Let us turn instead to meaner kinds of misbehaviour. With those jaws of yours, and those lungs, and that gladiatorial strength, you drank so much wine at Hippias' wedding, Antony, that on the next day you had to be sick in full view of the people of Rome. It was a disgusting sight; even to hear what happened is disgusting. If you had behaved like that at a private dinner party, among those outsize drinking cups of yours, everyone would have regarded it as disgraceful enough. But here, in the Assembly of the Roman People, was a man holding public office, a Master of the Horse - from whom even a belch would have been unseemly - flooding his own lap and the whole platform with the gobbets of wine-reeking food he had vomited up.¹

Cicero intended more than laughter from this description of Mark Antony. Moral rhetoric of the late Roman Republic, studded with personal abuse, was a serious weapon of political competition. Magistrates and also-rans routinely accused their rivals of sacrilege and sexual offences or questioned their family pedigree. The conspicuous display of wealth, through lavish architecture or oriental art, was also a constant theme in the demonisation of rivals. Luxury could imply waste, unRoman corruption, the erosion of the rustic simplicity cherished in Roman civic mythology. Politicians might even slander the most intimate domestic affairs of opponents, denouncing their dining habits or their exorbitant appetites. President Clinton's despair at the 'politics of personal destruction', to him anathema to responsible political debate, recalled the maxim of Roman moralists like Pliny that 'it is our leisure moments which betray us.'² Pliny's statement was typical of the belief in Roman political discourse that, rather than ideologies and policies, it was domestic, social and personal conduct that most illuminated the qualities of Roman leaders. Political authority derived much from the private display of civic virtue.

The approach of this article is threefold. It will define the place of luxury within the ideology of moral decline as espoused by moralists in the Late Republic. It will then reassess the problem of why sumptuary legislation was frequently revisited, analysing the responses of Roman moralists to the impact of sumptuary laws in the

¹ Cic. Phil. 2.25.63.
² Plin. Pan. 82.8-9.
Late Republic and Early Empire. Finally, it will locate Augustus' reforms within the ideological context of moral discourses on luxury in that period, explicating the layers of symbolism in Augustus' sumptuary regulations of clothing and banqueting. This article takes an unorthodox approach. By examining the symbolism of the laws themselves rather than just their effectiveness, Augustus' sumptuary laws prove more than merely flawed regulations, taking on a new significance altogether. As is argued here, the laws have less to do with control of social behaviour than with the legitimisation of power. The ideological force of Augustus' sumptuary laws derives from the potency of themes of social behaviour (banqueting, drinking, gambling and dress) in Roman political discourse. To contextualise Augustus' laws, it will be necessary first to identify the place of luxury within the value system of elite moralists in the Late Republic.

As the new ruler and first citizen of the Roman empire, Augustus founded his authority on moral revolution. It was his celebrated revival of Rome's ancestral morals which officially justified his autocracy, his gradual appropriation of the political power that had been traditionally shared by competing elite families. In the Res Gestae, his own commemorative inscription, Augustus boasted:

By new laws which I proposed, I restored many exemplary practices of our ancestors which were falling out of use in our own time, and I myself transmitted many exemplars to be imitated by posterity.

A neglected part of Augustus' moral revolution was his regulation of everyday social behaviour. While reconstituting the republic after successive civil wars, Augustus passed a series of sumptuary laws. They restricted the number of state banquets, and regulated even household dining. Gellius records that:

The Lex Julia came before the people when Caesar Augustus was Emperor. This set an upper limit of expenditure on a dinner at 200 sesterces on working days, 300 on the Kalends, Ides, Nones and some other holidays, 1000 for weddings and wedding feasts. Ateius Capito

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4 Aug. RG 8.5.

5 Dio. 54.2.
records another edict - but I do not quite recall whether it belongs to the divine Augustus or to Tiberius Caesar - permitting expenditure on dinner at various festivals to increase from 300 sesterces to 2000, so that the rising tide of extravagance might at least be confined within those limits.6

This small passage may appear prima facie as a minor footnote in Augustus' major constitutional, military and political reforms. Yet it exemplifies several significant themes of Augustan moral revivalism: that Augustus' moral legislation embraced not only marital and sexual relations but the very regulation of display, consumption, and private expenditure, known as sumptuary laws, as part of a broader programme of moral reform;7 that 'extravagance' was considered sufficiently threatening to the wider community that it warranted legislative intervention by the state, and that elite moralists were conscious of the inefficacy of the laws. Most significant, however, is the inference that such sumptuary regulations were considered desirable despite their limited effectiveness. Yet the urge of Roman elites to regulate leisure activities remains largely unexplained. Precisely why Augustus would re-enact sumptuary laws, what value they were presumed to have, is the focus of this analysis.

