Ortwin Knorr (Salem, Oregon)

METATHEATRICAL HUMOR
IN THE COMEDIES OF TERENCE[*]

Plautus has long been celebrated as a master of metatheatrical humor.[1] The plays of his successor Terence, in contrast, are generally thought to be almost devoid of comical references to their theatrical nature.[2] In fact, Duckworth claimed that Terence strove "for a higher kind of comedy" (1952, 137) that avoided such crude humor for the sake of realism. Yet Terence tends to be a lot funnier than some scholars give him credit for, and metatheatrical humor in particular plays a more important role in his comedies than modern readers have realized. Indeed, quite a few witty instances of metatheater have been identified in Terence's first play, the Andria (The Girl from Andros).[3] Still, many more remain to be discovered, both in Andria and in other plays. For reasons of space, I will focus in particular on three hitherto overlooked instances of metatheater in Terence: two metatheatrical puns in Andria, the role of Parmeno in Hecyra (The Mother-in-Law), and the two entrance scenes of Chaerea in Eunuchus (The Eunuch).

Before I continue, I should briefly indicate what I mean by 'metatheater' since the term is not always used uniformly. To cite the words of Oliver Taplin, metatheater is "theatrical self-reference" or "the ways in which plays may, or may not, draw attention to their own 'playness', to the fact that they are artifices being performed under special controlled circumstances" (Taplin 1986, 164).[4] Taplin's investigation of metatheater in Aristophanes, however, focuses almost exclusively on explicit textual references to the audience, to the poet, the act of writing, and to contemporary tragedies. Regarding visual elements of performance with a potential for metatheatrical self-reference, he briefly refers only to costumes (Taplin 1986, 170). The following pages, in contrast, will emphasize both visual and verbal aspects of performance since they often work hand in hand to convey metatheatrical humor.

---

1. See, e. g., Moore 1998; Slater 2000; McCarthy 2000; Anderson 1993, 138–139 cautions against an inappropriately unrestricted use of the term metatheater with regard to Plautus.

2 Thus most recently, for example, Cicu 1996, 70.

3 Most recently discussed by Kruschwitz 2004, 49–50.

4 Slater 2000, 10 gives a useful overview of the evolution and divergent uses of the term 'metatheater.'

So far, only a handful of scenes from two of Terence's six comedies have been identified as instances of metatheater. In Hecyra 866–868, the character Pamphilus notoriously calls attention to this play's unusual ending which, in explicit contrast to other comedies (*non ... ut in comoediis*, 866), limits the *anagnorisis* (recognition) to only "those for whom it was appropriate that they learn the facts" (*hic quos par fuerat resciscere, sciunt*, 867–868).[5] Even in this passage, however, the full extent of the metatheatrical humor in Pamphilus' comment has not yet been appreciated. Pamphilus is not only referring to himself and a few other characters (Bacchis, Murrina and possibly Philumena), but in a metatheatrical break with the dramatic illusion he is also pointing to the audience watching the play. The actor playing Pamphilus may well have made this clear with a gesture or a nod directed at the spectators.

The other scenes where metatheatrical humor has been observed are all part of Andria. Here, the character Simo, an old man, repeatedly comments on the artificiality of comic conventions and refuses to believe what he is seeing. In Andria 474–477 he laughs at the convenient onset of Glycerium's labor as soon as he stands in front of her door. In Andria 490–493 Simo points to the unnatural behavior of the midwife, who, in accordance with comic custom, turns on the threshold and shouts back her instructions to the women inside the stage building.[6] Lastly, in Andria 915–916 Simo comments on the improbability of the sudden appearance of Crito, the only one who can vouch for Glycerium's free birth.[7]

In Andria too, some instances of metatheatrical humor have previously been overlooked. When the slave Davus is left alone on stage in the third scene of the first act (215–224), he reveals to the audience that the hetaera Glycerium is pregnant by Pamphilus, Davus' young master, and that Pamphilus wants to recognize the child as his own. For that purpose, the two lovers, Davus further reports, have devised a bold plan (*audaciam*, 217), which he considers "an undertaking of lunatics, not of lovers" (*inceptiost amentium, haud amantium*, 218). They want to claim that Glycerium is a freeborn Athenian citizen, brought to Andros by an Athenian merchant who suffered shipwreck on this island and entrusted the small girl before his death to the father of Chrysis (221–224); the latter we have already met as the prostitute with whom Glycerium was staying in

Athens. This story so clearly seems invented in order to allow Pamphilus to take Glycerium as his lawful wife that the world-wise slave immediately dismisses it as *fabulae*, that is, "silly stories" or "nonsense" (224).

