semi-profession). Greek drama arose out of sacred festivals for the gods, particularly Dionysos, and so the acting profession originated in sacred performance. Actors, in turn, were viewed as performing a service for the god. Moreover, Greek actors seem to have been paid, some even highly, and there were monetary prizes for the winners of dramatic competitions. See Lightfoot (2002) 213-215. This all changed by the Roman period, when "acting was a despised profession". Brown (2002) 225-237.

from the song, however, were: "Weel about and turn about and do jis so, Ebery time I weel about, I jump Jim Crow".[55]

While there are many similarities between the Greek comic slave and the blackface minstrel, it is important to stress that they are not mirror reflections of each other. Most notably, ethnic difference was much more important in the American than the Greek context, much like it was more important to American than to Greek slavery. To be sure, in some Greek comedies there were attempts to portray ethnic differences with respect to some slaves, such as the Skythian Archer in Aristophanes' *Women at the Thesmophoria*, whose actor presumably wore Skythian-inspired garb and spoke Skythian-sounding words.[56] One of the primary ways that the Skythian Archer is mocked is through his poor, and presumably humorous, grasp of the Greek language, which he consistently misuses and mispronounces. Although he can always be understood, his speech has been called a "cacophonous pidgin Greek" and makes him seem intellectually blunt, a buffoon; a perfect slave and the opposite to an intelligent Greek.[57] For instance, he utilizes an unusually wide vocabulary of vulgar words, and he repeatedly mispronounces the character Artemisia's name as "Artamuxia", which might reflect the fact that Skythian names often included the letter "x".[58] Yet, judging by the plays we possess, which are admittedly few relative to what was produced, the Skythian Archer does not represent the typical comic slave, whose speech and costume probably did not normally denote ethnic difference, save perhaps the red-haired mask that the character might have worn (possibly the very same type described by Pollux). Some slave characters also had ethnic-sounding names, such as Thraix/Thratta, Manes/-ia and Daos.[59] In short, while there was at times some reference to ethnic difference, this was rarely the primary focus of representations of slaves in Greek comedy; in many cases, no ethnic difference can be discerned at all. Where the American and Greek representations overlap is in their focus of presenting slave characters as the "other" who in many ways stands in direct contrast to members of the audience. Of course, there were various ways of doing this; at times Greek and American artists and writers chose the same methods of "othering" and other times they did not.

In contrast, in American blackface theatre ethnic difference always characterized the minstrel, even in the absence of slavery (i.e. the characters are not always slaves, but they are *always* "Negroes"). The very name of the genre illustrates the importance of race. The actors were made to look like "Negroes", speak like "Negroes", and dance and sing like "Negroes". Indeed, the primary purpose of the genre, aside from entertainment, seems to have been to recreate on stage the ideal white conception of the black American. Race and racism were and still are inseparable from blackface minstrelsy. When it came to black characters on stage, whether the blackface minstrel or Othello, there were "shared cultural assumptions" that

[55] For a discussion of the song Jim Crow and the actor who made it famous, see Cockrell (2012) 51-54. It should be noted that the singing, dancing, and running slave is not restricted to minstrel plays but can be found in other comedies, such as Sambo in John Murdock's play *The Triumphs of Love* (1795).

[56] For a discussion of the archer scene in Aristophanes' *Women at the Thesmophoria*, see Hall (1989).

[57] Hall (1989) 38.

[58] Hall (1989) 40; Rostovtzeff (1969) 36-40.

[59] Aristophanes *Acharnians* 273, *Wasps* 829, *Peace* 1138, 1146, *Women at the Thesmophoria* 279, 728, *Birds* 1311, *Frogs* 1345; Menander *Aspis*, *Dys*., *Epitrepontes*, *Georgos*, *Her*., *Kolax*, *Pk*., *Perinthia*. See Wrenhaven (2013b) 135.

"linked race with character, temperament, and values" and this was "an incipient form of racialism that flowered in England and America."[60]

Another major difference between the Greek comic slave and the blackface minstrel are aspects of their behavior. In Greek comedy, slaves were typically the most vulgar and offensive of all characters, often prone to drunkenness and even masturbation, behaviors that were viewed unbecoming for free citizens. For example, the two slaves at the outset of Aristophanes' *Wasps* are both drunk and dozing off when they are supposed to be on watch. Similarly, the beginning of Aristophanes' *Knights* finds one slave encouraging another to masturbate in order to give himself courage. The slave dutifully obliges and then complains that he has rubbed himself so hard his foreskin is coming off (24-29).[61] Certainly, vulgarity and "foul speech" are characteristics of Old Comedy. As Halliwell notes, " 'foul speech' of almost every conceivable variety is not only permitted, it is actively expected and celebrated".[62] Greek audiences must have found such antics humorous, even when applied to slaves, or presumably they would not have represented them onstage. Conversely, while American audiences also expected to laugh at slave characters, it appears to have been a virtual rule that in blackface theatre the minstrels "should carefully avoid everything approaching vulgarity, and no offensive personalities should be introduced."[63] It appears, moreover, that American slave characters became more sanitized over time. For instance, in pre-Revolution drama, we find the slave character Mungo, who appears in Isaac Bickerstaffe's popular play *The Padlock*. While Mungo was a precursor to later characters, such as Uncle Tom, he was not as "spotless" because he "drinks and swears and plots against his master".[64] Yet, even then he was never as vulgar as Greek comic slaves.

