

A COMPANION TO LATIN LITERATURE

Edited by

Stephen Harrison

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CHAPTER NINE

Comedy, Atellane Farce and Mime

Costas Panayotakis

1 Introduction

Roman comedy occupies a distinctive position in the history of Latin literature. It enables the student of Latin language and Roman civilization to glimpse how Latin (in its pre-classical stage) may have been spoken outside the educated elite, and how the victorious Romans, influenced (at the beginning of their history as a nation) by the culture of their defeated opponents, forged their literary and national identity (see Goldberg, Chapter 1 above). The inferiority complex created by Rome's contact with foreign civilizations, especially Greek culture, turned out to be extremely fruitful from a literary point of view.

The twenty-seven (more or less) complete comedies of the playwrights traditionally representing this genre, T. Maccius Plautus (whose plays span the period 206–183 BC) and P. Terentius Afer (whose comedies were performed from 166 to 160 BC), along with the works – now extant only in fragments – of numerous other equally important comic dramatists of the third and second centuries BC (e.g. Livius Andronicus, Naevius, and Caecilius Statius), were initially called *comoediae*, but by the first century BC (Varro *gramm.* 36) acquired the generic title *fabulae palliatae* (plays dressed in a Greek cloak). This conventional name both indicated that such plays had been adapted from Greek originals, and distinguished the repertory of comedies with Greek characters, costumes, and subject matter not only from the *fabulae togatae* (plays dressed in a toga), comedies normally set in Rome or Italy and composed mainly in the second century BC by Titinius and Afranius, but also from the *fabulae Atellanae*, native Italian farces named after the town Atella in Campania and given a literary form in the early first century BC by Pomponius and Novius. 'Toga-clad' comedies in general were not as popular as 'Greek-cloaked' plays, which dominated the Roman stage for at least two centuries; even these, however, were eventually upstaged by the low theatre of the 'mime' (*mimus*), a form of entertainment

given literary qualities by Decimus Laberius and Publilius Syrus (mimographers of the first century BC), and associated with everyday-life scenes of an intensely sexual and satirical content with occasional outspoken comments on political issues.

The Romans, a warlike nation without a strong tradition of theatrical performances focusing on its state, were keen to point out that drama – a potential source of moral corruption – was a foreign institution, and its introduction into and gradual establishment within their society was closely related to religious needs and to the influence of foreign nations. That theatre was an imported product is the common element in the differing accounts of the origins of Roman drama offered by Vergil (*Georg.* 2.380–96), Horace (*Ep.* 2.1.139–55), Tibullus (2.1.51–8) and Livy (7.2) – all writing in the Augustan era, centuries after the events they were describing. Their theories are not reliable and were most likely formulated on the basis of the now lost treatise *De Scaenicis Originibus* of the polymath Varro (116–27 BC), which itself probably imported into Rome the views of Hellenistic scholars on the genesis of theatre in general. But Livy's complicated reconstruction of this event in seven stages deserves a closer look, not because of its detailed nature but because of the facts it omits.

The important dates in Livy's chronological scheme are 364 BC, the year in which the Romans had their first theatrical experience through a troupe of professional Etruscan dancers accompanied by a pipe-player, and 240 BC – the date at which a Greek from Tarentum in southern Italy named Livius Andronicus, having allegedly invented the element of dramatic plot, put on a tragedy and a comedy at a festival (see Goldberg, Chapter 1 above). But the events leading to this important occasion are far from clear in the exposition of Livy, who offers an imaginative hotch-potch of Etruscan dancing, pipe-playing, native Italian improvised verses, mime, pantomime and (most peculiarly) an obscure dramatic species called *satura*. It may well be the case that this 'musical medley', which apparently lacked a coherent plot but seems to have had songs with fixed lyrics and musical accompaniment, was invented by Livy as a pristine phase of Roman theatrical entertainment, out of which drama proper eventually emerged. Even more odd is the fact that, for entirely unclear reasons, Livy fails to mention the various forms of Greek drama that contributed to the shaping of Roman theatre: the Doric mythological mimes of the Sicilian Epicharmus (fifth century BC), the burlesque tragedies of the Tarentine Rhinthon (third century BC) and (most importantly) the plays of Menander, Philemon, Diphilus and other playwrights, whose works belonged to the period of Greek drama conventionally known as New Comedy, and were performed in the Greek-speaking world (including Sicily and south Italy) by wandering troupes of actors, musicians, and playwrights – the so-called 'Artists of Dionysus' – after 290 BC.

Greek New Comedy was a type of five-act drama cultivated mainly after the death of Alexander the Great (323 BC); although it shared structural and thematic motifs with earlier periods of Greek comedy, it differed from them in its chorus,

which was apparently used for musical interludes only, the stock characters who were presented as members of a family rather than of the *polis*, the subject matter which was drawn usually from the lives of fictional prosperous Athenians, the rarity of long musically accompanied songs, the apparent lack of obscene jokes and explicit political comments, and the greater tendency toward realism, which was exemplified through language, costumes, masks and theatrical conventions such as the unity of time and space – itself associated with a major change in the architectural space in which these plays were performed. The audience's superior knowledge, acquired through the expository prologues uttered by omniscient deities, the emphasis on character-portrayal by means of lengthy soliloquies, and the multiple levels on which a character's words operated indicate that New Comedy was a sophisticated means of entertainment, required an attentive audience and had a moral agenda in the guise of troubled human relationships ending happily.

The successful adoption and original adaptation of Greek New Comedy by Roman theatrical culture was not an isolated artistic phenomenon, but should be seen in the wider context of the cultural influence Greece – through military conquests and merchants' travels to Greek-speaking lands – exerted on Roman civilization in terms of literature, morals and material culture, and also in relation to the current political circumstances: it was safer to deride fictional characters and social institutions rather than real individuals, and it was even more convenient if these were associated with a foreign nation. On the other hand, the amusingly chaotic world of Roman adaptations of Greek New Comedy, and the subversion of the social hierarchy witnessed in them, served both as a pleasant break from the routine of everyday life and as a case of 'negative exemplarity': the plays with their happy endings featuring the punishment of the bad and the reward of the good functioned as a salutary re-enforcement of the values, order and discipline that traditional Romans so strongly advocated for their families and themselves.