The word *fabulae*, however, means not only "nonsense." It is also a technical term for dramatic plays in general and comedies in particular.[8] Thus understood, Davus' comment turns into a metatheatrical observation about the remarkable similarity of Glycerium's story to the unrealistic plots of many Roman comedies, including the Andria itself. Comedies often end with the fortuitous discovery that the female heroine is the freeborn citizen daughter of a rich neighbor and thus a wonderful match for her besotted young lover. The improbability of this kind of conventional comic plot leads Davus to reject Glycerium's story as theatrical fiction, *fabulae*.

In the end, of course, the apparent fiction will paradoxically turn out to be reality. In fact, it is one of the most important themes of the play that virtually everything that one of the play's characters rejects as unrealistic because of its obvious theatricality turns out to be true: Glycerium is 'really' a freeborn Athenian, she is 'really' giving birth, the midwife has 'really' just delivered a baby, and Crito is 'really' a reliable witness.[9]

At the end of the play, old man Simo interrupts Crito's account of Glycerium's shipwreck in Andros with another metatheatrical pun. In Andria 925, the old man blurts out, "He [Crito] is starting a *fabula*," i. e., the plot of a comedy (*fabulam inceptat*). This ambiguous remark is designed both to point out the height of Simo's delusion and to remind us of Davus' similarly erroneous comment earlier (*fabulae*, 224). Thus, Davus' metatheatrical comment in line 224 serves two functions: First, it introduces the theme that everything in this play that seems staged or, in other words, everything that smacks of dramatic convention is, in fact, 'reality'. Secondly, Davus' comment foreshadows the typical happy ending, the recognition of Glycerium as the daughter of the wealthy Athenian Chremes (933).

One year after Andria, in his wonderful, fast-paced comedy Hecyra (Mother-in-Law),[10] Terence again used metatheater to call attention to a comic routine,

---

5   For discussions of the theatrical self-referentiality of this passage, see, e. g., Norwood 1923, 105; Duckworth 1952, 138; Perelli 1973, 173; Büchner 1974, 168; Goldberg 1986, 152 and 166; Slater 1988, 259; Ireland 1990, 156; Cicu 1998, 52 n. 19 and 54; Anderson 2000, 316–23; Anderson 2002, 6–7.

6   Fantham 2000, 295 makes the appealing suggestion that Simo in 470–476 and 490–494 reacts to a supposititious baby routine that she assumes "was an established variant in traditional courtesan comedy." Her assumption is confirmed by a passage she overlooks: The Eunuchus prologue lists a series of conventional comic routines, including the supposition of a child (*puerum supponi*, Eun. 39).

7   On these scenes, see Duckworth 1952, 137–38; Shipp 1960, 160; Büchner 1974, 74–79 and 110; Hunter 1985, 77–79; Frangoulidis 1997, 8–11; Fantham 2000, 294–295; Kruschwitz 2004, 49–50.

8   Cf. Plaut. Pseud. 388 and see *OLD* s. v. *fabula* 6. Frangoulidis 1997, 9 also observes the ambiguity of the term *fabula* but fails to see its metatheatrical implications. I am grateful to Babette Pütz (Wellington) who in an email has called my attention to a Greek parallel in Aristoph. Vesp. 64 where λογίδιον in a similarly ambiguous manner means both "play" and "a little story" like the ones that Philokleon keeps telling throughout the play.

9   Hunter 1985, 79 nicely sums up the play's message: "It is a pleasing irony that Simo is deceived because he refuses to take dramatic conventions at their face value; nothing but trouble can come from mixing the real world with the world of the theatre" [misunderstood by Frangoulidis 1997, 9 n. 14].

