

A NOTE ON THE MOTIF OF  
'EAVESDROPPING BEHIND THE DOOR'  
IN COMEDY

---

Those scholars who support the theory that Plautus' *Miles Gloriosus* is 'contaminated' from two (or more) Greek originals have always had one cardinal difficulty to face: the presence of several references to the hole-in-the-wall intrigue and to the imaginary twin sister in the second half of the play<sup>1</sup>). Professor Jachmann, whose work in the field of ancient comedy has been a learned and entertaining stimulus to classical scholarship now for more than fifty years, made the most ingenious attempt to dispose of this difficulty<sup>2</sup>). Acting on a suggestion made by Leo<sup>3</sup>), he argued that these references were invented and inserted into an alien context by Plautus himself; this of course involves the implausible (but not impossible) assumption that the man whose incompetence as a fuser of plots allowed their incompatibilities and contradictions to be blatantly revealed was at the same time careful enough to bind together two such different plots by adding link passages. However, the core of Jachmann's argument here was *Miles* 1089ff, where Palaestrio tells Milphidippa to order Philocomasium to cross from one house to the other (by means of the hole in the party-wall), and Milphidippa informs Palaestrio by way of reply that Philocomasium and Acroteleutium have actually overheard Palaestrio's request: *clam nostrum hunc sermonem sublegerunt*<sup>4</sup>). Jachmann claimed that such overhearing was

---

1) A bibliography of works on the problem of contamination in the *Miles Gloriosus* will be found in P. J. Enk, *Handboek der Latijnse Letterkunde*, ii 2 (Zutphen 1937), 52 ff; for later works, see E. Paratore, *Plauto* (Florence 1961), 97f. Paratore, however, omits J. J. Tierney, *P. R. I. A.*, xlix/1 1943, 167ff; T. B. L. Webster, *Studies in Later Greek Comedy* (Manchester 1953), 174ff; and W. H. Friedrich, *Euripides und Diphilos* (Munich 1953), 255 ff.

2) *Plautinisches und Attisches* (Berlin 1931), 185 ff.

3) *Plautinische Forschungen*<sup>2</sup> (Berlin 1912), 180.

4) The text is here affected either by the loss of a word (possibly *hinc*, Mueller) or by a corrupt transposition, but the general sense is in no way vitiated thereby.

unparalleled, and that the use of this device without the audience being apprised of it in any way constituted a 'sneer' at the technique of Greek comedy. Consequently, he added, the motif is an *Anstoss* in itself, enough on its own to make us suspect this passage to be a Plautine addition.

It is reasonable to ignore the string of subordinate arguments that Jachmann advanced to support this last allegation, because they have been cogently refuted by other scholars<sup>5</sup>); let us confine our attention to the eavesdropping motif. The weight of Jachmann's argument is not improved by a certain mis-statement of the facts, since the audience is apprised of the device to a certain extent by Milphidippa's clear words in 1090, even though there is no direct reference to a door or hiding behind one. Of course, if Plautus did adapt this line and its context from a Greek original, he could well have omitted a reference such as *πρὸς τῆ θύρα* in his original.

Tierney<sup>6</sup>) attacked another part of Jachmann's argument by pointing out that Menander, *Epit.* 494ff Jensen = 558ff Koerte, has some analogy with the situation in the *Miles*: thus Jachmann's 'unparalleled' went too far. Yet Tierney in his turn perhaps exaggerates in claiming that the Menander passage affords an exact parallel. In this, Onesimos plays the role of *ἑξάγγελος* in a monologue describing an incident in which his master eavesdropped behind a door. But this eavesdropping is not part of the dramatic situation on the stage, as that of the *Miles* is, where the maid reports to a character on stage that the two courtesans have overheard not an offstage conversation that needs to be described, but the very lines which have just been spoken on the stage. Closer parallels to the *Miles* situation are provided by *Mercator*, 474ff, and *Dyskolos*, 820ff. In the former passage Eutyclus overhears *ab ostio* the previous conversation between Charinus and his father; in the latter, Gorgias appears in answer to Sostratos' call and admits to having eavesdropped on the conversation which has just been taking place on stage between Sostratos and

5) G.E. Duckworth, *C.Pb.* xxx 1935, 234ff; G. Williams, *Hermes*, lxxxvi 1958, 82f (the best modern study of the play); cf. Tierney, *op. cit.*, 176f.

6) *Loc. cit.* in the previous note. Tierney failed to note other parallels to the *Épitrepontes* passage: Terence, *Phormio* 866ff, where Geta reports on an offstage piece of eavesdropping that he has just done, and Menander, *Sam.* 1-51, where Demeas' eavesdropping is cardinal to the plot; cf. V.E. Hiatt, *Eavesdropping in Roman Comedy* (Diss. Chicago, 1946), 19 n. 1, and G.E. Duckworth, *The Nature of Roman Comedy* (Princeton 1952), 122 n. 53.

his father. There is one slight difference between these two situations and that in the *Miles*, since the eavesdropper makes a personal confession in the *Mercator* and the *Dyskolos*, while a servant merely reports the eavesdropping of other characters in the *Miles*; but they all have one important feature in common, not shared with the *Epitrepontes* passage: an identical aim, that is, to avoid boring the audience with a repeat of information already given<sup>7</sup>). One may conclude, therefore, that there is now absolutely nothing to indicate that vv. 1089ff of the *Miles* did not come from the Greek original used at this context: thus one (but only one) prop of the contaminationists' strong arguments has been removed<sup>8</sup>).