We do not know the criteria according to which Roman playwrights adapted their Greek originals; this is partly due to the fact that of all the extant Latin comedies only a small part from Plautus' *Bacchides* (494–562) can be compared with its (fragmentary) original, a mere hundred lines from Menander's *Dis exapatōn*. Before this discovery (as recently as 1968), we relied on more or less plausible speculations about Plautine originality and Terentian craftsmanship and on the comparison the erudite Aulus Gellius (2.23) made in the second century AD between three passages of Caecilius' *Plocium* and the corresponding thirty-two lines of its Greek original, Menander's *Plokion*.

No doubt, each Roman playwright had his own views on adaptation, and these may have been dictated by both personal taste and the literary trends of his time, but judging from the (admittedly scanty) evidence it seems clear that the playwrights' ideas about 'translating' a foreign text into their language (a process referred to by the verb *vertere*, 'to turn') were more akin to our concept of loose

adaptation than to faithful rendering. The process of reconstructing the plot of the Greek original and signalling the intellectual originality of the Roman playwright on the basis of pointing out Roman allusions, inconsistencies in character-portrayal and in narrative events, and other such dramatic infelicities occupied scholars for nearly a century – mainly under the influence of Eduard Fraenkel, whose strong views on Plautine innovation appeared in 1922 and dominated approaches to the study of Plautus until the 1980s, when there was a shift in Plautine scholarship to issues of performance-criticism and the evaluation of Plautus and Terence as playwrights on their own merit (see e.g. Slater 1985).

Although it is difficult to disentangle the question of the comic value of Plautine and Terentian plays from the quest for their lost Greek originals, it is equally important to remember that the original Roman audience, about whose exact social and gender identity we can only speculate, very likely went to the theatre without having studied or knowing anything about the Greek original of the play they were about to watch (they may not even have known its title). If Suetonius' testimony (cited by Donatus, *Commentum Terenti*, 3 Wessner) on the outstanding success of Terence's *Eunuchus* is reliable, the prize awarded to that play and the fact that, because of popular demand, it was performed twice on the day of its first performance, are surely not due to the admiration the Roman audience felt for the complex way in which Terence had combined in his Latin adaptation Menander's *Eunoukhos* and *Kolax*. It is, therefore, more instructive, when examining the theatricality of Roman playwrights, to do so not in its Hellenistic but in its Roman context by looking, as far as possible, at how the visual, verbal and metrical techniques of a playwright compare with the corresponding techniques of his (near) contemporary (comic and tragic) fellow playwrights, rather than with the techniques of his Greek predecessors.

Perhaps the most striking change from the Greek originals concerns the disappearance of choral interludes from the structure of a Roman comedy (the reference in Plautus' *Bacchides* 107 to a crowd of people approaching the stage, and in Plautus' *Pseudolus* 573 ff. to a pipe-player, who is invited to entertain the audience until the triumphant return of the wily slave, are isolated cases that are best viewed within the context of the particular scenes in which they are found). This alteration, which suggests that performances of Roman comedies were not interrupted by breaks, did not mean that the musical element vanished; in fact, it was in Aristophanic fashion skilfully incorporated into the heart of the play itself. Expressed in the form of long iambic and trochaic lines, anapaestic rhythms, bacchiac and cretic metres (musically accompanied rhythmical patterns known as *cantica*, 'songs', favoured by Plautus but avoided by Terence perhaps because of the unrealistic picture they created), it presented a contrast with the spoken parts of the plot, which Livy (7.2) described with the term *diverbia*. These modes of delivery, which can be usefully compared to the corresponding modes of opera (spoken lines, recitative, and arias) are – at least in Plautus and Terence – functional, not merely decorative. Their position in the play and the combinations

they are allowed to form are deliberate, and they serve to stress the emotional atmosphere of a scene, delineate a character, introduce a person on stage and divide long episodes into smaller thematic units.

The comedies themselves were performed only by male actors who very likely wore masks and probably belonged to lower social classes (they were probably freedmen and slaves who belonged to the *dominus gregis*, the owner, director, producer and perhaps leading actor of the theatrical troupe). The resistance of (traditionalist) Romans to the construction of a permanent stone theatre in Rome (Pompey's theatre is dated as late as 55 BC) was surely due to both moral and political reasons. Consequently, at the time of Plautus and Terence performances were given on temporary wooden stages, perhaps resembling the buildings of Hellenistic theatres, and set on various locations in a city (the steps of a temple would have provided the ideal location for the audience to sit and watch a play). Although the context in which Roman comedies were performed may, as with Athenian drama, have been religious, there were also celebrations that included dramatic performances but were not associated with the cult of a god (Terence's *Adelphoe* was first performed at the funeral games in honour of the philhellene general L. Aemilius Paullus). Already at the end of the third century BC the Romans had the opportunity to watch plays as part of religious festivals that formed a season from spring to early winter (the *ludi Megalenses* were celebrated in April, the *ludi Apollinares* in July, the *ludi Romani* in September, and the *ludi Plebei* in November). Such occasions multiplied quickly.

Playwrights seem not to have dealt directly with the organizers of the festivals, junior officials (*aediles*) interested in securing the people's and their superiors' approval and votes by means of having only potentially successful plays staged in their sponsored celebrations, but through influential impresarios who – in spite of their social status and profession – probably moved in high circles and could pull many strings in the careers of both these officials and the young playwrights. In this respect the contribution of T. Publilius Pellio and L. Ambivius Turpio to the success of Plautus and Terence, respectively, should not be underestimated. But were the plays performed within a festival competing against each other? How many plays were performed on a single day of a festival? What were the financial arrangements between playwright, officials and impresarios? Such problems about the Roman stage have only recently come to the forefront of scholarship on Latin drama, and cannot yet be given definite answers.