10 *Pace* Forehand 1985, 95 who calls the Hecyra "the slowest of all Terence's plays." For interpretations that do more justice to the play, see Gilula 1979–1980, Konstan 1983 130–141, Slater 1988, Parker 1996, and Brown in this volume.

the Running Slave (*servus currens*), which he had skilfully reinvented for this occasion. In this play, a young man, Pamphilus, returns from abroad only to learn that his young wife, Philumena, has moved back in with her parents next door. When Pamphilus enters the stage, he hears Philumena crying in pain from inside the stage building. The audience, of course, recognizes these screams as the conventional labor cries that Greek and Roman comedy uses to portray the birth of a child. Pamphilus, however, comically misunderstands the situation and forces his way into her parents' house because he fears that his beloved wife has suddenly taken ill.

When Pamphilus leaves Philumena's house again, he immediately orders his slave, Parmeno, to run off the stage (*curre*, 359). Once the stage is clear, he breaks out into an emotional monologue that serves both as messenger report and confession (361–414). Pamphilus reveals that Philumena is giving birth. The child, we learn, is the result of Philumena's rape by an unknown attacker (383). It cannot be Pamphilus' child because the first time he slept with Philumena was five months ago, two months after their wedding (392–394). The young man has decided to divorce her, but he has also promised her mother, Murrina, to protect Philumena's secret that she is having an illegitimate child. The only character threatening the success of this plan is Pamphilus' old trusted slave, Parmeno. Pamphilus himself had confided in him some time after the wedding that he had not yet slept with his bride (409–411, cf. with Parmeno's own account 143–145). Thus Pamphilus has to prevent the slave from knowing that Philumena is having a baby (412–414). And so each time when Parmeno enters the stage, the young man immediately sends him running off on a fool's errand.

The first time, Pamphilus sends Parmeno stage left, to the harbor, to help the other slaves with his baggage (359):

> *tu pueris curre, Parmeno, obviam atque is onera adiuta!*

> You r u n to meet the boys (slaves) and help them with the baggage!

This gives Pamphilus time for the long soliloquy (361–414) I have just described in which he informs the audience of everything that has happened and tries to digest his shock at Philumena's true condition. As soon as this monologue is finished, Parmeno returns with the baggage. Again, Pamphilus immediately sends him running off, this time stage right, to the Acropolis, where he is supposed to wait for a non-existing shipmate of Pamphilus (431):

> PAMPHILUS: *in arcem transcurso opus est.*
> PARMENO:　　　　　　　　　　*quoi homini?*
> PAMPHILUS:　　　　　　　　　　　　　　*tibi!*

> PAMPHILUS: Someone needs to r u n to the acropolis.
> PARMENO:　　　　　　　　　　Who?
> PAMPHILUS:　　　　　　　　　　　　You!

Both scenes are funny metatheatrical inversions of a standard comic routine. The slave's acting and the repeated use of the verb *currere* (359) or a compound of it, *transcurrere* (431), both serve as audio-visual reminders for the audience that Terence is playing with a stock scene which the ancient playwrights and critics themselves called the Running Slave (*servus currens*).[11] In this slapstick routine, a slave rushes onto the stage, frantically trying to convey an important message to his master.[12] In the Hecyra, however, Terence wittily changes the routine so that the slave runs not onto, but off the stage as a way to prevent him from revealing an important secret.[13]

In fact, the playwright keeps poor Parmeno running like a *servus currens* throughout the entire play. Even when Parmeno finally returns from the Acropolis at the end of the comedy, he is immediately sent off again. This time, the hetaera Bacchis wants him to find Pamphilus (808–815):

> BACCHIS:　*Parmeno, opportune te offers: propere curre ad Pamphilum.*
> 　　　　　*[...]*
> 　　　　　*sed cessas?*
> PARMENO:　　　　　*minime equidem; nam hodie mihi potestas haud datast;*
> 　　　　　*ita cursando atque ambulando totum hunc contrivi diem.*

> BACCHIS:　Parmeno, you come at the right time: quick, r u n to Pamphilus.
> 　　　　　[...]
> 　　　　　But are you dallying?
> PARMENO:　　　　　Not at all; today, I haven't been given the chance.
> 　　　　　I s p e n t t h e e n t i r e d a y r u n n i n g a n d w a l k i n g.

