

**Chapter 14: Roman Comedy, Part 2 (Terence)**  
**Mark Damen (2012)**

## I. Introduction: Roman Comedy after Plautus

Following Plautus' death in the mid-180's BCE, **Caecilius Statius** emerged as the pre-eminent playwright of Roman Comedy. Though much admired in his day and long after, not even one work of his survives whole and intact. Yet even so, it's evident from the surviving fragments of his plays and other data that his comedy was less boisterous than Plautus'. That Caecilius Statius stayed closer to the tone and structure of his Hellenistic models is clear not only from the fragments of his plays but also the fact that their titles are mostly in Greek, not Latin, in some cases corresponding directly with the titles of the Menandrian originals he was adapting.

This does not mean, of course, that Caecilius Statius wrote in Greek; rather, it suggests that he inclined away from the Romanizing tendencies of his immediate predecessors Naevius and Plautus whose plays almost invariably have Latin titles, often not even translations of the original Greek title. ([note](#)) In other words, Roman Hellenism was clearly on the rise in the 170's BCE, and undoubtedly that was in no small part because of Caecilius' efforts. But his death in 168 BCE opened the door for new voices to enter the Roman stage, and onto these boards trod one of the greatest the Romans would ever produce, Publius Terentius Afer, known today as **Terence**.

Little is known about Terence's life, not even the years of his birth and death. Still, we can make good guesses at both. Ancient sources report he died young and, since his last play was produced in 160 BCE, he was probably born at some point between 195 and 185. Thus, he died most likely soon after his final drama debuted, probably in the early 150's. ([note](#))

With that, he would never have known Plautus, though there are other reasons these two are not likely to have met—they traveled in very different social circles—however, if the story is not a fiction, Terence as a young man Terence met Caecilius Statius. ([note](#)) Other data, however, which are often cited in textbooks as facts about Terence's life, such as that he was originally a slave from North Africa and later freed, seem on closer inspection suspect, at best "[secondary evidence](#)." About his drama and career as a playwright, on the other hand, we are much better informed.

## II. Terence's Drama

Several remarkable things stand out about Terence's work. First and foremost, all the plays he ever wrote survive complete. Along with that have come significant details about them: the years in which they premiered and thus the order in which he composed them, who produced them and at what festival, from which Greek originals Terence worked, and even the musician who arranged the music. So, for instance, we know that Terence's consummate masterpiece, *Adelphoe* ("The Brothers"), was staged at the celebrations surrounding the funeral of Aemilius Paullus in 160 BCE. All this information makes it possible to track Terence's career as we can no other ancient playwright's, even a celebrity on the order of Sophocles.

Nor does any other ancient dramatist's entire corpus survive. Indeed, few other classical authors writing in any genre have their entire body of work preserved, and then only luminaries like Vergil. ([note](#)) Thus, in many ways Terence stands alone among ancient



Source URL: <http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/143terence.htm>  
Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/ENGL401#2.1.1>

Attributed to: Mark Ramen



[www.saylor.org](http://www.saylor.org)  
Page 2 of 14

dramatists. His work is uniquely well-documented, and the reason must be, at least in part, the high regard in which he was held from his own time on.

So, for instance, the Romans living in the next century (100-1 BCE) saw Terence's writing style as the model of their own—Julius Caesar himself composed a treatise on Terence's *sermo purus* ("clean dialogue"; [note](#))—and well over a millennium later professors in the Renaissance used his drama as a teaching tool. Even a tenth-century nun named **Hrotswitha** (or **Hrotsvit**), a canoness living in a cloister in northern Germany just after the Viking invasions, read Terence's dramas with a pleasure that made her uneasy, and so she remodeled them to suit the ethic of the chaste Christian life and glorious virginity she and her sisters in their abbey exemplified.

As a result, we have over six-hundred Terence **manuscripts**, some of great antiquity and accuracy, dating from many different periods of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Compared to Plautus whose plays survived medieval times on the slenderest of threads, the existence of so many copies of Terence's work is a remarkable tribute to his endurance as an artist. ([note](#)) All in all, it is hard to find any age in which Terence's work has not been praised and imitated and his name not widely known, except our own, of course. On whom that will reflect more—Terence or us?—only the future can say.

