Coercion and Consequence in Roman Comedy

While much has been written in debate on the value of Roman Comedy as a source for social history (Saller 1993, Duckworth 1952, Mulder 2019), there is a wealth of information to be found in close analysis of the language used in depicting social situations, regardless of the exactness of the relationship between the comic and the commonplace. Such close linguistic analysis yields a deeper understanding of the sociophilological conditions from which these plays were produced and reveals the attitudes of the authors and by extension the society that produced their work, towards the social situations being described (Sharrock 2009, Fantham 1991). Ten of the surviving comedies center on acts of sexual assault, so it stands to reason that this approach can be taken to explore the social realities of sexual assault in Roman Comedy: who is being harmed, how exactly are these crimes described, and what effects are felt by the parties involved--the perpetrator, the victim, their families, and the community at large.

There are a handful of words and phrases at the core of this exploration: *facio iniuriam*, *offero vitium, addo vitium, affero vitium, vitio* and *compresso*. By taking a look at how these terms develop, connect, and relate to each other throughout the Roman comedic corpus, it is possible to create a web of words and phrases to visualize these relationships. In particular, Terence's *Hecyra* provides a particularly instructive view on both the usage of *facio iniuriam* and *offero vitium* but also the different significance between the similar phrases (*Hecyra 401, 383*). While *facio iniuriam* is used in reference to the insult, injury, and broader social ramifications of the crime, *offero vitium* is used in direct reference to the violence and circumstances of the act itself.

Like other conventions of Roman Comedy -- the portrayal of everyday situations familiar to their audiences using stock characters to represent stereotypical caricatures of the types of people they likely knew -- the basic framing of sexual assault stories is inherited from Greek New Comedy as well. Along with this inherited framing come a number of syntactic cues: Menander uses βιαζομαι in strikingly similar fashion to the use of *vitio* and *stupro* and αδικεω with the same striking similarity to *facio iniuriam* (*Epitrepontes* 451, *Samia 66*). Though the inherited syntax reminds us of Greek, the impact of the words and their exact usage is Roman (Segal 1968). In this way, the language of Roman Comedy is a useful tool in understanding the intersection of Greek and Roman culture, literature, and language as well as the influence of the former on the latter (Moore 1998).

This paper is one small part of a broader project to examine the use of sexual language in Roman Comedy and discover how the semantics of a word or phrase relate to the social context in which the plays were written. Roman Comedy represents an important part of early Roman linguistic history and gives valuable insight into the way that Romans at the time thought, and the impact of this thought on the Latin language. In continuing this research, it will be possible to determine the cultural norms and values that led to the meanings and connotations of these words and phrases and reach broader conclusions about how the literature and language of republican Rome responded.

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