

**Alison SHARROCK, *Reading Roman Comedy. Poetics and Playfulness in Plautus and Terence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 321pp., ISBN 978-0-521-76181-9, hb. £ 55.00.**

The twenty-first century in classical philology has become an age of renaissance for Roman comedy, and especially for Terence. As the effect of this revival phenomenon we can find not only new commentaries<sup>1</sup> and translations<sup>2</sup> but also a collection of articles<sup>3</sup> and monographs<sup>4</sup> which propose new ways of reading this (until recently) rather underestimated playwright. Those new texts redefine his work which is this time analyzed luckily not in opposition to Plautus. That was an erroneous practice of the earlier periods, and did neither of these authors any good.

Alison SHARROCK's (henceforth S.) book is the best example of this new approach to Plautus' and Terence's work. It brings many fine and, thanks to their freshness, intriguing interpretations. Although the author divides her time among the two playwrights in a just manner, one clearly gets the impression that her main goal – which she boldly admits to – is to “expose Terence as a subtle and playful playwright, self-consciously aware of his place in an established literary tradition” (p. 21). She examines him through and with the help of knowledge gathered by scholars of Plautus to show him (Terence) to the public as “more artful, more artificial, more farcical” than he is generally assumed to be.

The book itself is not a monograph in the strict sense of the word, because it does not deal with every aspect of the authors' plays one after the other in an organized structure, starting with sources of inspiration, masks, motifs, parts of the plays and language up to metre. Nevertheless none of these elements have been omitted, as long as they serve the higher purpose, that is to put finally an end to the opinion that Plautus and Terence, because of “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”, should be regarded

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<sup>1</sup> New commentaries begun to appear towards the end of the twentieth century, the most known being Terence, *The Mother-In-Law*, edited with translation, introduction and commentary by S. IRELAND, Warminster 1990; P. Terentius Afer, *Eunuchus*, Einführung, kritischer Text und Kommentar von L. TOMARAS, Hildesheim 1994; Terence, *The Brothers*, edited with translation and notes by A.S. GRATWICK, Warminster 1999; Terence, *The Eunuch*, edited by J. BARSBY, Cambridge 1999; Terence, *The Eunuch*, edited with translation and commentary by A.J. BROTHERS, Warminster 2000.

<sup>2</sup> In English alone, two new translations were published almost simultaneously: *Terence*, edited and translated by J. BARSBY, London 2001, vols. I–II (The Loeb Classical Library); *The Comedies of Terence*, translated with introduction and notes by P. BROWN, Oxford 2008; a new Polish translation, by this reviewer, was also published: *Terencjusz, Komedia*, vols. I–II, Warszawa 2005–2006.

<sup>3</sup> To list those deserving more notice: A.J. BOYLE (ed.), *Rethinking Terence* = Ramus XXXIII, 2004, 1–2; P. KRUSCHWITZ, W.-W. EHLERS, F. FELGENTREU (eds.), *Terentius Poeta*, München 2007 (Zetemata 127).

<sup>4</sup> A special group of monographs consists of books written by Eckard LEFÈVRE. They take up the analysis of Terence's comedies from the standpoint of their sources and inspirations: *Terenz' und Menanders Heautontimorumenos*, München 1994 (Zetemata 91); *Terenz' und Apollodoros Hecyra*, München 1999 (Zetemata 101); *Terenz' und Menanders Eunuchus*, München 2003 (Zetemata 117); *Terenz' und Menanders Andria*, München 2008 (Zetemata 132). For a monographic treatment of Terence's language and style, see E. KARAKASIS, *Terence and the Language of Roman Comedy*, Cambridge 2005. One should also mention the work of P. KRUSCHWITZ, *Terenz*, Hildesheim 2004.

“as fundamentally different from respectable poets like Virgil, or even Ovid, and even as ‘not really literature’” (pp. IX f.).

The book is divided into five main chapters, which in turn are divided into smaller sections, which constitute a coherent, logically ordered argumentation consistent with the topic given in the titles of individual parts. Each chapter begins with sections regarding Plautus and continues with those regarding Terence.

Chapter 1, “Art and Artifice” (pp. 1–21) underlines the relationship which occurs between art and deceit. It is general knowledge that “a trick, a manipulation of identity and disguise is the essence of comedy” (see pp. 2–7). A play does not have to reflect reality in the strictest of senses. It only has to make an impression of being probable, so that the tricks presented on stage are credible. An idea like this can be explained in a short way by saying that art’s relation to reality is a parasitic one, and one has to be (1) naive to believe it to be real, and on the other hand (2) wise, to recognize it is art.