This is an intriguing difference. While comic slaves were not usually openly rebellious, when it came to the behavior of slave characters Greek audiences seem to have been more permissive than American audiences. Considering the raucous nature of the minstrel plays and the equally raucous and notorious behavior of their audiences, it is challenging to determine the reasons, but there are several possibilities.[65] For one thing, as noted earlier vulgarity characterizes much of Greek Old Comedy. While slave characters are typically the most vulgar, this behavior is not restricted to slave characters but is connected more generally with (relatively) poor people, non-elites such as the Sausage-Seller in Aristophanes' *Knights* and the rustic Strepsiades in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, both of whom express slavish characteristics, such as thievery and vulgarity. As Dover states, "poverty was half-way to slavery in respect of social standing".[66] Both types of characters probably also wore the grotesque costume. Moreover,

[60] Vaughn (1998) 66.

[61] For Greek and Roman views of masturbation, see Wrenhaven (2016).

[62] Halliwell (2008) 243. As time went on, tastes changed. Menander's slaves, for instance, are generally more sanitized, less offensive, and more loyal than many found in Aristophanes' plays. Aristotle drew this distinction when he noted that older comedy used "obscenity" while later plays were more likely to allude to or suggest vulgarity (*EN* 4.8). For further discussion, see Halliwell (2008) 317.

[63] Townsend (1996) 122.

[64] Nathans (2009) 19.

[65] See Cockrell (1996) 161-165 for examples of contemporaneous descriptions of the minstrel plays and the purportedly low character and vulgar behavior of the mostly-male audiences.

[66] Dover (1974) 114.

with the possible exception of the Spartans, the Greeks appear to have been more liberal and less prescriptive with respect to personal behavior than early Americans, whose colonial beginnings were partly founded in Puritanism.[67] There was comparatively little formal attempt to moderate behavior or thought, which might have something to do with the differences between Greek religion and Christianity. Although religion was central to and permeated every aspect of Greek life, ancient Greek religion was polytheistic and inherently hospitable to new gods, ideas, and interpretations. While specific gods were sometimes invoked, in daily life divinity was often conceived of as a "nameless collective", if only because people could never be sure which god was responsible for a particular divine intervention.[68] There was also no sacred book comparable to the Bible or the Koran in ancient Greek religion; the closest the Greeks came were the works of Homer and Hesiod, both of whom provided written *theogonies* that included the attributes and offices of the major deities (Herodotus *Histories* 2.53).[69] There was not even a canon of myths; there were differences between accounts of particular gods and heroes depending upon writer or city-state, and some cults do not appear to have had a particular myth, or story, associated with them, a feature Parker refers to as "cult without myth".[70]

Although the Greeks certainly had ideas about what was considered acceptable and unacceptable behavior, as reflected in their laws (such as the law of *hubris*) and in their literature (for instance, in mythological models of behavior), there was no single or dominant moral code imposed by divine law comparable to that seen later in Christianity or other monotheistic religions.[71] In lieu of this, the Greeks seem to have believed in a variety of "restrictive influences", including laws and divine intervention.[72] It might be said that Greek comedy, much like Greek religion, reflects the reality that there was no broad "attempt to control or police the contents" of people's minds or even their actions.[73] Since slaves were not viewed as part of civilized society in their exclusion from the *demos* and the rights of citizenship, they were not even under the same types of expectations as citizens. In fact, they were not expected to act like citizens at all, which is likely one of the reasons why they were so often depicted as the most vulgar and offensive of characters, because it expressed their oppositional position in society and their lack of status. Dover explained it well when he wrote that "being denied so many opportunities to *choose* between courses of action, the slave was not expected – as the citizen was expected – to display virtues of loyalty, good faith, and self-sacrifice."[74] While slaves sometimes lie and behave poorly because they lack self-control

[67] While debatable, many scholars have seen Puritanism as "the foundational movement of American culture". Robinson (1994) 738.

[68] Parker (2011) 65.

[69] Parker (2011) 25. For a comprehensive discussion of the religious beliefs of the Greeks and the evidence for these beliefs in the absence of a book, prophecy, or revelation, see Parker (2011) 1-39.

[70] Parker (2011) 23.

[71] See Fisher (1992) for a comprehensive study of the meaning and use of the concept of *hubris*.

[72] Herman (2006) 17-18.

[73] Parker (2011) 33.

[74] Dover (1974) 114.

