MDS1TRW: The Roman World

Lecture 5: Roman Comedy: Plautus *Pseudolus*

http://www.utexas.edu/courses/moorecomedy/comedyimages/naplesrelief.jpg
ROMAN COMEDY

*fabula palliata* – story in Greek dress

- Plautus (c. 254 to 184 BCE) – 20 comedies including *Pseudolus*
- Terence (195-160 BCE) - 6 comedies
Italian influences on the *fabula palliata*

- **Fescennine Jesting** – obscene abuse, verbal duelling [e.g. Pseudolus and Simia (*Pseud.* 913-20 – pp. 251-2)]

- **Saturnalia** 17 December - overturning of social norms [e.g. slave in charge motif]

- **Atellan Farce**: innuendo, obscenity, visual comedy [everywhere! – see Ballio and slaves scene]
Plautus vs. Terence

• Terence:
  ❖ Athenian New Comedy
  ❖ family drama

• Plautus:
  ❖ Roman elements
    • e.g. Aulularia (Pot of Gold 107): Euclio visits the Roman magistrate
  ❖ Farce
  ❖ Metatheatrics
Performing Plautus’ *Pseudolus*

- 191 BCE
- *Ludi Megalenses*
- Plautus = 63 years old

Mosaic of two actors with masks
Sousse Museum, Tunisia

http://www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus_images/paula_chabot/theater/pctheater40.jpg
Plautus: use of stock characters

- Young man (*adulescens*)
- Slave (*servus, ancilla*)
- Old man (*senex*)
- Prostitute (*meretrix*)
- Pimp, bawd (*leno*)
- Soldier (*miles*)
- Parasite (*parasitus*)
- Nurse (*nutrix*)

Mosaic of comic masks: flute girl and slave, Conservatori Museum, Rome

Plautus: stock characters in *Pseudolus*

- Young man (*adulescens*) - Calidorus
- Slave (*servus*) – Pseudolus
  [and Simia]
- Old man (*senex*) – Simo
- Pimp, bawd (*leno*) – Ballio
- Cook (*coquus*) – unnamed
- Prostitute (*meretrix*) - Phoenicium

Mosaic of comic masks: flute girl and slave, Conservatori Museum, Rome

Names with meaning

• Slaves: Pseudolus; Harpax; Simia
• Soldier: Polymachaeroplagides = lit. ‘son of many blows of the dagger’
  – c.f. soldier in Braggart Soldier: Pyrgopolynices
    [ ‘Many fortress victories’ ]
Pseudolus – the plot in brief

• Love affair: Callidorus and Phoenicium
• Phoenicium and Ballio live next door to Callidorus, Simo and Pseudolus
• Harpax = soldier’s servant
• Simia: slave who impersonates Harpax

http://www.the-romans.co.uk/new_gallery_seven.htm
The Comic Slave

- In control: the clever slave (*servus callidus*)
- e.g. Pseudolus p.239 ‘victory is certain… Watch me!’
- Pseudolus likened to Socrates [p.235]
  - (also Ulysses & Alexander)
- even ‘writes’ the plot [p.243]:
  ‘It’s like being a playwright… I’ll play playwright.’

Terracotta statuette of comic actor seated on altar, British Museum

http://www.vroma.org/images/raia_images/comic_slave.jpg
The Clever Slave in Roman Comedy

- clever slave: *servus callidus*
- role reversal: young master & slave [e.g. p.244]
  = Saturnalian?
- military terminology: *dux, imperator, victoria*
- Pseudolus and Simia [note pp.251-2]
Verbal duelling

flagitatio (abuse vs. debtor)
– Ps. & Calidorus vs. Ballio – only partially successful, as B agrees!

Pseudolus & Simia [251-2]
Pseudolus as military commander

- Military language: [237] ‘Before I engage on the contest’ = ‘Before I fight that battle’
  [239] ‘assault’, ‘troops’, ‘defeat and despoil’
- weapon = deceit: ‘I’ve got all my forces lined up in my mind, arts and stratagems two and three deep’
- military hero with genealogy: ‘I am born of noble stock, and it behoves me to do such deeds of note’
- Simo’s comment: ‘Alexander the Great.’
Violence as Comedy

• Beating slaves as vehicle for jokes
• Verbal - colourful vocabulary
  – p.251 Pseudolus calls Simia ‘a walking whipping-post’
  – p.238 ‘you can scribble me over from head to foot with birch rods for pens, like writing words in a book’
• Slapstick – physical beating implied by text
  – Ballio and slaves pp.221-25

http://romancomedyinperformance.blogspot.com.au/search/label/Pseudolus
The double enemy in *Pseudolus*

- **senex** and **leno**
- Simo – *not* quite the typical *senex*, self-aware too:
  - pp.235-6: complaints about son
  - But, p.264: ‘Not the kind of reception you have seen in many another comedy...with whips and irons’.

- Ballio – stereotype of pimp; and self-aware:
  - p.230 ‘when I’m dead, you’ll be the wickedest man in Athens’
  - p.231 agrees with insults: ‘Grave-robber!’ ‘Certainly.’ etc.
  - p.258 ‘on your honour?’ ‘where would I get such a thing!’
Incongruity of slave claims

Major source of humour: paradox – elevates those of lowest status:

• claims to family: Ps. dry eyes ‘run in the whole family’ [p.219]

• comparisons with mythological figure of Ulysses

• challenging master: Pseudolus warns Simo to be on guard and lays bet [pp.236-7]

• Ballio gives his slaves mock ‘magistrate’ roles: [221-25]
Status confusion

- Ps. talks self up: ‘I’m his sub-Ballio’ [p.109]
- Harpax confused: ‘[Are you] slave or free?’

- Disjunction between appearance and behaviour: Pseudolus’ appearance = ‘Ginger hair, fat belly, thick legs, big head, dark skin, red face and very large feet’ [p. 263]
Violating the Dramatic Illusion

- metatheatre
- Pseudolus as playwright
- Characters play parts self-consciously
- Mention of being ‘characters’
- Mention of the play as a play [p.232]
- Talking directly to audience [p.221]: Ps. warns audience - will deceive them too
- effect: audience drawn in
The plot (of the play, of the slave)

- Full of loose ends – boast before the interlude...
  and after interlude [239] brilliant plan – never emerges
- All contingent upon events: e.g. Harpax’ arrival
- Callipho [238] – disappears
- Does the audience notice?
What the audience knows...

Humour in **revelation**

– the deceived (Ballio, Simo) think they have uncovered plot [259-63]
– Irony: map out deceit that has already occurred
– Audience has insider knowledge
Summing up

• Athenian new comedy plots with farcical Roman elements

• Roman comedy: self-aware

• Plautus – comedy of reversals: ultimately conservative?
Plautus’ influence in European drama

- *Amphitruo* and *The Brothers Menaechmus* -> Shakespeare *Comedy of Errors*
- *Pot of Gold* -> Molière *L’Avare*
- *Pseudolus* (et al.) -> Sondheim *A Funny Thing Happened on the way to the Forum*

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