

In my class on “Ancient Comedy: Then and Now,” I teach many plays that deal with uncomfortable issues: slavery and torture of slaves, rape, gender-crossing, and baby-swapping, to name but a few. I also teach at a private liberal arts college where everyone is polite, too polite to argue with me or to raise delicate issues. In such a course, we teach material that makes us, the teachers, uncomfortable, and so I suspect it makes the students uncomfortable too. We teach it, however, not to make our students uncomfortable but to unsettle their presumptions, to defamiliarize the familiar. And making them read scenes aloud and perform them in front of the class each day is even more unsettling, but also eye-opening.

In my Comedy class this semester, I have, out of 24 students, only one who is a student of color (African-American). I have observed that, while the rest of my students are made very uncomfortable by reading aloud and performing gender-bending scenes (e.g., Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazusai* or Plautus’s *Casina*), this particular student is perfectly happy to play, for example, the role of Pardalisca, the maid in *Casina*, modulating his voice to appear feminine, or to play roles in which a male is acting the part of a female. The rest of the class looks amused and askance at his performances. They are far less comfortable than he is acting out these scenes.

But when it comes time to talk about *Truculentus*, where Callicles arrives with his slaves, driving two maids ahead of him with goads and whips, and says to Syra, Phronesium’s maid: “I questioned you both when you were strung up by your thumbs on the whipping post” (777), or when Truculentus says to Astaphium: “This back is one field that will never know a whip’s furrows” (314), my normally voluble student becomes quiet, no other student will talk, and I do not feel that I can force the issue. Furthermore, I am left trying to explain why these jokes are now or ever were funny, and to whom they were/are funny.

I will explore in my presentation how to present slavery and the torture of slaves in a Comedy course, especially a course in which only one student is of color; why some students might find gender-bending a more comfortable topic than slavery (and why some may not); strategies for getting students to confront these topics in a productive way; and how to use comedy as a vehicle for facilitating this kind of a discussion. Lastly I will explore what difference the presence of one student of color makes in such a class.