Again, the use of *currere* and *cursare* in this short dialogue calls attention to the fact that Parmeno's entire role is a skillful variation of the trite old *servus currens* routine. Even more importantly, Parmeno's comment at the end, "I spent the entire day [i. e., the entire play] running and walking," makes the audience aware that Terence has rewritten his role so that he, the clever slave, is curiously absent from most of the play's action (808–815). In contrast to other comedies, the clever slave in Hecyra thus never receives a chance to show his cleverness.[14]

---

11 As a clearly technical term, *servus currens* appears Ter. Haut. 31 and 37; Eun. 36; Donatus on Ad. 299 and Phorm. 179; cf. also Plaut. Merc. 109.

12 The classic discussion of running slaves in ancient Roman comedy is Duckworth 1936, 93–102. For a detailed description of the different parts of the *servus currens* routine, see Csapo 1993, 42–45.

13 Others have also noticed Parmeno's unusually limited role and his constant running without commenting on the metatheatrical humor of his scenes, cf. Donat. p. 335 W.: Norwood 1923, 92; Konstan 1983, 132; and see Brown in this volume, below p. 183. Gilula 1979–1980, 148 summarizes the inversion of the typical *servus currens* role best: "The stock character of the running slave who possesses vital information unknown to others ... becomes a slave-on-the-run."

14 Ireland 1990, 132 remarks *ad* 409–414: "[T]he portrayal of Parmeno from this point on constitutes a direct inversion of the normal comic slave-role his earlier description suggested: arranging his young master's escape from the problems that beset him."

Instead, against all convention, both the young lover and the two old men (466–467) try their hand at deception, – and fail miserably at it (468; 701–705), to the audience's amusement.

Let us once more return to Parmeno's own unusual role. The conventional clever slave of Greek and Roman comedy constantly pulls all the strings. Parmeno in Hecyra, however, is so out of the picture that he never even begins to understand what is going on. Parmeno is absolutely flabbergasted (849–851) when Pamphilus, in a standard scene at the end of the play, wants to reward him for the all-important piece of information he has just unwittingly brought him, namely that Pamphilus himself must be Philumena's attacker and the father of her child because the ring that he gave Bacchis after the rape was Philumena's. Again, the exchange between the slave and the young man highlights the comically inadequate role the clever slave is forced to play in this comedy (849–851):

> PAMPHILUS: *egon pro hoc te nuntio qui donem? qui? qui? nescio.*
> PARMENO: *at ego scio.*
> PAMPHILUS: *qui[d]?*
> PARMENO: *nihilo enim.*
>   *nam neque in nuntio neque in me ipso tibi boni quid sit scio.*

> PAMPHILUS: How can I reward you for this news? How? How? I don't know.
> PARMENO: But I know.
> PAMPHILUS: How?
> PARMENO: With nothing.
>   I don't know what good either the message or I myself have done you.

Many more examples could be mentioned where Terence cleverly and metathetrically points out to his audience that he has transformed standard comic routines into something fresh and funny. I will limit myself to one last example from Terence's fourth comedy, Eunuchus (The Eunuch). We have already discussed the stereotypical *servus currens* routine, which in Terence's time is already such old hat that he makes fun of it in one of his prologues (Haut. 30–32). In Eunuchus, not a slave, but a hot-blooded young ephebe or citizen soldier in training, Chaerea, twice runs onto the stage in the typical manner of the *servus currens*.

