

John STARKS

Plautus' Balanced Structure for Ethnic Humor in the *Poenulus*

The *Poenulus* has frequently been treated as bad comedy (Duckworth: 154; Arnott RhM (1959): 252) and mined for its informative prologue (Slater YCS(1992):131ff) and Punic text (Snzyer *Les Passages Puniques*(1967); Gratwick *Hermes*(1971):25ff; Krahmalkov *Orientalia*(1988):55ff). But the social/historical relevance of the *Poenulus* is found in its comic treatment of ethnicity and cultural identity at a time when Carthage was still a thriving, independent city. Plautus means to entertain audience members with a traditional blend of New Comedy intrigue and confusion (23-45). The clincher is the prologue's promise that a naturally deceptive Carthaginian will enhance the usual mayhem (111-113). Plautus' lowbrow ethnic jokes are expected after the Second Punic War, but his selective use of these reveals talent for increasing comedy by surprising audience expectations. By limiting the characters who express anti-Punic sentiments, Plautus controls the timing and development of the fifth act so that it belongs to his unexpectedly sympathetic *senex*, Hanno the Carthaginian.

Plautus offers an excellent proof text for Franko's theory (*CPh* (1994):155-156) that early Latin authors used *Carthaginiensis* as a neutral socio-political designation for labeling Carthaginians, while reserving *Poenus* for describing stereotypes. In the *Poenulus*, the biased characters (*servus callidus* Milphio, *miles* Antamoenides) insult Hanno the *Poenus*, while the characters who turn out to be Carthaginians (*adulescens* Agorastocles, Hanno) use *Carthaginiensis*. Plautus probably mimics everyday Roman usage of these terms and thus delineates his cast into pro- and anti-Carthaginian characters.

Plautus' choice of Carthaginian bashers helps develop a heroic Hanno. After the prologue, Carthage remains unmentioned in the play until Act 4, heightening audience expectation of the Carthaginian's arrival. Hanno arrives piously pleading with the local gods to help him find his daughters (ll. 950-960). At first sight of the Carthaginian, Milphio launches into Punic stereotypes that the audience will immediately recognize: dress (975-976; 1008; earrings - 980-981); odd language (995-1027) and language skill (1032-1034); rich, sly merchant (1013-1023). This comic scene of language confusion allows the tricky slave quick jabs at Punic ethnicity. The audience knows Milphio's outrageous interpretations miscast the well-meaning Hanno, and they love it. Milphio controls the humor, but Hanno controls the scene's progression; when Milphio's mistranslation becomes harmful (he translates that Hanno wants to be killed - 1025-1026), Hanno switches to Latin and reveals Milphio's deception. Milphio's outburst against Hanno's deceit (1032-1034) brings Agorastocles' violence and mistrust on Milphio, and he is driven into the background for a silly recognition scene.

Milphio returns to Punic stereotyping later in this same scene, settling on a plan to utilize the "natural" Punic craftiness we were promised in the prologue. Hanno admits that he can be sneaky with enemies, but not with friends (1090) playing the role of father to the *leno's* prostitutes. The audience can see where this is leading and laughs as Hanno cries for the daughters he really lost. Milphio gets to watch and wonder at Hanno's "gift for deceit" (1106, 1107, 1125-1126) while the audience enjoys actors metatheatrically

playing on their acting roles. Milphio shows he is a set-up character for Hanno's induction into the trap by leaving the stage for good soon after.

The other fierce anti-Carthaginian in the play, the *miles*, leaps to biased conclusions about the foreigner in scene 5.5. Antamoenides contrasts his masculinity and Hanno's effeminacy (1298-1305), then launches into culturally relevant abuse at Hanno (1309-1314) calling him a smelly fish, a sheepskin coat (native Sardinian wear), and two varieties of garlic (one Carthaginian). Plautus shows he is playing here by ending with a comparison of Hanno's garlic-eating to "Roman rowers," a rare comic ethnic barb at Romans. Agorastocles again saves Hanno from further abuse by threatening the blustery soldier (1319-1320). Plautus has used another stock character who deserves his "come-uppance" after delivering unfounded ethnic aspersions. Hanno is ridiculed, but not to his detriment as heroic deliverer.

Plautus does not avoid ethnic jokes in salvaging Hanno, but he places them where they will heighten laughs and plot development. Deflection of ethnic barbs makes Hanno a pleasant contributor to Plautus' comic world of intrigue (cf. Franko's reading of a sinister Hanno - *CQ*(1995):250ff). Plautus' balanced treatment of the Carthaginian matches the mixed feelings of the Roman world for which he produced *Poenulus*, probably for games c. 191-189 BCE (Buck *Chronology* (1940):92-93; Johnston *TAPA* (1980):158; Maurach(1988):33). The Scipios, whose relative leniency toward defeated Carthage allowed it to prosper and pay off debts, held most of the highest offices during the 190s, including the curule aedileship for 191 BCE. Plautus could offer this comedy to an audience filled with people of differing opinion toward Carthage. He may even have gotten a Scipio to produce this comedy that surprisingly left the Carthaginian standing tall at the end of his conflict with the bigoted soldier.

University of North Carolina at Greensboro, jhstarks@uncg.edu