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Comedy and Roman Slavery in *Plebs* (2013-22)

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From the Roman playwright Plautus (*c*. 254-184 BCE), who featured many slave characters in his Greek-inspired comedies, to films and television series such as *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (dir. R. Lester,1966), *Carry on Cleo* (dir. G. Thomas, 1964), *Up Pompeii* (BBC, 1969-71), and *Plebs* (ITV2, 2013-22), the representation of Roman slavery through a comedic lens has a rich and enduring history. This article investigates how modern British comedy,[1] specifically *Plebs*, portrays the institution.[2] It explores two questions. First, can slavery, with its undeniably brutal historical reality, really be a subject for contemporary comedy? What needs to be changed, diluted, or even removed, to make the representation of servitude, even within a comedic context, 'acceptable' to modern audiences, arguably more attuned to the inherent injustices of enslavement, and ideas of universal equality and freedom, than their 1960s counterparts? And how can this be achieved without trivializing the everyday realities of a system that was essentially 'conceived in violence'?[3] Secondly, how does the series' characterisation of slavery address this particular moment in modern popular culture?

Plebs: Concept and Context

Plebs is an award-winning British situation comedy ('sitcom') centred around three young men, one of them a slave character, living in Rome in 27 BCE. The series was co-written by the classically-educated Sam Leifer and comedy actor-writer Tom Basden, who plays one of the supporting characters. First broadcast on the UK free-to-air and niche, but little known, channel ITV2 in 2013, it ran for five seasons and concluded with a feature length special *Soldiers of Rome* in 2022, broadcast on the digital platform ITVX.[4] Commercially successful and critically lauded,[5] *Plebs* has been compared to popular British comedy series such as *Blackadder* (BBC, 1983-89) and *The InBetweeners* (E4, 2008-10),[6] and uses a Roman setting to explore contemporary issues familiar to a young, primarily male British audience such as securing affordable accommodation, romance (or just getting sex), navigating the challenges of urban life, and badly paid, dead-end office jobs. As Lisa Maurice observes, 'this Rome is more 2007 AD than 27 BC'.[7] *Plebs* also coincided with the release of several onscreen dramas about historical enslavement, with no fewer than ten films about American slavery appearing in cinemas (or on streaming platforms) between 2012 and 2022.[8] The seminal 1977 television series *Roots* was remade in 2016 (History Channel) and hailed as a 'spikily relevant' miniseries for the 'Black Lives Matter era',[9] while *Underground* (WGN, 2016-17), a television drama about an escape from a brutal southern slave plantation, ran for two seasons.[10] The multi-season Starz's *Spartacus* series (2010-13), which dramatized the famous servile revolt of 73-71 BCE, concluded as the first season of *Plebs* hit screens. Additionally, this decade marked the rise to prominence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in 2013 in protest at the killing of black Americans by white police officers, culminating in global anti-racist demonstrations following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020,[11] and intense examinations by public bodies and institutions of their, or their countries', slave-owning pasts.[12] *Plebs* did not appear in a cultural or political vacuum.

While the subject matter of *Plebs* is firmly rooted in its own time and inevitably reflects the social, cultural, and gender sensibilities of its twenty-first-century production context, it also harks back to some of the comedic stereotypes featured in 1960s shows such as *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *Carry on Cleo* and *Up Pompeii*: crude, juvenile, masculine, and marked by an obsession with sex and ubiquitous penis jokes, *Plebs* was described by one reviewer as 'a thinking man's toilet humour'.[13] *Plebs* features much more profanity (and male nudity) than *Carry on Cleo* or *Up Pompeii* and the sexual double entendres prevalent in those earlier productions are redundant for a contemporary television series broadcast well after the 9 pm 'watershed' and targeted at audiences considerably more relaxed about onscreen sex, nudity, and swearing. Nor does the series take itself too seriously, with the series' co-writer Tom Basden (and character Aurelius) describing the show as 'very daft',[14] and 'self-serving' in its approach to truth.[15] His co-writer, and the series' director Sam Leifer, also claims that 'the joke is the hero' and he would 'forego every historical accuracy' for the sake of a laugh, although he stresses that they strive to be 'true to the world of ancient Rome' where