As another item of note, *scholia* accompany all Terence's plays. [Like those appended to Aristophanes' work](#), these critical commentaries explicate a wide range of subjects, everything from Terence's meter to his word choice to the original Greek underlying the Latin. Harboring many valuable, albeit not always accurate, morsels of data, the Terence *scholia* date back to the time of—and, no doubt, the hand of, as well—**Aelius Donatus**, one of St. Jerome's teachers. Though living in the 300's CE, as far from Terence as we are from da Vinci, Donatus clearly had

access to sources of data now lost about this early Roman playwright and, more important, sound judgment in analyzing literature. These *scholia* attest to a widespread and enduring interest in Terence's work, a general admiration lasting well beyond his lifetime.

### III. The Prologues of Terence's Plays

But most remarkable of all—and, without doubt, the best evidence for Terence's drama and its theatrical context—is information which comes from his own hand, the **prologues** appended to the front of his dramas. Except for Aristophanes' [parabases](#), the text of every ancient play extant is expressed not with its author himself as the spokesman outright but through the *persona* of a stage character. This makes it hard, often impossible, to unravel the dramatist from the drama. So, for instance, as strong and clear as Euripides' personal opinions may seem after one reads his plays, not one syllable of any script he wrote is preserved as his own words. Instead, everything we know about the man named Euripides must be deduced through the veil of his drama, or from what others had to say about him.



Terence's prologues, however, address the audience directly and discuss, not the plot of the upcoming play the way Greek dramatists often did, but details of the play's production and the workings of Roman theatre. Thus, unique documents attesting to the nature of Roman Comedy—and Republican drama and society in general—these prologues open our

eyes to the world beyond, behind and beneath the play, hinting, for instance, at what rehearsals were like, how productions were funded and the jealousy that could rage between rival playwrights. But, best of all,

Source URL: <http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/143terence.htm>  
Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/ENGL401#2.1.1>

Attributed to: Mark Ramen



[www.saylor.org](http://www.saylor.org)  
Page 4 of 14

we hear what Terence has to say about his work and his life *in his own words*.

And as expected, *his* truth is clearly not *the* truth, the whole truth, that is. Like any public figure who feels compelled to defend his actions and choices, Terence dodges questions, skirts issues, flatters his producers, kisses up to the public, points to his own genius and, generally, acts like a politician at a press conference, not a patient on truth serum. But like so many [invented histories](#), his catty retorts hint at larger realities and, as it turns out, speak volumes about the artist and his age. Also, because there is no known precedent for these prologues, they may even have been a feature of playwriting Terence himself invented. If so, it is one of the few aspects of drama the Romans may claim as their own, and claim proudly.

As such, the prologues are worth a closer look. Here is the prologue to Terence's *Andria* ("The Woman from Andros") notable, if for nothing else, as the first words he ever wrote for public performance, since *Andria* was his first play to be produced on stage:

Our poet, when first he set his mind to writing,  
Thought he was doing only one job:  
Pleasing the people with the plays he wrote.  
But, no! He found out quite differently  
That he'd have to spend his time writing prologues  
That don't discuss the plot but answer  
The abuses of a malevolent decrepit poet.  
As to what they cite as his crime, listen to this!  
Menander wrote an *Andria* and a *Perinthia*.  
If you've seen one, you've seen them both—  
They're not at all dissimilar in plot; in fact,  
They differ only in words and style.  
What fits into *Andria* from *Perinthia*  
Our poet admits he "translated" for his own purposes.  
And this is what some people call a crime, and furthermore  
Add it isn't right to "contaminate" a play. But

Source URL: <http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/143terence.htm>  
Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/ENGL401#2.1.1>

Attributed to: Mark Ramen



[www.saylor.org](http://www.saylor.org)  
Page 5 of 14

They show by this thinking they aren't thinking.  
When they accuse him, they accuse Naevius, Plautus,  
Ennius, too, whom our poet considers his guardians  
And whose "carelessness" he'd rather imitate  
Than those people's murky punctiliousness.  
And so I warn them to quiet down and stop  
Their slander, or they'll taste their own medicine!  
So, you, be good, judge fairly and listen to the case,  
So you can see whether there's any hope left  
That the comedies he will re-master after this  
You ought to sit and watch, or drive off stage before ever seeing them.

This prologue reveals that Terence felt for some reason compelled to justify the freedoms he had taken in rendering into Latin Menander's original, also entitled *Andria*. Though the young playwright leaves his accuser unnamed—for rhetorical purposes, it is often wise not to name your detractor but call him something like "that man"—Donatus tells us that it was **Luscius Lanuvinus**, a second-rate comic dramatist. In some public way, this "malevolent decrepit poet" had taken exception to Terence's practice of combining two Greek plays and making one Roman one. The reason this constitutes malfeasance is not clear—the plays were, after all, written by the same author which begs the question: what sort of criminal abuse is it to mix Menander with himself?—but then we must remember that we are hearing only Terence's side of the case.

