

Rape and Comedy in Terence's *Eunuch*

Although rape is a frequent initial impetus of conflict and concern in Roman comedy, Terence's *Eunuch* is the only play in which a rape actually takes place during the play itself. In other comedies, the action has already occurred before the play begins. Sharon James has written persuasively about some of the ways that Terence has added a moral dimension to the play by writing into the script the shock that characters feel and the reproaches they deliver at Chaerea, the perpetrator of the crime. And she has examined the cultural attitudes that Romans held regarding rape. Yet the written script and cultural attitudes can only explain so much. It is in performance that it becomes easier to see how Terence has faced the challenge of transforming into a comedy what could easily have become a tragedy. In staging Terence's *Eunuch* for a college audience, I certainly became more aware of the playwright's skill in shaping the audience's response. In this paper, I examine the multiple theatrical techniques used by Terence to elicit the comic emotions, laughter and pleasure, instead of tragic ones of pity and fear.

We must begin with casting, costume, and character. From the very first moment that we see Chaerea, he is the opposite of his brother Phaedria. Not only does his exuberant language mark him as free-spirited, impetuous, and naive, but his youthfulness is also marked by his appearance. Tall, lanky, bushy-haired, and blessed with a tenor-like voice, our Chaerea exhibited youthfulness and innocence both in appearance and voice. Additionally, Chaerea's youthfulness was also enhanced by giving his costume less bulk and less luxury than his brother Phaedria.

Second, music and blocking mark Chaerea's liveliness. Chaerea's entrance in Act II, Scene iii, is marked by a mixture of meters. As Chaerea runs haphazardly around the stage like a standard running slave, Chaerea opens with iambic octonarii. After Parmeno speaks an aside in mixed meters, Chaerea continues with octonarii. Later, after Parmeno has innocently suggested the idea of Chaerea impersonating the eunuch, Chaerea takes up the idea wholeheartedly. At this point, he again sings iambic octonarii to the close of the scene. The light and rapid pace of the music mark his devil-may-care attitude. At first, his wild, unfocused running introduces him as less in control and impetuous. Yet by the end of the scene, we see him functioning, not as a *servus currens*, but as a *servus callidus*.

Third, the staging of the scene off-stage allows the playwright to control the audience's response to the rape. Instead of an unknown messenger who reports the deed as in tragedy, it is instead Chaerea himself who tell the tale. His version of the events is supported by the comments of his friend Antipho whose joking and kidding points to how Terence expects the audience to respond.

Finally, the ensuing scenes temper the outrage, shift the blame, and create the impression of justice through a series of comic devices: faster pacing, misunderstanding, slapstick, deceit, drunkenness, a mock battle, and deflection of the blame onto the slaves Pythias, who failed to guard the girl, and Parmeno, who suggested the idea in the first place. In short, Terence has

carefully orchestrated the audience's response to the crime through as many theatrical and comic devices as he can muster.