Plautus & His Comedy

The full name, or so we are told, of the Roman playwright popularly known as Plautus is Titus Maccius Plautus, but there is much to make us suspect this was not his real name. For one, his own plays never refer to him by this three-word name, only parts of it: Titus Maccius, Maccus, or just Plautus. For another, this sort of tripartite name was a way of denoting Roman aristocrats, wherein each part of the name designated particular information—the first name (praenomen) was the name given a nobleman within his immediate family, the second name (nomen) denoted his gens or the larger family group he belonged to, and the third (cognomen) his clan or branch within that gens—but it is highly unlikely Plautus was born into the upper classes, at least, to judge from his dramas and what little we are told about his life.

The names themselves are odd—there is, for instance, no known Maccius clan of the Plautus family—instead, all three appear to be jokes mocking this complex, aristocratic nomenclature. To wit, Titus is slang in Latin for "penis," Maccius can be translated as "son of Maccus" and Plautus has a number of possible associations, most likely of which is "flat-footed" referring to a type of mime actor. Thus, the name says in Roman terms, "Titus belonging to the Flatfoot clan of the Maccus family" or, expressed in modern equivalents, "Dick Bozo Tapdancer." Thus, it seems safe to say this was not the playwright's birth-name but a stage name made up for comic purposes. And it conforms with other data ascertainable about Plautus from his drama: his taste for puns and broad comedy, his love of song and dance, his mockery of the upper classes and his strong ties to Atellan farce—he may even have been trained as a performer in that genre. Even if this humorous designation does not stem from Plautus himself, someone who knew his work intimately must have concocted it, which makes it as good as true.

What little else we are told about Plautus' life is probably later fabrication. That he was supposedly a freed slave who lost several fortunes and had to work in the mills is, no doubt, biographical detail invented out of his own comedies where slaves often win and lose large sums of money and fear the threat of being sent to labor camps. This fiction closely resembles the false information we receive about Euripides—that his home life was as troubled as that of his characters—just another tabloid tale abstracted at some later date from the playwright's drama in the absence of valid historical data.

About the only fact we can be certain of concerning Plautus as a person is that he was a highly successful, comic playwright in late third-century and early second-century Rome. And because, as noted above, Plautus is also the first Roman author belonging to any genre whose work survives entire, he is a valuable source of not just theatre history, but also the linguistic and cultural history of Rome. This sort of primogeniture, no doubt, played a large role in the later preservation of his comedy which grammarians valued for its use of peculiar and archaic Latin vocabulary, just as much as Roman audiences loved Plautus' rollicking, lively humor. In this
Plautine Comedy

Plautus' comedies revolve mostly around daily life and average people, superficially the stuff of Greek New Comedy as opposed to the politically oriented Old Comedy of the Classical Age or the spoofs of tragedy popular in post-classical Middle Comedy. Plautus, however, generates humor in a different way from Menandrean comedy. Often extreme personality types set in outlandish situations, Plautine characters as a group recall Aristophanes' creations more than Menander's. Indeed, devious pimps, mercenary prostitutes, lustful young men, lustful old men, tortured mothers and torturing wives and, most of all, crafty slaves who delight in deception populate Plautus' plays. This feast of broad stock types is a far cry from Menander's subtly shaded characters, and in a way, Plautus's comedy rewinds the evolutionary clock and returns Menander's characters to the caricatures from which they arose. Lest, however, this be seen as some sort of step backwards toward more "primitive" comedy, he did it all to excellent effect. Plautus's sense of comic timing, exactly how far to take a joke or run a scene, is unsurpassed in Western drama, even by Shakespeare, all of which presupposes a shrewd understanding of his audience's needs, intelligence and the reason they are sitting in the theatre at all. As a result, Plautus' plays may not always be great art, nor do they strive at every moment to educate or improve the audience or advance the technology of theatre, but Plautus' comedies are invariably and without exception entertaining. To the extent, then, that effective comic drama entails art or education or technological advancement, Plautus can be all those things, so long as the final product works on stage and people will pay to see it. The fact is, his comedies continue to be performed with great success today—they were among the first ancient plays produced on stage in the Renaissance, the dawn of the modern age—and even such crusty curmudgeons as the Christian fathers saw worth in his drama. St. Jerome, in particular, seems to have been quite fond of Plautus, at least to judge from how often he quotes Plautine comedy, all of which attests to this playwright's astute and practical assessment of what a general viewership seeks from comic drama: wit and diversion, spiced with sage observation of human life. Indeed, what audiences really want is a paradox, a stark enigma Plautus understood as well as anyone ever has. While many viewers announce in public that they want to learn from plays or see goodness and morality triumph, all too often what they actually pay for are flashy, vapid, sensual, amoral spectacles. At the same time, if there is nothing to be gained intellectually or esthetically from a play, their attention quickly turns to fresher, slicker, more novel nonsense and they tend not to come back a second time or send those friends of theirs who own wallets. Plautus' drama shows that he understood this conundrum quite well, and his finest talent is, no doubt, his ability to walk the fine line between fine art and a fine time.
This raises, then, a question that lies at the very heart of studies in Roman Comedy: how did Plautus create theatre so effective in such a place and time? While his cultural situation may look like a disadvantage—especially in comparison to the erudite and drama-mad society that for centuries packed the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens—there is much to say that Plautus' Rome was actually a fertile field for his art. The absence, for instance, of a commanding native tradition of theatre in late third-century Rome gave him carte blanche to create plays in a manner that suited his talent. He could follow his instincts and write with a freedom Menander never had nor even Euripides, a parrhesia ("freedom of speech"), in fact, no Greek playwright had ever had, at least not since Aeschylus' day.

