In 192 CE, a young Roman senator sitting in the front row of a show at the Colosseum in Rome could hardly restrain his laughter at what he saw. It was not a good moment to be caught laughing.

The emperor Commodus himself was hosting the spectacles, to a presumably packed crowd of some fifty thousand people—senators, as was the rule, in the ringside seats with the best view, while the women and slaves were squashed at the very back, high up and hardly able to see the bloody conflicts playing out more than a hundred feet beneath them in the arena. It could be that, for this particular show, some people had decided to stay away, for the story had got around that the emperor—the star of the spectacle, as well as its host—was intending to dress up as Hercules and fire deadly arrows into the audience. Perhaps this was one of those occasions when it was safer to be a slave (or female) and in the back row.¹

Rich and poor, scared and fearless, the audience needed stamina. The proceedings went on all day for fourteen days. The seats were hard, and those with money and sense must have brought cushions, drinks, and picnics. Everyone knew that applause for the emperor’s antics—as gladiator, wild-beast hunter, and god look-alike—was required. On the first day, he killed a hundred bears, “hurling spears at them from the balustrade around the arena” (“a display of marksmanship rather than of courage,” as one eyewitness tartly observed).² On other days, his animal
victims were brought to him on the floor of the arena but safely restrained in nets, and after lunch he would follow up these beast hunts with some mocked-up gladiatorial combat (at which he was of course always victorious) before the regular fighters came out to please the crowd.

It was during these shows, which took place just a couple of months before Commodus’ assassination on 31 December 192, that our senator nearly burst into laughter but managed to disguise the telltale signs of mirth on his face by plucking some laurel leaves from the wreath he was wearing and chewing on them hard. Or that is what he tells us in his own account.3

The senator in question was the historian Cassius Dio, whose family—originally from Bithynia, in modern Turkey—had been active in imperial Roman politics for generations.4 Dio himself became a leading player in the political life of the early third century CE: he was consul for the first time in around 205, during the reign of the emperor Septimius Severus, and again in 229, as the colleague of the emperor Severus Alexander; among other appointments, he served as governor of the provinces of Africa, Dalmatia, and Pannonia. But he is now better known as the author of an eighty-volume history of Rome, written in Greek, covering the period from the mythical arrival of Aeneas in Italy up till his own day, well over a millennium later, in the third century CE—and it is in one of the later books of this history that we learn of the stifled laugh. As Dio himself explains, the whole project took him more than twenty years, starting in the late 190s, first to research and then to write. Almost a third survives in its original form; for much of the rest (including the events of 192), we depend on more or less accurate medieval summaries of, or excerpts from, Dio’s text.5

The particular prompt for Dio’s half-stifled laughter was one memorable moment of imperial histrionics. After noting the emperor’s threats of Herculean violence against the audience in general, Dio’s account turns to Commodus’ assault on the senators in their—dangerously exposed—seats at the front:

He did something else along the same lines to us senators, which gave us good reason to think that we were about to die. That is to say, he killed an ostrich, cut off its head, and came over to where we were sitting, holding up the head in his left hand and in his right the bloody sword. He said absolutely nothing, but with a grin he shook his own head, making it clear that he would do the same to us. And in fact many would have been put to death on the spot by the sword for laughing at him (for it was laughter rather than distress that took hold of us) if I had not myself taken some laurel leaves
from my garland and chewed on them, and persuaded the others sitting near me to chew on them too—so that, by continually moving our mouths, we might hide the fact that we were laughing.\(^6\)

This glimpse of life in the dangerous front line of Roman imperial politics is one of the rare occasions where, across almost two thousand years, Roman laughter seems to come truly alive. We recognize the sensation that Dio describes; we can almost feel what he must have felt. In fact, his short account of how he desperately tried to conceal his laughter is bound to resonate with anyone who has ever bitten their lip, their chewing gum, or their eraser to prevent some dangerous or embarrassing hilarity from erupting in an entirely inappropriate setting, to disguise or contain the telltale quivers of face and mouth. Replace the laurel leaves with candy, and it is one of those moments when the Romans seem just like us.