To judge from the plaintiff's language, Luscius Lanuvinus has contemptuously referred to this process as *contaminatio* ("pollution," literally "a touching together"), a charge that has sparked Terence's defensive response. But why does Lanuvinus decry *contaminatio*? Did the Romans generally recognize, as some scholars have suggested, that there were a limited number of originals on which to base Roman plays? Did this lead to a rule of some sort about not using more than one Greek play in constructing a Roman copy?

If so, there is little other evidence to this effect, or that Lanuvinus' charges stuck. Terence went on producing plays and, so far as we can tell, "contaminated" everyone of them. Perhaps, then, it was just a matter of good taste, an area of life in which the young rarely listen to their elders.

Nevertheless, the charge of *contaminatio* did not go away quickly. Terence had to address this issue again in later prologues, such as that appended to *Adelphoe* ("The Brothers"), the last play he wrote and, without doubt, his consummate masterwork:

After our poet discerned his efforts  
Were being criticized by bigots, and rivals  
Were carping at the play we're about to perform,  
. . . <a line or two is missing here> . . .  
As witness for himself he will appear. You will be the judges,  
Whether this ought to called a fair play, or foul.  
*They Died As One* is a comedy by Diphilus.  
Plautus turned it into *Till Death Us Part!* ([note](#))  
In the Greek play there's a youth who steals a pimp's  
Girl in the first scene—this, Plautus omitted entirely—  
And this, our poet has now borrowed for himself  
In his *Adelphoe*, translated word for word and now relayed to you.  
It's the play we're going to play, all brand new! Consider, then,  
If you think this is burglary, or a scene that's been  
Rescued, one that was just overlooked accidentally.  
And as to what those malefactors say, that well-born men  
Assist our poet and write with him continually,  
He accepts the compliment—and no small compliment it is!—since he pleases  
Those who please everyone of you and the Roman people,  
For every man in his time has enjoyed a bit of their favor  
In war, in peace, in prosperity, without incurring envy.  
So, don't expect to hear the plot of the play here.  
The old men who come on first will reveal it, some of it,  
The action will unveil the rest. So, see to it now that  
Your fairness enhances the writer's will to write.

Terence's final play production—that is, the last to have been staged

during his lifetime as far as we know — was not *Adelphoe*, however, but a revival of an earlier flop, *Hecyra* ("The Mother-in-law"). No fewer than two previous attempts to stage this play had, in fact, failed before the production to which the prologue below was added. The reason for this drama's earlier failures, as explained below, was that noisy and bored spectators had disrupted the theatre so badly the actors could not continue performing — it *is* a very "talky" play! — so Terence and his producer, the famous actor Lucius Ambivius Turpio, tried a third time to stage the drama. Note that Turpio himself served as the speaker of the prologue, though presumably Terence wrote the words:

As advocate I come before you, in the guise of a prologue.  
Allow me to convince you that an old man may have  
The same right I once had as a younger man.  
In those days I gave old age to new plays, ones driven from the boards,  
Making sure the drama did not disappear with the poet.  
I produced new plays by Caecilius Staius —  
In some of them was booed, in others stood my ground —  
For I knew that fortune in the theatre is especially fickle,  
So I held on uncertainly to a certain task:  
I began to repeat the same plays and help this same man produce  
New plays. I worked hard so he wouldn't be discouraged.  
I made sure they were seen, and when they were well-known,  
They became a success. Thus, I gave this poet back his place  
Almost cut off because of his enemies' libel  
From his genius, his work and his own theatrical talents.  
But if I had scorned his writings at that time  
And had chosen to spend my energy disparaging him  
So he'd end up with more time for playing than play-making,  
I could have dissuaded him easily. He'd have written no more.  
Now, as to what I seek, listen and for my sake be fair!  
I bring before you *Hecyra*, again! I have never gotten through  
This play in peace. Some misfortune looms over it.  
And that misfortune your perspicacity  
Will finally put to rest, if you agree to, of course.  
When I first tried to put this play on, news of a boxing match,  
A gathering of friends, some shouting, women's voices  
Made me exit from the stage before my cue.

