Lost in barbarian translation: The anchoring function of the Greek models in Plautine comedy

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CONCLUSION

The present book opened with Edison's effort at anchoring his innovative electric lighting in the established gas lighting system. As we have seen, his effort consisted mainly in designing the new technology in such a way that it could look familiar and thus could be easily integrated in the urban environment of late nineteenth century New York. The following six chapters have shown that in mid-third century BC Rome Plautus had to tackle similar issues in a parallel way, although in a completely different context and by completely different means. Plautus' concern was definitely not electricity, opposing gas companies, or possible short circuits. Instead, his concern was represented by his own Latin comedies, an established Greek literary tradition in comparison to which his plays looked 'barbarian,' and a hypothetical resistance that some Plautine prologue-speakers envisaged arising from the philhellenic members of the audience. Regardless of the actual likelihood of such an imagined event, in order to overcome any potential obstacle to the reception of his dramas Plautus really adopted a strategy of promotion that proved to be similar to Edison's strategy. Plautus also negotiated with an established (literary) system and 'designed' some specific devices that anchored his self-claimed innovative (literary) product in that system.

My investigation has shown that this anchoring function is carried out mainly by Plautus' meta-literary discourse on the role of the Greek models in his poetic craft. In several plays, certain spokesmen (and a spokeswoman) develop on-stage this discourse on the poet's behalf in different forms and to different extents. The information thereby provided on the presence (or absence) of Greek models in Plautus' comedies, as well as on his activity as a translator from the Greek originals, turned out to be all but neutral and fully reliable information. Instead, the chapters above have pointed out the several omissions, inconsistencies, and, possibly, inventions that occur in these statements. In all cases, this manipulated and manipulative discourse turned out to aim at stressing the connection with the Greek authoritative and normative literary conventions—sometimes by shaping and adapting these conventions—thus making Plautus' comedies look (or, better, sound) less 'barbarian.' The fact that Plautus could imagine some spectators dismissing his Latin plays as 'barbarian' if compared with Greek theatre suggests that at the time of the second generation of 'official' Roman poets Latin literature was still perceived as a new, and thus as an unfamiliar, literary product. Such a perception must have belonged to an intended group of expert recipients—like those envisaged by some Plautine prologue-speakers—whose notion and experience of 'literature' relied exclusively on the well- and long-established Greek canon. Therefore, anchoring his otherwise 'barbarian' new plays in such an understanding of literature was

crucial for Plautus, who accomplished this goal by exploiting the discourse on the dependence of (some of) his plays from certain Greek models.

Indeed, there is some undeniable evidence that Plautus translated some passages of his plays from Greek. However, the very definition of the Roman *palliata* as a work of translation from certain Greek models provides the playwright with a pretext for playing with the generic conventions of the *palliata*. In other words, Plautus seems to profit from the derivative status of the *fabula palliata* in order to imply that a Greek—i.e. impeccable—source lies always behind his plays, even when some features could never derive from a Greek model. Therefore, Plautus did not really want to inform his audience and recipients on what he actually did in his activity as a translator, nor did he expect them to examine his poetic products closely, as Gellius and modern scholars will do later on. Rather, he wanted the spectators to take his words (and silences) on the Greek models at face value, and to enjoy the spectacle of the Greek disguise of his comedies. Moreover, the modern concept of translation as a faithful and literal rendition was unknown to the Roman practice of *vertere*, which instead made the 'translated' text 'lose in translation' its relationship with the model (when there was a model). Plautus' *palliatae*, just like the actors playing in them, are wrapped in a Greek cloak that hides their Romanness as well as their self-claimed novelty, which represents a tenet of Plautus' poetics throughout his whole career, as the five case studies analysed above have shown.

But why is novelty stressed with so much emphasis if the aim of Plautus' discourse on the presence of Greek models in his plays, and of anchoring in general, is to soften the bewildering impact of novelty itself? With regard to Augustan poetry, Hinds has called such meta-poetic claims of literary innovation a "very Roman paradox"[1] because, despite their message, these claims feature a clear allusion to a previous model, and thus prove to be clearly false. This phenomenon is peculiarly Roman, since it does not seem to occur in Greek literature. Hinds proposed to read these claims both as lies (on a literal level), and (on a more complex level) as a hint of "how Hellenizing revolutions often operate in Roman poetry and in Roman literary historical self-fashioning in the last centuries BCE: they operate through a revision of previous Hellenizing revolutions, a revision which can be simultaneously an appropriation and denial."[2]

Unless I am overlooking some indirect inter-textual references, I do not think that Plautus' claims of absolute originality allude to a precise literary predecessor (as I showed in Chapter 4, such a claim could be made for Pseudolus/Plautus' *aliquid novum inventum* and Aristophanes' καινόν τι λέγειν κἀξευρίσκειν, but the direct Aristophanic allusion is all but certain).[3] Nevertheless, Hinds' explanation of Augustan paradoxical claims of poetic

[1] Hinds 1998, 54. Hinds provides as an example Virgil *georg.* 3.8-9 (*…temptanda via est, qua me quoque possim/tollere humo victorque virum volitare per ora*), which alludes to Ennius *min.* 46 Courtney (*nemo me lacrimis decoret nec funera fletu/faxit. cur? volito vivos per ora virum*).
[2] Hinds 1998, 55.
[3] Fontaine 2013, 186 found one "paradoxical claim of primacy" of this kind in Terence's *Eunuchus* (l. 247: *hoc novomst aucupium; ego adeo hanc primus inveni viam*), which is disqualified by its own wording reminescent of the parasite Ergasilus' soliloquies in Plautus' *Captivi* 88-90 and 469-477 (see Fontaine 2013, 188-189).

innovation can also be applied to Plautus' statements, and sheds some light on the paradox of their presence next to the playwright's need to anchor the plays in the Greek tradition in order to soften the impact of their novelty on some members of the audience. Novelty and innovation seem to be regarded as positive and admired qualities only on an abstract level, that is to say only as absolute entities. In fact, when recipients face concretely something new, they experience a feeling of unfamiliarity, and hence of rejection, towards the new aspects of a newly invented or of a renovated thing. As we saw in the Introduction, this happens because the new requires some effort in order to be grasped and integrated in the recipient's current cognitive stystem. Most of all, this process requires a specific effort, which makes it easier to stick to a previous, already familiarised, object, despite any theoretical admiration for 'the new.'

This dynamics also applies to Plautine theatre. On the one hand it boasts of its own novelty, thus fulfilling the comic poet's duty to innovate, as Pseudolus, and before him, Aristophanes and Antiphanes, claimed. On the other hand, it develops a rhetoric about the dependence from the Greek models as an assurance that that novelty is accomplished within the frame of the Greek comic tradition, which unlike the native Italic theatre was a point of reference for the more sophisticated members of the audience, whose approval was pivotal to the success that Plautus gained during his own age and well beyond.