

“Filth are my Politics; Filth is my Life”: Dirt and Dirtiness in Plautus’ *Poenulus*

The *Poenulus* is a filthy play. This paper investigates the descriptions and metaphors of dirtiness in the *Poenulus* and demonstrates that the filth of the play is not inherent to women or Carthaginians, rather it is contagious, ultimately derived from a single individual, the *leno*, Lycus. This reading of the play adds nuance to scholarly discussions of gender and ethnicity in the play by showing that in this play filled with stereotypes about women and Carthaginians, the filthiest character is a homegrown man.

Previous scholarship on this play has been primarily concerned with depictions of ethnicity (Franko 1994; Richlin 2005, 2019) or gender (Fantham 2004; Manuwald 2004), however, the frequency of language for filth and dirtiness in the play, while seemingly connected to these topics, actually complicates them and suggests that being a foreign woman is still preferable to being a pimp. The first, and most telling, description of filth in this play comes from the young hero Agorastocles, who says that, compared to Lycus, no dirt is dirtier (*non lutum est lutulentius*, 158). Agorastocles has fallen in love with a young woman in the possession of Lycus, Adelphasium, and when he leaves the stage, his enslaved companion, Milphio, describes his love in terms of dirtiness, saying that he bears the stain of love (*amoris macula*, 198) which cannot be washed (*elui*, 199) without great expense. This idea that Agorastocles has stained himself by association with Adelphasium is repeated by Milphio following the entrance of the young women when he makes fun of Agorastocles’ metaphor for kissing (*limavi caput*, 292) by saying that he will find him some mud (*limum*, 293). The idea that it is his association with Adelphasium that has dirtied Agorastocles is seemingly endorsed by the lengthy conversation of Adelphasium and her sister Anterastilis, in which they describe the incessant

grooming required to overcome feminine flaws (220-245). The preoccupation with dirtiness, however, does not persist through the entirety of the play, when Agorastocles has learned of their freeborn status from his uncle and their father, Hanno, his description of Adelphasium is “lovely and clean” (*lepida et lauta*, 1098). It is this final revelation that the girls are not beholden to Lycus that “cleans” them for Agorastocles, and indeed, now that Lycus is no longer a concern, neither is filth, with no images or either dirtiness or cleanliness in the remainder of the play.

The beginning sections of the *Poenulus* contain many descriptions of filth, connecting these descriptions to gender and ethnicity. However, as characters distance themselves from Lycus throughout the play, they are “cleaned,” and they no longer employ language of dirt and dirtiness, meaning that filth is neither a gendered nor ethnic trait, rather a result of contamination by Lycus, the only figure in the play for whom filth is forever.

Works Cited

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