

Rapper's Delight: The Modernization of Plautus

When translating *cantica* by the Roman comic playwright Plautus into rap, I tried to adapt his attitude as well as his style in a way that would appeal to contemporary and young audiences today. Amy Richlin has argued that Plautus emerged from the impoverished region of Umbria and allegedly endured a protracted period of extreme poverty. Therefore, according to Richlin, his background has similarities to the origins of those who created rap music i.e. products of impoverished and working-class environments who were forced to endure various forms of injustice. Furthermore, according to Richlin, the language and music of Plautus also evoke rap. In particular, the presence of percussionists and importance of meter in Plautine plays prefigure the strong influence of funk and rhythm on rap.

Building upon Richlin's work, I translated a part of a *canticum* (Act II Scene III lines 227-278) from Plautus' *Casina* into a rap. I set it to the tune of two rap songs composed by the artist A Tribe Called Quest. The clear jazz influence present in the two songs I chose, *We Got the Jazz* and *Award Tour*, reflect the way Plautus is putting a new, Roman spin on Greek Comedy. While A Tribe Called Quest may be somewhat outdated, I think that the importance of the medium of expression outweighs the fact that a young audience today may not know the beat being sampled. My decision to use two songs allowed me to express the change in meter occurring in line 252, and to reflect the meter and attitude of Plautus' original Latin.

In the first part of the dialogue, originally written in *mutatis modis canticum*, I opted to compose my rap to the beat of the song "We Got the Jazz." The instrumental of this track exudes a relaxed, atmosphere of classic jazz. It basically consists of a single chord held over a long period of time, providing a solid foundation for the improvisational stylings of the trumpet and rapper. I chose this specific track to reflect the improvisational nature of Lysidamus' lines in this

section. Like a skilled jazz musician, Lysidamus attempts to invent excuses for his behavior. The amorphous nature of jazz also reflects the meter of this section, which varies greatly with no specific pattern.

For the second section of the dialogue, composed originally in trochaic septenarii, I chose a song entitled “Award Tour.” The main reason for this selection stems from the relative differences between the instrumental of “Award Tour” and “We Got the Jazz:” dynamism. The instrumental of “Award Tour” encompasses multiple musical ideas as opposed to the previous track. This reflects the change in the content of the conversation too, as each character finds a sense of authority. Lysidamus attempts to move the dialogue forward, taking control of the dialogue, while Cleostrata asserts herself as the more persuasive of the two. The move from passive improvisation and insults to dynamic declarations of authority and superiority is audibly reflected in the instrumental of “Award Tour.”

The rhyme schemes chosen for each section, AAAA BBBB etc. and AABBCC etc. respectively, also reflect the overall character of the scene, the stubbornness of both characters in the first scene and the more focused nature of the dialogue in the second scene. As a whole, I adapted the language with today’s young audience in mind, using words such as “boo” and “baby girl” as terms of endearment rather than “my dear” or “darling.” I also updated several references, notably those to “Jove” and “Juno” in line 230, changing them to Jay-Z and Beyoncé, the preeminent power couple of popular music today.

After completing this project, I spent this past summer teaching Latin to high school students at the University of Maryland College Park as part of the Upward Bound program for first-generation college students. As a part of this course, the students were assigned to complete a creative or research project related to Classics. After the students presented their projects at the

end of the semester, I showed them my Plautine rap. They responded very positively to the video, particularly due to the fact that some of them had just performed their own raps that they had written for their projects. While some may consider the comparison between rap and Classics to be “tired” I feel that the response of the high school students I shared this project with effectively negates such criticism. I am confident that my adaptation of Plautus preserves the playwright’s humor and style and makes his work more accessible to students.

Bibliography

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