

The New and the Old in Plautus' *Casina*

In Plautus' *Casina* a *senex*, Lysidamus, is in love with the title character, a foundling raised in his household since she was a baby. He contrives to consummate his lust by marrying Casina to another family slave, who is to act as stand-in and allow his master to slip into his place on their wedding night. Lysidamus' lecherous plan is foiled, however, by his wife Cleostrata, who disguises a third slave as a bride and has him act Casina's part in the wedding ceremony as well as in the highly anticipated 'honeymoon'. The *Casina*'s plot thus features a wedding between slaves, an element shocking to the audience - or so the *prologus* claims when he sets forth this plot in the *narratio* section of the prologue:

sunt hic inter se quos nunc credo dicere:
'quaeso, hercle, quid istuc est? serviles nuptiae?
servin uxorem ducent aut poscent sibi?
novum attulerunt, quod fit nusquam gentium'

vv.67-70

There are people here who, I think, now say amongst themselves:

"Please – what's that, by Hercules? A *slave* marriage?!

So slaves will take a wife or request one for themselves?!

They've brought on a new thing, which happens nowhere at all."

The speaker subsequently 'replies' to the 'audience's' incredulity with a satirical *apologia* that plays on Roman comedy's ethnic dimension:

at ego aio id fieri in Graecia et Carthagini,
et hic nostra terra in Apulia,
maioaque opere ibi serviles nuptiae

quam liberalis etiam curari solent.

vv.71-4

But I say that it happens in Greece and in Carthage,
and here in our land Apulia,
where they make a greater effort for slave weddings
than they do for those of the free.

This fictional exchange between spectators and *prologus* is conventionally read as a throwaway joke on the storyline's impossibility that tells us what we already know; *viz.* Roman comedy does not mirror reality but perverts it. According to the *communis opinio*, then, the slave wedding motif's novelty lies in its transgression of social and legal convention, and Plautus is ironically acknowledging that he is bringing "something new" on stage by depicting a practice alien to Roman society off stage (e.g. McCarthy 2000, Sharrock 2009 and Konstan 2014). But more remains to be said about this passage.

My paper shows that vv.67-70 foreground a previously unnoticed emphasis throughout the *Casina* on the novelty of Cleostrata's *ludus nuptialis*. Via repeated use of the adjective *novus*, this play tells us again and again that it contains "something new". And yet it problematizes the very status it lays claim to. I argue that the *Casina*'s *prologus* equivocates on the precise meaning of *novum* in v.70, capitalizing upon *novus*' wide semantic range by means of a jokingly literal interpretation of the idiom *nusquam gentium* which specifies the substantive's referent. He thereby creates ambiguity that prompts the audience (and us) to consider what, exactly, this comedy's novelty is predicated of. What else is "new" about Cleostrata's ruse?

To find out, I read the *Casina*'s claims to novelty alongside the *Pseudolus*, when its eponymous trickster proclaims that the deception which will finally get its slow-moving plot into

gear is “something new” (vv. 568-70, 601-2). A lexical echo of Pseudolus’ famous metareflection on *poiesis* earlier in the play (vv.395-405) confirms that this *novitas* is specifically poetic originality; the *Pseudolus*, that is, bills itself as innovative drama. Metatheatrical statements throughout the *Casina* confirm that the same is true of its own *aliquid novum*: the *serviles nuptiae* are something that has never before appeared on the comic stage. Thus, for instance, Pardalisca’s declaration that Cleostrata’s *res* is a spectacular *unicum*:

*nec pol ego Nemeae credo neque ego Olympiae
neque usquam ludos tam festivos fieri
quam hic intus fiunt ludi ludificabiles
seni nostro et nostro Olimpioni vilico.*

vv.759-62

By Pollux, neither at Nemea or at Olympia,
or indeed *anywhere*, I think, have there been *ludi* as fun
as the ludicrous *ludi* being held here, inside,
on our old man and our bailiff Olympio.

And yet the *Casina*’s *novitas* eludes precise definition, for its very ontology problematizes this distinction. What does it mean for a translated play within a highly conventionalized genre to be “new”? In the conclusion of my paper I parse the various possibilities both ironic and sincere, ultimately suggesting that the *Casina* exploits novelty’s multiple rhetorical dimensions to depict itself as at once new and old, reflecting and prompting reflection upon its place in literary history.

Bibliography

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