The first time, Chaerea, dressed as a young soldier, is in hot pursuit of a beautiful girl he has seen in the street (292–297). He has immediately fallen in love with her and is still so shaken by this experience and so intent on finding the girl, looking frantically around for her, that it takes him some time to realize that his slave Parmeno has been observing him for a while. This scene must visually remind the spectators of the old Running Slave routine. For the typical running slave is usually similarly occupied with his important news and so busy frantically looking for his master that he does not immediately notice him even though he has run past him several times, just as Chaerea fails to notice Parmeno for

some time.[15] What is striking and funny about this *servus currens* scene is that Terence has exchanged the roles of master and slave.[16]

The second time (549–556), Chaerea hurriedly enters the stage after he has not only found, but even *raped* the girl he was looking for. He does not enter from one of the side entrances, like a typical *servus currens*, but comes out of the house of the girl's new mistress, the prostitute Thais. Chaerea is still in the costume of a eunuch slave in which he managed to gain entrance to the house. The young man is so full of his 'success' that he blindly runs around on stage trying to find someone with whom he can share his experience even though his friend Antipho has been standing nearby all along and has been wondering what Chaerea is doing in such weird garb.

Both cases are creative transformations of the comic *servus currens* routine. The first scene makes one wonder whether Chaerea's slave-like behavior is meant to foreshadow his later disguise as an old slave. The second scene is both funny and shocking. Chaerea triumphs like a typical young lover, and his exotic eunuch's costume is clearly a source of humor. At the same time, however, his inappropriate attire, absolutely disgraceful for a free citizen, also reflects his shameless behavior and thoughtless disregard for decency and for the feelings of Pamphila, the girl he supposedly loves. The only excuse for his behavior that he can later proffer is that he thought Pamphila was a slave (858).

To come to a conclusion, Terence clearly does not avoid metatheatrical humor for the sake of realism. In fact, metatheatrical allusions form a significant source of humor in his plays. In contrast to Plautus,[17] however, Terence generally avoids openly breaking the dramatic illusion with his metatheatrical jokes, and in this sense, his use of metatheater is indeed more subtle and more 'realistic' than some of the instances of metatheater in Plautus.

Bibliography

W. S. Anderson, *Barbarian Play: Plautus' Roman Comedy*, Toronto 1993.

W. S. Anderson, *The Frustration of Anagnorisis in Terence's Hecyra*, in: Sheila K. Dickison – Judith P. Hallett (edd.), *Rome and Her Monuments. Essays on the City and Literature of Rome in Honor of Katherine A. Geffcken*, Wauconda, Il. 2000, 311–323.

W. S. Anderson, *Resistance to Recognition and 'Privileged Recognition' in Terence*, CJ 98, 2002, 1–8.

K. Büchner, *Das Theater des Terenz*, Heidelberg 1974.

L. Cicu, *Spectator extra fabulam: La Nascita del dramma assoluto*, Sandalion 19, 1996, 41–91.

E. G. Csapo, *A Case Study in the Use of Theatre Iconography as Evidence for Ancient Acting*, Antike Kunst 36, 1993, 41–58.

---

15 Compare, for example, Andr. 338–344, a more typical running slave scene.
16 Below in this volume, p. 183, Brown notices a similar role reversal in Heauton Timorumenos.
17 In Plautus, for example, characters habitually joke about the length of their plays without any regard for the dramatic illusion, cf. Cas. 1006; Merc. 1007–1008; Pseud. 388.

G. E. Duckworth, *The Dramatic Function of the Servus Currens*, in: *Classical Studies Presented to Edward Capps on his Seventieth Birthday*, Princeton 1936, 93–101.

G. E. Duckworth, *The Nature of Roman Comedy*, Princeton 1952.

E. Fantham, *DOMINA-tricks, or How to Construct a Good Whore from a Bad One*, in: E. Stärk – G. Vogt-Spira (edd.), *Dramatische Wäldchen: Festschrift für Eckard Lefèvre zum 65. Geburtstag* (Spudasmata 80), Hildesheim 2000, 287–299.

W. Forehand, *Terence*, Boston 1985.

S. A. Frangoulidis, *Handlung und Nebenhandlung: Theater, Metatheater und Gattungsbewusstsein in der römischen Komödie* (Drama Beiheft 6), Stuttgart 1997.

