

Renewing Old Methodologies: An Updated Reconstruction of Afranius' *Vopiscus*

The *fabulae togatae* have not received much scholarly attention since Ribbeck's comprehensive editions of fragments in the late nineteenth century. While newer critical editions have been published (Daviault 1981; López López 1983), and some excellent recent work has revised interpretations of individual fragments (e.g. Welsh 2016), little has been done to update or critique the wildly speculative plot summaries that Ribbeck (1898) provides for each fragmentary play. This paper aims, through a case study of Afranius' *Vopiscus*, to update Ribbeck's aging methodology and produce an interpretation of the *Vopiscus* that is renovated by more modern approaches to Roman comic theatre.

According to Ribbeck's plot summary, the *Vopiscus* concerns itself with the death of an infant and resultant dissolution of its parents' marriage. This reconstruction is problematic for several reasons: he takes the title of the play at face value, assumes a unified chronology for all of the plot points recoverable from the fragments, and makes no use of evidence from the extant plays of Afranius' near-contemporaries. Rectification of this last oversight primarily motivates my suggested revisitation of the play's plot; since modern scholarship has demonstrated through careful linguistic analysis that Afranius' plays contain significant affinities with those of Plautus and Terence (e.g. Karakasis 2005: 204ff), evidence from the extant *fabulae palliatae* can and should be used, with appropriate caution, to inform our reconstructions of the fragmentary *togatae* penned by Afranius within the same century.

The word *vopiscus* designates a twin who survives the premature birth of his stillborn sibling (Pliny *NH* 7.10). Ribbeck (1898: 250) deduces from the play's title that the death of an infant drives the plot, incorporating indications of childbirth and divorce into a single cohesive and synchronic storyline (Ribbeck 1898: 250). A reading of the fragments of the *Vopiscus* that

situates the play within its larger theatrical milieu resists Ribbeck's interpretation, because plentiful extant evidence from Republican theatre demonstrates that infants in comic plots *never* actually die. The survival of a supposedly dead infant is far more likely; in fact, we can identify in the fragments of the *Vopiscus* several of the most common characteristics of the lost-identity plotline familiar to us from Roman New Comedies.

In the first place, comparative evidence from near-contemporary plays suggests that *proieceret partum* (fr. II Ribbeck) refers not to the disposal of a stillborn infant but to the abandonment of a living one (cf. e.g. *Cistellaria* 124: *puellam proiectam*). Infant exposure is a familiar and formulaic precondition for the lost-identity plotline; the mere mention of a lost or exposed child (especially in the prologue: *Captivi*, *Casina*, *Menaechmi*, *Poenulus*, *Rudens*) is a virtual guarantee that this character is alive and onstage. In fact, the issue of the play's internal chronology is resolved by the likelihood that an omniscient narrator provides vital plot points (the pregnancy and childbirth in frs. I and II) in the prologue – and so the infants implicated in the title could very well be grown men during the time of the stage action.

Other fragments also support a lost-identity plot: the searching out of a slave girl (fr. XXII) points to the instrumental role that many slave-characters play in resolving lost identities as original witnesses to the child's loss (*Captivi*, *Cistellaria*, *Casina*). A fragment involving a character's bracing observation of his paternal *imago* (fr. XII), as a scene that invokes socially-charged images of the aristocracy, would not be out of place in an exploration of identity that concerns itself fundamentally with nobility of bloodline; it is also a situation rife with potential for twin mix-ups and dramatic irony. In like manner, the contents of fr. XIV recall the recurrent theme of the inherent nobility of bearing observed in freeborn citizens, regardless of the circumstances in which they were raised (e.g., *Captivi*).

This paper thus builds on the foundational textual criticism of early editors like Ribbeck in combination with thoughtful and methodical reference to evidence from extant works of Republican theatre to suggest a fresh methodology for reconstructing fragmentary plays. This updated approach produces a more nuanced interpretation of the *Vopiscus*' larger plot, helps to identify potential plot devices (twin confusion; dramatic irony; recovered identity) and highlights the potential thematic concerns of the play (social ties; kinship; nobility of bloodline).

Bibliography

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