

Imitation by Response: Metapoetics and Intertext in Terence's *Eunuchus*

Terence's celebrated remark "nothing is said now that has not been said previously" (*nullumst iam dictum quod non dictum sit prius*, *Eun.* 41) purportedly apologizes for the genre's derivativeness in defense against charges of plagiarism. Since such accusations were virtually an inside joke among Greek comic playwrights (Plato, Aristophanes, Cratinus; Hubbard 1991), there is reason to suspect that this apology may be tongue-in-cheek as well.

I argue that Terence's disingenuous response fulfills a metapoetic function, indicated by the curiously phrased opening disclaimer (*Eun.* 3-6): the polemic that follows is not a *dictum* but a response to *previous* provocation (*responsum, non dictum esse, quia laesit prior*, 6). Indicatively, Terence then accuses his unnamed opponent of having composed an absurd plot in which the reply to charges *preceded* the charges (*causam dicere / prius unde petitur*, 10-11). In line with various non-literalist interpretations of Terence's prologues (notably Germany 2013 following Gowers 2004; cf. Sharrock 2009 and Gruen 1992), I investigate how the 'response-model' frames the *Eunuchus*. I demonstrate that the motif of responses to and imitation of previous actions—as well as its constant interplay with that of emphatically *unsolicited* actions—transform into plot, reanimate a comic convention, and initiate dialogue with previous texts.

For example, when to Phaedria's confusion Thais initiates a meeting "unprompted" (*ultra*, 46-7), Parmeno warns him that she plans to eschew all charges and moreover accuse him *ultra* (69-70; cf. 152-4). The play thus develops the prologue's theme of provocation and accusation from the very start, while towards the end Parmeno and Pythias exchange pranks in response to one another's (*parem ubi referam gratiam* 719; *reddam*, 1119). Chaerea justifies his invasion of the brothel as an adequate response (*referam gratiam atque eas itidem fallam, ut ab is fallimur*, 385), and he famously commits rape when prompted by the painting of Jupiter, who

had *once already* put on a “similar show” (*consimilem luserat/ iam olim ille ludum*, 586-7; cf. Germany 2008; Frangoulidis 1994). Symptomatically, Chaerea confides in Antipho, significantly named ‘Replier’.

The figure of Gnatho the parasite is most revealing. He instructs Thraso to respond to Thais’ jealousy *par pro pari* (445), and the soldier internalizes the response-model as he ultimately succumbs to her charms by resorting to the excuse of a Chaerea: THR. “Why not? Hercules was a slave to Omphale.” GNA. “A fine precedent!” (*exemplum*, 1027; tr. Barsby 2011). Gnatho’s “philosophy” (264) employs the *dictum-responsum* relationship as a metapoetic intertext when Gnatho encounters a fellow-parasite out of business: his acquaintance still follows the lifestyle of the *previous* generation (*saeclum prius*, 246), that is, putting up with maltreatment, and is intriguingly reminiscent of Plautus’ parasite Ergasilus—who will be strikingly alluded to later (*Capt.* 800 ~ *Eun.* 801; Fontaine 2013; cf. also *Capt.* 70-76, *Eun.* 1058-60). Gnatho boasts of inventing a brand new strategy that his interlocutor should adopt: just *repeat* everything your patrons say (247-53). As this is of course one of the conventional techniques of comic parasites (e.g. Pl. *Men.* 162; Fontaine 2013), Gnatho’s rampantly ungrounded claim of primacy is puzzling.

Banters about primacy are attested, once more, among Greek comic *poets* (Hubbard 1991). In a comparable mode of poetic self-fashioning, I propose, Terence hijacks the convention of parasitic parroting. He repurposes it—precisely *within* the generic frame of *palliata*—into intra- and intertextual repetition and response in order to capitalize on his own late arrival in the game. Not unlike Terence, Gnatho was to emerge as ‘first’ after all—the first intertextual ‘repeater’, that is, in Roman comedy, while the poet, quite like Gnatho, does not allow to be laughed at but reclaims the initiative and laughs *ultro* (250).

References

- Barsby, J. (2001). *Terence: The Woman of Andros; The Self-Tormentor; The Eunuch*. Cambridge.
- Fontaine, M. (2013). "Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Comedy: Menander's *Kolax* in Three Roman Receptions (Naevius, Plautus, and Terence's *Eunuchus*)." In S. D. Olson, ed., *Ancient Comedy and Reception: Studies in the classical tradition of comedy from Aristophanes to the twenty-first century*, 180-202. Berlin.
- Frangoulidis, S. A. (1994). "Performance and Improvisation in Terence's *Eunuchus*". *QUCC* 48.3: 121-130.
- Germany, R. (2008). "Mimetic contagion in Terence's *Eunuchus*." Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago.
- _____ (2013). "Andria." In A. Augoustakis, A. Traill, eds., *A Companion to Terence*, 225-249. Malden, MA.
- Gowers, E. (2004). "The plot thickens: hidden outlines in Terence's prologues." In: A. J. Boyle, ed., *Rethinking Terence, Ramus* 33.1-2: 150-166.
- Gruen, E. S. (1992). *Culture and national identity in Republican Rome*. Ithaca.
- Hubbard, T. K. (1991). *The mask of comedy: Aristophanes and the intertextual parabasis*. Ithaca.
- Sharrock, A. (2009). *Reading Roman comedy: Poetics and playfulness in Plautus and Terence*. Cambridge.