possible.[16] Unsurprisingly, the series panders to audience expectations by focusing on a familiar set of cinematic tropes and conventions associated with the Roman world. Indeed, Leifer openly admits that he chose this particular historical period because it 'allows us to bring in gladiators and beheadings and orgies'.[17] The level of humour is also broadly contemporary: modern masculinity is mocked, sexual adventures go awry and money is short. Indeed, although the series may be set in ancient Rome, it is full of characters British audiences would recognize. As the *Guardian* reviewer, James Donahy, noted, 'Any of them could slip out of a toga and into an episode of *Skins* and fit right in. Marcus and Stylax could be Bob and Terry from *The Likely Lads*, Mark and Jez from *Peep Show* or Will and Jay from *The Inbetweeners* – the yin-yang of male friendship echoes down the ages'.[18] Or, as Leifer himself remarks, 'Same shit, different era'.[19] Furthermore, despite the characters' misadventures and disputes, male friendship invariably triumphs in the sitcom tradition of the 'happy ending', where the plot strands of each 30-minute episode are neatly 'closed off, reconciled and solved'.[20]

Plebs: Approaches to Slavery

Despite this levity and the series' overt parallels with contemporary life, *Plebs* still features two slave characters, one major, when it could conceivably have relegated the representation of Roman slavery to the periphery, or even avoided the theme altogether. While slave characters are expected within the wealthy households of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* and *Up Pompeii* – and necessary in texts influenced by Plautus' comedy, as these particular shows were[21] – it is less important for a sitcom about the daily struggles of impoverished 'plebs' for whom slave ownership is much less likely. Nor does the series draw back from representing the institution's centrality to Roman culture and society, featuring, for example, slave auctions, infant exposure, and rebellion. The slave characters' lack of civic and legal rights or bodily autonomy – common features of dramas set in the Roman world such as Starz's *Spartacus* (2010-13) and HBO's *Rome* (2005-7) – are also frequently referenced.[22] This can be partly explained by the longstanding tradition of featuring slave characters in comedic receptions. As noted earlier, they were central to many of Plautus' plots, and one character in particular, the cunning slave (*servus callidus*) 'whose spirit, poise, pluck, and wit often make him the hero of the show' was a favourite with audiences,[23] appearing in eight of his surviving twenty-one works.[24] Similarly, from Eddie Cantor's turn as the time-travelling Oklahoma resident sold into slavery in *Roman Scandals* (dir. F. Tuttle, 1933) to Horsa and Hengist in *Carry on Cleo*, Pseudolus in the musical *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, Lurcio in *Up Pompeii*, and Josephus in *The History of the World Part One* (dir. M. Brooks, 1981), the enslaved are frequently either the central or major supporting characters, providing much of the exposition and humour.[25] Leifer's insistence that the series strives to be 'true' to the period also necessitates some acknowledgement of slavery's central role in Roman culture and society.

Nevertheless, there is a deep contrast between the series' focus on contemporary problems such as humdrum jobs, failed relationships and the pressures of flat-sharing, and the use of character types that are so un-contemporary, namely the enslaved and Romans in general. How does the comedy arise from that gulf and to what extent is it potentially problematic? One approach the series adopts is to disrupt and subvert the rigid and exploitative master/slave power dynamic by 'neutralizing' its most distressing features. To explore this idea, I will examine the following themes: master/slave relations; role reversal and the equalisation of status; the slave market; and infant exposure.

Master/Slave Relations

Central to the series' success is the dysfunctional relationship between the main slave character Grumio (Ryan Sampson) and his owner Marcus Gallo (Tom Rosenthal). Modelled partly on the drunken cook from the *Cambridge Latin Course* (a slave character called Grumio also appears in a minor role in Plautus *Mostellaria*, 'The Ghost'),[26] the lazy, slow-witted Grumio lives with Marcus and the latter's sex-crazed Roman friend/work colleague, Stylax (Joel Fry), in a cramped and squalid flat in the rundown Subura district of Rome.[27] The other important slave character (seasons 1-2) is the intelligent, capable, and outspoken Metella (Lydia Rose Bewley), owned by the dim-witted Cynthia (Sophie Colquhoun). A dominant theme in the depiction of Roman servitude in film and television, from *Spartacus* (dir. S. Kubrik, 1960), *I Claudius* (BBC, 1979) and *Gladiator* (dir. R. Scott, 2000) to more recent works such as *Spartacus*, *Rome* and *Domina* (Sky Atlantic, 2021-24), is the stark, often brutal inequality in status and treatment between free and enslaved. Even *Forum* and *Up Pompeii*

highlight the formality of master/slave relations and the slave's complete subordination. By contrast, *Plebs* completely subverts this traditional paradigm, equalizing the power dynamic or even shifting it in favour of the enslaved. This is achieved in several ways.