2 Plautus

The life and works of Plautus – particularly the question of authorship of the (at least) 130 plays circulating in antiquity under his name – were scrutinized by the tragic playwright Accius (in his lost treatise *Didascalica*), the scholar Varro (in his non-extant works *De poetis* and *De comoediis Plautinis*), and the polymath Gellius

(3.3). Twenty-one of those plays were selected as Plautus' own compositions only because there was 'general agreement' (*consensu omnium*, Gellius 3.3.3) on this matter, and in spite of the fact that Varro himself had also selected a further group of nineteen, whose style and humour were strikingly similar to the style and humour of the chosen twenty-one. It is nowadays assumed that the twenty-one plays selected through Varro's research are identical with the Plautine comedies transmitted to us in the manuscript tradition. Some indicate explicitly that they were based on works by Diphilus, Philemon and Menander; for most of them there is no indication of the date of the first performance, and no mention of a Greek playwright or a title of the Greek original; perhaps there was none in some cases. On the whole, however, the homogeneity in language, style, metre and comic spirit has been taken as proof that these texts were composed by the same person. These are *Amphitruo*, *Asinaria*, *Aulularia*, *Bacchides*, *Captivi*, *Casina* (dated 186–184 BC), *Cistellaria* (after 201 BC), *Curculio*, *Epidicus* (before the *Bacchides*), *Menaechmi*, *Mercator*, *Miles Gloriosus* (206–204/3 BC), *Mostellaria*, *Persa*, *Poenulus*, *Pseudolus* (191 BC), *Rudens*, *Stichus* (200 BC), *Trinummus*, *Truculentus* and *Vidularia*.

Uncertainty also surrounds Plautus' identity. The ancient reconstructions of his life as the trials and tribulations of a slave who worked as a stage-hand, invested and lost his earnings in merchandise, and ended up writing comedies in his spare time from his occupation in a baker's mill, are unreliable and based on information deduced from the plays themselves. Moreover, Gratwick (1973: 2–3) has demonstrated that Plautus' name – transmitted in the manuscripts as *Plautus*, *Plauti* ('of Plautus' but also 'of Plautius'), *Macci Titi* ('of Maccus Titus' but also 'of Maccius Titus'), *Maccus*, and *T. Macci Plauti* – could be a brilliantly conceived theatrical pseudonym with aristocratic pretensions associated with native Roman low theatre and rendered as 'Dickie Clownson Tumbler, Esq.'. Whether Plautus was a member of a noble family or a freedman is now beside the point. His popularity is exemplified by the revivals of his plays even in the third century AD (if Arnobius, *Adv. Nat.* 7.33, is to be trusted) – long after the days of Cicero, who refers to Roscius' famous stage-portrayals of the Plautine pimp Ballio (*Phil.* 2.6.15; *Rosc. Com.* 7.20). His linguistic talent earned him the praise of scholars and orators such as Aelius Stilo, Varro, Cicero, and Fronto (Varro *Sat.* 399B; Cic. *Off.* 1.104; Quint. 10.1.99; Fronto *Ep. ad M. Caes. et invicem* 4.3.3), but his loosely composed plots and his exaggerated humour were censured by Horace, whose metrical, linguistic and artistic preferences were squarely placed within the tastes of the Augustan elite (*Ep.* 2.1.58; 2.1.170–6; *Ars Poet.* 270–4; cf. Jocelyn 1995).

Horace's criticisms are not entirely unfounded. Plautus neither translates faithfully nor adapts loosely his Greek originals: he transforms them into extravagant musical shows, and essentially alters both the substance of Greek New Comedy and the social hierarchy of his time. For he lowers the tone of Hellenistic comedy, uses an entirely original and exaggerated style of language (abounding in

rhetorical devices, neologisms, elevated vocabulary, and colloquialisms), prefers musical ‘numbers’ to sections of spoken verse, has as many as six speaking actors on stage at the same time, prolongs the exchange of jokes in scenes that do not advance the plot, makes his Greek characters allude to Roman customs, stresses the motif of treachery and deceit, sacrifices subtlety of character-portrayal to amusingly violent images of verbal and visual humour, and (most importantly) gives a new dimension to the character of the cunning slave, who dominates the action and becomes not only the hero of the play but also the poet’s *alter ego*. ‘Plautopolis’ (as Gratwick 1982 happily called it) is a topsy-turvy world, in which everything is possible, but the Saturnalian anarchy that reigns supreme in the toings and froings of the familiar characters in these plays is almost always followed by a return to social and moral order.

A discussion (even a brief one) of all the Plautine comedies is not within the scope of this chapter. It will be useful, however, to view Plautus’ overwhelming comic spirit in action by looking at one passage from the *Rudens* (*The Rope*), whose main theme is the reinstatement of moral order that has been violated twice at the expense of the virtuous maiden Palaestra (having been abducted by pirates, she has lost both her parents and her freedom at the hands of a pimp). The motif of the restoration of justice appears firstly in the opening speech of the constellation Arcturus, who observes people’s actions and reports their immoral deeds to Jupiter. The current victim of his tempestuous wrath is the impious pimp Labrax (‘Mr Dirty-Fish’), a wonderfully evil and greedy perjurer pursued at sea by Palaestra’s beloved, Plesidippus. Having survived the shipwreck caused by Arcturus, Labrax is keen to retrieve his lost property, the tragically portrayed Palaestra (‘Miss Wrestling-Ground’), who seeks refuge in the temple of Venus and asks for the assistance of the priestess Ptolemaia (‘Ms Warpower’), a dreadfully old-fashioned lady representing divine solace on earth. Subsequently Palaestra is aided by another unfairly treated but eventually rewarded person, the honest old Daemones (‘Mr Divine Spirits’), Palaestra’s father; he represents divine justice on earth, since he punishes Labrax and enables Palaestra to identify himself as her long-lost father. Plautus, however, an expert in comic timing, knows when to change ‘comic gear’, as it were. Slapstick sequences follow serious scenes and create a variety of tone that attracts attention and advances the storyline. Picture the scene. Labrax is attacking both the priestess and the girl. There is a lot of noise off-stage. An actor, whose mask and costume indicate that he plays the role of a slave (his name is Trachalio, ‘Trustful Neck’), runs out of the temple door and delivers the following monologue:

Good people of Cyrene, I beseech you, place your trust in me.
 You farmer fellows, country dwellers now residing in these parts,
 Dear neighbours, help the helpless and repel a most repulsive deed!
 Be instruments of vengeance! Don’t let wicked people wield more weight
 Than innocents who do not wish a notoriety from crime.