Augustus' sumptuary laws followed a tradition of sumptuary legislation under the republic. Between 218BC and 18BC, approximately 33 separate edicts or laws were promulgated in Rome by senators, magistrates, or popular assemblies. The frequency of Roman sumptuary laws itself suggests their ineffectiveness, but demands explanation. Owing to assumptions about their very purpose, modern analysis of Roman political history has almost wholly disregarded sumptuary laws as a species of moral reform in antiquity. A narrow legalistic paradigm has robbed sumptuary laws of significance, rendering them peripheral to the drama of Roman politics. For example, in Cook's dismissive portrayal of the sumptuary measures of dictator Sulla (82-78BC) he remarks:

...he legislated at length against private extravagance. A limit was set to expenditure on food, the maximum cost of tombs and funerals was prescribed and, in the same optimistic vein, the dictator went on to deal with the public morals. To such futility even a man of Sulla's commonsense could stoop: but belief in the value of sumptuary legislation was a delusion which even the most enlightened minds of Rome rarely managed to escape.8

7 Suet. Aug. 34.
An important recent analysis of moral discourses in Roman politics omits any sustained discussion of sumptuary laws as a focus of such discourses. Sumptuary laws are barely addressed in the new edition of the *Cambridge Ancient History*, as ‘their effectiveness was in any case almost nil.’ Jones, too, echoed the orthodox response, remarking that ‘to the problem of extravagance Augustus made the usual response of sumptuary law, limiting expenditure on meals, clothes, plates, jewelry and the like. Like all sumptuary laws it soon became a dead letter.’ Historians lament the failure of the laws to operate as practical mechanisms of social control. Yet this mode of analysis, narrowly concerned with enforcement, cannot satisfactorily explain why, despite their ‘failures’, sumptuary laws were revisited by members of the ruling senatorial class with almost formulaic repetition. As this article demonstrates, the ruling oligarchy realised the limitations of sumptuary regulation. Garnsey recently observed that the laws ‘were designed at one level (for they also had political implications) to prevent extravagance and the importation and consumption of new, exotic foods.’ What precisely were the political implications? Why would Augustus champion sumptuary legislation in a political tradition recognising the ineffectiveness of such laws?

**The Critique of Luxury**

*The early lessons of depraved desire must be*
*rooted out of our minds*
*They have been too soft and must now be moulded*
*by harsher studies The Free young Roman is not trained*
*to stay on a horse.*
*He is afraid of hunting. His skill is rather in playing*
*with a Greek hoop, if you please,*
*or breaking the law by throwing dice...*  

Horace’s poem blames extravagant foreign luxuries for the loosening of traditional *mores*. Denouncing new forms of leisure, Horace urges the restoration of political order through the restraint of licentiousness. Sumptuary laws were informed by a particular ideology surrounding luxury, and were a response to a nexus of

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10 Cook *et al.*, *The Roman Republic*, p. 640.
perceived immoralities that were commonly interrelated in the literary sources of the Late Republic. Roman moralising rhetoric surrounding luxury reflected multiple anxieties: Rome's military and economic security, anxieties about threats to Rome's racial identity, and even to Rome's perceived masculine national character.

According to the political ideology of the Roman elite, luxury (such as extravagant feasting, exotic dress, lavish architecture, expensive furniture) was an emblem and cause of political chaos. Laws directed against elaborate garments, possession of gold, gambling, jewellery, wild-beasts, litters, funerary and dining expenditure were explicitly framed to combat the related phenomena of leisured extravagance, moral degeneration and political chaos. The debilitating influence of luxury permeated Roman rhetoric. National mythology depicted Rome as a once small agrarian populace of citizen-soldiers characterised by tough simplicity. Imperial expansion brought Rome into contact with the luxurious Hellenistic orient. Ancient historiography in particular charged luxury with spoiling Rome's mythical past. Sallust's portrayal of political corruption in the Late Republic typifies the common association of foreign luxuries with moral decline, resulting in political disorder and sacrilege:

...Sulla had sought to secure the loyalty of the army he commanded in Asia by allowing it a degree of luxury and indulgence that would not have been tolerated by his predecessors, and the pleasures they enjoyed during leisure hours in those attractive lands soon enervated the men's warlike spirit. It was there that Roman soldiers first learnt to indulge in wine and women, and to cultivate a taste for statues, pictures, and embossed plate, which they stole from private houses and public buildings, plundering temples and profaning everything sacred and secular alike.14

The interrelationship of imperialism and the influx of luxury was the key dynamic for the decline of the state. Imperial conquest was a manifestation of inner excellence, yet expansion was also the cause of moral decline, exposing Rome to foreign luxuries and immoralities. Once Rome had eliminated foreign rivals, imported luxury would supplant martial virtues and virtus with hedonism, falling 'from the pursuit of arms to the pursuit of pleasure.'15

Luxury was associated with material as well as moral decay. Wealth accruing from Rome's imperial conquest was implicated in the decline of the state. Juvenal, for

14 Sall. Cat. 1.10. See also Livy, Hist. 39.6.7-9.
15 Velleius Paterculus, Compendium of Roman History 2.1.1-2.
example, lamented the bankruptcies caused by excessive spending, denouncing the
pursuit of delicacies such as expensive foods for destroying family patrimonies. As
Livy judged, 'riches have imported avarice and excessive pleasures with a craving of
luxury and a wantonness to the ruination of ourselves and everyone else.'

