THE FOOL'S ERRAND IN TERENCE'S *HECYRA**

ABSTRACT

About halfway through Terence's Hecyra*, Pamphilus sends his slave Parmeno on a fool's errand to find Callidemides, a (non-existent) friend of his (415–50). Previous analyses of this unique exchange have revealed several layers of humour at work, but this article proposes a new reading of the scene through the lens of performance and staging which suggests that Pamphilus' verbal description of Callidemides is lifted from the physical appearance of Parmeno himself. This scenario accounts for all the elements of the fool's errand provided by Terence and ties the scene into the play's broader thematic interest in stock character subversion.*

This article proposes a new reading of the fool's errand scene in Terence's *Hecyra* (415–50) which is grounded in the performance elements at work, namely the relevant actor's mask and costume. I propose that Pamphilus' description of the (non–existent) Mykonian tourist whom Parmeno is tasked to find (that is, the fool's errand) actually described the mask and costume worn by the actor playing Parmeno. This scenario provides an explanation for all the details Pamphilus provides about the stranger and shifts the source of the scene's humour to Parmeno's laughable lack of self-awareness (since he does not realize that he has been sent to find himself). This scenario maintains the humour of the exchange and would function well as a standalone joke, but it also plays into the comedy's broader interest in stressing the dissonance between Parmeno and the traditional *seruus callidus* stock type. Although there are limitations to how far this reading can be supported on a philological level, this performance proposal provides sensible solutions to complement traditional interpretations of the scene.

A brief summary of the events leading up to the fool's errand will be useful. About halfway through Terence's *Hecyra*, the young man, Pamphilus, delivers a soliloquy that summarizes what he has just seen and heard inside his in-laws' house (361–408).[1] Pamphilus had discovered his wife pregnant and in labour, about to give birth to a child which seemingly could not be his (they had consummated their marriage only five months prior). Pamphilus' mother-in-law, Myrinna, informed him that the child was conceived as the result of a rape by an unknown assailant several months before Pamphilus and Philumena were married. Pamphilus made a promise to Myrinna based on the understanding that the child would be exposed: he would keep secret that she had been raped either by covering up the birth of the child entirely or, if necessary, by claiming the child was his, but stillborn.

Following his song (361–408), Pamphilus laments a marriage he claims he can no longer accept when he sees his slave, Parmeno, returning from the harbour with another slave, Sosia, and a group of porters (409–14):

> adĕst Parmeno cum pueris. hunc minimest opus
> in hac re adesse, nam olim soli credidi   410
> ea me abstinuisse in principio quom datast.
> uereor, si clamorem ei(u)s hic crebro exaudiat,
> ne parturire intellegat. aliquo mihist
> hinc ablegandu' dum parit Philumena.[2]

> Parmeno is arriving with the slaves. He is the last person I need
> involved in this matter, since at one point I confided in him and him alone
> that I had initially avoided Philumena's touch after we were married.
> Should he overhear her persistent screaming, I'm afraid
> he'll realize she is in labour. I've got to send him on an errand
> somewhere far from here until Philumena gives birth.

Parmeno's arrival presents a significant obstacle to Pamphilus keeping Philumena's assault a secret. Before the action of the play, Pamphilus had confided in Parmeno (and in Parmeno alone) that he and Philumena had only begun having sex in the last few months. Pamphilus knows that, should Parmeno get within earshot of Philumena's labour cries, it will raise paternity questions that may ultimately bring Philumena's rape to light.[3]

Pamphilus quickly determines that Parmeno must be shuffled off somewhere else. Small talk between Parmeno and Sosia on the miseries of sea travel (415–29) gives Pamphilus time to fabricate a plausible pretence for keeping Parmeno occupied elsewhere (430–43):

> PAR: ere etiam tu hic stas? PAM: et quidĕm tĕ ĕxspecto. PAR: quid est? 430
> PAM: in arcem transcurso opus est. PAR: quoĭ homini? PAM: tibi.
> PAR: in arcem? quid eo? PAM: Callidemidem hospitem
> Myconium, qui mecum una uectust, conueni.
> PAR: perii. uouisse hunc dicam, si saluos domum
> redisset umquam, ut me ambulando rumperet?   435
> PAM: quid cessas? PAR: quid uis dicam? an conueniam modo?
> PAM: ĭmmŏ quod constitui me hodie conuenturum eum,
> non posse, ne me frustra illi exspectet. uola.
> PAR: at non noui homini' faciem. PAM: at faciam ut noueris:
> magnu' rubicundu' crispu' crassu' caesius   440
> cadauerosa facie. PAR: dĭ ĭllum perduint!
> quid si non ueniet? maneamne usque ad uesperum?
> PAM: maneto. curre … [4]