First, Metella and Grumio are never treated as inferiors, but as friends and flatmates. Whereas previous comedic receptions always portrayed slaves addressing their owners as 'master' or 'mistress', Grumio calls Marcus by his first name, and Marcus frequently calls him 'mate', while Stylax calls him 'G-man'. Similarly, Metella calls her owner 'Cynth', and is called 'Mets' in return, underscoring both their intimacy and equality. Secondly, both slave characters enjoy complete freedom of movement, and neither is branded, disciplined, collared, chained, overworked, or poorly fed; even Lurcio in *Up Pompeii* complains bitterly about his inferior diet and being forced to eat from a bowl like a dog, while Pseudolus' mistress relishes the punishments she plans to inflict upon her hapless slave.[28] Again unlike Pseudolus and Lurcio, Grumio and Metella share the same living arrangements, eat alongside their owners and wear the same clothes another important contrast since inferior clothing is frequently deployed onscreen to underscore the inequality between slave and freeborn characters while also reflecting the Roman custom of using clothes to delineate social class, status, and identity.[29] Thirdly, the representation of gender, and particularly female slavery, mirrors contemporary notions of sexual rights and equality. Dispensing with the giggling, scantily clad slave girls of *A Funny thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* and *Up Pompeii* (a stereotype and motif prominent in many onscreen adaptations of Rome),[30] *Plebs* represents female servitude in arguably more progressive and positive ways. As noted earlier, Metella is the most capable and perceptive character onscreen, remarkable for her caustic wit, cleverness and agency. Not only does Cynthia rely upon her for all major decisions, she frequently defers to her as a social equal and from the outset her power and authority within the relationship are underscored. For example, as they arrive to inspect the rental property, Metella is immediately established as the chief decision maker and her approval counts:

> Metella: We're not staying here.
> Cynthia: No? Oh, really?
> (S01 E01)

Metella is never discouraged from expressing her views, nor are her opinions dismissed or disparaged on account of her enslaved status, another distinct shift from more conventional, earlier comedy series where master/slave relations were more strictly defined and historically accurate even if the institution, and the Roman world itself, were satirized and parodied.

Another way the series subverts and distorts the master/slave power dynamic is to subject what Marcus calls 'proper slaving', here coded as obedience, servility, and efficiency, to mockery and ridicule. Channelling modern consumer trends for 'impulse' purchases, in an episode entitled 'New Slave' (S02 E06), Stylax decides to buy Mushki, referred to ominously as a 'serial slave' and brilliantly played by the poet Tim Key, who delivers his lines with a subtle combination of passive aggressive humility and menace: 'My work's not done until you're in the land of nod, so SHUT your eyes….sir!' Initially, the flatmates are impressed with Mushki. Where Grumio's self-confessed 'talents' extend to 'comments, trivia, burp songs' and cooking inedible meals – endearing certainly, but not traditional servile attributes – Mushki shows Marcus what 'real' enslavement entails. He instinctively addresses the housemates as 'sir', carries Stylax home from the auction on his back, waits until his master has gone to sleep before retiring (which unnerves rather than pleases Stylax: when asked by Marcus how long Mushki stayed for, he replies, 'I dunno, I was too scared to look!'), negotiates favourable deals with local shopkeepers, cleans the flat with vigour and both warms and knits socks for his new master. Unlike Grumio, he also regards eating with his owners 'quite inappropriate', as one would expect of a slave character (in Starz's *Spartacus* Lucretia berates her husband for sitting down and drinking wine with his gladiator Spartacus). Endowed with exemplary culinary skills and appropriate levels of deference and solicitousness towards all the physical needs of his new masters, Mushki is everything that Grumio is not.

However, while such behaviour might be expected of slaves in serious dramas such as *Rome* and *Spartacus*, this extreme servility and proficiency is incongruous in *Plebs* because the series has created a space where enslavement is itself incongruous. Mushki's form of servitude must therefore be discredited. Like science fiction films where robots begin as efficient labour-saving devices and