Make shameless conduct stand condemned, grant decency its just reward;
 Allow our lives to be controlled by law, not low brutality.
 Come running here to Venus' temple (I implore you once again),
 All of you present with me now and all who hear my urgent cry.
 Assist these suppliants who have placed themselves, by custom old as time,
 In Venus' care and in the hands of Venus' lady overseer.
 Seize injustice: wring its neck before it can affect your lives.

(*Rudens* 615–26, trans. Smith 1991: 255)

The humour in this rhetorically constructed plea for help (notice the repetition of similar sounds in lines 618 *inpiorum potior sit pollutia*, 621 *vi victo vivere*, 625 *in custodelam suom commiserunt caput*; the pun *exemplum pessimum pessum date* in line 617; and the personification of injustice in line 626) is based not only on the incongruity of the situation (urgent action is needed, not lengthy speeches) but also on the legal inconsistency of the incident (a Greek character, and a slave at that, is appealing for help according to the Roman custom of *quiritatio*, public request for aid). Plautus wants to get the maximum comic effect from such a scene, and prolongs the state of the slave's alarm and his entertaining panic in his ensuing discussion with Daemones.

3 Terence

Such scenes are much rarer in the plays of Terence (d. 159 BC), whose view of drama is, on the whole, incompatible with the verbal fireworks and the slapstick visual humour of his predecessor. Allegedly a slave of Carthaginian origin and of such wit and good looks that he was manumitted, Terence was patronized by powerful philhellenes (prominent among them was P. Cornelius Scipio Aemilianus), whose aesthetic preferences he followed only partly. Six plays are attributed to him: *Andria* (performed 166 BC), *Heauton Timorumenos* (163 BC), *Eunuchus* (161 BC), *Phormio* (161 BC), *Hecyra* (having failed to impress the audience in 165 BC, it was successfully performed in 160 BC), *Adelphoe* (160 BC). *Phormio* and *Hecyra* are based on plays by Apollodorus of Carystos, the others on Menandrian comedies (with a small contribution in *Adelphoe* from Diphilus). None of his originals survives complete.

The theatrical self-awareness that forms such an indispensable part of Plautine humour is barely felt in some of Terence's plays (*Andria*, *Hecyra*), and is wholly absent in others. Terence both 'translates' his Greek originals more faithfully than Plautus and 'adapts' them in ways that may have been unacceptable to a more conservative dramatist. Using the prologue not in its traditional expository function but as a means of defending himself (an echo of the Aristophanic *parabasis*) against the charges of a theatrical nature levelled at him by a 'maicious old poet' he never names (how accurately reported these charges are

is questionable), Terence holds his audience's attention with surprise as well as irony and suspense, since he withholds information that is only gradually revealed to the audience and to the stage-characters at the same time. His characters are superbly drawn; the courageous courtesan Thais in *The Eunuch*, for instance, is a fully rounded individual with her virtues and faults: she combines feelings of genuine affection toward the young man Phaedria (feelings normally displayed by chaste maidens) with cruelty and manipulative tenderness toward the soldier Thraso (qualities usually associated with greedy and mercenary courtesans).

Terence's language, which contributes to the impression of watching individuals rather than stock characters and realistic plays rather than Saturnalian farces, earned him a place in ancient school curricula, while his sparing use of musical scenes ensured that his comedies were not endowed with Plautine artificiality. But despite the apparent seriousness of his themes (the maltreatment of women in *The Mother-in-Law*, the proper bringing up of boys in *The Brothers*, the relation between love and profit in *The Eunuch*), Terence also injects his storylines with generous doses of visual humour but does not allow it to take priority over character-portrayal. Consider the celebrated opening lines of *The Eunuch* (46–9), admired by Cicero, Horace, Persius and Quintilian: the rhetorical figures in Phaedria's speech not only function as cues for visually entertaining gestures but also reveal the agitation of the unhappy young-man-in-love. Comedy for Terence is intellectual amusement of a Menandrian quality.

4 *Fabula Togata* and *Fabula Atellana*

Side by side with the *fabula palliata* were performances of 'toga-clad' farcical plays with Italian characters enacting (probably with masks) fictional events set in Italian settings. The fragmentary remains of this *fabula togata* (about 65 titles and 600 lines) give the impression that – at least as far as repertory and dramaturgical techniques were concerned – the second-century BC playwrights Titinius, Afranius, and the first-century Atta (praised by Varro for his character-portrayal) derived their inspiration (possibly more than that) from Greek New Comedy: the cast comprises slaves, prostitutes and parasites, and the affairs of problematic families seem to have been vital to the plots; there is also evidence for the use of lyric metres. Some would like to draw a sharper line between *palliata* and *togata*: Quintilian (10.1.100) rebukes Afranius for the pederastic affairs of his plays (a motif unattested in the extant *palliata*), while Donatus (on Ter. *Eun.* 57) implies that the master–slave relationship was not subverted in the *togata*. Surely, however, there was cross-fertilization between these genres. 'Toga-clad plays' were revived in the first century AD (Afranius' *Incendium*: Suet. *Nero* 11.2) and new ones composed, though for recitation rather than for full-scale performance, in the second (Juv. 1.3).