> PAR: Are you still dawdling here, master? PAM: Yes, and what's more, I've been
>   waiting for you. PAR: Why?
> PAM: I need someone to hustle up to the Acropolis. PAR: Who? PAM: You.
> PAR: To the Acropolis? What's there? PAM: Meet up with a Mykonian tourist

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[2] Latin text from S.M. Goldberg, *Terence Hecyra* (Cambridge and New York, 2013), 65; translation mine.

[3] As lines 409–14 make clear, Pamphilus does not think that Parmeno can be trusted. The audience will have readily accepted Pamphilus' fears as genuine, since the slave's utter unreliability as a confidant had already been established at the beginning of the play (135–75).

[4] Latin text from Goldberg (n. 2), 66.

named Callidemides who's travelled with me.
PAR: (*aside, to the audience*) Kill me now. Dare I say he made a vow
that if he ever returned safely, he'd wear me out with walking.
PAM: What's the holdup? PAR: What am I supposed to say? Or am I to just meet
  him?
PAM: No, tell him I can't meet him today as planned,
so he doesn't pointlessly wait around for me there. Now go.
PAR: But I don't know what the man looks like. PAM: I'll see to it that you do.
He is big, ruddy, curly-haired and plump, with grey-blue eyes
and the face of a corpse. PAR: (*aside, to the audience*) May he meet his maker.
(*to Pamphilus*) But what if he doesn't come? Am I to just stay put until it's
  evening?
PAM: Yes. Stay put. Now run along …

Pamphilus has sent Parmeno on a fool's errand to keep him at a safe distance from his
in-laws' house indefinitely. Parmeno is tasked to find Pamphilus' non-existent travel
companion, a Mykonian named Callidemides, to cancel a meeting they had scheduled
for that day on the Athenian Acropolis. This Callidemides is 'big, ruddy, curly-haired
and plump, with grey-blue eyes and the face of a corpse' (440–1).

The ancient commentator, Aelius Donatus, provides a basis for appreciating the
nuance of Terence's humour in this fool's errand. In his comments on the scene,
Donatus isolates a slight departure Terence apparently made from his Greek model
(the *Hekyra* of Apollodorus of Carystus). In his commentary on line 440, Donatus
writes:

imperite Terentium de Myconio crispum dixisse aiunt, cum Apollodorus caluum dixerit, quod
proprium Myconiis … sed ego Terentium puto scientem facetius Myconium crispum dixisse.[5]

They say that Terence mistakenly said 'curly-haired' about the Mykonian, since Apollodorus
said 'bald-headed', which is the cliché about Mykonians … but I personally think that
Terence rather cleverly said 'curly-haired' with deliberate intention.

The implication in Donatus is that Terence's alteration was a conscious choice meant to
cap the stereotype humour of the Greek model: by assigning Parmeno the task of finding
a Mykonian with a head of hair, Terence doubles down on rigging the errand and
amplifies the joke's humour in the process.

For an audience armed with the knowledge that Mykonians were stereotypically
bald-headed, the Terentian edit giving him hair is a comedic tweak. However,
Donatus himself gives indications elsewhere that Terence's audience may not have
been as well informed as he was when it came to the minutiae of Greek culture.
Consider, for example, the nature of the departures Terence made from the Greek
model of his *Phormio* (the *Epidikazomenos* of Apollodorus of Carystus). If Terence
did not think his audience would recognize Greek religious traditions (Donat. on Ter.
Phorm. 46–9), mourning practices (91–2), debt slavery (661), turns-of-phrase (668)
and heiress/inheritance laws (*praef.*), it would seem unlikely that they would be familiar
with the stereotype that the inhabitants of a particular Greek island were distinct for the
prevalence of male-pattern baldness.[6] Terence could not have counted on the whole of

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[5] Latin text from P. Wessner, *Aeli Donati Commentum Terenti* (Leipzig, 1905), 2.267 §§13–19.
[6] See Wessner (n. 5), 363 §§7–10, 374 §§9–13, 466 §§23–4, 467 §§11–15 and 345 §§1–10,
respectively. Donatus is explicit in his comment on *Phorm.* 91–2 that Terence made the change
because the Greek mourning customs might confuse a Roman audience.

his audience recognizing the irony of searching for a curly-haired Mykonian.[7] One also wonders why Terence would risk burying the key component of an already esoteric joke among additional, potentially distracting descriptors if the only requisite details were the figure's nationality and hair.