then take over,[31] it soon becomes clear that Mushki is too perfect, and his over-zealous attentions reveal a much darker agenda: a desire for absolute control. In a perverse variation on the much more benign role reversal between Marcus and Grumio, Mushki reveals psychotic tendencies, insidiously undermining Grumio's position in the household – 'I've worked for too many masters to know that anyone who doesn't provide an essential service tends to get...*squeezed* out' (my emphasis) – and terrifying the flatmates into submission; even his use of 'sir' adopts a menacing tone. In one particularly sinister, but very funny, scene, while shaving Stylax's face with a huge knife Mushki discloses that he has had sixteen masters, some of whom he intimidatingly describes as 'fucking scum' before calmly assuring his new master: 'I'm very happy with you though, sir'; Stylax's terror is almost palpable. Eventually, after he tries to starve Cynthia and Metella to death because the latter asked for tomato sauce on her meal, and starts walking around the flat without underwear, they give him to their boss Flavia (played by Doon Mackichan) as a birthday present. Needless to say, he is soon controlling her as well. Clearly, 'proper slaving', or at least anything more efficient than Grumio, is coded as dangerous while Mushki's desire for perfection and concern for his master's needs are transformed into a sinister parody of the faithful and loyal slave character from the Roman tradition.[32] A 'normal' model of enslavement, Mushki appears ridiculous, whereas it is really the model of Grumio that is ridiculous if placed in its true historical context. As Mushki's unhinged personality emerges, it becomes clear that despite his frequent complaints about Grumio's lack of servile qualities, Marcus does not actually want a real slave but rather a friend or companion.

This comforting and endearing scenario has two important implications. It dilutes the moral questionability of creating enslaved characters in a series which draws upon modern concerns for its humour, and crafts a model more befitting a contemporary sitcom and a less deferential, more socially equal age. It also serves to distance the series from the condescending Roman literary tradition of representing slave characters as household 'pets', indulged for their playful pranks and granted temporary agency, but ultimately dependent and trained to obedience; as William Fitzgerald observes, the literature 'serves to naturalize the institution and its practices'.[33] *Plebs* cannot permit enslavement to be 'naturalized', so it distorts the historical realities of the master/slave relationship beyond recognition. In short, these characters are slaves in name only.

Role Reversal

A second feature of the series' neutralisation or 'sanitization' of enslavement is the complete reversal of master/slave roles, with owners assuming many of the responsibilities (and burdens) historically associated with the enslaved. This harks back to the theme of the *servus callidus* gaining the upper hand over weak, ineffectual masters in Plautus' plays and some modern receptions (notably Lurcio in *Up Pompeii*). However, whereas these works often emphasized the temporary nature of this ascendancy before restoration of the status quo at the end of the play/episode, in *Plebs* this reversal is both the norm and permanent. One of the ways this is conveyed is the working life (or lack of it) of the slave characters. Prominent in all onscreen depictions of the Roman world is the assumption that enslaved people were expected to toil so their masters could relax in comfort and luxury, and comedy is no exception. Margaret Malamud has drawn attention to the sharp visual contrast between the comedic singing episodes and 'shots of slaves toiling away' in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.[34] Even *Up Pompeii*'s Lurcio does the housework and serves his owners; when roles are reversed during an episode on the Spartacus rebellion it is symbolized by the owners doing the housework.

By contrast, in *Plebs* it is the 'free' citizen Marcus who goes out to work, drudging in a cramped office in a badly paid and pointless job which historically would probably have been performed by an enslaved person.[35] In the workplace, Marcus and Stylax are even known by their job titles, 'copier' and 'shredder', rather than their names, and their attitude towards their domineering boss Flavia is decidedly servile. Despite frequent, but ineffectual, admonitions and criticisms from Marcus that Grumio must behave like a 'proper slave', it is Marcus who is the real 'wage slave' in the household, while Grumio relaxes at home, chatting with the sleazy landlord and doing the occasional bit of cleaning and shopping (very badly), but mostly dreaming of food. Indeed, much comedic mileage is derived from Grumio's unpalatable meals which his master eats, furiously but helplessly. Likewise, it is the freeborn Cynthia who supports the household and pays the rent by seeking insecure, menial and even dubious employment, including a stint as a nightclub waitress. In reality she would probably be prostituting Metella to supplement the household income, as the wife of the *ludus* owner Lucretia

does with her gladiators and female attendants in Starz's *Spartacus*.[36] As Marcus ineffectually moans, 'we've got no money, the one of us with the best job is a slave' (S03 E01). Tellingly, when new flatmate Jason (who replaces Stylax in season four) complains to Grumio about the back breaking toil on one of Crassus' building sites, 'You're a slave, you must know what it means to be overworked?' Grumio calmly replies, 'Yeah, not really as it goes' (S04 E01).