The very interesting second chapter (“Beginnings”, pp. 22–95) points out the role of the prologues, which seems at first sight to be the same in the case of each of the two playwrights, that is to settle the audience, to grab their attention and to engage their good will. But S. shows through an analysis of Plautus’ prologues that although all plays start in the same way and there is a standard formula for an opening, yet there are still very many variations within that formula and there is a great variety of ways of opening a play. It suffices to look through the titles of subsequent sections of this chapter to understand how many different ways Plautus used to open a play – “Plautine Openings”, pp. 27–30; “Exposition: how much is enough?”, pp. 30–41; „*The Prologue*: another try at getting going”, pp. 41–51; “*in medias res*: doing it differently”, pp. 51–56.

S. also shows that the prologues more than any other part of the play clearly indicate the ritual role of performances (“Ritual initiation”, pp. 56–63). When prologue-speaker calls for silence, he uses the metaphor of the ritual “silence” or “good speaking” which accompanies religious observance: *favete linguis*. At the end of a prologue he also uses formulaic ritual and good wishes for divine favour in war and peace, at home and abroad. In this sacral sense the play forms part of the relationship with Roman gods, and could be loosely categorized as “prayer” (pp. 57 f.). S. pays particular attention to *Amphitruo*, which can be also seen as a hymn to Jupiter and Hercules. Without denying the validity of her observations on the special importance of Jupiter in Roman plays presented to the public, one may notice that S. does not take into account in this respect hilarocomic tradition which most certainly was not without influence on Plautus’ choice of this theme (pp. 61 f.).

S.’s analysis of Terence’s seemingly so different prologues points to the use of arrangements similar to those applied by Plautus in his comedies (“Terence”, pp. 63–68; “Plautine elements in Terentian prologues”, pp. 68–75). Both poets refuse to expose the plot in the beginning of the play and both tease the audience with a device of “over-exposition”. This gives a sense of something bigger, something deeper, something that lurks beyond the stage house and beyond the play. This on the other hand creates the illusion that there is enough plot material for a whole new play hidden in the “background” of the text, which one does not see on the stage.

Particularly noteworthy is the section “The intertexts”, pp. 75–83, opening a reflection on the relationship between prologues of Terence and the oratory, comic agonism and Callimachean poetic programme. In the light of S.’s prologue-analysis the conflict between Terence and Luscius Lanuvinus called “the old poet” turns out to be a poetic trick, modelled on well-known literary agons (e.g. that between Euripides and Aeschylus in the *Frogs*). Luscius for Terence is therefore the same poetic rival as Cratinus was for Aristophanes or the half-mythical Telchines for Callimachus. It is hard to deny the validity of S.’s ideas when she points to the relationships of the prologues with the oratorical art (“Oratory: *captatio*, accusation and defence”, pp. 83–87). I am however unconvinced by the assertion that in the story of Luscius (“Prologue to *Eunuchus*”, pp. 87–95), who enters upon the stage during the *Eunuch* rehearsal in order to accuse Terence of theft, lies the promise of Chaerea’s intrusion into the house of Thais in order to rape Pamphila. It seems to me that the associations are farfetched. Furthermore recognizing that the attacking Luscius is

a thematic prototype of Chaerea the attacker raises the question which S. does not answer: has the story of the accusation of theft (*furtum*) actually occurred or was it created by the playwright for the purpose of the prologue to the *Eunuchus*?