Modern interpretations give more consideration to how the other descriptors might be contributing to the scene's humour. Goldberg, for example, sees the description as a collection of obvious incongruities and suggests that the scene's comedy comes from Parmeno's inability to recognize the contradictions of the seemingly sloppy fabrication.[8] Building on the absurdity of a man who both is Mykonian and has a full head of hair, Goldberg draws particular attention to the notion of someone who is 'ruddy' and 'plump', yet also has the 'face of a corpse'. Vincent also sees absurdity in the description, but suggests it is the order in which the descriptors are presented— increasing in their absurdity—which provides the scene's humour, in addition to the description's alliteration and homoioteleuton.[9]

These readings are compelling, but they do not account for the description in full. There are, for example, no humorous incongruities to complement 'big' (*magnu'*) or 'grey-blue eyes' (*caesius*), and the penultimate 'grey-blue eyes' are not obviously more absurd than the initial descriptor of 'big'. It is also not a given that these descriptors are decidedly incompatible and absurd, at least on the Roman stage.[10]

A new interpretation of this scene's humour might account for all details of the description: Pamphilus is in fact describing Parmeno as he appeared on stage for the production of the *Hecyra*.[11] Pamphilus' description is not inconsistent with our understanding of how comic slaves were costumed on the Roman stage. The descriptor 'plump' suggests belly padding, a costuming feature reserved for slaves and only two other stock types on the Roman stage (the *senex* and the *leno*).[12] Concrete visual depictions of *palliata* masks are elusive, but the material record for the Greek tradition on which the Roman *palliata* is based does attest to comparable masks on slaves.[13] An especially clear example is the ruddy-faced, blue-eyed mask of Sosias, a slave in Menander's *Perikeiromene*, in a mosaic from Daphne (*c.*200–250 C.E.).[14] Julius

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[7] The Mykonian stereotype also appears in the works of Lucilius (1211 M), Pliny (*HN* 11.130–1) and Strabo (10.5.9). These works had an elite readership and cannot be taken as evidence that the stereotype was common knowledge. For those familiar with the stereotype, it would have remained an exclusive additional source of humour, embedded within the more accessible visual gag I am suggesting.

[8] See Goldberg (n. 2), 149 and S.M. Goldberg, 'Donatus on Terence and the Greeks', *AJPh* 141 (2020), 83–102, at 94.

[9] See H. Vincent, '*Fabula stataria*: language and humor in Terence', in A. Augoustakis and A. Traill (edd.), *A Companion to Terence* (Chichester and Malden, MA, 2013), 69–88, at 76–7.

[10] Cf. Pseudolus, who is described as having both a dark complexion (*subniger*) and a ruddy face (*ore rubicundo*) in a context where the description is clearly meant to reflect the appearance of Pseudolus as he appeared on stage (Plaut. *Pseud.* 1218–20).

[11] When character descriptions analogous to that of *Hec.* 440–1 occur elsewhere in Roman comedy, they almost always refer to a character that appears on stage at some point. See Plaut. *Asin.* 400–1, *Capt.* 647–8, *Merc.* 639–40, *Pseud.* 1218–20 and *Rud.* 316–18.

[12] See C.W. Marshall, *The Stagecraft and Performance of Roman Comedy* (Cambridge and New York, 2006), 64, 66.

[13] e.g. Boston Museum of Fine Arts 01.7679 and Kavalla Museum 240 / E 489 (top left mask). See T.B.L. Webster, *Monuments Illustrating New Comedy*, revised and enlarged by J.R. Green and A. Seeberg (London, 1995³), 2.201 §3DT 28a and 34 §1BT 5c.

