

The role of slavery in roman comedy



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The Role of Slavery in Roman Comedy The theater of the Roman Empire was very similar to that of the Greek theater. Masks were worn by the actors to amplify their voices and to allow some actors to play two different roles, and women were not allowed to have roles in the theater. Roman playwrights such as Plautus and Terence borrowed comedic stories from the Greek theater, “Romanizing” them in the process. For instance, Terence wrote a play called *Heauton Timorumenos* or *The Self-Tormentor*.

A Greek comedic playwright named Menander wrote a play with the same title. Since Menander’s version is lost, historians aren’t sure how original Terence’s version is. We can suspect that at least some of Terence’s version is merely a translation or a very slightly edited form of Menander’s. One of the most recurring themes in Greek and Roman Theater is that of the master and the slave. Almost every play by Plautus contained “the cunning slave” who outwitted or ridiculed his master’s action.

George Duckworth described this relationship saying, “It is hardly possible that in real life ancient slaves had as much freedom as the slaves of Roman comedy, nor could they have been as outspoken and as impudent,” (Duckworth 288). Themes such as this sought to diminish the harsh reality of slavery and racism through comedy. Because Plutarch and Terence depicted slaves more as free men than as prisoners, their comedies fought the traditional ideas of slavery and discrimination. Before discussing slavery in Roman plays, it is important to know the customs of the Roman Theater.

All Roman citizens attended the theater for free, because either the city funded the play, or a wealthy, individual citizen paid for the production.

These individuals might be running for an upcoming election, so they provided entertainment to the Roman people to gain favor with them. The better the play, the better their reputation would be. In general, the Romans of the time, combat and bloodshed were of the utmost desires for entertainment. The more realistic and gruesome the event, the more they enjoyed themselves.

At the time, women were not allowed to have roles in the theater, and in the beginning stages of Roman Theater, women could not even attend the productions. Young boys played the female roles instead. But most interestingly, slaves usually made up the entire cast of a Roman production. There are twenty surviving plays written by Plautus. The first instance of a slave acting out of character is in the play *Captivi*. In this play, Philopolemus, an Aetolian is captured and sold into slavery under an Elean doctor.

His father, Hegio proceeds to buy many Elean slaves to trade for his son. He ends up buying a well-known Elean named Philocrates, who is accompanied by his own slave, Tyndarus. Hegio plans to send the master back to Elis to facilitate the trade. But Tyndarus and Philocrates switched identities, which would have caused the deal to fall through. Hegio is infuriated, and orders Tyndarus to the quarries. David Konstan explains the theme of this play as, “the conflict between a stern, conventional father and a son driven to defiance by the irresistible force of erotic passion.

A common figure in these plays is the household slave, who risks the displeasure of his senior master...in order to advance the amatory interests of the junior,” (Konstan 59). Instead of the general storyline, Philocrates is

the senior master because he is the original owner of Tyndarus. Hegio is the junior master because he has only recently obtained Tyndarus. Hegio still holds all power over Tyndarus, though, and this act of defiance would normally be punished with death for the perpetrator. Instead, Hegio is convinced by Tyndarus that his actions were purely out of loyalty, and not to offend Hegio.

Hegio respects this and decides to let him live. Another famous play by Plautus that contains the role of the cunning slave who is not punished justly is *Rudens*. Gripus, the slave of a poor man that lives on the coast comes across a treasure chest while fishing, and dreams of what he will do with his spoils, explaining that he will buy his freedom and become a tyrant with his immense wealth. Another slave, Trachalio comes along, though, and claims that if Gripus doesn't split the treasure with him, then he will report Gripus to the original owner of the treasure.

Gripus argues that the treasure is his because the sea belongs to no one, and consequently that which is recovered from the sea belongs to the finder. Trachalio suggests they settle the argument by talking to Gripus' owner Daemones. Daemones sides with Trachalio, who wanted the treasure not for himself, but for the original owner, Palaestra. Daemones then chides Gripus for his selfishness, " Daemones angrily sends him into the house and complains about the poor quality of slaves; luckily, he reflects, Gripus didn't meet another like himself, or both would have been implicated in the crime," (Konstan 84).