Some might now say that Dio was in danger of “getting the giggles” or “corpsing,” which is how we often envisage that struggle between, on the one hand, discretion, obedience, or politeness and, on the other, the laughter that stubbornly refuses to be put down. But there are in Dio’s language none of the gendered associations that come with the English word *giggle*—the sound, as Angela Carter memorably put it, that “expresses the innocent glee with which women humiliate men in the only way available to them.”\(^7\) Nor does Dio use the Greek word *kichlizein*, often translated as “giggle” and with its own significantly eroticized implications; indeed, on one occasion, it is explicitly defined as “the laughter of prostitutes.”\(^8\) What Dio was trying to keep to himself was *gelos* or *gelan*, the standard Greek word, from Homer to late Roman antiquity and beyond, for “laughter” or “to laugh” (and the root of some of the modern technical terminology of laughter—the adjective *gelastic* and the noun *agelast*, “nonlaugher”—which, I am afraid, will inevitably crop up in the chapters that follow).\(^9\)

There is, of course, something curiously gratifying about a story that casts the excesses of Roman imperial power as the object of laughter. Dio’s account of Commodus’ threats in the amphitheater—both menacing and ridiculous as they were—suggests that laughter could be one of the weapons of those opposed to Roman autocracy and the abuse of power: one response by the disaffected was violence, conspiracy, or rebellion; another was to refuse to take it seriously.

This is not the only occasion in Dio’s *History* when laughter plays a role in the clash between Roman power and its subjects. There is another, even less well-known story in his account of Rome’s expansion.
at the beginning of the third century BCE, almost five hundred years earlier—which brought the Romans into conflict with the Greek town of Tarentum in South Italy. At the start of hostilities, the Romans dispatched envoys to Tarentum, dressed in their formal togas, intending to use this costume to impress their adversaries. When they arrived, according to Dio at least (there are other versions), the Tarentines laughed at the Romans’ dress, and one man managed to shit all over the clean Roman clothes of the chief envoy, Lucius Postumius Megellus. This went down well with the locals but provoked a predictable response from Postumius: “‘Laugh,’ he said, ‘laugh while you still can! For you will be crying for a very long time, when you wash these clothes clean with your blood.’” The threat, of course, came true; Roman victory meant that the Tarentines did shortly pay with their blood.10

What made the Tarentines laugh? In part, maybe, it was a laugh of derision or scorn (that certainly is how, in Dio’s account, Postumius took it when his toga was aggressively fouled). But Dio implies that the sheer silliness of the formal Roman dress was also a factor in causing the Tarentines to crack up. In other words, this combination of laughter, power, and menace matches the much later story from the Colosseum. Power is met, and spontaneously challenged, by laughter. In the case of Tarentum there is an added extra: a clear hint that the cumbersome and hopelessly impractical Roman toga could look as funny to non-Romans in the ancient world as it now does, in the modern, to us.

Dio’s stifled laughter in the arena raises three important sets of questions, which this book will explore. First, what prompted the Romans to laugh? Or, to be realistic, what prompted urban elite male Romans to laugh? For we have almost no access to the laughter of the poor, of the peasants, of slaves, or of women—except in the descriptions that urban elite males give.11 In the ancient world, as often now, one way of marking difference among different social groups was to assert that they laughed differently, and at different things. Second, how did laughter operate in Roman elite culture, and what were its effects? What political, intellectual, or ideological jobs did it do? How was it controlled and policed? And what does that tell us about how Roman society worked more generally? Third, how far can we now understand or share the Roman culture of laughter? Were there some aspects of it in which the Romans really were “just like us”? Or will modern historians of Roman laughter always resemble anxious guests at a foreign party—joining in with the hearty chuckling when it seems the polite thing to do but never quite sure that they have really got the joke?
These are big questions, which I hope will open up new perspectives on the social and cultural life of ancient Rome, as well as contribute some classical insights to the cross-cultural history of human laughter—and I mean primarily laughter, not humor, wit, emotion, satire, epigram, or comedy, even though all those related subjects will make occasional appearances in what follows. A second look at Dio’s description of the scene in the Colosseum reveals just how complicated, intriguing, and (sometimes unexpectedly) revealing those questions can be. Simple as it may seem at first sight, there is more to the narrative of Dio’s laugh than a straightforward, first-person account of a young man resourceful enough, in the deadly power politics of second-century Rome, to suppress his laughter, and so save his skin, just by chewing on some laurel leaves. For a start, in Dio’s account the strategy adopted is definitely chewing, not—as would be more familiar to us—biting. Of course, it is tempting to tell the story as if it exactly matched the modern cliché of the desperate laugh who crunches on some convenient implement to repress his laughter (“Dio recorded how he had kept himself from laughing . . . by chewing desperately on a laurel leaf,” as one modern historian summarized the event12). But Dio makes clear that he was not actually preventing himself from laughing but rather exploiting the movement of his jaws on the leaves as a clever disguise—an alibi, even—for the movement that his laughter produced.

WHY DID DIO LAUGH?

