

Metatheater, *Meretrices*, and Life Behind the Scenes in Plautus and Terence

Towards the end of Terence's *Eunuchus*, the not-so-clever enslaved character Parmeno expounds upon the nature of sex-laborers (934-940):

While they're in public, nothing seems more sophisticated, nothing more well put-together, nothing more elegant....But seeing their filth, squalor, poverty, how dishonorable and greedy for food they are when home alone, how they eat dark bread in day-old broth—that's a healthy experience for a young man.

As he speaks, Parmeno probably points right at the *meretrix* Thais' house, the central topographical feature of this play. Parmeno says he is looking for his young master Chaerea, who has spent much of the play inside and who has disguised himself as a eunuch to rape the citizen girl currently residing there, Pamphila. In this paper, I argue the house of the *meretrix* in comedy is a major locus for exploring the business and livelihood of women sex-laborers. The onstage presence of their houses makes almost any mention of their profession an opportunity for metatheater, which raises issues of status, appearance versus reality, and economic dependency and insecurity for sex-laborers, actors, and playwrights alike.

Parmeno's monologue not only gives what Witzke calls "a glimpse into the experiences of free sex-laborers in the ancient world," but also presents a metatheatrical moment. The bourgeois citizens of Roman comedy, as well as *meretrices* like Thais who are neither enslaved nor in abject poverty, are well-to-do only in appearance, since behind their masks are actors, generally ranked among society's dregs by elites. This rant emblemizes the role played by the houses of *meretrices* in Plautine and Terentian comedy, a role seen most clearly in *Eunuchus* and Plautus' *Truculentus*.

Plautus' *Truculentus* opens with mirrored monologues (cf. Marshall) in which Diniarchus the *amator* laments that the houses of *meretrices* swallow men's fortunes (40-56) and Astaphium the assistant *meretrix* says *amatores* try to steal property from those very houses (97-111). A second pair of mirrored monologues has the *meretrix* Phronesium carefully inhabiting the role of mother (part of the play's deception plot) by performing religious rituals incumbent upon maternity (450-482) and Stratophanes the soldier insisting that his prowess is one of true manliness, of action not words (483-496). Late in the play, Phronesium lays out the basic dilemma sex-laborers face: "however much we take, there's little to show for what's been given—*that's* the glory of being a *meretrix*" (888-889). The characters' concerns with how they play their roles draws attention to the fictiveness of the characters themselves (compare Slater), while the contradictory claims about what actually happens to wealth in connection with a sex-laborer's house emphasizes the fact that much of the business (both stage-action and economic labor) of comedy takes place behind the scenes, invisible to the audience.

What happens backstage is the central crisis of *Eunuchus*: Chaerea's premeditated rape of Pamphila, an act that takes place in the house of a *meretrix* and so, I argue, has metatheatrical undertones. By entering the house disguised as a eunuch, Chaerea violates social boundaries; by gaining sexual access to a woman in that house without payment, he violates the house rules of a *meretrix*; and by raping a citizen girl in the middle of a play, during daylight, while he is sober, he violates not only the law but also the conventions of the genre. His inspiration for his violent act, he claims (583-591), was a fixture of the house itself, a painting of Jupiter raping Danae—perhaps even a painting of a scene from a play—and so his crime is a mimetic act (cf. Germany). I suggest that Chaerea's actions inside and interaction with Thaïs' house make him another "monster of metatheater" (as Anderson calls the rapist of Terence's *Hecyra*).

Plautus' and Terence's meretricious metatheater revolves around the gaps between façade and foundation, between the fakery of roles and the reality of deeds. The particularly gendered character of the passages considered here is picked up also in a theatrical metaphor in Lucretius, whose narrator says that infatuated lovers (such as those in Roman comedy) would be horrified if they saw what women's lives behind the scenes were really like (4.1186)—a perfect echo of Parmeno's revelatory invective in *Eunuchus*. In all these instances, the man speaking demonstrates confusion and concern at the backstage work that goes into the visible presentation the *meretrix* offers, metaphorically replicating the deceptive but desirable performance offered by comedy itself.

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