Moral concerns about luxury were also highly gendered. Luxurious clothing,
for example, threatened social cohesion by undermining the visible distinctions of men
and women. Luxury was an emasculating phenomenon. With its effeminising and
encrusting effect on the Roman character, it would subvert masculine self-sufficiency
and physical hardiness. Moralists invoked pejorative connotations of femininity, such as
wasteful ostentation and physical weakness. Emperor Tiberius' despair at
uncontrollable luxury in a letter to the senate evokes these multiple associations:

And where should I begin my prohibitions and attempted reversions
to antique standards? With the vast mansions, or the cosmopolitan
hordes of slaves? Or with the ponderous gold and silver plate, the
wonderful pictures and bronze-work, the men's clothes
indistinguishable from women's? Or the feminine speciality - the
export of our currency to foreign or enemy countries for precious
stones?

Imported luxuries were a potent metaphor for the decline of the state.
Dionysius of Halicarnassus elucidated this moral code, that 'there should be no
banquets and revels lasting all night long, no wantonness and corrupting of youthful
comrades... nor any other of the things that are done contrary to propriety and the
advantage of the state.' Immoderate banqueting particularly became the 'most
frequent of all the contexts where luxury is invoked.' Food and clothing, the targets of
Augustus sumptuary laws, served as one important focus of the ideology of moral
decay. In his denunciation of Catiline's conspirators, for example, Cicero describes
their 'ankle- and wrist-length tunics, and cloaked in sails, not togas. The entire drive of
their life and sleepless labor is used up in predawn feasting.' But what did the Roman
governing class, and especially Augustus, think regulating morality via legislation would
achieve?

17 Livy, Hist. Pref, 10.
18 Tac. Ann. 3.52.
20 C.J. Berry, The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation, Cambridge University
21 Cic. Cat. 2.22.
Enforcing Morality

There is considerable evidence that Rome's political elite were aware that sumptuary laws were ineffective as practical mechanisms of social control. Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, the text of a moralising symposium of the fourth century A.D, records the failure of the laws to limit sumptuary indulgences, revealing an illuminating pattern. Laws with the same basic provisions are repeatedly re-enacted in the face of widespread lack of adherence and enforcement. The elder Cato, elected on a manifesto of eliminating 'hydra-like luxury and effeminacy'\(^{22}\), was the archetypal custodian of ancient morality.\(^ {23}\) Yet even according to his speeches, early restrictions on excessive numbers of guests in the *Lex Orchia* of 181BC were violated, and there remained 'a growing need for reform.'\(^ {24}\) A fragment of another speech of Cato also testifies to the difficulties related to enforcing sumptuary laws.\(^ {25}\) Violation of the laws with impunity could also embarrass legislators. As Macrobius remarks on the *Lex Antia*, passed by Antius Restio in 71BC:

... another law came before the people on the motion of Antius Restio, which - excellent as its provisions were and although it was never repealed - was nullified by a stubborn extravagance and the strength of the general addition to such vices... Restio, who introduced the law, is said never again to have dined out as long as he lived, for fear of witnessing contempt for a law which he had himself proposed for the public good.\(^ {26}\)

Similarly, Athenaeus reports widespread disregard of the Fannian Law of 161BC, which regulated private dining, alleging that 'out of so many thousands of people' only Mucius Scaevola, Aelius Tubero and Rutilius Rufus had remotely observed the law.\(^ {27}\) Multiple laws stimulated citizen ingenuity. Vegetables, exempt from legislation, were used as substitutes to arrange lavish meals.\(^ {28}\) The dictator Sulla had legislated in 81BC to restrict expenditure on dinners, differentiating the amount of


\(^{23}\) Mac. *Sat.* 2-4.

\(^{24}\) Mac. *Sat.* 13.3.

\(^{25}\) ORF fr.142.


\(^{27}\) Athen. *Deipn.* 273c-274e.

