

Talking Around the Victim:
The Contentious Discussion of Rape in Terence's *Hecyra*

Hecyra is a play about rape. All conflicts in the play trace back to a night roughly nine months prior to the start of the action. Breaking from comic tradition, Terence does not give the audience a divine prologue explaining the event and its perpetrator. In fact, the identity of the rapist is not revealed until the last sixty lines of the play. Instead of a clear, omniscient explanation, the rape is described by different characters, with divergent accounts of events, providing only second or third-hand explanations of what has transpired. This paper explores the differences in these accounts and investigates the narrative consequence of these Terentian choices. By looking closely at these elements, this paper shows the ways in which the play asks the audience to consider the implications of one notable exclusion, a “missing perspective”, the silence of the victim herself.

It is conventional for New Comedy to explain events like rape to the audience, allowing the audience members to enjoy dramatic irony and comfortably watch as the characters scramble around on stage (Rosivach, 1998). Terence offers no such comfort in *Hecyra*. Bucking tradition, Terence centers suspense rather than dramatic irony, asking the audience to explore events along with the characters and destroying the detachment of the omniscient observer (Goldberg, 1986). The rape is disclosed to the audience for the first time almost halfway through the play and is described twice more. The three descriptions of the rape come from three different characters, each with a different perspective on the event. The first description (382-384) comes from Pamphilus, husband of the victim, who is eventually identified as the rapist. The second (572-576) comes from Myrrina, mother of the victim, and the third (821-832) comes from Bacchis, the former lover of Pamphilus. Every account of the rape is detached from the event by at least one

degree, and although Pamphilus was present, his monologue tells the story as he heard it from Myrrina. Myrrina's story that she tells to Pamphilus and later the audience is necessarily based on what she has learned from her daughter. Finally, Bacchis tells the story as she heard it from Pamphilus on the night of the attack. Only one character who was present for the rape, Pamphilus, speaks for himself in the play, but his discussion of the rape is the farthest removed, narratively, from the event itself.

Although they come from different primary sources, the descriptions of Myrrina and Bacchis are similar. Contrasted with these versions, however, the story Pamphilus tells is hardly recognizable. In exploring the differences and similarities between these three accounts, a pair of solutions for their divergence arise. The first involves Myrrina obfuscating the violence to protect her daughter, and the second has Pamphilus lying and manipulating the story not just to influence events on stage, but the audience itself (cf. James, 1998, and Penwill, 2004). In all this ambiguity, the account of the victim, Philumena, is sorely missed. By excluding her, Terence dares the audience to think, not only about her struggle, but about what it means when the person most affected by sexual violence is not permitted to speak for herself.

References

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