

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PLAUTINE COMIC IN *PSEUDOLUS*

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It has been often suggested, not without good reason, that Titus Maccius Plautus¹ did not write an original work. Some critics only made some objective remarks, (Pierre Grimal²), others were subjective and lenient on his lack of originality (René Pichon³), while others pledged to turn this into an accusation charge, characterizing him as a sort of adaptor with flair of the Greek theater (René Martin et Jaques Gaillard⁴).

Nevertheless, it seems to us that, at least partly, René Pichon is right in being moderate as Plautus shows no interest towards originality: “Il ne vise pas l’originalité”⁵. The Greek models are unequivocally assumed; in the prologue to the “Asinaria” the Latin author says: “The name of this play in Greek is Onagos/ Demophilus composed it; Maccius turned it into Latin. He wishes it to be called *Asinaria*”⁶.

It is a known fact that the ancients did not have a cult for originality, the way modernists do. The Latin literature commences with a translation from the Greek literature, Marcus Tullius Cicero takes over, in his philosophical writings, not only the substance of Plato’s thought, but also the form used to expose ideas, Virgil’s “Aeneid” has *its homeric duty* and the examples abound up to the scale of an independent work on the matter.

But if originality is not Plautus’ primary goal, where is the point of focus of the Sarsina born creator⁷? *Age, sitiunt qui sedent!*⁸ (the end of the plays “The Little Carthaginian” or “Casina”). The enchanted mob’s thirst needed to be quenched, but, as René Pichon⁹ meaningfully

¹ Plautus lived between 254? – 184.

² The French author carefully sought for the Greek elements, separating them from the Roman ones: “...while tragedy, with Greek subject matters, was farther than Roman reality, the *palliata* comedy offered numerous connections with the contemporary society. Certainly, the costumes, the characters’ names, the plot were borrowed, and the world the play’s action took place in was sensed as Greek, but the social structures were similar...” in *Literatura latina*, Teora Publishing House, translation by Mariana and Liviu Franga, Bucharest, 1997, p. 78.

³ “... quels que soient ses modèles, Plaute veut les suivre fidèlement. Il ne vise pas l’originalité. Il sait que ses pièces n’en seront que mieux accueillies si elles viennent du pays qui a la spécialité d’approvisionner le marché romain de bonnes plaisanteries”. *Histoire de la littérature latine*, Paris Librairie Hachette, 1898, p. 60.

⁴ “Plus qu’ils (Plautus si Terentius n.n.) ne traduisent les œuvres originales, ils les transposent, ou mieux, ils les récrivent, ajoutant leur grain du sel, acomodant tel ou tel passage à la sensibilité de leur public, romanisant ce qui était trop grec dans le décor ou les dialogues”. *Les Genres Littéraires à Rome*, Paris : Edition Nathan, 1990, p. 25.

⁵ See footnote 3.

⁶ *Asinaria, or The Ass-Dealer, The Prologue*, Henry Thomas Riley, Ed., www.perseus.tufts.edu.

⁷ T. Maccius Plautus was born in Sarsina, town in Umbria, today in Romagna.

⁸ *Hurry up, the spectators are thirsty!*

⁹ Op. cit., p. 65.

asks, how come the fine literature lovers prove/proved to share the same need? Is it only the pleasure to savor the craftsmanship of Greek adaptation?

Plautus borrows the prime matter from the Greeks, but he uses it to create his own Galatea, while preserving its Greek name. It is this Galatea he makes talk, dance, sing and, especially laugh, in Latin manner.

It has been often stated that Plautus' interest is in the performance, the comic show. He thus aligns himself with his spectators' request, showing a special appetite for the *playing*: "The Romans, simultaneously ritualistic, constructivist and pragmatic, stated a certain taste for "playing", *ludus*, for playful fiction, for performance. [...] Besides, the Romans will love to listen to epic, oratorical, even historiographic texts being recited, as during a real performance"¹⁰. The comic charge of *ludus* makes Plautus twice the Roman public's favorite - *qui sedent*-, because the spicy taste of *acetum Italicum*, "as well as the possibility to let off steam, to more easily free oneself, in a more realistic, concrete manner, with the help of the comic performance"¹¹ are closer to the Romans' taste than tragedy.