Furthermore, he had an eager audience ready to explore the stage and vast dramatic wealth to draw upon. Far from a poor "niche" for theatre, when seen this way, the Roman world of Plautus' day had everything going for it. He could pull what he wanted from Atellan farce, with which he was clearly familiar, to judge from his stage-name. What's more, he could siphon off ideas at will from the great, untapped reservoir of Greek comic drama. Thus, from one perspective, his plays represent an inspired blend of native Italian drama and Hellenistic comedy, the product of lathering a bawdy slapstick tone over the well-oiled machinery of Menandran plots. To have seen and utilized the opportunities for making effective comedy in such a situation, that is surely Plautus' finest stroke of genius.

The Question of Greek Originals

Another question at the heart of Plautine studies is one that has predominated scholarship for well over a century. In what way and to what extent did Plautus adapt the works of Greek New Comedy, often called "Greek originals"? That is, in adapting Menander or any Greek playwright, how and how much did he change the language, tone and plot of his model? This question has long been a matter of speculation, because the loss of almost all Hellenistic drama has left theatre historians with no Greek originals by which to make comparison. While that situation has not changed much of late even if we now have slightly better insight into the situation—a few things are clear about the changes he made as he re-sculpted Greek drama for the Roman theatre. For instance, Plautus' comedies are essentially "musicals" inasmuch as they have songs, discernable from the type of meter in which the text is disposed. That is, where Greek New Comedies typically quarantine lyric passages off in embolima (the musical interludes separating acts), Plautus' characters regularly burst into song and perhaps also dance during the course of the drama. As one scholar has noted, he turned "Menandran Pygmalions into Roman My Fair Ladys."

Thus, Plautus romanized his Greek originals to that extent at least. An important corollary here is the question of which Greek author's work underlies which of Plautus' plays. No doubt, the methods he used in adapting Greek originals were bound in some way to—or to some extent must have varied in accordance with—the mode and style of the particular model he was adapting. In other words, a quiet Menandran original surely called for a different method of adaptation from that
required by a Middle Comedy send-up of myth or a Diphilean "knockabout" farce. That makes knowing who the original authors are central in assessing Plautus' craftsmanship and place in theatre history.

And we know who some of the authors of these "Greek originals" are. For just under half of Plautus' surviving plays, they are named in the Roman text or can be deduced from quotations outside the play, and as far as we can tell, all of them turn out to be playwrights of Greek New Comedy, none from the preceding periods of Middle or Old Comedy. To be precise, Plautus based four of his plays on Menander (Aulularia, Bacchides, Cistellaria, Stichus), two on Diphilus (Casina, Rudens), and two on Philemon (Mercator, Trinummus). Moreover, the different natures of these Romanized re-creations of Hellenistic drama confirm the supposition that Plautus did, indeed, have to modulate his method of adaptation to suit the varying styles of Greek comic playwrights.

All in all, the situation recalls the works of Shakespeare who also "borrowed" plots from others' work, nor are the reasons that both he and his Roman forebears did not forge entirely new works hard to understand. For one, they could—the Greek plays were there for the taking—so, following in Livius Andronicus' footsteps, Plautus opted to adapt Greek originals rather than construct his own plays from whole cloth. Moreover, the long, complex but coherent plots of New Comedy, a much more difficult thing to fabricate than is often assumed, must have been quite attractive for both playwright and audience in the day.

Some support for this notion is found in the term saturae ("medleys"; singular satira), which was used after the inception of the literary drama (ca. 240 BCE) to refer to the older, native Italian forms of entertainment, the Atellan farce and phlyax plays of the days before the invasion of Hellenic arts. The designation satira argues that the coherent but complex nature of the Greek plots struck later Romans as the major difference between Greek drama and the more episodic, indigenous Roman fare. That is, the scenes in Greek comedy were clearly "linked," while those of early Roman drama looked more like a "medley" of disjointed actions, à la Old Comedy perhaps.

All in all, why Plautus adapted Greek comedy is really not the question but how, and about that little of substance can be said as long as we do not have access to the Greek originals that lie behind Plautus' plays. In other words, we can go only so far without having more Menander to compare to the Plautus we can see for ourselves and from that assess how the Roman used his Greek prototypes. Unfortunately, however, those Hellenistic originals have for the most part been lost—that is, until recently.

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