In Chapter 3 (“Plotting and playwrights”, pp. 96–162) S. devotes much attention to analyzing the kind of plot which is based on manipulating someone else’s knowledge or belief formed solely on the basis of sensory impressions (“Vision and confusion”, pp. 100–115). She uses the example of comedies like *Mostellaria*, *Miles gloriosus* and *Amphitruo* to show what kind of possibilities of creating an intrigue are given to those who have control over one’s sense of sight. In light of her findings and especially of her brilliant analysis of the comedy *Epidicus* (“Plotting and playwrights in Plautus”, pp. 116–130) one may see that the author of the intrigue, its *spiritus movens*, is the one who reigns over what others see. Such reasoning leads to the suggestion that the playwright and the clever slave are often one and the same person. In view of this interpretation it seems only natural that the next section in this chapter (“Playwright as slave”, pp. 131–140) shows how and why the playwright is identified with his own creation, the slave. The greatest embodiment of this idea, according to S., is Mercury in *Amphitruo*, who is like a god and like a slave, who turns day into night, extends it, controls the world (of comedy), the plot and the genre of the play (changing it from tragedy into comedy). He has therefore the skill and authority of the author. But not always has Plautus entrusted the intrigue into the hands of a slave. In some comedies he establishes another, different controlling character, e.g. *matrona* (*Casina*), *senex* (*Captivi*) or *adulescens* (*Persa*). This ascertainment leads to the examination of some of the ways in which Terence lets his characters share (and denies them) the authorial voice (“Plotting and playwrights in Terence”, pp. 140–162). One might expect that Terence who is known for his double plots would entrust the leading of the intrigue, if not to two slaves, at least to one slave and any other character, doubling the number of *spiritus movens* characters. He does not do so. S. with amazing agility shows and proves that, although Terence plays with Plautus by incorporating into his own comedies the greatest invention of his predecessor, the controlling clever slave, he uses him in such a way that, as it turns out, it is not he who is steering the plot. The presented examples show that Terence puts the intrigue into the hands of many (or even a group), leaving himself the right to intervene.

Everything that is not “planned” and “played out” by the characters would be considered the “truth” of the world shown to us on stage. Therefore the second part of this section is devoted to issues of realism, credibility and theatricality, and above all the ways of manipulations of realism, which become the source of metatheatrical comments.

Chapter 4 (“Repeat performance”, pp. 163–249), no less interesting than the former, seems to be a kind of a patchwork made up of many small pieces which have one common feature, namely *repetitio*. A review of the very choices of titles for individual sections shows that S. intends to point the reader’s attention to the artful usage of repetition as a means of manipulating viewers and above all characters which is a common feature in the plays of the two playwrights.

“Repetition comedy” (pp. 163–167) shows that repetition is hidden everywhere – both in the comedy of twins and in imitation of actions. It manifests itself also on the language level of the texts in the form of alliteration, anaphora, assonance, *geminatio*, homoeoteleuton, polyptoton (“Pitter-patter Plautus”, pp. 167–177). Multiplications of words or a surfeit of language often enhanced by other features of repetition is usually associated with excitement, and often also with food or sex. *Repetitio* includes a situation on the stage in which a character unwillingly repeats the word which has just been said by another character, e.g. by someone speaking on the side (“Comic echo”, pp. 178–190). Of course, humour lies in the fact that the audience hears both and sees a funny repetition. S. argues that this kind of comic device is not limited to only two repeated words or phrases within a single paragraph or scene, but extends to the whole play. Numerous examples taken from *Pseudolus* and *Amphitruo* show that Plautus used this specific “echo” to create a ring-composition.

Another type of repetition is iteration, incongruity and irrelevance, which Bergson in his famous essay about laughter defines as a Jack-in-a-box (“Pop-ups”, pp. 190–193). An excellent example of this type of humour are the repeated intrusions of Parmeno in Terence’s *Hecyra*.

S. devotes the next section (“Sweeping the spiders: *Aulularia*”, pp. 194–201) to discussing replication in *Aulularia* where we can find many repetitions, e.g. the invisible but constantly mentioned pot of gold pops in and out of the stage and Euclio breaks off the conversation four times in order to plunge back into the house and check on his gold. Echoes and dualities link Euclio and Lyconides in their conversation about the crime described as a feeling to *illa* (the pot of gold – *aula* or the daughter – *puella*).

In the following sections S. turns her analysis unto more sophisticated forms of repetition, namely parody and intertextuality (“Parody and intertextuality: the artificial repetition of life and literature”, pp. 201–204). Special attention is paid to parody as a comic mixture of intertextual allusion. As an example of Plautus’ enjoyment of playing with tragedy and tragic parody should suffice his play *Rudens* (“Plautus – Ennius – Euripides: *ut paratragediat carnufex!*”, pp. 204–219). According to S., Terence also, though in a slightly different, unique manner, uses the parody of tragedy. In section “Bacchis revels: intertextuality in Terence’s *Eunuchus*” (pp. 219–233) she points to the scenes strongly reminiscent of the popular tragedies: Parmeno’s idea of disguising his young master makes one recall the scene in Euripides’ *Bacchae*, where Dionysus tempts Pentheus into dressing up as a woman. The famous description of Jupiter “qui templa caeli summa sonitu concutit” (*Eun.* 590) which is recognized by Donatus as a parody of a tragedy of Ennius is associated by S. also with a fragment of Naevius’ *Danae*. Further, she compares the scene where the disguised Chaerea enters Thais’ house to Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazousae*. Thus Terence does not quote tragedy in a comical way, as Plautus does, but he mimics it in a comical way, as evidenced by quite close verbal connections. An interesting addition in this section (called by S. herself “a coda to the discussion”) is the passage about possible Terentian connections to Sappho.