'One Careful Owner': The Slave Market

The slave market is arguably one of the most common features of the depiction of slavery onscreen; even the Empress Livia in *Domina* is subjected to a humiliating public sale when she is arrested following a tavern brawl (S02 E01). Since comedy works best by parodying familiar motifs, the auction has also featured heavily. In most cases, the horror is undercut by the active participation of the victims, who join in or play up to the bidders for comedic effect. In *Carry on Cleo*, Horsa struts across the stage, trying to attract bids from an attractive young Roman woman, although he is sold to the older Willa Claudia (both are clearly interested in him sexually) and then branded with her initials.[37] In *The History of the World Part One*, the exchange between the auctioneer and the slave Josephus plays upon the actor Gregory Hines' career as a professional dancer in New York City, with Josephus treating the crowd to a 'sand' dance number; when asked where in Ethiopia he is from, he replies: '125th Street'.

However, in both these cases the victims conspire with the auction process out of desperation to secure a good owner, or simply to find a buyer (the unsold Josephus and Hengist are both condemned to a violent death in the arena). *Plebs* adopts a similarly irreverent approach in its depiction of Grumio's sale (S02 E06). Yet the tone is still different from these earlier texts, where the unwillingness of the enslaved and the use of coercion, restraints and dehumanizing language are evident, even if the slave characters are in no real jeopardy (Horsa easily escapes, and Josephus is rescued by the Empress Nympho). By contrast, *Plebs* downplays any sinister and contentious features. Indeed, Grumio actually wants to be there. In the episode described above, having engineered his own kidnapping after falling out with Marcus over Mushki, Grumio refuses Marcus' offer to reclaim him, and forces his master to pay an inflated sum to buy him back. Grumio also enthusiastically colludes in the sale. When this 'stylish accessory' comes up for auction, he basks in the auctioneer's description of his attributes. The cheery sales pitch, which deploys the language of a second-hand car salesman – 'all slaves are completely non-refundable', 'sold as seen', and descriptions of chains and shackles as 'a security device' – neutralizes any potential horror at the notion of buying and selling human beings.[38] It is more *Cash in the Attic* (BBC1, 2002-12; Channel 5, 2022-present), during which contestants compete over how much they can raise by selling antiques found in their homes, than *Roots* and *Spartacus* or even *Up Pompeii*.

Indeed, anything traditionally associated, either historically or onscreen, with the trade in enslaved people is not just sanitized, but removed entirely. There is no stripping of the victims for inspections, as found in contemporary dramas such as *Spartacus*, *Domina* and *Roots*, or any references to sexual exploitation; in fact, the scene is completely de-sexualized. We see a couple of women in the background, but the only victims shown being sold are the willing Grumio and the 'professional' slave Mushki. Nor are any of the slaves shackled or branded. Given that the auction is invariably represented as one of the most distressingly brutal and inhumane experiences in the lives of the enslaved, one must ask whether it is problematic, even offensive, to depict auctions entirely devoid of menace. Since Grumio must gain (and maintain) the upper hand in every dispute with Marcus, regardless of the circumstances, then his sale must therefore be presented as a 'victory'.

Infant Exposure

Infant exposure, whereby Roman newborns were abandoned and left to die either for economic reasons or because the father refused to acknowledge paternity, is an abhorrent practice by modern standards. While its true scale is disputed,[39] it was also an important source of native slave supply.[40] Although the kidnapping and enslavement of freeborn children is a theme in Plautus,[41] child exposure does not usually appear in comedies set in the Roman world and even serious dramas avoid it. When the historical consultant hired to advise on HBO's *Rome* suggested child exposure could be used to illustrate Romans' relationship to their children, a horrified executive producer replied: 'we couldn't do

that. We don't want to make them look *evil*' (original emphasis).[42] Yet the practice features in *Plebs*. When Grumio finds a baby girl, whom he names Binnie, at the local refuse dump, he makes plans to adopt her even though, as Marcus reminds him, slaves cannot legally do so (S02 E03). The scene's comedic value is immediately and deliberately signposted, first by the title of the episode ('Collection Day') and secondly, the fact that Grumio is there to 'recycle' the household waste. This modern reference to recycling potentially diminishes the horror audiences might feel regarding the practice of child abandonment (although Binnie's association with 'waste' is still discomforting), and, superficially at least, the episode offers yet another opportunity for 'bird-pulling' when Stylax encourages Grumio to hire an attractive wet nurse to care for the infant. The nurse's reference to modern feeding methods – 'breast is best!' – also underscores the contemporary tone, as does the restyling of the 'shelter' (there were no such charitable institutions in Rome)[43] where Binnie is initially placed as a benign children's home where unruly, misbehaving children torment the hapless manager (mirroring Marcus' own lack of authority over Grumio).

