Men Among Monuments: Plautus's *Choragus* and Roman Topography

At Plaut. *Curc*. 462, the *choragus*—a provider of costumes for Roman theatrical performances—steps out onto the stage. Encompassing the entire panorama of the second-century forum from his elevated vantage point, he points out places of assembly and religious sites, temples and porticoes (462-86). Along with each monument, he singles out real-life Romans wandering among the buildings, and highlights their similarity to the stock-characters of the *comoedia palliata*. Previous discussions of this passage have focused primarily on determining the performance's location in the *forum Romanum*, as well as on exploring the types of people mentioned in the monologue (Moore 1991; Marshall 2006: 40-45). This paper posits that the edifices mentioned by the *choragus* are "readable" too (compare, e.g., Edwards 1996; Larmour-Spencer 2007; Thalmann 2011). In factoring these lost three-dimensional inter-"texts" back into an analysis of the scene, I argue that the *choragus* presents Roman comedy as the culmination of Rome's imperial aspirations and, furthermore, as a means for lower social *strata* to claim control over their city and its empire.

Temples, colonnades, and monuments told the story of Rome's rise to power and the city's place in the contemporary world even to illiterate onlookers. The *choragus*'s list of urban structures reminds the audience of Rome's cultural superiority and at once guides them chronologically through the *urbs*'s history. Thus his reference to the temple of Venus Cloacina (*Cloacinae sacrum*, 471), appropriately placed at the speech's beginning, recalls Aeneas's descent from the Goddess of Love. Given that the *sacrum* derives its name from its proximity to the *Cloaca Maxima*, the forum's massive drainage pipe (then not yet a sewer), it also evokes Roman preeminence in the field of public works. These differ from palaces, theaters, or pleasure-gardens in that they were not seen as corrupting the Roman citizenry (see Cic. *Off*. 2.60; Dion.

Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 3.67.5; Plin. *NH* 36.103-4, 123; Frontin. *Aq.* 1.16) but stood as an attestation of the ingenuity of Roman engineers and the city's taming of its natural environs. What is more, the ancient sources repeatedly mention the workers' heroic efforts at digging the early channels, spurred on by the tyrannical measures of the Tarquins. The *choragus* thus evokes not only the beginning, but also the end of Roman kingship.

Next, his mention of the *lacus Curtius* (*Curc.* 476) recalls Roman *gloria* of an even later date. Several heroic tales—most from the Republican era—are attached to the *lacus*, which had by the second century been paved over in a testament to Roman architectural resourcefulness. The resultant plaza had come to host several altars (the source closest to Plautus is Varro, *Ling*. 6.148-50) that, in turn, reminded the onlookers of the city's divine favor. Thus, too, the *choragus*'s reference to the Temple of Castor and Pollux (*aedem Castoris*, 481) recalls a Roman Republican victory in the 490s BCE. Elsewhere, references to the *comitium* (469) and a *basilica* (472) highlight Rome's achievements in governance, administration, and trade.

If we acknowledge the speech's rough chronological arrangement, it is relevant that the last item in the *choragus*'s list of buildings is, in fact, the stage he stands on. Having completed his description of Rome, he yields to the returning actors (*sed interim fores crepuere; linguae moderandum est mihi*, 486). It turns out, then, that the *choragus*'s very position in the theater presents Roman comedy as the culmination of the city's history. Furthermore, the *palliata* was, it seems, produced by the lowest *strata* of Roman society: immigrants, freedmen, and slaves (Richlin 2014). Thus Roman comedy emerges as more than simply the next tale of Roman glory. It also constitutes an appropriation of the Romans' history by those who were typically regarded as their subjects.

This last point is apparent in the *choragus*'s continued juxtapositions of lofty buildings

with lowly characters. *Periuri homines* wander about the *comitium* (470); braggarts crowd the temple of Venus (471); *scorta exoleta* are in the *basilica* (472); and sinister characters populate the *lacus Curtius* (*confidentes garrulique et malevoli supra lacum*, 476). The *palliata*'s victory consists in exposing everyday Romans as comedic stock-types. By granting such insights into city life, the comedic outsiders and newcomers not only prove their ability to contribute to Rome's literary and theatrical culture, but also deflate the delusions of grandeur that led to their original subjection.

Bibliography

Edwards, C. 1996. *Writing Rome: Textual Approaches to the City.* Cambridge: CUP.

Larmour, D. and D. Spencer, eds. 2007. *Sites of Rome: Time, Space, Memory.* Oxford: OUP.

Marshall, C. W. 2006. *The Stagecraft and Performance of Roman Comedy.* Cambridge: CUP.

Moore, T. 1991. "*Palliata Togata*: Plautus, *Curculio* 482-86." *AJP* 112: 343-62.

Richlin, A. 2014. "Talking to Slaves in the Plautine Audience." *ClAnt* 33: 174-226.

Thalmann, W. 2011. *Apollonius of Rhodes and the Spaces of Hellenism*. Oxford: OUP.