\(^{28}\) Cic. *Ad. Fam.* 9.15.
allowable spending during religious festivals, days of games and certain calendar periods from all other periods. Yet, he was merely replicating previous decrees,\(^{29}\) which had been 'blotted out through neglect and... many men were dissipating huge fortunes in luxury and recklessly pouring out their households and money into an abyss of dinners and banquets.'\(^{30}\) Enforcement of various provisions would be impossible, especially for a premodern state lacking systematic law enforcement. Lack of adequate enforcement is not surprising, given the absence of any adequate state machinery (such as a police force) to supervise and ensure restraint in the domestic setting. Roman law generally eschewed systematic policing, functioning instead through litigation by citizens, localised adherence via the family, and occasional exemplary punishment.\(^{31}\) While expenditure at public games could be monitored, policing annual household expenditure or numbers invited to private meals was impossible.\(^{32}\) Emperor Tiberius reportedly cautioned:

> It is better... to leave vigorous and full-blown vices alone, rather than force matters to an issue which might only inform the world with what abuses we were powerless to cope.\(^{33}\)

The Elder Pliny also observed: '...when it was seen that there was no effective way of banning what had been expressly forbidden, it seemed preferable to have no laws at all rather than laws that were of no avail.'\(^{34}\) Tacitus regarded laws themselves as a phase in the degeneration of 'primitive man,' corresponding with an increasingly debauched populace. 'Corruption reached its climax, and legislation abounded.'\(^{35}\) \(^{36}\) There were at best sporadic efforts at enforcement. Cicero's letter to Atticus in 45BC observes the failure of Caesar's sumptuary laws, despite unusual attempts at enforcement.\(^{37}\) Caesar summoned a military presence, and even this failed.\(^{37}\)

\(^{29}\) As Gellius testifies, this legislation followed the pattern set by the senatorial decree passed under the consulship of Marcus Valerius Messala and the Fannian law (both of 161BC), and the Licinian law (between 113 and 97 BC), the only essential difference being the inflated amounts of expenditure on food allowed under each successive law: Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 2.24.

\(^{30}\) ibid.


\(^{33}\) Tac. *Ann.* 3.53.3. Tiberius was responding to complaints from aediles about the failure of sumptuary laws. Tac. *Ann.* 3.53.1.

\(^{34}\) Pliny, *NH* 36.8.

\(^{35}\) Tac. *Ann.* 3.28.

\(^{36}\) Cic. *Att.* 13.7.

\(^{37}\) Similarly, Caesar modified his regulations on private building when it was realised that they were commonly disregarded: Cic. *Att.* 13.6; 13.7.1. Caesar's sumptuary legislation is further
Evidence from another genre confirms this mentality. Plautus, the Latin comic poet, satirised the inefficacy of high-minded legislation. The theme of unenforceable legislation must have contained resonances with contemporary audiences to be repeatedly alluded to in popular comedies. In satire that parodies ‘the moralism that frowns on luxury but is powerless to check it,’ several Plautine characters emphasise the incapacity of laws to regulate mos (custom). Plautus’ fictional slave Stasimus, lamenting their failure to moderate social behaviour, denounces laws of moral reform as hollow and incapable of restraining the morei mali, corresponding also with the theme of hypocrisy of legislators. Sumptuary laws lacked adherence even from their authors. Augustus’ predilection for gambling conflicted with the anti-dicing law of c.204BC, the lex aleria, and the law of 81BC, the leges Corneliae. In Plautus’ comic vision, corruption and irresponsibility thrives under legal loopholes while moral laws fail to prevent the erosion of Roman traditions. Social behaviour has displaced the rule of law, injuring Rome’s relationship with the gods.

Thus consciousness amongst Roman elites of sumptuary laws’ inefficacy undermines the assumption that sumptuary reformers were merely deluded ideologues who believed that moral legislation would eliminate luxury. The oligarchy resorted to sumptuary legislation long after a widespread realisation that sumptuary laws were easily evaded and difficult to enforce. The frequency with which they were pursued requires alternative explanation. The constant re-enactment of notoriously ineffective sumptuary laws can be explained by an intrinsic, symbolic value that was independent of their practical utility. As vehicles for ideological gestures, such laws were primarily intended to address the anxieties of Roman elites, rather than actually eliminate luxurious extravagance. In the value system of the ruling elite, laws on dining and dress were loaded with meaning.

38 For further discussion of social content in Plautus, see E. Gruen, ‘Plautus and the Public Stage’, in Gruen, Studies in Greek Culture, pp.124-57.
39 Gruen, Culture and Identity in Republican Rome, p. 146.
41 Plautus, Trinummus 1037-1040. See also 1032-1034.
42 ibid., 1043-1044.
43 Only E. Gruen, ‘Philosophy, Rhetoric and Roman Anxieties’, in Studies in Greek Culture, p.172, suggests this argument, but his comments are restricted to the Fannian laws passed in the mid-second century.
Private Vices, Public Gestures

If sumptuary laws were indeed symbolic, what precisely did they symbolise? At one level, sumptuary excesses, with their foreign associations, were tainted by religious impiety. Augustus’ differentiation of allowable expenditure for food served on weekdays and on festival dates ‘reinstituted symbolically the traditional distinction between weekday food and amplified festival food which was being blurred by increased prosperity and availability.’ By reaffirming the boundary delineating sacred and ordinary daily dining customs, Augustus linked his sumptuary laws with his project of religious restoration. Regulations on dining, dress and assorted pleasures signified the restoration of religious piety.