Nevertheless, despite the sexual angle, the modern child care arrangements and the fact that Binnie is cherished (and ends the episode being adopted by a loving Roman couple), her story still hints at the darker side of child welfare in ancient Rome.[44] Given this, one might ask why *Plebs* chooses to feature child exposure and make it a source of comedy when it studiously avoids the use of violence and intimidation, neutralizes the slave market, and subjects the Marcus/Grumio relationship to a complete role reversal (as detailed above). One possible reason is that Binnie provides a catalyst for exploring ideas of identity and belonging, highlighting Grumio's own 'journey' into servitude: he empathizes with Binnie because he himself was exposed by his deadbeat father, who appears later on seeking reconciliation (S03 E02). It is significant that only the slave characters Grumio and Metella show any genuine interest in her welfare, which implies a sense of camaraderie with other disenfranchised and marginalized persons; for the freeborn Marcus and Stylax she is either a noisy hindrance or a weapon in their perennial search for sex. Furthermore, while it is true that Grumio later trades her in for some tasty biscuits, his refusal to leave her at the shelter after the manager confirms that she is likely to end up a prostitute not only highlights Grumio's humanity and solidarity with the disempowered, but also the often bleak outlook for abandoned female children in the Roman world. These historical realities do creep in, if only fleetingly, and primarily to advance the familiar narrative of Marcus' and Grumio's numerous disputes/disagreements over their living arrangements and responsibilities.

Conclusion

The success of *Plebs* shows that featuring a major slave character and representing familiar aspects of the servile experience can be 'funny', but only by stripping out everything that is potentially sinister and unsettling for modern audiences, and by introducing an incongruous master/slave role reversal which is both absolute and permanent; it is a hollowed out, deeply sanitized and unrecognizable version of a profoundly inhumane institution. While it is true that earlier comedic receptions also parodied and satirized tropes such as slave markets, crucifixions (notably the film *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, dir. T. Jones, 1979), and a failed rebellion, they still featured some of enslavement's more insidious elements, notably the threat of physical violence and inferior conditions, as well as the strict social and legal hierarchies which governed master/slave relations and subjugated the enslaved. By contrast, *Plebs* suppresses anything remotely unpleasant to fit the conventions of a modern, irreverent sitcom regarded as a traditionally 'masculine form of humour'.[45] Grumio is endearingly guileless in his numerous battles for supremacy with Marcus, whose inadequacies as a master are mirrored by (and may be linked to) his persistent sexual failures, and consistently prevails, his power within the household enhanced as Marcus' authority is diminished. So why bother to feature enslavement, particularly in the form of a major character, if its most disturbing features have been so comprehensively neutered, and the master himself is in some respects the real 'slave' within the household? This is particularly important since at least one commentator does not even refer to these characters as 'slaves', but 'servants', despite the fact that the series pointedly deploys the term 'slave' to describe them and frequently references their lack of rights and legal status as human chattel.[46]

There are several possible reasons for the series' inclusion of slavery, even in this highly sanitized form. First, by making one of the housemates a slave, even one as incongruous as Grumio, *Plebs* creates opportunities for the sort of status-based conflict that sitcom enjoys and creates comedy out of. Secondly, it could be argued that *Plebs* is merely responding to a prior tradition of representing

enslavement in both Roman comedy and modern comedic receptions, with the characters of Grumio (lazy, incompetent) and Metella (intelligent, capable) building upon Plautus' and others' servile stereotypes. Thirdly, although the comedy is as juvenile as one might expect given comparisons with shows such as *The Inbetweeners*,[47] by including this important institution and referencing some of its obvious injustices – political and civil disenfranchisement, lack of bodily rights, and the treatment of humans as objects to be bought, sold, or abandoned – the series encourages audiences who might receive their history through a visual rather than a literary medium, to reflect on all aspects of Roman society. Furthermore, if the series had opted to exclude slave characters or failed to explore the servile experience, even within this deeply sanitized, satirical context, it could be criticized for ignoring not only the social and economic realities of the Roman world, but the painful history of enslavement more generally. While the series lacks the realism for which *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* was praised,[48] it still foregrounds the existence of slavery through the central character of Grumio, and issues around status, rights and responsibilities.