One tricky issue is how power operated on different sides of this laugh. The idea that Dio’s half-concealed outburst amounted to an act of subversion or resistance to Commodus’ tyranny is, of course, one compelling way of seeing it. And that would fit with the views of many modern theorists and critics who characterize laughter as an “unruly force” and “a site of popular resistance to totalitarianism.”13 In these terms, Dio’s laugh was a spontaneous and powerful weapon in the standoff between a vicious autocrat and an apparently supine Senate: not only because it was an expression of senatorial opposition but also because it acted more positively, to make Commodus seem ridiculous, to cut him down to size. As in the story of the Tarentines, it is impossible to exclude the element of derision: a person who prompts us to laugh is, by definition, laughable (or laugh-able, a term whose ambiguities will be a recurrent theme in this book14).
But that is only part of the picture. For laughter, in its various guises, can be a weapon of the ruling power, as well as against it. And in this story the emperor himself was (as I have translated it) grinning, as he shook his own head while waving the ostrich’s at the frightened, bemused—or amused—senators. The word Dio uses is *sesérōs* (from the verb *sesērenai*), which means literally “parting the lips” (it is also used of “gaping” wounds) and can carry a friendly or more often, as presumably here, a threatening sense. No doubt the emperor’s gesture is to be distinguished from Dio’s simple “laugh” (which is what my translation aims to do, though possibly introducing misleading modern associations with the word *grin*). But this is nevertheless another of those words—of moving the lips and mouth—that make up the wide vocabulary of laughter and its cognates in ancient Greek.

Roman power relations of all kinds were displayed, negotiated, manipulated, or contested with a laugh. For every laugh in the face of autocracy, there was another laugh by the powerful at the expense of the weak—or even laughter imposed upon the weak by the strong. That, in a sense, is one message of the sneer of Postumius at the Tarentines (“Laugh, laugh . . .”), and it is more obviously the moral of a chilling anecdote about one of Commodus’ predecessors, the emperor Caligula: he had forced a man to watch the execution of his own son in the morning, then invited him to dinner in the afternoon—and forced him to laugh and joke. Laughter, in other words, flourished amid the inequalities of the Roman social and geopolitical order.

Even trickier is the question of what exactly Dio was laughing at. Why did the display of the emperor brandishing the ostrich head have the senator reaching for his garland? We are not dealing with a joke here. Although the study of laughter and the study of jokes often go together (and the second part of this chapter looks at the relationship between some Roman laughter and some Latin verbal jokes), most laughter in most cultures has nothing to do with jokes at all. So was it, as Dio himself implies, that the sight of the emperor dressed up in the costume of an arena fighter (or rather dressed down, with bare feet and wearing just a tunic) and proudly decapitating an ungainly bird with the longest, and silliest, neck in the world could not help but appear ridiculous—whatever the menace that might lie behind it? Was it as if the emperor had turned himself into a parody of that heroic and mythical decapitator Perseus, brandishing his sword and the head of the Gorgon Medusa? Or was the laughter, as most recent commentators have imagined, produced by the terror of the occasion—what we would call
a nervous laugh, and nothing to do with the potentially comic aspects of the display at all?19

Laughter often produces these interpretative dilemmas. The most common response to any outburst of laughing is the question “What are you (or they) laughing at?” or rather “Why are you (or they) laughing?” (for, despite some powerful theories to the contrary, laughter is not always laughter at20). There is, of course, no definitive, right answer, least of all from the mouth of the laugher. In fact, any answer given is rarely an independent or objective explanation but almost always part of the debates, contestations, fears, paradoxes, hilarities, transgressions, or anxieties that produced the laughter in the first place. In this case, imagine that Dio had not managed to control himself but had been caught chortling by one of Commodus’ henchmen, who proceeded to challenge him as to why he was laughing. It is not hard to guess roughly what he might have said—something, perhaps, to do with a joke that his neighbor had just whispered in his ear, or with that bald man in the row behind (and certainly not to do with the antics of the emperor).21 Nor is it hard to guess how he might have presented the scene in the safety of his home later that evening: “Of course, I just laughed at him . . .” For if laughter is, or can be, political, so too are all those claims people make about having laughed—and the reasons they give (true or false) for doing so.

These are certainly some of the factors at work in Dio’s account of this occasion in his History. It is such an appealing description, and it is so easy for us to empathize with what seems close to a very modern struggle to keep the “giggle” in, that we are liable to overlook its literary and political artifice and to imagine that we are (however remotely) eyewitnesses of a Roman laugh. But, of course, we are not. This is a carefully crafted analysis, chosen for excerption in a medieval digest (whose compiler no doubt found it a vivid and pointed tale of imperial transgression), originally written some two decades after the events it describes—a moment when it must have seemed wise for any writer to distance himself from the tyrant-emperor Commodus. And distance himself is exactly what Dio does by claiming to have laughed at the antics not from fear but at the sheer absurdity of the scene (“It was laughter rather than distress that took hold of us,” as he insists, against all those who would accuse him of nervous laughter). The very point of his account lies in the retrospective, and possibly tendentious, interpretation that it offers. To say “I found this funny” or, even better, “I had to conceal my laughter, else I would have been put to death” simultaneously indicts and ridicules the
tyrant while casting the writer as a down-to-earth, genial observer not taken in by the ruler’s cruel but empty posturing. Which is no doubt just what Dio intended.