Is there perhaps a further parallel to this 'eavesdropping behind the door' in another play in the centre of the contamination controversy, the *Eunuchus*? In his stimulating analysis of

7) Cf. Hiatt, *op. cit.*, 19 (on the *Mercator* passage).

8) The qualification 'only one' needs to be made for two reasons. First, among certain scholars there is a belief that the efforts of Duckworth, Tierney and others have completely proved that the *Miles* is not 'contaminated': on this 'over-optimistic' opinion, see the sensible words of G. Williams, *op. cit.*, 80f. Secondly, in view of the large number of parallel motifs that the *Dyskolos* shares with several plays of Roman comedy (e.g., *Aulularia*, *Adelphoe*, *Eunuchus*), it is very easy to exaggerate the amount of help that this play's discovery has afforded to the solution of Roman-comedy problems (cf. M. R. Posani, *Atene e Roma*, n. s., vii 1962, 135). Perhaps it will be advisable to cite just one example showing the limitations of that 'help'. The phrase 'Ὀδύνης νόσος' (*Dysk.* 88), about which there is already a sizeable bibliography (see especially S. Boscherini, *Stud. It.*, xxxi 1959, 247ff; A. Wifstrand, 'Lyckans son och Plågans son' in *Från Småland och Hellas* (1959), 247ff; and C. Gallavotti, *R. F. I. C.*, xci 1963, 73ff; and cf. also H. Lloyd-Jones, *C. R.*, ix 1959, 183; S. Eitrem, *Symb. Ostl.*, xxxv 1959, 132f; F. W. Danker, *New Testament Studies*, vii 1960-1, 94; L. A. Post, *A. J. P.*, lxxxii 1961, 99f; M. Gigante, *R. F. I. C.*, xl 1962, 185; and Kraus, J. Martin, and Treu *ad loc.* in their editions of the *Dyskolos*), may be aptly compared to three passages of Plautus: *Miles* 1292, *mulier ... natas ex ipsa Mora*; *Rudens* 1284, *lenones ex Gaudio ... procreatos*; and *Stichus* 155, *Famem ego fuisse suspicor matrem mihi* (cf. here also pseudo-Alexis, fr. 25 vv. 6-7 Kock). Yet it would be unwise merely because of these parallelisms to leap to the conclusion that in each of these places Plautus is translating an equivalent Greek expression in his originals. For one thing, the Plautine phrases are rather differently organised from the pregnant 'Ὀδύνης νόσος'; for another, the personification of inanimate objects and abstract ideas was so rooted in the Plautine imagination (Fraenkel, *Elementi Plautini*, ch. iv) that he was perfectly capable of inventing such phrases himself, especially since expressions like *Fortunae filius* (Horace, *Serm.* ii 6, 49; Petronius, *Sat.* xliii 7) were part of everyday Latin speech; and thirdly, there are other traces of Plautus' original work in the passages cited (Fraenkel, *op. cit.*, 278f, 434).

certain sections of this play<sup>9</sup>) Jachmann again concerned himself with actions and motifs that seemed to him in conflict with known Greek-comedy technique. In his discussion of Pythias' role in act 5, he commented 'am sonderbarsten ist aber das ganze Verhalten der Pythias'. There were four disquieting features. First, when Pythias remains behind on stage to carry out Thais' order of 908 f, she does not 'lead' (*ducat*) Chremes and the nurse in to see Thais, as ordered, but 'sends' them inside (*ite intro*), remaining on stage herself. Secondly, when she sees Parmeno arrive directly after this, she refers to him without any explicit transition formula, 918 f. The tone of her remarks surprised Jachmann, for although she has just previously been talking about Parmeno, she does not link up her comment about Parmeno's arrival to those previous words: as Jachmann says, there is not even an 'ipsum'. Thirdly, Pythias turns away from Parmeno just as abruptly as she had turned towards him, and in an amazing way. After emphasising three times (911, 920, 922) her intention of punishing Parmeno, she ignores her prey as soon as it is within her grasp, and decides instead to enter her mistress' house and confirm that the ἀγανώμοισις inside has taken place; 'later' (*post*) she will come out again to gain her revenge on Parmeno. But, Jachmann asks, how can she know that Parmeno will still be there when she returns on stage? The final difficulty occurs when Pythias has left and Parmeno has delivered his entrance monologue; according to Jachmann, at the end of Parmeno's monologue Pythias is suddenly back on the stage, apparently having heard all that Parmeno has said, for she refers to it at 941 f. Jachmann concluded that Pythias must have entered at some point during Parmeno's speech, unobserved by Parmeno and with no express comment made: in a way, that is, which conflicts with new-comedy practice. In short, Terence is here alleged to have destroyed the dramatic organisation of his original.