Nevertheless, any real or direct engagement with the political, social and cultural movements shaping the decade in which the series was broadcast is lacking. Several conversations around decolonisation and calls for redress for the historical wrongs of imperialism (including the treatment of black Africans) were taking place, notably the Rhodes Must Fall movement in 2015,[49] and the beginning of the Windrush scandal in 2018.[50] Furthermore, although the series ended in October 2019,[51] a few months later, in June 2020 and a month after the murder of George Floyd sparked global protests, the enslaver Edward Colston's statue in Bristol was toppled during a protest rally by the Black Lives Matter movement; many other statues linked to the British slave trade were also removed and venues renamed following similar actions across the US. Yet the inequality and brutality associated with all forms of slavery, which many contemporary films, television shows and public protests sought to highlight during this period, are markedly absent in *Plebs*. Furthermore, the series' comprehensive neutralization of the slave system through a permanent inversion of the master/slave relationship and deployment of contemporary language around 'recycling' and 'renewing licenses' effectively trivialize slavery's harsh realities. This comprehensive sanitization also represents a clear departure from the comedic tradition of depicting Roman slavery, master/slave relations, and the psychology of the enslaved (such as a desire for freedom) in historically authentic terms,[52] as comparisons with *Pleb*'s 1960s predecessors *Up Pompei* and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* have shown.[53] Indeed, to describe Grumio and Metella as 'slaves' could be perceived as deeply offensive to the memory of the millions of victims of historical enslavement if the term is so comprehensively denuded of any of its historical injustices and reviewers feel comfortable substituting 'servant' for 'slave'. *Plebs* may be the latest in a long line of sitcoms about the trials and tribulations of young male flatmates and their sexual misadventures, but it still has a responsibility to approach historical slavery, particularly at this culturally and racially sensitive juncture, with a degree of realism and authenticity.

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[1] This article draws partly upon research undertaken as part of my PhD thesis on the depiction of slavery in ancient world television drama: see Greenhalgh (2020).

[2] A French comedy series *Peplum* featuring a former slave Bravus, who becomes an advisor to the Emperor Maximus, appeared in 2015 on M6. Like *Plebs*, it explores contemporary themes through a Roman setting: the pressures of a stressful job and a demanding boss, difficult teenagers addicted to 'tablets', and a complicated family life.

[3] Lenski (2016: 275).

[4] This paper focuses primarily on seasons 1-5 of the television series, but references will be made to *Soldiers of Rome* where relevant. Many of the points made about the series' portrayal of slavery also apply to this feature length episode.

[5] Best New Comedy Programme at the British Comedy Awards 2013. It was the biggest sitcom launch in the channel's history (Kanter 2013). There was speculation in the press (Doll 2018) that Seth Rogan was developing a US version, but nothing has yet materialized.

[6] Donaghy (2013).

[7] Maurice (2017: 225).

[8] *Django Unchained* (2012), *Lincoln* (2013), *Belle* (2013), *12 Years a Slave* (2013), *Freedom* (2014), *The Keeping Room* (2014), *The Birth of a Nation* (2016), *Free State of Jones* (2016), *Harriet* (2019), *Emperor* (2020) (released on Netflix due to the Covid-19 pandemic), and *Emancipation* (2022). *12 Years* and *Lincoln* won Academy Awards, while *Django* was a major box office success for its director, Quentin Tarantino.

[9] Gilbert (2016).

[10] Other television series included *The Book of Negroes* (2015) and *The Long Song* (2018).

[11] This killing sparked one of the most 'riveting' periods of public protest in recent US history (Heaney 2020), drawing attention to ingrained racism and structural inequality at the heart of American society.

[12] For example, in 2020 The National Trust, a major UK charity which cares for historical homes and gardens, published an interim report on the links between its properties and colonialism and slavery.

[13] Jones (2016).

[14] DVD Bonus Track, Season 1.

[15] Basden (2013).

[16] Noven (2016).

[17] Holland (2014).

[18] Donaghy (2013). Leifer places the final series of *Peep Show* (Channel 4, 2003-15) on his 'recommended list' of television sitcoms (Noven 2016).

[19] DVD Bonus Track, Season 2.

[20] Mintz (1985: 114-115).

[21] On the different interpretations of the slave characters in Plautus, see McCarthy (2004: 17-34), Segal (1987: 165-6), Moore (1998: 40-1), and Barton (1993: 123-5, 147-9). On *Up Pompeii*'s debt to Plautus, see Malamud (2001: 197-8). *Forum* is directly lifted from Plautus' *Casina*, *Pseudolus* and *Miles Gloriosus.*

[22] Greenhalgh (2020: 119-53) on 'Shaming, Naming and Maiming' explores the theme of slave characters' lack of bodily autonomy in *Spartacus* and other contemporary texts, including *Rome*. Denied any legal authority over the use of their bodies, slaves were frequently instrumentalized to advance the interests of their owners in these series. This was also enshrined in Roman law where 'masters have the power of life and death over their slaves' (Gaius, *Institutes* 1.52; see Wiedemann 1994: 29) and slaves lacked the legal status of 'persons' (Gardner 2011: 415).

