

Girls and Trauma in New Comedy

The plots, generic rules and stage humor of New Comedy both require and mask a good deal of personal trauma, much of it experienced by girls. Sources of trauma include, for citizen women, long-term displacement from family, fear of permanent separation and loss of citizenship, prospect of enforced concubinage to unpleasant soldiers, sexual enslavement, physical abuse, male threats and violence, and, finally, rape. Displaced daughters brought up in brothels fear sexual abuse and trafficking. Displacement from families occurs in infancy or early childhood and forces citizen girls into dangerous situations. Domestic violence is represented, as well.

Although New Comedy focuses on citizen families, it stages many non-citizen women, chiefly slaves and *meretrices*, who also experience trauma. *Ancillae* regularly suffer torture and abuse, from a young age. The *meretrices* most at risk are typically about sixteen years old. On the page, these traumas are easy to miss, but in performance they would be unmistakable: the famous *canticum* of Ballio in *Pseudolus* threatens appalling tortures for his *meretrices*, who would be staged as terrified. The specter of sexual trafficking haunts the lives of enslaved *meretrices*: see, for example, the soldiers planning to take away Planesium of Curculio and Phoenicium of *Pseudolus*. Indeed, the propensity of soldiers toward physical violence is widely staged, from Menander's *Perikeiromene* to Plautus' *Truculentus* and *Poenulus*, to Terence's *Eunuchus*, among others.

Forcible physical removal is a further threat for *meretrices* both free and unfree, permanent and temporary (i.e., the pseudo-*meretrix*): Pyrgopolinices kidnaps Pasicompsa, much against her will, in *Miles Gloriosus*, and in *Adelphoe* Aeschines abducts a psaltria from her pimp, for his infatuated brother; because she does not seem to speak the local language (Marshall

2013), she is terrified and weeping, having no idea who he is or what is happening. Bacchis II of *Bacchides* fears sexual enslavement, though she is free, by the soldier Cleomachus. Thraso of Eunuchus threatens to repossess Pamphila for sexual use, after having restored her to her foster sister Thais. The pimp Labrax terrorizes Palaestra and Ampelisca of *Rudens*, bringing violence to them even in Venus' sanctuary, after having suddenly taken them from Athens for sale abroad. Rape is the most obvious trauma to befall girls in New Comedy, and it happens to citizen girls rather than to non-citizens, a pattern inverted relative to actual lived reality. Pamphile of Menander's *Epitrepontes* and Philumene of Terence's *Hecyra* are traumatized by rape, pregnancy, and childbirth, and the ensuing urgent need to hide pregnancy and baby from the new husband (who is ultimately the rapist-father). The unseen title character of Plautus' *Casina*, a teenager, is sexually sought, even stalked, by four different men; her traumatized reaction is staged by proxy, via the *ancilla* Pardalisca. Pamphila of Terence's *Eunuchus* shows multiple signs of trauma after being raped. The social crime and scandal of rape is always resolved by marriage, in a much-studied pattern (see, e.g., Brown 1991, Harris 2006, James 1998, 2013, Pierce 2017), and the trauma of the rape must go unstaged, as it is not comic and would destroy the festival atmosphere of the play, but traces of it are clearly shown via powerful second-hand reports in both *Epitrepontes* and *Eunuchus*, and hinted at in Plautus' *Epidicus*.

This paper surveys women's trauma in New Comedy, arguing that the risks faced and experienced by citizen girls represent social anxieties over the safety of the citizen daughter, and that the genre inevitably, perhaps sometimes inadvertently, represents the risks and traumas experienced by non-citizen girls, as well. The subject is, then, of real—if disturbing—use for studying social reality in antiquity.

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