

Permanently Punic?: The Endurance of Ethnicity in Plautus, *Poenulus*

With some exceptions (Fantham 2004, Manuwald 2004), most inquiries into Plautus's representation of Punic ethnicity in the *Poenulus* have focused on the father/ uncle figure Hanno, who is famously given entire speeches in bastardized Semitic as he searches for his lost nephew and daughters, abducted from Carthage as children long ago. This paper instead turns its attention to the other Carthaginian characters on the stage—the adolescents, themselves, who were the object of Hanno's quest. The nephew, Agorastocles, had been adopted by a man in Aetolia, where the play is set, and has now inherited his estate, and apparently his citizenship status, too; the daughters, Adelphasium and Anterastilis, in a more dire turn, wound up in a brothel. All three have grown up largely unaware of their origins in Carthage, and for much of the play, well before Hanno's entrance, the plot is solely about Agorastocles's attempts to win Adelphasium from her pimp, not knowing that they were, in fact, cousins.

A principal argument of this paper is that Plautus intentionally crafted these three characters as inhabiting a kind of ethnic solidarity, and that much of the play only makes sense if they were rendered as somehow distinct from the Aetolian cast—and likely as monstrous—such as through masks or costuming. Previous scholars have suggested that the sisters should be understood as beautiful (Henderson 1999, Richlin 2005), but Plautus's language repeatedly implies the opposite: the girls' looks run counter to prevailing standards of beauty, at least in "Aetolia." And yet, Agorastocles (alone) is smitten by them, presumably drawn to a Punic essence that none of them can shake, in spite of their shared upbringing in Greece. The paper argues further that Plautus imbued the three with uniquely sinister qualities, betraying suspicions of a Carthaginian "type."

The themes in the *Poenulus* of abducted children and reunited families are stock-in-trade for New Comedy, but a second dimension of this paper is to consider an imperial context, and motivation, for Plautus's composition. As the *Poenulus* was performed, Rome's victory in the Second Punic War was fresh in the audience's mind, and would remain so for years to come, as hundreds of hostage youths from Carthage lived in and around the city, tokenizing the treaty over its fifty-year span. Tropes of hostage-taking evident in other texts suggest that Romans expected these hostages, especially the adolescents, to become acculturated to Rome (Allen 2006). By portraying a group of youths whose Punic characteristics persist, even after living a different world for all of their conscious memory—and for whom any form of acculturation should thus be said to have failed—Plautus is making an argument about the nature of ethnicity as immutable and deterministic, a sentiment likely exacerbated by Rome's new, imperial ambition.

Works Cited

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