D. Gilula, *Terence's Hecyra: A Delicate Balance of Suspense and Dramatic Irony*, SCI 5, 1979–1980, 137–157.

S. M. Goldberg, *Understanding Terence*, Princeton 1986.

R. L. Hunter, *The New Comedy of Greece and Rome*, Cambridge 1985.

S. Ireland, *Terence. The Mother-in-Law*, Warminster 1990.

D. Konstan, *Roman Comedy*, Ithaca, N.Y 1983.

P. Kruschwitz, *Terenz* (Studienbücher Antike 12), Hildesheim 2004.

E. Lefèvre, *Der 'Heautontimoroumenos' des Terenz*, in: E. Lefèvre (ed), *Die Römische Komödie: Plautus und Terenz* (Wege der Forschung 236), Darmstadt 1973, 443–462.

E. Lefèvre, *Terenz and Menanders Heautontimorumenos* (Zetemata 91), Munich 1994.

K. McCarthy, *Slaves, Masters, and the Art of Authority in Plautine Comedy*, Princeton 2000.

T. Moore, *The Theater of Plautus: Playing to the Audience*, Austin 1998.

G. Norwood, *The Art of Terence*, Oxford 1923.

H. N. Parker, *Plautus vs. Terence: Audience and Popularity re-examined*, AJPh 117, 1996, 585–617.

L. Perelli, *Il teatro rivoluzionario di Terenzio*, Florence 1973.

G. P. Shipp, *P. Terenti Afri Andria*, Oxford ²1960 [originally published 1939].

N. W. Slater, *The Fictions of Patriarchy in Terence's Hecyra*, CW 81, 1988, 249–260.

N. W. Slater, *Plautus in Performance: The Theatre of the Mind* (Greek and Roman Theatre Archive 2), Amsterdam 2000.

O. Taplin, *Fifth-Century Tragedy and Comedy: A Synkrisis*, JHS 106, 1986, 163–174.

Peter G. McC. Brown (Oxford)

MOVEMENTS OF CHARACTERS AND PACE OF ACTION IN TERENCE'S PLAYS

George Duckworth in 1952 criticised Terence for his 'failure to visualize the stage business as successfully as Plautus had done',[1] and that criticism has sometimes been echoed by subsequent writers. It implies a rather fundamental shortcoming in a playwright we know to have been remarkably successful,[2] and in fact Duckworth withdrew it in the very next sentence by adding: 'Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he had less inclination than Plautus to write into the text announcements which might be helpful as stage directions to the actors (and to the modern reader). In whatever manner the problems mentioned above were handled in actual presentation, there would be little in their staging to perplex the Roman audience.' In other words, Terence was perfectly well able to visualise the stage business after all. As Christopher Lowe has said, 'Terence's plays are much more naturalistic than those of Plautus, but it must not be forgotten that he too was a man of the theatre'.[3]

Some scholars have noted the liveliness of Terence's handling of the action on stage: Walther Ludwig, for instance, in 1968 listed among the changes Terence made to his plays a tendency 'towards a richer visual element, livelier plots and stage business, increase in suspense or emotional effect'.[4] Examples of the 'richer visual element' are the occasional conversion of monologues into dialogues, or of simple monologues into overheard monologues,[5] and the creation of scenes with more than three speaking characters, often providing opportunities for eavesdropping and often thereby adding to the comedy or pathos of the situation. (Such scenes have been well studied by Lowe in the article on 'Terence's Four-Speaker Scenes' from which I have just quoted;[6] in an Italian paper largely devoted to examining the same scenes Lowe stresses even more explicitly that Terence was an 'autore di teatro'.[7]) One obvious example of lively stage business is the scene in Adelphoe in which the pimp protests about the theft of one of his girls and gets beaten up on stage; we know that Terence imported this scene into his version of Menander's Adelphoe from a play by Diphilus.

---

1 Duckworth 1952, 121.
2 See Parker 1996.
3 Lowe 1997, 158.
4 Ludwig 1968, 181.
5 On Terence's treatment of monologues, see Lowe 1983, 428–431.
6 Lowe 1997.
7 Lowe 1997/98, 235–248.

Terentius Poeta

herausgegeben von

PETER KRUSCHWITZ –
WIDU-WOLFGANG EHLERS – FRITZ FELGENTREU

VERLAG C. H. BECK MÜNCHEN

INHALTSVERZEICHNIS