Trachalio is the cunning slave in this example, and he, like Tyndarus, is not motivated by selfish reasons, but by doing what is right. This is the reason why the cunning slave is celebrated in Roman Theater. Duckworth describes the attitude of this slave as, “ the freedom and insolence of the comic slaves, their immunity from serious punishment, their happy-go-luck existence... combine to paint a picture of slave life that bears little relation to reality,” (Duckworth 290). In his essay entitled Comic Shackles, Ulrike Roth elaborates on this point saying, “ But Geta’s concern is not evidence for the employment of chained labour on the land.

Both Plautus and Terence, then, do not employ the image of the chained slave for work on the land of Roman slave owners,” (Roth). The slaves don’t actually suffer any torture throughout the course of the productions. In reality, the Roman master surely would have punished his slave for even the most minor mistakes, just to keep his reputation as a man in power.

Duckworth says that, “ however much the slaves of comedy refer to whips and chains, to the mill and the quarry and the cross, they seldom experience them in the plays.

The frequent use by slaves of epithets like *mastigia*, *furcifer*, *uerbero*, *verbereum caput*, as terms of banter or abuse does not mean that the slaves are necessarily referring to punishments which they or their fellow-slaves have themselves undergone,” (Duckworth 290). Plautus and Terence do not want to show the truth about slavery of the time in their productions. This may be so that they didn’t insult anyone by generalizing what “ most” Romans did. If a play was poorly received, then the citizen who invested in the production would likely destroy the name of the playwright.

Duckworth explains that, " when the intrigue is directed against a pompous soldier or a rascally leno, the slave's machinations have the approval of the other characters and the sympathy of the spectators. Such trickery is successful and there is no question of punishment," (Duckworth 288). When the audience is on the side of the trickster, there is no need for punishment in the eyes of the audience. This technique is essential in Roman theater. It makes the slave, a degenerate type in the eyes of most Romans, the hero of the play; an integral part in the outcome of the story. Just like in *Miles Gloriosus*.

Plautus writes about the character of Palaestrio as another example of this motif. He plots and schemes against his new master Pyrgopolynices in order to return the kidnapped Philocomasium to his former master, Pleusicles. Pleusicles hides with an old man next door after receiving a letter from Palaestrio about their location. Palaestrio crafts an opening in the wall so that the girl can visit her true love behind the soldier's back. The plan almost fails when another slave sees the girl with another man, but through his craftiness Palaestrio manages to convince him it was the girl's visiting twin sister.

He then enlists the help of a courtesan to stand in for the neighbour's wife and seduces the soldier so he will set the girl free. The ruse is successful, and Palaestrio escapes with his old master and the girl. The freedom that Palaestrio has in this play is something to be desired by all slaves. The fact that he could find paper to write a letter to his master in secret and that he could even write at all is hard to imagine of a slave during this time period.

But his defiance of the unjust soldier Pyrgopolynices is admired by the audience because he is one of the main characters.

This depiction of the life of a slave is not one of reality, but it does make for good entertainment. The pardoning of slaves and the cunning slave are two important motifs in Roman theater. Duckworth states, " Angry threats...are not to be taken seriously. They are more useful in portraying the comic aspects of a young man's impatience or an old man's wrath than in throwing light upon the relation of master and slave in antiquity," (Duckworth 289).

The slave is usually meant to be a beloved character that either encourages the main character to do what is right or is the main character himself.

The audience connects with this traditional character, even though it most likely isn't a very accurate portrayal of how slavery was in ancient Rome.

Whether it is or is not, we must take Roman comedy for what it is; a story of ancient Roman society with a happy ending. Works Cited Duckworth, George E. *The Nature of Roman Comedy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952. Print. Konstan, David. *Roman Comedy*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983. Print. Roth, Ulrike. " Comic Shackles. " *Mnemosyne* 65. 4 (2012): 746-749. Web. 8 December 2012.