Source URL: <http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/143terence.htm>  
Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/ENGL401#2.1.1>

Attributed to: Mark Ramen



[www.saylor.org](http://www.saylor.org)  
Page 8 of 14

I decided to try my old habits on a new play,  
Make another go of it. I put it on again.  
Act One goes well. But in the meantime a rumor circulates  
That gladiators will be fighting. A mob flocks in.  
There's pushing and shoving, screaming and fights over seats.  
In the meantime I could hardly keep my place.  
But today there is no mob, only peace and quiet.  
The time for me to act has finally come, for you to take  
The opportunity to dignify this dramatic festival with us.  
Don't let your name be used to give a chance for stardom  
To only a few. See that your influence  
Fosters and furthers my own influence.  
Allow me to beg of you: this man who has entrusted  
His genius to my tutelage, his person to your good faith,  
Let him not be sieged by detractors who demean him derisively.  
For my sake, hear his case and lend him silence,  
So others may write and I can bring to the stage  
New plays henceforth, what I've paid good money for.

From these prologues it is clear that in Terence's mind the foremost issues concerning Roman drama circulate around the production of the play and the nature of adapting Greek drama into Latin. Also evident here is the hierarchy of Roman theatre, where a *dominus* like Turpio truly dominates and playwrights-in-need like Terence and Caecilius must enlist his aid in a crisis.

But from our remove, what looms larger is the issue of the Romans' cultural appropriation of Greek drama, and there one thing stands out: Menander in the long run won the battle among Greek comic playwrights and finally emerged "the star of New Comedy." To wit, four of Terence's comedies (*Andria*, *Heautontimoroumenos*, *Eunuchus*, *Adelphoe*) are adaptations of Menander's work, and the remaining two (*Hecyra*, *Phormio*) come from Greek originals written by a later Menandrian imitator, **Apollodorus of Carystus**.

As the dust kicked up by Alexander and his cronies slowly settled, one thing at least began clear: Philemon, Diphilus and Menander's other

rivals and predecessors were left sitting off stage for the most part. That is, when all the politics and pomp of the Dionysia finally died away and Greek culture became the world's possession, that quiet type of comedy championed by the master of character depiction took home the award for best drama of all time, leaving his rowdier and, to be frank, often funnier compatriots off stage. Humor, or so it seems history is telling us, is in the long run not the point of comedy; ironically, it's irony.

## A. Terence and Menander

And indeed irony lies at the heart of Terence's drama. His focus, like Menander's, rests mainly on drawing realistic and gently humorous—often hardly comical at all—portraits of stereotypical characters deployed in flexible and deceptively simple-sounding language. Throughout his scant six comedies are found many excellent examples of the subtle personality types Terence favored, "subtle" meaning "Menandrian." Indeed, there is reason to suppose they are actually Menander's own creations, copied faithfully out of the Greek.

Among the more memorable is the lovesick braggart soldier **Thraso** ("Bold") of *The Eunuch*, a man hopelessly smitten with affection for the beautiful prostitute Thais. Though he tries to stick up for himself, and at one point even attacks her house with an army—granted, a corps of *cooks*, the only force he could serve up in short order!—at the conclusion of the play Thraso capitulates to her completely and, just to be in her ravishing presence, agrees to pay handsomely for the privilege of watching her lie in the arms of his rival. A soldier maybe, a braggart definitely, but mostly just a man, this bold loser is, in fact, a sad weakling far more controlled than controlling. Though there is an actual eunuch in the play—and, of course, a false one since this is a comedy—the *real* eunuch in Terence's *Eunuch* is the pitiful warrior Thraso, the quintessential symbol of a capon's bravado.

An even more pitiful creation is the kind and indulgent father **Micio** of Terence's *Adelphoe* ("The Brothers"). Actually the uncle of his stepson Aeschinus, Micio has served as the boy's "father" for nearly all his young nephew's life. Micio and his brother Demea, Aeschinus' genetic father, have had a running battle for many years about the right way to bring up children, with leniency or strictness. Gentle Micio, the champion of tender love, has taken many blows to the ego—and the wallet!—because of Aeschinus' outrageous behavior ever since the boy embarked upon puberty, but his adoptive father's abiding love has always found a way to bring them back together.



In the course of the play, however, Aeschinus challenges his stepfather's patience to the very limit of endurance—he roughs up a pimp, steals a prostitute, and fathers a child by the poor girl next-door—yet in the end Micio, as always, capitulates and repairs the damage incurred through his beloved child's indiscretions. Finally, at the conclusion of the play, this fool for the love of his son has served up not only patience and money but his house and home and, though he balks at first when Aeschinus pleads with him to marry, is persuaded to give up even his prized bachelorhood, too. The thought underlying this play—what indeed runs beneath all of Terence's drama—seems to be that the love of whatever and in whatever form is, at the same time, the finest attribute of humanity and also what makes utter idiots of us all. It is hard to imagine a more Menandrian sentiment.