Plautus takes his destiny to make the others laugh so seriously that he not only brings good mood to people but also warns them, in the prologues of his comedies, that moments of total relaxation await for them, in order to induce the proper atmosphere, so that the experience of laughter is at its climax: "It is a comedy full of charm and humor: /You will roll in the aisles"¹². Here is the key to Plautine goal: to laugh one's head off. And the goal was reached. Nobody can deny this, and should one attempt it, it is but in vain.

One of the most successful Plautine comedies – according to many¹³, the most successful - is *Pseudolus*¹⁴, from whose prologue only two lines survived: "Tis better for your loins to be stretched, and for you to arise. A long play of Plautus is coming upon the stage"¹⁵. In this "long comedy" the subject matter does not "stray" from the tradition of Plautine thematic approaches: Pseudolus, a brilliant slave, manages to steal young Phaenicia from Ballio, the girl's old master who is about to sell her to a soldier, for his young master, Calidorus. The comic weight is credited to this slave who can juggle with human nature as a true expert and who easily dominates, through his intelligence, all the inhabitants of his universe, offhandedly ruling the rulers.

Pseudolus engages the spectator/reader in his *domination* as well, as in the unwinding of the plot, in the pursuit of character outlining, in the enjoyment of language and tumult of retorts, the receptor avidly seeks this brilliant slave, the interest for the others being consistently diluted. From the first scene, Pseudolus takes over the action, starts spinning Ariadne's thread then casually and offhandedly wanders through all the winding paths of the plot's labyrinth, solving everything to his and his master's advantage.

In the drama Calidorus lives, on the verge of losing his lover, Pseudolus is honestly compassionate, but cannot help noticing that young Phaenicia has difficulties writing: "As I think, these letters are very loving; they are climbing on each other's backs. [...] Troth now, have hens, prithe, such hands? For certainly a hen has written these letters"¹⁶. From open mockery,

¹⁰ Eugen Cizek, *History of Latin Literature*, vol. I, Societatea Adevărul, 1994, p. 66.

¹¹ Id., *Ibid.*

¹² *Asinaria, or The Ass-Dealer, The Prologue*, Henry Thomas Riley, Ed., www.perseus.tufts.edu.

¹³ For ex.: "It is the best Plautine comedy, way over the others. In the ensemble of Plautus' works it is similar to what "The Evening Star" represents for Eminescu's poems." Eugen Cizek, *Op. cit.*, p. 74.

¹⁴ *The deceiver*.

¹⁵ *Pseudolus, or The Cheat, The Prologue*, Henry Thomas Riley, Ed., www.perseus.tufts.edu.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, act 1, scene 1.

Pseudolus turns to irony when Calidorus suffers too much, not to hurt his feelings. Asked by his master whether the sad letter of the young girl informing she is about to be sold to a soldier does not make him cry, Pseudolus replies: „I've eyes of pumice stone; I can't prevail upon them to squeeze out one tear even. CALIDORUS Why so? PSEUDOLUS My family was always a dryeyed one”¹⁷.

Similar to all Plautine work, the play on words have their contribution to increase the comic of the play: „PSEUDOLUS Harden your heart. CALIDORUS I cannot. PSEUDOLUS Make ourself to can. CALIDORUS By what means, pray, can I prevail upon my feelings? PSEUDOLUS Carry you out that which is to your advantage...”¹⁸. Planning to obtain the ransom money from Simo, Calidorus' father, he finds out that Simo had already known about the son's need for money and Pseudolus asserts, to himself: „There's no booty for the marauders”¹⁹. (*Nihil est praedae praedatoribus*).

In Pseudolus' dialogue with Harpax, the soldier's messenger, who is preparing to knock on Ballio's door, another pun is created: „HARPAX I'll knock at the door, and call some one out of doors from within. *Goes towards the door of BALLIO'S house*. PSEUDOLUS *coming up to him*. Whoever you are, I wish you to spare your knocking; for I've just come out of doors, I, the spokesman and the defender of the door”²⁰.