A different impression is given by the 115 titles and the (approximately) 320 lines of the extant *fabula Atellana* in its literary form, which seems to have evolved from largely improvised Italian farces delivered originally in Oscan dialect and associated with amateur actors (Livy 7.2; Val. Max. 2.4.4). Though composed in the metres of the *palliata* and the *togata*, the plays of Pomponius, Novius, Aprissius and Mummius (largely from the early first century BC) seem to have dealt with low-life situations (many of the plays are entitled after disreputable professions) couched in equally low language. Five stock characters (Bucco, Dossennus, Maccus, Manducus and Pappus) – played by masked actors – starred in various comic situations (some indication of the plot is given by the titles *The Adopted Bucco*, *Pappus' Jug*, *The Maccus Twins*, *Maccus the Soldier*, *Maccus the Trustee*, *Maccus the Maiden*, *Pappus the Farmer*, *Pappus Past and Gone*, *Pappus' Spouse*, *The Two Dossenni*, *Maccus the Innkeeper* and *Maccus in Exile*), while parody of mythological scenes (known from tragedy) seem to have featured frequently in the repertory (*The False Agamemnon*, *Ariadne*, *The Dispute over the Armour*, *Atalanta*, *Sisyphus*, *Andromache* and *The Phoenician Women*). Suetonius (Nero 39.3) and Juvenal (3.173–6) testify to the continuation of such performances until at least the second century AD. In a letter to L. Papirius Paetus, dated July 46 BC, Cicero (*Ad fam.* 9.16.7) implies that Atellane farces were traditionally performed after tragedies (this might explain the mythological content of some of them) but also that the current trend was to have low mimes rather than *Atellanae* as ‘after-pieces’ (*exodia*). Even if Cicero’s testimony does not reflect general theatrical practice, it clearly demonstrates how mime gradually ousted other types of comedy from the Roman stage.

5 Mime

The word *mimus* in both its meanings of an imitator, actor and a form of drama, covering any kind of theatrical spectacle that did not belong to masked tragic and comic drama, was taken over from the Greek into Latin, and a great number of mimic performers came to Italy from Greek-speaking lands. Mime, however, was not a purely Greek phenomenon transplanted to Rome. Greek mime and farcical comedy had flourished in Greek-speaking southern Italy and Sicily for centuries in the comedies of Epicharmus, the prose mimes of Sophron and the burlesque plays of Rhinthon. With this native Italian mimic tradition the mime from the East was blended, and formed what should be more correctly defined as the Graeco-Roman mime.

Surviving from the Roman mime today are 734 moral apophthegms lacking a theatrical context, some 55 titles of literary plays, and a number of fragments that amount to a total of 241 lines (of which 201 are generally considered to be genuine). These fragments, whose length varies from one word to twenty-seven lines, were composed in iambic and trochaic rhythm, and cited by polymaths

(Pliny the Elder, Fronto, Gellius and Macrobius), grammarians (Bede, Charisius, Diomedes and Priscian), and lexicographers (Nonius) not for their theatrical merits but on account of their linguistic peculiarities or literary virtues. The publication in 1912 of a Pompeian inscription added one more line to our meagre corpus. The improvisational character of the mime as a theatrical genre, its non-educational character and the low reputation mime had acquired already in antiquity are more plausible explanations for the almost complete disappearance of these scripts rather than a hypothesis that the quality of the playwrights' skills was so poor, or that the content of their plays was so obscene that it condemned the scripts to oblivion.

The literary mime, composed in verse and performed in theatres, featured political satire, literary parody, philosophical burlesque and mythological travesties. Nowadays it is usually contrasted with the so-called 'popular' mime (what Elaine Fantham aptly called 'the missing link in Latin literature' [1989, 153]), which may have been enacted in streets, squares, theatres and private houses, and which included in its repertory adulteries, mock-weddings, staged trials, staged shipwrecks, and false deaths presented in a grotesque fashion. These 'popular' mimes had words, but possibly not a fixed script that could have been copied by later scribes and assessed on literary grounds. But this distinction between the two strands of mimic drama was not made by ancient authors, whose testimonies betray an obvious contempt for all of these shows.

Although mime influenced, and was influenced by, widely divergent literary genres, such as love elegy, the novel and satire, it was regarded as inferior in comparison not only to other types of Roman theatre (usually tragedy, the highest type of drama) but also to the rest of Latin literature, and pejorative adjectives such as *turpis* (shameful), *vilis* (cheap) and *levis* (insignificant) often accompany the word *mimus* in our testimonies on the mime throughout the centuries. Even in the treatises of grammarians and antiquarians of late antiquity (Diomedes, *Art. Gramm. Lib. III*, p. 491 Kiel, and Evanthius, *exc. de com.* 4.1, p. 21 Wessner; 6.2, p. 26 Wessner) mime almost always comes last in the list of theatrical genres examined and defined by them. This is hardly surprising. Mime with its imitation of base things and worthless characters was pre-eminently the genre of crude realism in antiquity: a maskless actor or actress, usually a slave or freedman/freedwoman, would expose himself/herself to the public gaze, and satirize people and contemporary events with inelegant and uncouth words that belonged to the vocabulary of the lower classes. Such performances did not seem to have any moral message to convey to their audience. As far as we know, a mime aimed only at making its audience burst out laughing (J. Lydus, *Magistr.* 1.40; Choricus, *Apol. Mim.* 30). This laughter (*mimicus risus*) was characterized by Quintilian (6.3.8) as 'a light thing, aroused generally by buffoons, mimes and brainless characters'.

The head of a mimic troupe was called *archimimus* (or *archimima*, when a woman was in charge) or *magister mimariorum*. He would own the company,

direct the plays, and take a part. There also seems to have been a hierarchy in the division of parts: the *archimimus* (or *archimima*) would dominate the scene. Then there are the *actores secundarum*, *tertiarum* and *quartarum partium*. The reference to ‘secondary parts’ does not necessarily imply that this role was of a lesser or inferior importance. The *actor secundarum* may have played the part of the *stupidus*, mimic fool or the parasite (see Hor. *Ep.* 1.18.10–4). There are also the characters of the flatterer, the slave, the adulterer, the jealous husband, the jealous woman, the mother-in-law and the foolish scholar. In his sixth-century description of mimic characters Choricus (*Apol. Mim.* 110) listed ‘the master, the household slaves, the inn-keepers, the sausage-sellers, the cook, the host and his guests, the notaries, the lisping child, the young lover, the angry rival, and the man who attempts to soothe another man’s anger’. Evidence for more mimic characters may be found in the surviving titles of mimic plays: *Augur* (*The Soothsayer*), *Piscator* (*The Fisherman*), *Hetaera* (*The Courtesan*), *Restio* (*The Rope-dealer*).

According to Cicero (*De Orat.* 2.251–2) the characteristics of mimic wit were ridicule of human figures who exhibit particular vices, emphasis on mimicry, exaggerated facial expressions (an indication that mimic actors and actresses did not wear masks) and obscenity. Cicero (*De Orat.* 2.242) too urges future orators to avoid excessive mimicry, ‘for, if the imitation is exaggerated, it becomes a characteristic of mimic actors who portrayed characters, as also does obscenity’. Quintilian, faithfully following Cicero’s doctrine, corroborates this notion (6.3.29).

