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978-0-521-76181-9 - Reading Roman Comedy: Poetics and Playfulness in Plautus and Terence

Alison Sharrock

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## READING ROMAN COMEDY

For many years the domain of specialists in early Latin, in complex metres and in the reconstruction of texts, Roman comedy has only recently begun to establish itself in the mainstream of classical literary criticism. Where most recent books stress the original performance as the primary location for the encountering of the plays, this book finds the locus of meaning and appreciation in the activity of a reader, albeit one whose manner of reading necessarily involves the imaginative reconstruction of performance. The texts are treated, and celebrated, as literary devices, with programmatic beginnings, middles, ends and intertexts. All the extant plays of Plautus and Terence have at least a bit-part in this book, which seeks to expose the authors' fabulous artificiality and artifice, while playing along with their differing but interrelated poses of generic humility.

ALISON SHARROCK is Professor of Classics at the University of Manchester. She is also the author of *Seduction and Repetition in Ovid's Ars Amatoria 2* (1994) and *Fifty Key Classical Authors* (with Rhiannon Ash, 2002), and co-editor of *Intratextuality: Greek and Roman Textual Relations* (with Helen Morales, 2000) and *The Art of Love: Bimillennial Essays on Ovid's Ars Amatoria and Remedia Amoris* (with Roy Gibson and Steven Green, 2006).

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## *Preface*

I hated Roman comedy as an undergraduate. Not only was it hard Latin, but also it gave little promise to be worth the effort, as being apparently a stereotype-ridden exercise in lamentable literary secondariness. It was only many years later when I was forced to teach the genre that I began to see that there might be some fun in it. Perhaps I should apologise for being slow, but anecdotal research suggests that I am not alone in my early experience, and that, apart from a select group of experts, most people, even professional classicists, are not avid readers. The less-than-avid readers of Plautus and Terence are first among those for whom this book is written. If the experts also find something here to amuse, if not to inform, I shall be well pleased.

From a career beginning in Augustan elegy, my entry into Roman comedy does not follow what might be thought the traditional route from the former to the latter. That there has been some degree of connection between the two genres has been known since antiquity, although not greatly exploited by modern critics, but the connections made have in any case been largely through what one might call the fictional worlds of the two genres. Insofar as one believes the imagined world of elegy to be that of a 'demi-monde', where the main players are slaves and freedwoman-prostitutes interacting with citizen men, that world can be seen to relate to the fictional world of the *fabula palliata*. This, however, is not my primary interest. I have been more concerned to consider how the *poetics* of Augustan poetry might find resonances in the artistry of republican comedy. Plautus and even Terence still labour under the calumny of baseness: their generic lowness, the immediacy of their performance, their early date in the story of Roman literary culture, the loss of so much other Latin literature from their period and their own self-deprecating self-display have contributed to an underlying prejudice about the playwrights as fundamentally different from respectable poets like Virgil, or even Ovid, and even

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as ‘not really literature’. Their study has been the preserve of experts, who have done important work but who have not always evangelised effectively among a wider classical audience. Much of the recent non-philological work on comedy has been mainly concerned with performance; my primary concern, by contrast, is with reading, and with performance as it features in imaginative reconstruction by the reader. One of the aims of this book is to help in bringing Plautus and Terence into the mainstream of Latin literary studies.

The twenty-one plays of Plautus and the six of Terence all feature to some extent in this study, but the discussions are scattered throughout. Rather than burdening the text with multiple cross-references, I have attempted to use the index to guide the reader towards all discussions of a particular play.

All quotations from Plautus and Terence are from the relevant Oxford Classical Texts (OCTs), as are those of all other classical texts except where stated. I have translated all substantial passages in the main text, although not in the footnotes. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated: they make no claims to elegance or cleverness. Abbreviations for classical texts and authors are as in the Oxford Latin Dictionary (*OLD*) or, for Greek authors, Liddell and Scott (*LSJ*); abbreviations for scholarly journals are as in *L'Année philologique*.

This book began life far too long ago, when I was invited by the Department of Classics at Trinity College, Dublin to deliver the W. B. Stanford Memorial lectures for 1999. I am very grateful to the Department, and especially to Brian McGing, for the opportunity, their hospitality, and most of all their patience. I acknowledge with gratitude the support of the Leverhulme Trust and the University of Manchester for periods of research leave which contributed to the writing of this book. Many friends and colleagues have offered generous advice and invaluable moral support at various stages, among whom I would mention particularly Ruth Morello, David Langslow, John Henderson, Joanne McNamara, Emma Griffiths and Dorota Dutsch. I have been very fortunate in my dealings with the Press throughout, in Michael Sharp's acuity, flexibility and helpful advice and support, in the enormously useful reports from the readers, and in the expertise of the editorial team. I am particularly indebted to the care and expertise of my copy editor, Iveta Adams. The person without whom this book would never have reached its final form is Valerie Knight, my research assistant for the last couple of years, who kept me going when university administration threatened to overwhelm me, who insisted on precision

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when I would have been lazy, who went far beyond the call of duty in every aspect, and who always brought me a cup of coffee. It goes without saying that remaining errors are my own responsibility. Finally, I would like to thank my family, my husband Tim and our three boys who have all but grown up with this book, and my parents, Jim and Christine Wiegold, who have always supported me in every way. This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother.

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