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 (Aetolici 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 19th-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
evined by the continued political relevance of dramatic revivals during the late Republic.
Bibliography


