

The Triumph of Venus and Jupiter over their Punic Counterparts in Plautus' *Poenulus*

This paper argues that the presence of the gods Venus and Jupiter in Plautus' *Poenulus* demonstrates the superiority of the Roman deities over their Punic counterparts. Venus and Jupiter are the tutelary divinities of the play, with Venus presiding until the arrival of Hanno in line 930, when Jupiter takes over. Although John Henderson (1999) has noted the connection between the play and Venus Erycina, the Punic goddess Astarte worshipped at Eryx in Sicily, his aim is to suggest that the Forum, with the temple of Venus on the Capitoline above, would have been a fitting backdrop for the play's performance. Henderson does not consider the role of Venus in the play itself, or how her presence would have impacted Plautus' audience. Moreover, aside from Henderson's passing remark that the play (if put on in the Forum) also would have been staged under the Temple of Capitoline Jupiter, no scholar has attempted to investigate the role of Jupiter in relation to the *Poenulus*. This paper suggests that we can better understand the dramatic purpose of Plautus' leading divinities through an examination of contemporary history and Roman perceptions of and attitudes toward Carthaginian religion.

Venus was not originally one of the great traditional deities of Rome, and the first temple to the goddess in the city was vowed only in 295 BCE. After the Romans' crushing defeat at Lake Trasimene in 217 BCE, Fabius Maximus pledged to build a temple to Venus Erycina on the Capitoline. The fact that the Romans deemed Venus Erycina worthy enough to erect her temple among that of the Capitoline Triad suggests the significance of the new cult's veneration. Indeed, Eryx had been the site of a major victory of the Romans over the Barcids in the First Punic War, and so represented Rome's triumph over her enemies. The construction of a second temple to the goddess near the Porta Collina in 184 BCE, according to Strabo a replica of the temple of Astarte in Eryx (6.2.6), attests to her popularity at Rome in the time of Plautus. Although ritual

prostitution was supposedly a major aspect of the worship of Astarte, Venus Erycina's cult at Rome had no connection to this practice. The Aphrodisia in the *Poenulus* resembles the actual festival of Venus Erycina, the Vinalia, where *vulgares puellae* and *meretrices* worshipped with wreaths and flowers (Ovid *Fasti* 4.863-72). The fact that Adelphasium and Anterastilis, two Carthaginian girls, worship Venus as non-sacred prostitutes emphasize that they venerate a distinctly *Roman* goddess – the Roman Venus has supplanted Punic Astarte just as the Romans defeated Carthage in the Second Punic War.

In addition to associating Astarte with Venus, the Romans also identified the goddess with Juno (Miles 2010). The Carthaginians variously considered Astarte the wife of Melqart, the Punic equivalent of Hercules, or Baal Hammon, the chief Carthaginian deity. Although the Romans later equated Baal Hammon with Saturn, during Plautus' time it is likely that they identified him with Jupiter (Harden 1963). This identification suggests that Plautus deliberately chose to pair Venus, as an embodiment of Astarte, with Jupiter in the *Poenulus*. In the play, the Carthaginian characters do not pray to Baal Hammon, but rather invoke his Roman counterpart. Furthermore, Baal Hammon and Astarte were the presiding deities of the *tophet* at Carthage, the sanctuary where the Carthaginians sacrificed children. The fact that Hanno did not sacrifice his children but instead ardently seeks to be reunited with them calls attention to the play's substitution of Roman gods for Punic deities. Moreover, Hanno's distinctly Roman *pietas* contrasts with the Romans' perception of Hannibal as impious and underscores the Romanness of Plautus' Carthaginian characters. By making the Carthaginians of his play worship according to Roman custom, Plautus highlights the Romans' superiority over their bitter rivals not only in war, but also in religious life.

Select Bibliography

- Beard, Mary and John Henderson. "With This Body Thee I Worship: Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity." *Gender & History* 9.3 (2002): 480-503.
- Budin, Stephanie. *The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Clifford, Richard J. "Phoenician Religion." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 279 (1990): 55-64.
- Fantham, Elaine. *Roman Readings: Roman Response to Greek Literature from Plautus to Statius and Quintilian*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011.
- Gruen, Erich S. *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Harden, Donald. *The Phoenicians*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1963.
- Henderson, John. *Writing Down Rome: Satire, Comedy, and Other Offences in Latin Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Hoyos, Dexter, ed. *A Companion to the Punic Wars*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2011.
- Miles, Richard. *Carthage Must Be Destroyed*. New York: Viking, 2010.
- Moscatti, Sabatino, ed. *The Phoenicians*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1999.