

Plautus' *Poenulus* and the Play-within-the-Play: A Metageneric Reevaluation

Two puzzles confront the modern reader of Plautus' *Poenulus*. First, in the wake of the Second Punic War, it is striking that Plautus casts a family of Carthaginians as its protagonists, and this unexpected choice has led many to interpret the play as a topical piece that engages contemporary opinions about Rome's erstwhile enemies (Franko 1996, Starks 2000, Faller 2004). Second, *Poenulus*' structure divides readily into what Gratwick (1982, 98) described as "two unsatisfactory halves." I propose a new reading of *Poenulus* that integrates the two halves thematically through the sophisticated use of metagenre and, consequently, complicates our understanding of the Carthaginian characters, their ethnicity, and their status as comic stock types.

I begin with a reading of the deception of the *leno* Lycus, which occupies the play's first half. As has long been recognized, this deception takes the form of a self-referential play-within-the-play (Lowe 1990, Scafuro 1993, Maurice 2004). The full range of performance features that this inset play incorporates, however, has so far flown under the radar. Alongside references to costumes (*Poen.* 577), props (595-600), and rehearsals (552, 554, 578), *Poenulus*' deception scheme includes aspects of Roman comic performance that are less frequently represented in Plautus' plays-within-the-play. These aspects include a prologue outlining the inset play's *argumentum* (an overview of its plot, 547-65); an onstage audience in the *aduocati*; and a self-referential epilogue delivered to the offstage audience (809-16). This scene thus forms a near-perfect *mise-en-abyme* of a Roman comedy, complete with its performance conventions.

Plautus' unusual incorporation of these features into *Poenulus*' play-within-the-play makes the comedy more than metatheatrical: it is metageneric, reflecting not only its status as

performance, but its status as a Roman comedy specifically. Moreover, the deception of Lycus, with its perfect, self-conscious, and emphatic mirroring of comic conventions, implies that in Plautus' theater, conformity to generic norms is important; the successful scheme succeeds because it meets our generic expectations. Consequently, when Hanno enters just over a hundred lines later (*Poen.* 930), he takes the stage before an audience that has been primed to pay attention not only to what *Poenulus*' characters do, but also to how they uphold comic conventions.

I suggest that Plautus' placement of a large-scale metagenic commentary immediately before the introduction of the play's titular Carthaginian implies that comic conventions form at least as important a context for the play's interpretation as recent Roman history. Thus, I propose, it is only after we understand how Plautus' genre preconditions Hanno's representation that we can ask how and why Plautus' represented Carthaginians upon his Roman stage.

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