In one of the few extended analyses of Roman sumptuary law, Miles contends that the ruling aristocracy was vigilant in the enforcement of sumptuary laws. Emphasising the scope of both legal and social constraints upon sumptuary extravagance, Miles suggests a twofold form of enforcement. He speculates about ‘the considerable deterrent value of a single, exemplary punishment which may have easily dropped out of the historical record, [which] could have affected the conduct of a whole generation of citizens.’ Miles’ hypothesis suffers an acknowledged lack of evidence, and assumes that enforcement and compliance was the only ultimate significance of the laws.

A more valuable paradigm for the interpretation of moral reform can be found in Joseph Gusfield’s Symbolic Crusade: Status, Politics and the American Temperance Movement, an important analysis of the American Temperance Reform movement. Without straining the analogy with the Temperance Movement, both campaigns for moral reform stressed the triumph of values in the face of their violation, concerned more with public affirmation of values than actual enforcement. As Gusfield suggests:

The action of Temperance forces during the Prohibition decade strongly suggests that they did not utilise their political power to demand as much enforcement as they might have obtained. The

43 Gowers, The Loaded Table, p. 73.
passage of the legislation itself presented satisfactions which could not be endangered by too zealous an effort to enforce it.49

The passage of laws affirming austerity and restraint in itself must have heartened elite moralists who assumed the link between affluent luxuries, moral failing and imperial collapse. Both laws served also as sources of political legitimacy for their advocates. The temperance legislation lent authority to their champions for their faithful upholding of a Protestant ethic of moderation. Augustus’ sumptuary laws lent legitimacy to their founder through their adherence to a Roman value system which idealised rustic resistance to corruptive luxury, even while the Princeps was legislating in the setting of a wealthy urban milieu.

Gusfield’s thesis is also reflected in the recent approach of Gruen and Toner that the laws held a symbolic function, an approach this article seeks to develop further. Both Gruen and Toner see the symbolism of sumptuary laws as relating to the preservation of aristocratic hegemony. Gruen interprets the laws as advertising the solidarity and cohesion of the oligarchy, against individual elites whose individual predominance might threaten the fabric of collective aristocratic government.50 Toner characterises the laws as a mechanism of class conflict between the ruling aristocracy and the populace.51 Toner’s Hegelian analysis identifies an internal contradiction in Roman social relations, namely the need by an exclusive elite aristocracy for popular support. Under his analysis, the sharing of elite leisure activities under the imperial rule of emperors is the solution. However, his analysis confines the symbolic operation of laws to class conflict and co-operation between the ruling aristocracy and the populace, emphasising the way class relations were reflected in tensions between popular and traditional forms of leisure. Both interpretations astutely look beyond mechanisms and effectiveness of enforcement to the symbolic meanings of the laws themselves, focussing on their importance in communicating messages about social and political relations to the mass. However, the potential for sumptuary laws to be wielded as symbolic weapons in political conflicts within the leisureed ruling elite has been

49 ibid., pp.119-120.
50 ‘Cato stood forth as champion of sumptuary legislation. In this he was far from alone. The Roman assembly regularly passed leges sumptuarias in the second century, announcing their resistance to excessive opulence among the upper classes. The measures were generally ineffective, loosely enforced, and designed more as advertisement of aristocratic conscience than as authentic reform.’ E. Gruen, Culture and National Identity in Republican Rome, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1992, p. 69.
51 ‘Even if the law was broken, it was clear whose law it was. This symbolic function served to enhance and glorify the social status and prestige of the traditional elements of Roman life, which held the affirmed values, and to demean and degrade the popular culture, whose moral patterns and lifestyle were condemned as deviant and disreputable.’ J.P. Toner, Leisure and Ancient Rome, Blackwell Publishers, Malden, 1995, p. 120.
The competitive aristocratic political ethos was imbued with rhetoric associating moral profligacy with extravagant feasting. Augustus' laws corresponded with his political conflict with fellow triumvir Mark Antony, a conflict which climaxed in the battle of Actium in 31BC and brought Augustus control of the Roman world. Sumptuary laws on clothing and dining invoked the moral contrast between him and Antony. Their competing propaganda was drenched with the rhetoric of luxury, investing Augustus' later sumptuary laws with symbolic resonances. Augustus claimed to be defending native values against alien cultural influences. As restorer and guardian of Roman morality, he legislated against licentiousness to associate his regime with the core ideals of restraint, civic duty, moderation and piety.