A feature peculiar to the mimic stage, and surely linked with its low reputation, was the employment of women for female roles. Although it may be argued that the voice of a female character portrayed by an actress is ‘a real woman’s voice’ (i.e. the expression of – and an insight into – what a woman of that time would have felt about certain issues, such as adultery, presented on the stage), such a view is seriously undermined by the surviving evidence of the mimes of Laberius and Publilius, and the non-dramatic references to lost mimic plays, according to which the female characters of Roman mime are as artificial and conventional in their behaviour as their female counterparts in the other genres of popular theatrical shows. Moreover, the reliability of the majority of our evidence on historical women who acted in mimes is affected by the image of the ‘starlet’ that was deliberately created and projected on to these women, who functioned as attractive, even seductive, social scapegoats to preserve the chastity of decent wives, whose role was to be faithful to their husbands and produce legitimate children. In fact, the body of the mime-actress seems to have been exploited to such an extent that it became a stereotypical source of entertainment; this was the case especially in the obscene festival traditionally associated with the mimes, the Floralia, instituted in or after 173 BC (Val. Max. 2.10.8; Ovid *F.* 5.347–50; Lact. *Div. Inst.* 1.20.10).

Perhaps the most important feature of mimic performances was their very heterogeneity. The great variety of performances called mimes in antiquity makes an exact definition of mime particularly difficult. Mimic performers are often named alongside jugglers and magicians, and mime itself seems to have derived from this circus milieu. Its opportunistic nature sought amusement in any topic, but social mores, religion, philosophy and politics were targeted in a most extraordinary style, which comprised instances of vulgar obscenity happily coexisting with sophisticated apophthegms of highly moral standards.

Most of these features may be exemplified in the extant fragments of Laberius, which are much more numerous than the sum of the other mimic fragments written in Latin. Thirty-three titles and 178 lines are currently acknowledged to be by Laberius. It is not surprising, therefore, that his plays have formed the basis for much generalization about the mimic theatre. Macrobius's account (*Sat.* 2.6.6) of Laberius's refusal to write a mime for Clodius Pulcher indicates that he had probably already gained recognition for his works by 56 BC. His outspokenness is more clearly shown in his bold attacks on Caesar. Although, in accordance with his status as a Roman knight, he had not previously acted publicly the mimes he had written, in 46 BC (allegedly at the age of 60) he was said to have been forced by Caesar to compete with Publilius as a mimic actor. Macrobius informs us that Laberius obtained his revenge by a veiled threat to the dictator; he appeared dressed as a Syrian slave (without doubt, a disparaging comment on the servile origin of his theatrical opponent), who had allegedly been flogged because he was a thief, and started shouting at the top of his voice:

‘furthermore, Roman citizens, we lose our liberty’ and after a while he [Laberius] added: ‘He whom many fear should inevitably fear many.’ At the sound of these words everyone in the audience turned their eyes and faces towards Caesar alone, observing that his immoderate behaviour had received a fatal blow with this caustic jibe. (*Sat.* 2.7.4–5)

In the *Necyomantia* Laberius is thought to have made another attack upon Caesar. The first fragment of this mime refers to two wives and six aediles; editors of the mimes have interpreted this as a reference to Caesar's action in early 44 BC of raising the number of aediles from four to six, and to the rumour prevalent at that time that he was also thinking of legalizing polygamy (cf. Suet. *Iul.* 52). Moreover, Laberius did not spare philosophical trends; in the *Cancer* he referred to the Pythagorean doctrine of transfiguration of souls, while in the *Compitalia* he attacked the philosophy of the Cynics. He also targeted mythology, the gods and religious ceremonies: the titles *Anna Peranna*, *Lacus Avernus* and *Necyomantia* have been taken to represent travestied mythology, which may have also been presented in the five mimes attributed to him, named after signs of the Zodiac, *Aries*, *Cancer*, *Gemelli*, *Taurus* and *Virgo*; mimes named after festivals were *Parilicii*, *Compitalia* and *Saturnalia*.

As a poet, Laberius was admired by Horace (*Sat.* 1.10.1–10) for his satirical power but also criticized by him for his crude and unpolished diction. It is true that Laberius sometimes used colloquial Latin, and perhaps neologisms, which attracted the attention of grammarians and antiquarians (Gellius devotes a whole chapter (10.17) to Laberius' literary archaisms). But the colloquial Latin that appears in Laberius preserved many old words that the literary language of the Augustan age usually rejected as coarse; moreover, Laberius was also capable of effective diction. This is evident from a fragment from *Restio* (*The Rope-dealer*):

Democritus, the natural scientist of Abdera,
positioned a shield to face the rising of Hyperion,
so that, by the splendid sheen of brass, he could poke his eyes out.
Thus by the sun's rays he destroyed his vision,
not wishing to see the good fortune of bad citizens.
Likewise, I want the sheen of my gleaming gold
to deprive of light my last days,
so that I may not see my worthless son's good fortune.

A good critique of this fragment is to be found in Gellius. Having recounted the self-blinding of Democritus, he remarks:

It is that deed and the very manner in which he readily inflicted blindness on himself by the cleverest of tricks that the playwright Laberius, in a mime entitled *The Rope-dealer*, described in very elegant and vivid verses (*versibus quidem satis munde atque graphice factis descripsit*); however, Laberius came up with a different reason for the self-blinding and transferred it, quite neatly (*non inconcinniter*), to the story which he was then presenting on stage. (10.17.2)

Gellius praises the elegance of Laberius' writing, his power of description, and his inventiveness. Laberius was not the first or, indeed, the last to exploit the spectacular incident of Democritus' self-blinding; but the motive of the philosopher's action is different in the various accounts of his self-blinding: Lucretius (3.1039–41) attributes this decision to the onset of old age, which weakened his mental powers; Cicero (*Tusc. Disp.* 5.114 and *Fin.* 5.87) states that Democritus' eyesight was a distraction and an obstacle to the piercing vision of his soul (*aciem animi*), while Tertullian (*Apol.* 46.11), predictably enough, exploits the story to convey a message of Christian morality. Laberius' Democritus blinds himself *malis bene esse ne videret civibus* (not wishing to see the good fortune of bad citizens).