**HAHAHAEE, 161 BCE**

My second instance of laughter was to be heard less than a mile away from the site of the Colosseum, almost four hundred years earlier, in 161 BCE. Laughter of a very different kind, it occurred on the stage of a Roman comedy, not in a spectacle played out under the eye of a threatening emperor but in the course of one of those festivals of fun, games, and worship of the gods that had been, in some form or other, a part of Roman urban culture as far back as we can trace it. This was not theater as we now know it, nor even, in our terms, a “stage.” In the second century BCE, there were still no permanent theater buildings in Rome; performances took place in the open air, in temporary wooden structures sometimes erected around the steps of a temple (most likely to provide a convenient block of seating for the audience—which cannot have amounted to more than a few thousand). In the case I shall be exploring, the theater was probably put up on the Capitoline Hill, around the temple of the Great Mother (Magna Mater).

It must have been a jolly and lighthearted atmosphere—perhaps even raucous. Romancomedies typically featured entangled boy-wants-girl intrigues and a series of more or less stock characters (the clever slave, the mean brothel keeper, the boastful but rather stupid soldier, and so on), each recognizable by its distinctive theatrical mask. As specialists have long insisted, most of the Roman comedy that survives has strong links with its Greek predecessors. I shall return to these in chapter 4; for the moment, I am concentrating on the Roman context. Whatever the laughter erupting from the audience, I shall focus first on a couple of instances of laughter between the actors onstage, written into the comic script. They introduce an even more subtle laughter narrative than Dio’s account of his giggle in the Colosseum and show how knowingly a Roman writer could exploit the tricky dilemmas of what a laugh could mean.

These two cases of scripted laughter come from *The Eunuch*, by Publius Terentius Afer (now usually known as Terence), which was first performed in 161 BCE. It has always been the most popular of Terence’s plays, was given an immediate second showing, and reputedly earned its author the unprecedented sum of eight thousand sesterces.
from the official sponsors. The memorable plot involves all the usual romantic intrigues but owes its extra punch to an outrageous scenario of disguise and cross-dressing—in which a lusty, love-sick young man (Chaerea) pretends to be a eunuch in order to get up close to the (slave) girl of his affections (Pamphila), who belongs to a courtesan called Thais. It is a marker of the almost unbridgeable gulf between ancient sexual politics and our own that the “happy ending” comes after Chaerea has used his eunuch disguise to rape Pamphila, as a prelude to the wedding bells that ring for them in the finale of the play. One version of the ancient production notes claims that the precise occasion of the play’s first performance was the Roman festival of the Megalesia, in honor of the Great Mother (hence the suggestion that the performance may well have taken place around the steps of her temple). If that is correct, then the context itself must have given the plot a curious piquancy. For the priests of the Great Mother, the so-called Galli, who lived in the temple precinct, were themselves eunuchs, reputedly self-castrated—as Roman writers loved to dwell on, and to decry—with a sharpened flint. Eunuchs and their look-alikes, in other words, would have been on view both inside and outside this drama.

At two points in the play, one of the characters, Gnatho (Gnasher), a typically ancient comic combination of jokester, sponger, and flatterer, erupts in a peal of laughter: hahahaha. These are two of only a dozen or so occasions in which classical Latin literature explicitly represents the sound of laughter, and for that reason alone they are worth looking at carefully; we do not need, as we normally do, to infer laughter as part of a comic exchange, since we are explicitly told when and where it occurred. As another tale from the very front line of Roman laughter, it is well worth the effort to decode. The complexity; the multiple perspectives; the twists and turns among joker, recipient, and observers (on- and offstage); and the sheer difficulty in getting the joke are all part of the point.

The scripted laughter is part of a series of exchanges between the sponger Gnatho and Thraso, a blustering soldier in the service of some unidentified Eastern monarch, who feature in one of the play’s intricate subplots (which may have been as difficult for some of the ancient audience to follow in detail as for us—indeed a bit of bafflement was all part of the fun). The soldier not only is Gnatho’s meal ticket but had also been the owner of Pamphila and is himself in love with Thais (in fact he had given young Pamphila to Thais as a love gift). In the scenes in question, Thraso is bragging about his various exploits to Gnatho, who (as the