In the chapter discussing repetitions there is also a section about Terence’s *Hecyra* (“A reading of *Hecyra* through repetition”, pp. 233–249). S. reads the play as a series of failed attempts at marriage, as a ritual which is constantly going wrong, constantly being interrupted, so that it must be repeated – there must occur *instauratio*. Her suggestions that the practice of *instauratio* provides a useful image for coming to terms with this play, and that the principles behind the practice might well have been at the back of the mind of the playwright, seem to me to be an overinterpretation without any justification in the text. It is a brilliant interpretation, impressive, astounding with ingenuity, but unfortunately unconvincing. If that idea really had been based on *instauratio*, Terence would have made sure to emphasize it in the text and to draw the viewer’s attention to these badly begun and “constantly being interrupted” rape, marriage, love/consummation and birth (p. 239). And in particular, he would have emphasized the need for repetition.

Moreover, S.’s argumentation would have to assume that Terence knew from the outset that *Hecyra* would not be put on stage until the third time. S. does not conceal that she sees a neat link between the content of the play and the context of its performance. She stresses that although there is no strong reason to suppose that the entire story of failure and re-performance was invented, it would not be impossible. The lack of the prologue for the first presentation, and the unusual form and shortness of the prologue to the second made the author arrange the sequence: no prologue, a mini-prologue, complete prologue. “The series of prologues has been preserved in this form in order to contribute to making precisely these points about failure and repetition” (p. 247). S. asks the question whether Terence invented the whole story or opportunistically appropriated the situation that really did arise and opts for the second possibility. Approaching the problem in this way opens a long list of questions and concerns which have not been answered: did Terence have something to do with the preparation of the “opportunistic situation” or has he rewritten *Hecyra* for this third staging in such a way as to expose failure and repetition. It is difficult to assume it to be just a happy coincidence. It is also unclear whether the unusual prologue for the second staging attempt (too brief and not in the style of Terence) was designed already in the time of its formation as a prequel to the one written for the third staging. Although S.’s argument appears to be based on many unknowns, her perception of the play brings many new ideas to existing interpretations.

The closing chapter 5 (“Endings”, pp. 250–289) discusses the different types of endings in comedies. S. firstly compares the characters which were assigned the last “*valete et plaudite*” in the comedies (“Having the last word”, pp. 251–258). This leads to the conclusion that this issue is mostly entrusted to the characters of low social status (slave, parasite), but those who played the role of the *architectus* of the plot. If the last word has been given to someone “anti-comic”, e.g. *senex*, it is probably meant to show acceptance of what has happened to him during the play. In the following sections S. discusses the various types of termination, and the titles of subsequent sections clearly show what distinctive features are examined by the author: “A play with moral” (pp. 258–273), “Ending in farce” (pp. 273–277), “Ending in parties” (pp. 277–284), “Ending denied, repeated and foreclosed” (pp. 284–287). These considerations lead to the conclusion that normally endings tend towards the farcical mess, which is not a sign of incompetent dramaturgy or an incomplete transfer of details from a Greek play, but rather it is a joke played on the audience.

S.’s book is a fascinating read, not only because of the interesting proposals of interpretation, but also due to the arrangement of chapters and language. When writing about the playwright S. calls him “uncle Plautus” (p. 68), when quoting him she exclaims, “hey, guys, I’m the poet” (p. 53), when discussing the plot she says keeping the score “one point to Davos” (p. 144), or when she says “Terence kicks Parmeno beneath the belt” (p. 152), one gets the impression that she is standing between them on the stage, fighting for attention and applause of the audience.

S. writes in the foreword: “If the experts also find something here to amuse, I shall be well pleased”. I doubt if I can say about myself that I am an expert, but I can certainly say that I amused myself greatly reading this book.

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