The speaker, a *dives avarus et parcus* (a rich and stingy miser) (according to Gellius), presents the blinding process in a mock-epic style, emphasized by the reference to Hyperion, and the humour of the passage is derived from bathos: contrast the elevated tone established by the reference to Democritus and the reason for the miser's introduction of it – namely, his exaggerated desire not to

see the good fortune of his worthless son. Laberius' joke can thus be summarized as follows: 'A did x; his intention was y; I want to be like A in order to do x, because my intention is z'. The logic of this joke is not uncommon in earlier comedy, both Menandrian (e.g. *Dysk.* 153–9) and Plautine (e.g. *Men.* 77–95), and demonstrates that Laberius was working along the lines of a well-established comic tradition. The humour of the passage was surely emphasized by the actor's gestures, tone of voice or other comic business, which are now irretrievably lost to us. Care has also been taken, however, by the playwright not only to amuse his audience visually but also to satisfy its literary expectations. Consider, for example, the repetition of *ph* in the first line (*physicus philosophus*), and of *c* and *t* in the second (*clipeum constituit contra exortum*), or the symmetrical arrangement of the two parts of the comparison (so, *splendore aereo* in line 3 corresponds to *fulgentis splendorem pecuniae* in line 6, *bene esse* in line 5 to *in re bona esse* in line 8, and *malis civibus* in line 5 to *nequam filium* in line 8).

Attention to linguistic detail is a common feature of Laberius' works. His fragments contain 32 neologisms that can be divided into three categories: compound words composed by two or more nouns (e.g. *testitrahus*, 'bollocks-dragging'); compound words composed by a preposition and an otherwise unattested verbal form derived from a noun (e.g. *collabellare*, 'to purse one's lips for a kiss'); and compound words composed with the aid of suffixes: these could be nouns (e.g. *adulterio* instead of *adulter*, 'adulterer'), adjectives (e.g. *bibosus*, 'boozy'), and verbs (e.g. *adulescenturire*, 'to behave like a youth'). Parallelisms with comic neologisms in Plautine drama are especially revealing here, and it is reasonable to assume that Laberius may have been deliberately attempting to revive the Plautine tradition of entertaining the audience by means of extravagant imagery and amusingly coined words.

Publilius was the great contemporary and rival of Laberius. He was born probably at Antioch and came to Italy, together with the astronomer Manilius and the grammarian Staberius Eros, as a young slave (Pliny *Nat. Hist.* 35.199). From Macrobius (*Sat.* 2.7.6–7) we hear that Publilius gained his manumission by his wit and beauty and received a careful education. According to Suetonius (*Vita Terenti* 1), Terence had exactly the same qualifications and, likewise, was educated with the support of a rich patron. The similarity of these romantic accounts undermines their reliability, and suggests that Pliny the Elder, Suetonius and Macrobius – who do not specify their sources – were drawing from a stock tradition of biographies of poor and unknown foreigners who became famous and influential public figures once they arrived in Italy, and specifically in Rome. Although it is unknown at what time he made his professional debut as writer and actor of mimes, Macrobius' words seem to imply that this occurred not long before his contest with Laberius in 46 BC. Of Publilius' mimes we have merely two titles (*Murmurco*, *The Mutterer* [Ribbeck's emendation for various unintelligible manuscript readings], and *Putatores*, *The Pruners*, a manuscript reading that has been emended to *Portatores* or, more plausibly, *Potatores*, *The Drinkers*) and

approximately four lines. In addition, there have come down to us 734 *sententiae* (iambic aphorisms) bearing Publilius' name, although opinions vary as to how many of these are genuine.

The brilliance of Publilius' style was greatly admired in antiquity. Seneca the Elder declares that this writer excelled in this respect all the tragedians and comedians (*Contr.* 7.3.8), while Seneca the Younger explicitly compares the *dicta* of Publilius with those of tragedy (*Ep.* 8.8; *Tranqu. An.* 11.8). That Publilius, like Laberius, was not averse to commenting on current events or to parodying Roman manners can be inferred from a letter of Cicero, written on 8 April 44, a few weeks after the assassination of Caesar (*Ad Att.* 14.2.1), and from Petronius' (or, better, Trimalchio's) imitation of Publilius' style (55.6).

The contempt felt toward the mimes in antiquity may militate against a generous assessment of their literary value and artistic worth. I would like to suggest, however, that this contempt may often be explained not only as intellectual snobbery but also as a reaction to the potential (and often actual) threat mime posed to the social and political status quo. Mime was attacked on stylistic, linguistic and moral grounds, but its satirical spirit against authority remained unchallenged. The exclusion of even literary mimes from 'serious literature' was both convenient and safe, because mime with its huge popularity could become an important political weapon that might manipulate and influence people's feelings concerning public figures, social norms and prestigious institutions. Its inferior status and its 'subliterary' label meant that it could be controlled and that its subject matter was not meant to be taken very seriously. Sulla was really the first to diagnose the usefulness of mime as a strategic tool for political propaganda, and so not only maintained close (sometimes quite intimate) relationships with actors and actresses, but also is thought to have composed mimes himself. In fact, Sulla is also the first clear example of the long-standing tension that may be detected in the feelings of the Romans toward mime. For although mimes were very poorly regarded in terms of both social prestige and artistic worth, there is evidence that throughout most of the period from Sulla to Domitian educated people enjoyed watching unrefined mimic shows, and sometimes engaged in writing mimes designed for scenic performance.