Conversely, Antony is portrayed as the consummate deviant. The majority of the extant sources represent Antony as the inversion of Roman civic ideals, embodying the same immoralties targeted by Augustus' sumptuary law. Antony's alleged weakness for luxury, particularly in the form of lavish banquets, is either vilified as a menace to the proper gravitas expected of Roman authority, or pitied as a character flaw triggering his tragic self-destruction. Hostile moralists amplified Antony's alleged threat to Roman values through his reputation for luxurious banqueting. Antony's gluttony at the banquet table translated into orgiastic appetites at the level of imperial politics, culminating in a scheme of swallowing Rome by orientalising its empire:

...what Antony habitually spent on dining was surpassed only by the value of the pearl which his wife Cleopatra swallowed. To his mind all the produce of sea, land and even air existed but to appease his gluttony- all was subservient to his gullet and teeth - and it was as the slave of this gluttony that he wished to make an Egyptian kingdom of the empire of Rome. However, his wife Cleopatra disdained to be worsted even in extravagance by the Romans, and she wagered him that she could dispose of ten million sesterces at a single meal... he had no hesitation in accepting the wager...

Macrobius' slander of Antony's imperial policies through the vocabulary of gluttony makes the same associations as Octavian's reconstructed battle speech,

52 As is demonstrated here, these interpretations are incomplete, as they neglect the role of sumptuary laws in internal political competition between individuals within the aristocracy.
54 For an account of the general propaganda war between the two triumvirs, see the important article of K. Scott, 'The Political Propaganda of 44-30BC', Vol. 11, Memoirs of the American Academy at Rome, 1933, pp. 7-49.
supposedly delivered before the battle of Actium. Octavian denounced Antony’s political alliance with a foreign dynasty, the Ptolemies of Egypt, and a foreign woman, Cleopatra, and his weakness for luxury. Antony has abandoned his ‘ancestral habits of life’, has ‘emulated all alien and barbaric customs’, dishonours ‘his father’s gods’ and dismembers the empire by ‘making presents of whole islands and parts of the continents, as though he were master of the whole earth and sea’, all done ‘in his luxurious indulgence’ in ‘a life of court luxury’ pampering himself ‘like a woman’. Antony was ridiculed for the court luxuries of Alexandria, Egypt’s royal capital. The statesman Messala Corvinus even condemned him for using a golden chamberpot.

The Latin tradition, particularly Florus, denounces Antony’s preference for luxury and even regal costume at the expense of his civic duties. Florus portrays a nexus between Antony’s luxuries, his political corruption, his imperial policies, his femininity and his clothing:

After the Parthian expedition, he acquired a loathing for war and lived a life of ease...The Egyptian woman demanded the Roman Empire from the drunken general as the price of her favours - and Antony promised her this, as though the Romans were more easily conquered than the Parthians. He therefore began to aim at sovereignty, though not for himself...Forgetful of his country, his name, his toga, and the emblems of his office, he soon completely degenerated...In his hand was a golden sceptre, at his side a scimitar, and he wore a purple robe studded with huge gems...

Under Augustus, the toga became a code for proper mores, and conversely foreign clothing a symbol of Antonian degeneracy. Just as Florus despaired of Antony’s foreign clothing as a sign of cultural enslavement, Horace despaired of Roman soldiers captured by Parthians in 53BC, identifying the toga among other emblems of lost Roman identity:

Have soldiers of Crassus lived on as the shameful husbands of barbarous wives, and have the Marsian and Apulian - shame on the Senate and our changed ways - grown old bearing arms for their fathers-in-law

and serving the King of the Medes, forgetting

56 Dio. 50.3-6.
57 Pliny, NH 33.50.
58 Florus 2.21.
the sacred shields, their own names, the toga,
and *Aetern* Vesta, while Jupiter
and the city of Rome still live?59

The dissident poet Ovid, 'teacher of obscene adultery'60 parodied Augustus' emphasis on clothing as a signpost of restoration, ridiculing the female stola which had become the official emblem of female sexual virtue.61 The clothing metaphor also features in Cicero's denunciation of Antony's alleged homosexuality and effeminacy.62 The Vergilian Jupiter's prophecy of the eternal empire of the 'race that wears the toga',63 and statues of Augustus as togaed priest,64 were more than merely decorative. Augustus' later strict regulations of clothing, where he 'set himself to revive the ancient Roman dress', resonate powerfully in this ideological context.65