[14] See K. Gutzwiller and Ö. Çelik, 'New Menander mosaics from Antioch', *AJA* 116 (2012), 573–623, at 538 fig. 13. While the Daphne example is late, we can reasonably assume that it is based on a Hellenistic model: cf. the clear compositional relationship between the Daphne

Pollux even attests to a 'Curly-Haired Servant' (24) among the masks of Greek comedy which bears a basic resemblance to the facial features Pamphilus provides for Callidemides (4.149.13–15):[15]

ὁ δ᾽ οὖλος θεράπων δηλοῖ μὲν τὰς τρίχας, εἰσὶ δὲ πυρραὶ ὥσπερ καὶ τὸ χρῶμα· καὶ ἀναφαλαντίας ἐστὶ καὶ διάστροφος τὴν ὄψιν.[16]

The Curly-Haired Servant has its namesake's hair which is red as is the skin tone; it has a large forehead and narrowed eyes.[17]

Pollux catalogues this mask among those used specifically for slave characters (4.148.6–8). Like Callidemides, the 'Curly-Haired Servant' slave mask has curly hair and a ruddy complexion.[18]

Finally, the corpse-like face that punctuates the description can be understood as a metatheatrical reference to a comic mask. The post-mortem processes of primary flaccidity and rigor mortis will often fix the face in an unnatural expression evocative of a theatrical slave mask. Since the other physical features that might be suggested by the corpse-face descriptor have already been accounted for by preceding descriptors (*pace* Donat. on Ter. *Hec*. 441), the distinct rigid expression, redolent of comic masks, is the only remaining viable interpretation.[19] The fixed expression of theatre masks provides the basis for humour elsewhere in Roman comedy (e.g. Plaut. *Asin*. 837–41; Ter. *Phorm*. 210–12). Broadly speaking, the Romans connected theatrical masks with death and the *imagines*.[20] This association is made explicit with another slave mask in Plautus' *Amphitruo* (458–9) and we may be additionally primed to make the connection in the *Hecyra* by Parmeno's formulaic outburst that he is already all but dead (*perii*, 434).

If indeed Pamphilus' description of Callidemides reflected the mask and costume of Parmeno, the comedy of this scene was generated not from Parmeno's inability to recognize apparent incongruities or their increasing absurdity, but rather from his inability to recognize himself. Pamphilus had only seconds to generate a pretence that would keep Parmeno occupied; under these circumstances, it would be natural that Pamphilus draw on his immediate environment for details to support the lie he was weaving in real time. As Parmeno came into frame and Pamphilus began his description, the inspiration for Callidemides would have been clear to all—and to humorous effect.

Theophoroumene mosaic and earlier depictions (e.g. National Archaeological Museum of Athens 5070, National Archaeological Museum of Naples 9034 and 9985).

[15] While Pollux's catalogue deals with masks of the Greek performance tradition in the early Hellenistic period (Webster [n. 13], 1.6), there seems to be a basic continuity between the masks of the catalogue and those of Roman *palliata* (e.g. Marshall [n. 12], 136–7).

[16] Greek text from E. Bethe, *Pollucis Onomasticon* (Leipzig, 1900–1937), 1.245.

[17] For this reading of διάστροφος τὴν ὄψιν, see Hsch. π 462 Hansen on παραβλῶπες ('looking askance, squinting', LSJ s.v. παραβλώψ).

[18] The mask's 'narrowed eyes' may even suggest grey-blue irises. Blue-grey eyes, having limited pigmentation, are especially photophobic and much less efficient at filtering light than brown eyes. As a result, people with blue-grey eyes necessarily find themselves needing to squint more than those with darker eye colours.

[19] The previous descriptors *rubicundu'* and *crassu'* (440) are not necessarily at odds with the face of a corpse.

[20] D. Wiles, *The Masks of Menander: Sign and Meaning in Greek & Roman Performance* (Cambridge, 2004), 129–31.

The spectators, perhaps guided by Pamphilus' intonation and body language, link the descriptors vocalized by Pamphilus with the physical appearance of Parmeno as he appeared on stage. Parmeno's subsequent response (441), an aside which curses this Callidemides—*dĭ ĭllum perduint!* ('May he meet his maker!')—signals that the ruse has worked and would have been the cue for laughter as Parmeno reveals his complete lack of self-awareness by unknowingly condemning himself.