But by far, the most surprising and consistent aspect of the comic is the Saturnalic figure²¹, of the world upside down²², of the way the slave approaches the master and the way the former assumes, most of the times, control of the situation. The ruled ruler asks for protection and help from his slave himself: „CALIDORUS Will you this day find me twenty minae of silver? PSEUDOLUS I will find them; be no more troublesome to me then.”²³. Than: „PSEUDOLUS I'll let you; only let me go. *Going*. CALIDORUS Stay, stay. As you shall, then, wish me to be, so will I be.”²⁴. In certain scenes *dominus* cannot help wondering how much he needs to put up with from his *servus*: „PSEUDOLUS Come, say anything you please, although I am angry at you. SIMO What, you, a slave, angry at me your master? PSEUDOLUS And does that seem wonderful to you? SIMO Why, by my troth, according to what you say, I must be on my guard against you in your anger, and you are thinking of beating me in no other way than I am wont to beat yourself. What do you think? *To CALLIPHO*”²⁵. Under such conditions Plautus does not leave his hero by himself, bringing on stage characters whose role is to support him: „CALLIPHO I' faith, I think that he's angry with good reason, since you have so little confidence in him.”²⁶.

Pseudolus is not only a master of irony, but also of self-irony. He characterizes himself as a crafted hero in the art of war, fighting with enemies like Ballio, using his brilliant weapons:

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., act 1, scene 2.

¹⁹ Ibid., act 1, scene 5.

²⁰ Ibid., act 2, scene 1.

²¹ Saturnalia, celebrated between December 17th and December 23rd, under Domitianus, is “the biggest Roman celebration, but also a symbol of freedom and peace, when bloody performances and war declarations were forbidden, when all public and private activities were suspended and when everybody became temporarily equal, there being no difference between masters and servants, certain slaves becoming freemen for ever”. Victor Kernbach, *Dictionary of General Mythology*, Bucharest: Scientific and Encyclopedic Publishing House, 1989, p. 526.

²² See also: Traian Diaconescu, *Homo Saturnalicus in Plautus' Comedy* in vol. *Antiquity and its Spiritual Inheritance*, I, Iași, 1980, p. 130-140.

²³ *Pseudolus, or The Cheat*, act 1, scene 1, Henry Thomas Riley, Ed.

www.perseus.tufts.edu.

²⁴ Ibid., act 1, scene 2.

²⁵ Ibid., act 1, scene 5.

²⁶ Ibid.

conspiracy, tricks, deceitful cunning: “O Jupiter, whatever I undertake, how cleverly and how fortunately does it befall me. [...]. Now in my breast have I already so prepared my forces--double, aye, threefold stratagems, that when I engage with the enemy, relying upon the merits, I say, of my forefathers, and on my own industry and tricking propensity for mischief, I may easily conquer, and easily spoil my antagonists by my contrivances”²⁷.

Like a character from modern drama, Pseudolus KNOWS he is playing a part, that he is a character on a stage where a comedy is performed and that he is unable to escape its course. The *awareness* of being a character²⁸ is also proved by the fact that he becomes friend with the spectators as companions of the action, turning them all into characters: „ Now will I adroitly batter down this Ballio, the common foe of me and all of you”²⁹.

Pseudolus has all the traits of a comic character and, besides, certain features which place him in the elitist space of the absurd modern theater, reminding of Pirandello, Brecht, but also of Eugen Ionesco. Pseudolus is subtle in irony, substantial in “gross”, straight-forward jokes, sarcastic with a character like Phaenicius, who cannot write; he has his way with words, juggles with them to create hilarious meanings, laughs cautiously when a Simo confronts him and turns the spectators into laughter companions. Pseudolus is a comic character in every fiber of his creation.

Over all his works Plautus did not seek, as we have pointed out, to be unique, but rather to justify his creations: if comedy is at stake, than “the artistic message” should be a comic one, and the audience should have fun, laugh their heads off.

We can assert that Plautus reached his goal entirely, *omne tulit punctum*³⁰, because, if reality confirms that one corrects customs by laughing at them, Plautus found a perfect combination between the useful and the entertainment, enchanting his audience and simultaneously forcing them on the right path. By use of the intelligent joke, Pseudolus made the bad one lose, the lover love, the poor win, thus offering a comic and moral lesson to his spectators.

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²⁷ Ibid., act 2, scene 1.

²⁸ “The Italian scientist Marino Barchiesi [...] considers Plautus as a magician of what he called metatheater. The Scientist from Pisa identified the metatheater in Brecht and Pirandello, where the plays are discussed with the spectators, turned into accomplices of the author. [...] The transgression of dramatic convention would determine the progressive penetration of the narrative self, the domination of the plot by an actor-character...” Eugen Cizek, Op. cit., pp. 75-76.

²⁹ Pseudolus, or The Cheat, act 2, scene 1, Henry Thomas Riley, Ed., www.perseus.tufts.edu.

³⁰ Horatius, *Ars Poetica*, v. 342.s

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