

## What Sort of Man: Terence's *Eunuchus* as an Early Roman Conception of Eunuchs

Terence's adaptation of Menander's *Eunuchus*, like many other Roman plays, required numerous changes in the plot and characters in order to convincingly portray it to the audience as authentically Roman. Despite the lack of New Comedy to use as comparison, scholiasts like Donatus comment specifically on changes made to Terence's version. Furthermore, the author himself admits in the prologue that in creating this play he cannibalized characters from other productions, whose presence must significantly change the plot and ideas expressed in it. Notably, many such characters express prejudice and fear of the prominent figure of a eunuch, whose very nature is integral to the plot. At the time the play was produced in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, eunuchs had been present in Rome only since the introduction of the cult of Magna Mater in 204 BCE. Several ancient writers describe at great length the arrival of this cult in Rome, notable for its many Eastern features, especially the *galli* (Liv. 14.5-14; Ov. *Fast.* 4.247-348; App. *Hann.* 9). However, none of these authors devote significant space to the priests other than to simply note their presence. What we lack, therefore, is the reaction of the Roman populace to these unfamiliar figures.

The *Eunuchus*, coming right on the heels of this period, provides a near-contemporaneous viewpoint on eunuchs. This presents scholars with a rare opportunity to assess the perception of the eunuch in early Republican society (Kuefler 2001). Broadly speaking, Terence evinces a pervasive anxiety in Roman society regarding the influence eunuchs would exert over 'normal' Romans, specifically citizen males. The protagonist Chaerea, whose decision to disguise himself in eunuch drag initiates the comic plot, experiences alterations to his gendered societal role due to this choice. Before he dons the costume, his behavior falls in line with expectations for a

citizen male in terms of sexual and social privilege, as he acts to take what he wishes without regard to non-citizen, non-male wishes (Ter. *Eun.* 604-6). But his assumed eunuch drag soon begins to undermine his *virtus*, disrupting proper behaviors, and jeopardizing his once-secure identity as a privileged citizen male (Ter. *Eun.* 549-56, 609-11). The disorder created by this assumed identity spreads out beyond Chaerea, and colors the reactions of other characters to the eunuch. Confusingly, they are referred to sometimes as ideal companions only for women (Ter. *Eun.* 167-8), and at other times for men (476-8), and other disagreements as to the exact identity and role of eunuchs arise. Although this confusion does not damage the other characters as much as the eunuch drag does Chaerea, these examples all speak to the liminal and turbulent identity associated with eunuchs. Specifically, eunuchs were believed to cause breakdowns in the societal norms governing the hierarchy of class, gender, and sexuality (James 2013; Erlinger 2016). The ending reveals to the characters what the audience has always been privy to: that the eunuch was only a disguise. Despite this revelation, the destabilizing effects of the eunuch do not simply disappear. Although Chaerea as the comic hero receives a happy ending, his *virtus* will remain stained by his stint in eunuch drag, and furthermore by his eagerness to do so, despite the manly reasons which prompted it (Christenson 2013). The willingness of a previously well-adjusted young man to engage in such effeminate behavior echoes the Roman platitude decrying the degeneracy of each new generation, and for Terence the eunuch is the current force corrupting the youth and degrading traditional manly values.

#### Bibliography

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