[23] Cyrino (2005: 165).

[24] Slave characters also feature in all six plays of the freedman Terence (*c*. 185/195-159 BCE), although they are less important to the plot and differ significantly in purpose from Plautus.

[25] *Chelmsford 123* (Channel 4, 1988-90) is a notable exception. Set in Roman Britain, the 'slaves' of the series are arguably the British native tribes. Like other portrayals of the Roman world, the enslaved occasionally appear as extras, but there is no suggestion that the natives themselves own any.

[26] Plautus' Grumio is a timid, profoundly servile slave character who tries to prevent Tranio, a prime example of the *servus callidus*, from wasting the master's money and corrupting his son.

[27] The Cambridge Latin Course was updated in 2022 and this 'lazy slave' motif removed. While Grumio still features, 'slavery is now depicted through the eyes of its victims, focusing on their anxieties and gruelling lives': https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/new-cambridge-latin-course-reflects-diversity-of-the-roman-world (accessed 12 November 2024).

[28] As Fitzgerald (2019: 193) notes, 'Plautine comedy is saturated with the language of punishment and torture'.

[29] George (2002: 42).

[30] Sharing the same writer (Talbot Rothwell), *Up Pompeii* imitates *Carry on Cleo* (and indeed *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*) where female bodies are offered up 'to the male gaze and the male snigger': Gray (1995: 95).

[31] Notably *I, Robot* (2004).

[32] Plautus' *Captivi* (*The Prisoners*) offers the 'paradigm' of the 'good slave': Thalmann (1996: 117). As prisoners of war, Tyndarus swaps identities with his master so the latter may be freed to arrange a trade; he almost dies in the quarries when the deception is discovered, but bears no ill will towards his master.

[33] Fitzgerald (2000: 8).

[34] Malamud (2001: 203).

[35] See Joshel (2010) on the variety of tasks slaves carried out both domestically (179-95) and in the workplace (195-214). 'Copyist' is cited as a typical job performed by the enslaved (183).

[36] Indeed, when the series does feature a prostitute character, she is a woman of agency and intelligence who fleeces the hapless flatmates.

[37] W.C., i.e. water-closet or toilet, consistent with the *Carry On* franchise's notorious potty humour.

[38] *Soldiers of Rome* also deploys this language when Marcus is chided for missing the deadline to 'license' Grumio.

[39] Corbier (2001: 66).

[40] Harris (1994: 9-10).

[41] It allows Roman audiences to accept the worthiness of 'good slaves' to be freed or to marry the hero. A notable example is Tyndarus from *Captivi*.

[42] Milnor (2008: 45).

[43] Corbier (2001: 64).

[44] Corbier (2001: 66).

[45] Mills (2009: 21).

[46] Holland (2014).

[47] Holland (2014).

[48] The film scholar Derek Elley was so impressed with the film that he called it 'the most accurate portrait of everyday [Roman] life' on screen: Elley (1984: 88). Cull (2001: 178-80) also praised the film's realistic portrayal of slavery.

[49] Following the successful removal of Cecil Rhodes' statue at the University of Cape Town in South Africa in March 2015, in 2016 similar demands were made to remove a statue of Rhodes in Oriel College, Oxford, although they were unsuccessful. Protests reignited after the killing of George Floyd in March 2020.

[50] Whereby people, many of them born British subjects and part of the 'Windrush' generation who had arrived in the UK from Caribbean countries before 1973, were wrongly detained, denied legal rights and, in some cases, wrongly deported.

[51] As mentioned earlier, *Soldiers of Rome* appeared in 2022 but little changed in terms of its depiction of slavery and the behaviour/attitudes of the freeborn characters towards Grumio (and vice versa).

[52] Incidentally, Grumio is finally freed at the end of *Soldiers of Rome*, marking the series' conclusion, with Marcus recognizing Grumio as his 'brother'.

[53] It has even been suggested that Pseudolus' strong desire for freedom not only reflects the behaviour of slave characters in Plautus' plays, but represents a critique of McCarthyism and its suppression of freedom of speech: the actor who played him on stage and onscreen, Zero Mostel, was blacklisted for alleged membership of the Communist Party: Cyrino (2005: 173). Sinyard (1985: 42) sees the film as an attempt by Lester to expose contemporary social and economic injustice. Lurcio also yearns for his freedom.