Cicero's famous invective against Antony, the *Philippics*, also associates Antony's alleged banqueting perversions with his conduct of public business. Antony's excessive behaviour at social occasions is conflated with his neglect of magistrates' civic and religious duties, invoking the association of social behaviour with political corruption. Dining deviancy, like sexual licence, was a sign of political disarray:66

You were an augur, yet you never took the auspices. You were a consul, yet you blocked the legal right of other officials to exercise the veto...You are a drink-sodden, sex-ridden wreck. Never a day passes in that ill-reputed house of yours without orgies of the most repulsive kind.67

Referring to Antony's alleged financial profligacy and his reliance on Caesar's wealth, he thunders: 'when you had glutted yourself there with Caesar's largesses and your own plunderings - if glut is the word for gobbling down one minute to throw up

59 Horace, *Odes*, 3.5.5-12.
60 Ovid, *Tristitia* 2.212 .
61 Ovid *Ars Arm*. 1.31-33:

*Aid my enterprise, Venus! Respectable ladies, the kind who
Wear headbands and ankle-length skirts,
Are hereby warned off.*

67 Cic. *Phil*. 2.5.
the next - you rushed up hungrily for the tribunate...".68 Antony is depicted elsewhere as a giant maw consuming the property of Pompey.69 Cicero denounces Antony’s waste of Pompey’s property in the same allegorical terms:

Was ever a Charybdis so ravenous? ... So you may cease to wonder at the speed of consumption. Such prodigality could quickly have devoured cities and kingdoms, let alone one individual’s patrimony, however ample - and ample it was.70

Cicero’s emphasis on Antony’s gluttony in several different contexts reflects the importance of the theme in political discourse. Another connection between orgiastic eating and political violence is suggested in an anecdote wherein Antony allegedly kept Cicero’s head in sight of his dining table.71 Plutarch offers a similar portrayal. In his treatment of Antony, informed by Cicero’s writings and Augustus’ lost personal accounts, Antony became ‘insolent in prosperity and abandoned...to luxury and enjoyment.’72 Notified of military defeat by Octavian, Plutarch depicts Antony as preoccupied in orgiastic feasts, thus vindicating the triumph of Octavian.73 Conversely, Augustus’ cultivation of a reputation for frugal eating and simple tastes underscored the ideology of his sumptuary laws with their prescriptions of traditional diet.74 Juxtaposed against the indulgences of Antony, Augustus’ dining habits reflected a ‘calculated regard for republican protocol.’75

The theme of Antony’s dining extravagance intersects with his affiliations with the god Dionysus, whose cult was frequently stigmatised by Roman moralists for lavish feasting.76 Antony was made vulnerable to slander through his geo-political power base in the eastern sphere of the Roman empire. As patron of Rome’s eastern client states, he cultivated a mythological association with Dionysus, deity of wine and ecstasy. Accounts of Antony’s reception in Athens included extravagant Dionysiac symposiums.77 Fittingly, Dionysus’ cult even envisaged an afterlife in the form of an eternal banquet of the blessed Dead.78 Plutarch affirms the self-destructive nature of

68 Cic. Phil. 2.50.
69 Sen. Suas. 6.3.
70 Cic. Phil. 2.66-68.
72 Plut. Ant. 2.1.
73 Plut. Ant. 61.
74 Suet. Aug. 76.
75 Gowers, The Loaded Table, p. 21.
76 Livy 39.8.3-39.9.1.
77 Socrates of Rhodes, FGrH 192 f2.
78 M.P. Nilsson, The Dionysiac Mysteries of the Hellenistic and Roman Age, Acta Instituti Atheniensis
Antony’s orgiastic weakness by depicting Dionysus deserting Antony on the eve of battle.  

Antony’s mealtime extravagance was also intertwined with anxieties about the subversion of gender and racial hierarchy. He is depicted at once as the subversion of Roman masculinity and Roman imperial hegemony. His alcoholism and effeminacy converge in Augustan iconography, which juxtaposes Octavian’s Apollo as deity of ‘order, morality and discipline’ with Antony’s Dionysus embodying ‘the licentious disorder of the Hellenistic east.’ A popular silver bowl depicts the relationship of Antony and Cleopatra through the mythological theme of enslavement in the analogy of Heracles and Omphale. Antony, effeminised by sitting in a chariot in female clothing, looks on as a slave girl offers Cleopatra a comically large drinking vessel. Antony is emasculated by the foreign queen, ‘just as in the paintings of Omphale taking Heracles’ club and donning his lion skin, so did Cleopatra disarm Antony and make sport of him. Drunken excess is also associated with the new Roman-Egyptian dynasty, while hostile sources commemorate Antony’s Bacchanalian alcoholism as his fatal defect. Horace represents the Egyptian court as unmanning men before subverting the Roman capital:

... while the mad queen  
with her contaminated flock of men  
diseased by vice was preparing  

the ruin of the Capitol and the destruction  
of our power, crazed with hope  
unlimited and drunk:  
with sweet fortune.