## IV. Conclusion: What's So Roman about Roman Comedy?

Source URL: <http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ClasDram/chapters/143terence.htm>  
Saylor URL: <http://www.saylor.org/ENGL401#2.1.1>

Attributed to: Mark Ramen



[www.saylor.org](http://www.saylor.org)  
Page 11 of 14

In fact, there is little in Terence that does not scream Menander. But if there is anything substantively new in the Roman playwright's work—besides the forensic prologue which is really more innovative for what it omits (exposition of the plot) than what it includes—it is **dramatic suspense**. By not revealing the general parameters of the story to follow, Terence creates tension among his viewers who are now on an intellectual par with the characters. This is contrary to every Menander play known, indeed all of Greek drama since the Classical Age, and sets Terence's art in a new mode characteristic of virtually all stage works written after antiquity. In this essential respect, modern theatre begins with him.

To understand how and why Terence did this requires that one look back at Menander and the reasons his plays always reveal the outcome of the plot to the audience. While giving away the end at the very outset of a play may seem to us today like spoiling the story because we are acculturated to anticipate surprises and unforeseen plot twists, to the ancient Greeks the converse was true. Suckled as Menander's audience was on classical tragedy where the outcome of a dramatic plot is almost always a foregone conclusion—in Euripides, admittedly, it is sometimes the *only* foregone conclusion—the Hellenistic crowd had come to expect to know right from the outset how a play would turn out. That made watching a tragedy more like being a god than a human, an Olympian sitting above the turmoil of mortal life or a scientist observing an experimental animal pinned and squirming in the laboratory dish below. All in all, Greek tragedy is clearly designed to make the viewer feel superior to the hero on stage, in the same way that the majority of the audience loomed over the stage action physically.

Given an audience inured to being seated well above the characters on stage, post-classical comic poets in Greece had little choice but to dispose their drama from this same vantage point. So in telling his viewers the end of the story, often through a philosophical abstraction

such as Luck or Ignorance—gods that looked to post-classical Greece more divine, or at least more immediate, than Homer's all-powerful humanoids—Menander put those watching his plays in the flattering position of feeling like divinities gazing down upon the tragi-comedy of human life unfolding below. It's important to remember, also, that Menander's audience in Hellenistic Athens may well have needed this sort of boost to the ego. The world outside their theatre was doing a very poor job of making them feel divine.

But unlike Menander, Terence had no such history or pressure weighing down on him and his society. The Romans were booming in his day and therefore needed a pat on the back far less than their Hellenic counterparts. If the theatre in Rome did not make the viewers feel divine, so what? His strong and confident audience could take it—even tolerate being fooled by a plot twist or two—without feeling their intelligence slighted. It was only a play, after all, just some Greek riddle not worth too much time or mental exertion, certainly nothing to hang your ego on.

It was part and parcel of the Romans' general attitude toward drama, that theatre was not a refuge from anything but a day's work. To seek complexity in the arts at all was, to many of them, wasted effort where amusement and diversion should rule. Thus, no complex "three-actor rule" for the Romans, no stereotypical characters whose behavior is subtly predictable, no long, philosophical heart-to-hearts between fathers and sons—the Roman stage was a place for boisterous joy, for singing loud and long that life is good. And so it was!

And so irony reigns again, but in this case the irony that the Romans' "Aristophanic" zest is what sets their drama apart from the Greeks'. Whether or not the idea originated with them, it is now the heritage of Rome that plays ought at heart be just plain fun: no serious contemplation of life, no subtle analysis of character, no big political

message, just a day at a festival—even if it's a funeral! And if amidst all the jokes and physical humor Terence or Plautus happened to inject some serious art and education into their drama, it seems unlikely any Romans minded, as long as the players primarily played. After all, in Latin *ludus* means both "play" and "a play."

## Terms, Places, People and Things to Know

Caecilius Staius

Terence

*Adelphoe*

*Sermo Purus*

Hrotswitha (Hrotsvit)

Manuscripts

Aelius Donatus

Prologues

*Andria*

Luscius Lanuvinus

*Contaminatio*

*Hecyra*

Apollodorus of Carystus

Thraso

Micio

Dramatic Suspense