

Soldiers of Misfortune in Plautus.

One of the archetype stock figures of New Comedy is the boastful *miles*. Over the course of the typical Plautine play, this figure soon becomes the target of mockery and derision, on stage or off. Furthermore, the *miles* often ‘loses’ the play’s conflict. So why does Roman Comedy have such mockery for soldiers, considering Roman attitudes towards soldiering and war generally? In this paper, I argue this situation is more than just a Menandrian holdover, but reflects a cultural divide between two types of soldier, the volunteer citizen soldier and the professional mercenary. Moreover, citizen-soldiers do not receive the same mockery that the outsiders do. For the sake of space, I limit my discussion to the plays of Plautus.

The role of *miles* as character is more nuanced than Duckworth’s description (1952, 264-5). In particular, the mercenary *miles* is more exaggerated and incompetent than the (few) ‘volunteer’ counterparts. In my approach, taking a cue from the study of Leigh 2004, my examination of historic mercenaries is *not* undertaken through attempts to mine comedy for data on mercenaries and whom they serve, but rather by the portrayal of the mercenaries. Overall, I present a new (and consistent) facet to the stock *miles*, namely that the stock figure of comedy reinforces common aristocratic attitudes towards real mercenaries.

Plautus uses a variety of terms for mercenary: *latro* (x7), *mercennarius* (x3), *praedo* (x10, not always with meaning of mercenary). Even *miles* generally refers to a *mercenary* soldier, not a citizen. The soldiers in Plautus are professional, career soldiers and such soldiers in the ancient world are almost invariably mercenaries. The terms Plautus uses have a disreputable flavor (*praedo* also being his favored word for ‘pirate’, for example). The employ of the braggart soldier is another way of emphasizing these figures as outsiders.

In comedy, the easily-fooled, incompetent mercenary is obsessed with money, glory, and sex, and exceedingly happy to lose the first in pursuit of the last. The bombastic soldier threatens violence at every downturn (e.g. *Bacc.* 849, *Cur.* 535-6 *Poe.* 494). Mercenaries are said to do whatever they want (*Miles* 499). The implication of these, of course, is that their military services are essential enough that they may flout the law.

This comedic caricature reflects contemporary opinions about mercenaries (see Eckstein 1995, 125-9 for some such). Figures such as Polybius (e.g. 4.8) and Cato (*Origines* 4.F81) held starkly disapproving attitudes towards mercenaries, who were untrustworthy, incompetent, or both. Cato's sentiment "Often their mercenary soldiers kill each other in their camp, often they run off all together to the enemy, often they make an attack on their own general" would be familiar to the audience of Plautus.

Mercenaries were a rising threat to the audience's lifestyle. Despite the insistence of incompetence in history and comedy alike, mercenary troops gradually became more common and acquitted themselves better than their conscript counterparts. Though the Romans won the wars, the mercenaries of Hannibal and Pyrrhus won battles aplenty. Moreover, the professional soldier posed economic problems. The 'regular' people such as the *senes* and *adulescentes* may have wealth, but it is tied up in agreements, business, and property (thus the *adulescens* of the *Mostellaria* finances his liaisons through fraudulent real estate deals). The *miles*, however, carries his campaign wealth in readily spendable coin, often an advantage in the setting of the plays.

As an aside, I observe that Plautus is writing precisely when the Romans were beginning to hire mercenary auxiliaries more frequently and in greater numbers (which often had more to do with the expense of transporting Romans and Italians across the sea). Where Brown 2004

discussed mercenaries in new comedy, he focused on Menander's soldiers. Nevertheless the stereotypical Greek braggart soldier was recognizable. The swaggering stock figure of the professional mercenary soldier, as distinct from the citizen soldier, again had cultural significance to an Italian audience as well as a Greek one.

New Comedy generally reaffirms the biases of the status quo and reinforces existing stereotypes. This maxim holds true for the mercenary as well. While the characters are recognized as exaggerations, they are exaggerations of what is considered to be the true essence. The portrayal of the *miles* in Plautine comedy reflects the citizen distaste for the non-citizen soldier, and emphasizes the inferiority of such soldiers. Ultimately, the crowd is pleased to see these soldiers of fortune meet with misfortune.

Bibliography

Brown, Peter G. McC. "Soldiers in New Comedy" *LICS* 3.8, 1-16. 2004.

Duckworth, George E. *The Nature of Roman Comedy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952.

Eckstein, Arthur M. *Moral Vision in the Histories of Polybius*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Leigh, Matthew. *Comedy and the Rise of Rome*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.