(*sōphrosunē*) and are motivated by fear, need, and short-term gain, freemen by contrast are (in theory) truthful, better behaved, and "think big" (Menander *Heros* Fr. 3).[75]

Yet, perhaps the most compelling explanation for the comparatively better-behaved blackface minstrel is related to the fear of slave rebellion. Greek chattel slavery was evidently less conducive to insurrection than American slavery, which perhaps resulted in less apprehension of slaves and, in turn, less desire to legislate their behavior. While the planation was the cornerstone of American slavery, this kind of system did not exist in Greek slavery. Consequently, Greek individuals did not own large numbers of slaves and the slaves that they did hold were more ethnically varied. The diversity of the slave population in Greek city-states likely had more to do with the fact that Greeks took slaves from many different regions. There is evidence, however, that the Greeks were aware of the dangers of keeping slaves who hailed from the same group, which could imply that this diversity was at least partly by design. Plato's *Laws*, for instance, advises against keeping slaves who come from the same "nation" (*patriōtēs*) and share the same language (777c-d). Perhaps as a result of the heterogeneity of Greek slavery, there is little evidence of Greek laws legislating slave behavior, or even slavery in general. Even taking into account helotage, which is a very different form of servitude than chattel slavery (some scholars even view helots as more akin to serfs than slaves, not least in their lack of natal alienation), large-scale revolt in ancient Greece seems to have been exceedingly rare. There is no evidence of any massive revolts involving chattel slaves in classical Greek history, although there is evidence of sizeable numbers of slaves fleeing during periods of warfare (e.g. Thucydides *Peloponnesian War* 7.27.5; 8.40.2).[76] Even when small rebellions did occur, "they had no impact, or only a minimal one, on their own societies".[77]

While large-scale insurrection was also relatively rare in American slavery, which is rather extraordinary considering the high concentration of slaves on some plantations and the ethnic similarity of the slaves, there were some instances when it became a very real threat, such as the Stono Rebellion, which led to the South Carolinian Negro Act of 1740 barring slave (and more generally black) literacy.[78] Another infamous example is Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831, which resulted in the brutal slaughter of a number of whites, including women and children. News of insurrections elsewhere in the New World further helped to instill fear of similar occurrences in America, such as the Jamaican slave revolts. Aside from sheer racism, American hysteria over the possibility of slave insurrection led to ever-harsher slave codes, which paradoxically led to further unrest amongst slaves and, consequently, greater risk of rebellion.[79] Moreover, whites became "victimized" by their own fear and paranoia so that in this way "no one was truly free".[80] This subject could be expanded further to include other

[75] Dover (1974) 115.

[76] See Hunt (1998) 102-115 for a discussion of slave revolt in the ancient world.

[77] Urbainczyk (2008) 2. Slave rebellion, while never a major issue, appears to have been relatively more common in Roman times. For a detailed study of slave revolts in Greek and Roman antiquity with some comparative discussion, see Urbainczyk (2008).

[78] Rasmussen (2010) 201-202. For a thorough discussion of this rebellion, see Hoffer's book, *Cry Liberty* (2010).

[79] For a case-study (Louisiana) of the effects of slave insurrection, including the psychological effects of having to be "en garde", see Rodriguez (1992).

[80] Rodriguez (1992) 400.

possibilities, but suffice it to say that these are some of the reasons why American audiences seem to have preferred more sanguine and safely humorous, unthreatening slave characters who followed the expected rules of behavior. Not only did this reflect the reality of proscribed slave behavior, but representing ill-mannered and rebellious slaves would have been too unsettling to be humorous.

In sum, comparative studies have a way of revealing just as many differences as similarities. This, in turn, can help to bring subjects into sharper focus, which is one of the principle values of comparative research. The institution of slavery was important, perhaps essential, to the development of Greek *poleis*, particularly Athens, and to the early United States. Both societies found similar ways to justify what was for them a fundamental institution whose existence and necessity was taken for granted. Even though there were significant differences between the two, not least the absence of racial slavery in ancient Greece and the importance of race to slavery in the United States, both sought to draw stark conceptual distinctions between the slaves and the slaveholders. They did this, in part, by attributing a range of characteristics to slaves that aimed to justify their enslavement, such as mental and physical inferiority, shamelessness, and lack of honor. Playwrights drew upon this kind of ideology and in doing so advertised it to audiences, helping to naturalize the enslavement of the "other". While there are differences in the details, the Greek comic slave, with his vulgar costume and equally vulgar behavior, was just as suited to slavery as the blackface minstrel, with his laughable use of English and his silly but always entertaining songs and dances. By representing slaves in these ways, an innately inhumane institution that blurs the nuances and complexities inherent in every human being was sanitized, essentially stripped of its raw brutality, and made entertaining, perfectly suited to the consumption of slave societies. Audience members could leave the theatre feeling superior to the figures depicted on stage, even if many were in some ways little different from slaves in their working lives. They might even stop to purchase a souvenir on their way out.

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