Virgil’s depiction of the opposing naval fleets at the battle of Actium presents a conflict of cosmic proportions. In a war of two cultural traditions, Virgil juxtaposes Antony’s ostentatious eastern luxury and his treacherous alliance with the orient with

Regni Sueciae, Sweden, 1957, p.146.
79 Plut. Ant. 75.
81 The silver bowl is lost, but its image survives in mold for Arretine clay bowl, c.30BC. The clay impression of pottery of Perennius in Arezzo is described further in P. Zanker, The Power of Images in Augustan Rome, University of Michigan Press, Michigan, p. 59.
82 Plutarch, Ant. 3.3.
83 For references to drunkenness, see Horace, Odes, 1.37.14; Prop.3.11.56. For excess: Prop.3.11.
84 Seneca, Epistles 68.25.
85 Horace, Odes 1.37.6-12.
Octavian’s divine mission to restore Roman hegemony. Through his association with foreign luxuries, Augustus represented Antony’s adherents as ‘womanish easterners, enthralled by the Egyptian Queen’ who ‘need to have imposed on them the masculine order of the West, embodied in the figure of Augustus.’

Successful propaganda requires some pre-existing shared values, insecurities, prejudices or ideologies from which it can derive force. Whether Antony genuinely indulged to excess is unverifiable. That metaphors of dining could be exploited to challenge his legitimacy as a Triumvir still points to the symbolic importance of Augustus’ laws. That he felt compelled to defend himself in a lost pamphlet (‘on his own drunkenness’) demonstrates the power of these images in political competition. Antony’s own propaganda, in response to Octavian’s claims, also illustrates the resonances of themes of luxurious banqueting in their dialogue of power: orgies and extravagance featured in his assaults on Augustus. Accusing him of hubris and self-indulgence, Antony denounced a private banquet hosted by Octavian during a food shortage ‘known as the feast of the Divine Twelve, which caused a public scandal. The guests came dressed as gods or goddesses, Octavian himself representing Apollo. An anonymous poem satirising the feast reflects the meanings popularly invested in dining extravagance. Again, regardless of its authenticity, the episode affirms the power of banqueting themes in political discourse. Augustus was similarly denounced for other indulgences, refuting allegations of ‘over-luxurious tastes’ and for being ‘too fond of expensive furniture, Corinthian bronzes and the gaming table.’

Sumptuary laws reasserted native traditions against the luxury that might threaten the moral fabric of Rome, also reinforcing Augustus’ own ideology of

86 Virgil, Aen. 8.675-88.
88 Pliny, NH, 14.148. See also K. Scott ‘Octavian’s Propaganda and Antony’s De Sua Ebrietate’ CPh 24 (1929) pp.133-141.
89 ibid.
90 Suet. Aug 70.
91 Apollo’s part was lowly played
By impious Caesar; he
Made merry at a table laid
For gross debauchery.
(Suet. Aug. 70.)
This alleged episode conforms to the literary topos of blasphemous banqueting evident in other Roman texts: see also J. Griffin, ‘Propertius and Antony’, Journal of Roman Studies, Vol. 67, 1977, pp. 17-26, 22.
92 For analysis of its authenticity, see M.P. Charlesworth, ‘Some Fragments of the Propaganda of Mark Antony’, Classical Quarterly, Vol. 27, 1933, pp. 172-77, 175.
93 Suet. Aug. 71
94 Suet. Aug. 70.
restoration. Antony’s denunciations of Augustus’ extravagance were ultimately undermined by the contradiction of his own extravagant Dionysiac and Egyptian iconography. Exploiting these themes, Augustus transformed his war with Antony from an essentially civil conflict into a national crusade against barbarism. Antony’s luxuriousness, implying vulnerability to the feminine and the foreign, was presented as the antithesis of core Roman values, an antithesis Augustus reinforced through sumptuary law.

Thus while sumptuary laws served little instrumental purpose, they symbolically advertised Augustus’ association with the values of a mythical Roman past. They exemplify Gusfield’s paradigm of government actions ‘as ceremonial and ritual performances, designating the content of public morality’, a function ‘unrelated to its function in influencing behaviour through enforcement’. If not for their symbolic value, why else resurrect the unenforceable? In the heat of civil war, Augustus declared Italy’s repudiation of Antony’s orientalism with a public oath. Likewise, sumptuary laws declared moralities to which Romans owed their public allegiance. Rather than controlling social behaviour, they gave the assurance of order restored and continuity with an idealised past. Dormant and unenforceable, the laws regulating luxury celebrated the triumph of an ideal, of Augustan restraint over Antonian hedonism.