

*Contaminatio* and *Retractatio* Revisited: A Revival of Plautus' *Poenulus* at the Temple  
Dedication of Venus Erycina in 181 BCE

Plautus' *Poenulus* features a festival to Venus that bears a strong resemblance to the cult of Venus Erycina. Though this goddess had had a temple at Rome since the Second Punic War, a more exotic version of this cult was officially imported to Rome from Sicily in the year 181 BCE with the dedication of a temple to the goddess outside the Colline Gate (Galinsky 1969, Orlin 2000). Given the common practice of performing plays at temple dedications (Goldberg 1998), John Henderson calls the event "a not-quite-unthinkable occasion for *Poenulus*' debut" (1999, 8). The problem with this, however, is that Cicero is quite clear in dating Plautus' death to 184 BCE (*Brutus* 15; *de Senec.* 14). I will argue that *Poenulus* was indeed performed at the temple dedication, but it was a revival performance a decade after the play's debut, which is generally dated to the late 190s or early 180s BCE (De Melo 2012, Johnston 1980, Richlin 2005).

The prologue to *Casina* (5-20) provides evidence for revivals of Plautine comedy, while *Bacchides* 213-15 suggests that such revivals could have been produced relatively soon after the premiere performance, within a decade of it. Ultimately, the text of *Poenulus* itself, which features a number of what C. W. Marshall calls performance variants (2006), provides the best evidence for a long and varied performance tradition of the play, one that could have featured a production at the temple dedication of Venus Erycina in 181. Of the frequent textual issues in the play, lines 210-409 have caused sufficient consternation that Fraenkel determined that Plautus must have borrowed the segment from another play, in the fashion of what has come to be known as Terentian *contaminatio* (Fraenkel 2007, 179-90). Although Fraenkel does well to note that 210-409 split up the exposition of the plot in jarring fashion, the additional evidence he uses to support the *contaminatio* is too subjective. I argue that the most compelling evidence for the

addition of this scene to the play is the lack of the blocking character Lycus the pimp and the seeming disappearance of the young man Agorastocles' wealth when compared to the rest of the play, not to mention a reference to Athenian citizenship (372) in a play set in Calydon amongst Aetolian citizens (*Aetoli cives* 621). Whatever the original context of 210-409, the vivid descriptions within the passage of the activities at the temple and the elaborate bathing ceremonies associated with Venus Erycina make it the perfect choice for adding topical specificity to a revival of *Poenulus* at the temple dedication in 181.

The term *retractatio*, coined by 19<sup>th</sup>-century scholars, describes the changes that a theatrical text undergoes when it is prepared for revival performances. This term has fallen into disrepute for the implications it entails of damage to a pristine original, but it can be rehabilitated and used to describe what happened to the text of *Poenulus* if we think of it as part of the process and tradition of theatrical performance at Rome. Cicero's *Pro Sestio* 121-3 provides examples of how old plays are transformed through *retractatio* and *contaminatio* and are thus repurposed in order to fill contemporary needs. Acknowledging the probability of a revival performance of *Poenulus* in 181 and its possible effects on the text of the play will help scholars avoid placing undue emphasis on the debut performances of Roman drama and focus rather on the potential that these plays have for enduring influence and dialog with Roman culture over time, as is evinced by the continued political relevance of dramatic revivals during the late Republic.

## Bibliography

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