

“Nice Figure, a Little Over the Hill”: ‘Elderly’ Women in Roman New Comedy

Roman New Comedy focuses on the young; the older generation obstructs the freewheeling pursuits of the younger, like drinking, dining, and chasing *meretrices*. When the plays explore the sexuality and experiences of the older generation, it is through the inappropriate behavior of the lecherous *senex*, who desires extramarital sex with his son’s *amica*. The character of the comic *anus*, the counterpart of the *senex*, is rarely considered by the playwrights. So too by scholars: the lascivious *senex* draws analysis (Cody 1976, Duckworth 1952, Segal 1968, and others), while his wife is less studied (James 2013, Krauss 2004, Rosivach 1994). Nevertheless, Plautus and Terence do represent the feelings and desires of older woman in passing, in mockery, and in sympathy. This paper will explore these references and the ways in which they support or undermine cultural expectations for older women’s sexuality and familial role.

Roman comedy’s *senex* is elderly (65+), but his wife is younger (35-45), given Roman marriage customs (Saller 1987). Regardless of actual age, she wears the standard old woman mask (Marshall 2006), and her husband thinks her malodorous (*Asinaria*), disgusting (*Casina*), and hated like snakes (*Mercator*). Revulsion for the comic *uxor* is a product of the dramatic convention: older men hate their wives, so the older woman is unattractive. Furthermore, as child-bearing *uxores*, they have provided heirs and should no longer desire sex (according to Roman social ideology). Their husbands wish them to retreat, never question men’s affairs, or die altogether (e.g. Periphanes, *Epidicus*). But how accurate are their husbands’ mocking jibes, their asexuality, and expectations of non-interference? To answer, the context of jokes, women’s representations of themselves and their needs, and observations of other characters must be considered.

First, is the comic *anus* objectively repulsive? Artemona self-deprecates when she threatens to punish her philandering husband by kissing him (*Asinaria* 903). Lecherous Demaenetus (*Asinaria*) and Lysidamus (*Casina*) wish their “disgusting” wives dead, but these women obstruct their philandering. Micio (*Adelphoe*) is generous until faced with marriage to “an old hag” (his daughter-in-law’s mother). But while Micio is 65, Sostrata has a young daughter, and would have been much younger herself. *Mercator* adds further nuance: confusing *uxor* Dorippa for the purported concubine of his employer, the cook says that even though she is getting on in years, she has a nice figure, she is not bad-looking, and she will make a good concubine (755-7).

Both Plautus and Terence question the asexuality of the formerly-procreative *uxor*. Though they confine their desires to marriage, unlike their husbands, these women still have sexual needs. Artemona (*Asinaria*) rebukes her husband for “plowing someone else’s field, while leaving his own untilled” (874); Simo (*Mostellaria*) boasts of having escaped sex with his wife, who tried to lure him into bed (692-705); and Nausistrata in *Phormio* laments that she is not getting any younger, with little hope of holding her husband’s attention (1021-25).

Finally, while *senes* find wives’ actions intrusive, older *uxores* conform to cultural expectations for their gender and status. They are responsible for the moral instruction of children (Hemelrijk 1999; Artemona in *Asinaria*), manage the household and funds (D’Ambra 2006; Cleostrata in *Casina*), and expect their husbands to behave appropriately for their age and class (Krauss 2004; Dorippa in *Mercator*, Nausistrata in *Phormio*). The *uxor dotata* wielded authority through her production of a son and heir and bringing a large dowry into the marriage. By conforming to social expectations, she may expect her husband to uphold social standards for age and gender as well.

The comic *anus* is under-analyzed: as a blocking character she is often ignored in scholarship or accepted as presented by her offensive mate. But both playwrights offer sympathy, acknowledge human sexuality, and contradict her husband's affront at her interference. These fleeting glimpses of her life afford the only extant evidence of adult citizen women's lived realities in this period of Roman social history and deserve further study.

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