This argument, which is advanced with Jachmann's customary panache, has been tacitly ignored by most later scholars<sup>10</sup>). These scholars are, I think, right, but Jachmann's points nevertheless deserve closer examination. Let us take them in the order given above.

9) *Gött. Nachr.*, 1921, 69-88, especially 82 ff.

10) Thus the ending of the play (I leave aside the one vexed question about the 'sharing of a sweetheart') is usually said to have followed the Menandrian lines (Webster, *Studies in Menander*, Manchester 1950, 74). The best general examination of the constructional problems of the *Eumuchus* is now W. Ludwig, *Philologus*, ciii 1959, 1 ff, with a good modern bibliography.

In his allegation that *ducas* is contradicted by *ite intro*, Jachmann is indulging in overliteral word-play. Neither in real life nor in terms of dramatic values would one require Thais' *ducas* to be interpreted so strictly, so exactly that Pythias had perforce to lead Chremes and the nurse in personally. This is not to say, of course, that Menander's language in the original was necessarily translated exactly by Terence at this point: Terence's *ducas*, for instance, could have been equivalent to a Menandrian 'tell them to come in'.

As to the second point, it is not certain that Jachmann appreciates the irony of Pythias' *uirum bonum eccum Parmenonem* (918), where the sarcastic *bonum* in itself acts as the required link with Pythias' previous reference to Parmeno. Note too the presence of the *eccum*, which itself serves as a transitional formula, exactly equivalent to the *ἀλλὰ ... γὰρ* of parallel Greek monologues in comedy (e.g., Menander, *Sam.* 65 ff, 294 f Koerte<sup>4</sup>)<sup>11</sup>).

Thirdly, when Jachmann wonders how Pythias can know that Parmeno will still be there when she returns, one cannot but feel that this subtle scholar has fallen into a trap of his own making. Jachmann and other scholars<sup>12</sup>) have clearly expounded the 'real-life' fallacy that has tripped up many writers about ancient comedy. In real life, no doubt, Parmeno could have gone on past Thais' house and away, or returned immediately back to the place from which he had come; in a play, however, with its nexus of motivations and dramatic preparations, we know that when Pythias goes in at Thais' door with the promise that 'later' she will come out again to punish Parmeno, either Parmeno will still be on stage at her return, or the playwright will have so manipulated the action that a plausible reason has been given for Parmeno's disappearance<sup>13</sup>).

This leaves the final point, which has considerable validity: for neither Parmeno nor Pythias in Terence indicates the precise moment at which the latter re-enters. Jachmann assumes that this entry occurs at some point during Parmeno's monologue, but this is inherently less plausible than an entry at the end of that monologue: when the entry of a character is not remarked on by a speaker already on the stage, that entry more generally

11) There are, of course, many Latin parallels for this stereotyped form of entrance announcement: cf. Duckworth, *Roman Comedy*, 114 ff.

12) Jachmann, *Χάριτες Leo* (Berlin 1911), 273; Fraenkel, *op. cit.*, 245 n. 1; H. Drexler, *Hermes*, lxxiii 1938, 90.

13) Cf. Duckworth, *Roman Comedy*, 115.



takes place at the end, not in the middle of a speaker's words. However, if Jachmann is correct in alleging that what Pythias says at 941 f is a clear indication that she has overheard Parmeno's monologue either wholly or in part, we should then have to assume that Pythias had eavesdropped on this monologue from behind the door of Thais' house, in the way that the courtesans of the *Miles*, Eutyclus in the *Mercator*, and Gorgias in the *Dyskolos* did in the passages compared in the earlier part of this paper; yet at the same time we should note that in this *Eunuchus* passage no verbal indication seems to be given about this eavesdropping. But is Jachmann's allegation true: does 941 f necessarily imply that Pythias has overheard Parmeno's words? I do not think so; the only possible reference that there may be in these two verses to the content of Parmeno's monologue is the vague *dictis* of 941, and this *dictis* can with equal plausibility be referred not to Parmeno's monologue but to all the words spoken by Parmeno in connection with the substitution of Chaerea for the eunuch. In act 4, scene 4 Pythias had learnt that Chaerea was the substitute eunuch, and that Parmeno had taken a prominent part in the organisation of the scheme both by word and by action (cf. 700 f, 718 f); thus the *istis factis et dictis* of 941 could very well be a reference simply to Parmeno's general part in the plot. In this case there would be no need either to posit an entry by Pythias during Parmeno's monologue, or to assume that Pythias had engaged in eavesdropping. There would also be nothing against the assumption that Terence had taken at least the basic essentials of the dramatic action in which Pythias and Parmeno were here involved from the Greek original; in this case the lack of clarity about the way in which Pythias' re-entry after Parmeno's monologue is presented would perhaps have to be attributed to a not entirely uncharacteristic failure by Terence to visualise the stage action as clearly as his predecessors had done<sup>14</sup>).

University of Newcastle  
upon Tyne, England

W. G. Arnott

---

14) Duckworth, *op. cit.*, 121, citing several examples.