A good case study of this tension is none other than Cicero. He often saw mimic plays, and even more often expressed contempt for them. This scorn frequently appears both in his speeches, in some of which references to mime are used as terms of abuse against Cicero's political opponents, and in his correspondence. Yet it is not easy to decide what weight should be attributed to Cicero's opinion as an accurate barometer of the general public's feelings toward mime, nor should his dismissive remarks be interpreted as indicative of the low literary value of the *poemata* of Laberius and Publilius. For occasionally Cicero's attitude toward mime is less unfriendly. In the *De Oratore*, especially, he acknowledges the wit of mimic actors, and in fact cites several fragments of Roman mimes older than those of Laberius. The topical nature of mimic satire seems to frighten and attract him at

the same time. In 61 BC he fears that his glorious consulship may come to resemble a ridiculous mime entitled *The Bean* (*Ad Att.* 1.16.13), while in January 53 BC he jokingly expresses his anxiety for the subject matter of a new mime of Valerius (*Ad fam.* 7.11.2). In two other letters, written shortly after the assassination of Caesar, Cicero implies that the mimes reflect popular sentiments about this event, and is highly interested in them (*Ad Att.* 14.2.1; 14.3.2).

The uncouth language of the mime, its vulgar subject matter, and some of its stage-conventions (acting without masks, women playing female roles) are usually brought forth as the main reasons for the generic inferiority attached to mime within the literary hierarchy of Roman theatrical entertainment. These reasons conveniently obscured the fact that mime could cause considerable damage and exert strong influence in Roman politics, and should not be taken to mean that mimic texts did not observe high literary standards. After all, Laberius is mentioned – along with Plautus, Ennius, Accius, Caecilius, Naevius and Lucretius – in Fronto's correspondence as a poet Marcus Aurelius is urged to study in order to polish his literary style (*Ad M. Caes. et invicem* 4.3.3).

FURTHER READING

Fabula palliata. The fragments of this genre are in Ribbeck (1898) and (with a facing English translation) in Warmington (1936–8). In the absence of a commentary on them Wright (1974) remains invaluable. The best edition of Plautus is still Leo's (1895–6), although it is not as easily accessible as Lindsay's in the OCT series (1903–10). Terence's text is well presented in the Kauer et al. edition, also in the OCT series (1958). There are numerous scholarly editions and commentaries in English, German, Italian and Latin for individual Plautine and Terentian plays. Especially valuable for English readers are the editions by Gratwick (1993 and 1999), Barsby (1986 and 1999), Christenson (2000), MacCary and Willcock (1976), and Martin (1976). Complete sets of English translations of Plautus and Terence are in the Loeb Classical Library (there is now a new version of Terence by Barsby 2001) and in the series edited by Slavitt and Bowie (1974 and 1995). Terence has also been translated by Radice (1976), while select plays of Plautus were rendered by Watling (1964 and 1965), Stace (1981), Tatum (1983), Smith (1991) and Segal (1996). All the Roman comedies edited in the Aris & Phillips series (Barsby 1986; Brothers 1988 and 2000; Gratwick (1999); and Ireland 1990) include an English translation.

The most reliable general works in English on Roman drama are Duckworth (1952/1994), Beare (1964), Sandbach (1977), Hunter (1985), Beacham (1991) and Conte (1994b). Bieber (1961) is invaluable for her illustrations of all aspects of Greek and Roman theatre, while the recent collection of articles on Graeco-Roman acting in Easterling and Hall (2002) superbly illuminates neglected aspects

of ancient drama. The bibliography on Plautus and Terence is vast. Comprehensive lists of secondary sources (more than 5,000 items thematically classified) have been compiled by Hughes (1975), Babel (1992), Cupaiolo (1984 and 1992) and Hunter (1994). The best accounts in English of Plautus and Terence are Norwood (1923), Arnott (1975), Gratwick (1982 – especially recommended), Slater (1985 – a ground-breaking book on Plautine performance-criticism), Goldberg (1986), Segal (1987) and Anderson (1993). Jocelyn (1995) on Horace and Plautus is well worth reading. However, no scholar has contributed to our understanding of the Plautine comic spirit at work more than Fraenkel (1922, rev. Ital. transl. 1960). His views still dominate Plautine criticism, and should be consulted along with Handley (1968) and Bain (1979). Helpful concordances of Plautine and Terentian vocabulary have been compiled by Lodge (1904–33) and McGlynn (1963–7), while Gratwick (in all of his works) and Soubiran (1988) have cleared up many misconceptions about the function of Roman comic (especially Plautine) metre.

Fabula Atellana and *fabula togata*. Frassinetti (1967), Daviault (1981) and Guardì (1985) remain the only modern editions (with translations) of the fragments of the *Atellana* and the *togata*. Short introductions to these two literary genres in English may be found in most of the histories of Roman drama mentioned above.

Mime. The most recent edition of the fragments (with a brief commentary, an Italian translation, and a list of chronologically arranged *testimonia* on mime and pantomime) is Bonaria (1965). Ribbeck (1898) remains invaluable in presenting a stimulating text and a concise *apparatus criticus*. The most influential edition of Publilius' *sententiae* is Meyer's (1880). The few Greek mimes that survived from Roman antiquity are gathered in Page (1962) and Wiemken (1972), but the most detailed discussion of the lengthiest of these pieces is now Andreassi (2001).

English histories of Roman drama are not generous in allocating space to the study of the mimographers. Bieber (1961 – with excellent illustrations), Beare (1964), Horsfall (1982) and Beacham (1991) provide brief accounts of the Roman mime, which are more accurate and critical of the evidence than Nicoll's book on the subject (1931). But the most comprehensive treatments of this genre are in German (Gryzar 1854, Wüst 1932 and Rieks 1978 are the best; Reich 1903 is less helpful) or in Italian (Bernini 1915, Cicu 1988 and Giancotti 1967 is less reliable). Special scholarly attention has been given to the study of the mimic repertory that includes adultery, parody of philosophical doctrines and Christian rituals, and mythological travesties (Reynolds 1946; Eden 1964; Kehoe 1984; Herrmann 1985; Coleman 1990; Panayotakis 1997). Fantham (1988) rightly argues for the influence mimic subjects exerted on Rome's formal literature (elegy, lyric, the novel, Ovid's poetry) – a topic that still generates scholarly contributions: Stemplinger (1918), Wiemken (1972), McKeown (1979), Panayotakis (1995), Andreassi (1997) and Wiseman (2002). The language of the mimographers (and of the *fabula Atellana*) is discussed by Bonfante (1967) and Traglia (1972).