The self-evident humour of this scenario could account for other, previously unexplained details of the description.[21] This new reading also has the benefit of tying this scene into one of the comedy's major through-lines: Parmeno's metatheatrical identity crisis. The first detail we hear about the Mykonian tourist is his name, Callidemides. Vincent points out that 'the Latin root, *callid-*, reminds us that the slave Parmeno is chasing after the cleverness he ought to, but does not, possess'.[22] This is an allusion to the well-documented tension between the anticipation of Parmeno as *seruus callidus* and the reality that he consistently falls short of representing the stock designation throughout the *Hecyra*.[23] The notion that the name Callidemides contributes to this tension is arguably reinforced by his physical attributes. Among comparable descriptions in Roman comedy, Callidemides most closely resembles Plautus' Pseudolus (*Pseud.* 1218–20), the industry standard of the *seruus callidus*.[24] If these physical attributes lined up with the staged appearance of Parmeno, they also contributed to the image of Parmeno as potential *seruus callidus*. However, since Parmeno ultimately fails to see through the fool's errand, he shows yet again that he is incapable of fulfilling the dramatic role that his costume and mask suggest.

The humour of the fool's errand in Terence's *Hecyra* was not necessarily grounded in stereotypes, obvious incompatibilities, or escalating absurdities in Pamphilus' description of the fictional Callidemides, though these may also have been operating.

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[21] The exact sense of *magnu'* (440), the only descriptor I have not discussed, remains elusive. It may indeed suggest literal stature, but could alternatively refer to projected stature. The observable physical expression of being 'great in one's own estimation' (*OLD*[2] s.v. *magnus* 15) is attested on the Roman stage (Plaut. *Mil.* 1044–5) and this is in fact how *magnus* is understood in its preceding appearance in the *Hecyra* (380). The possibility that Parmeno sees himself as 'great' (we might say 'self-important') and represented himself as such through posture and gait (regardless of his actual stature on stage) is compelling and fits into the metatheatrical considerations discussed next.

[22] See Vincent (n. 9), 77. Most Terentian characters have unassuming, simple names made up of no more than three syllables (the sole exceptions are Glycerium, *An.*; Menedemus, *Haut.* and Nausistrata, *Phorm.*). Callidemides, a cartoonishly Plautine Greek name, would have stood out, piquing interest and scrutiny on its initial mention and when it is repeated at lines 801 and 804.

[23] Parmeno's potential to shine as the comedy's anticipated clever slave is consistently supressed whenever opportunities arise (e.g. 409–14, 799–800, 810 and 873–80). See G. Norwood, *The Art of Terence* (Oxford, 1923), 145; C.W. Amerasinghe, 'The part of the slave in Terence's drama', *G&R* 19 (1950), 62–72, at 69; D. Sewart, 'Exposition in the *Hekyra* of Apollodorus', *Hermes* 102 (1974), 247–60, at 257–8; T. McGarrity, 'Reputation v. reality in Terence's *Hecyra*', *CJ* 76 (1980–1981), 149–56, at 151; J.A. Barsby, *Terence* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2001), 2.142; A. Sharrock, *Reading Roman Comedy: Poetics and Playfulness in Plautus and Terence* (Cambridge and New York, 2009), 156; and Goldberg (n. 2), 14.

[24] *rufus quidam, uentriosus, crassis suris, subniger,* | *magno capite, acutis oculis, ore rubicundo, admodum* | *magnis pedibus* ... ('Someone red-haired, paunchy, with fat calves, darkish, with a big head, sharp eyes, a ruddy face, and very big feet … '; Latin text and transl. W. de Melo, *Plautus* [Cambridge, MA and London, 2012], 4.374–5). Cf. the description of Leonida, another *seruus callidus*, at Plaut. *Asin.* 400–1 with Marshall (n. 12), 133–4. On Pseudolus as the prototypical *seruus callidus*, see A. Sharrock, 'The art of deceit: *Pseudolus* and the nature of reading', *CQ* 46 (1996), 152–74, at 155 and F. Schironi, 'The trickster onstage: the cunning slave from Plautus to *commedia dell'arte*', in S.D. Olson (ed.), *Ancient Comedy and Reception: Essays in Honor of Jeffrey Henderson* (Berlin and Boston, 2014), 447–78, at 450.

I have suggested instead that the humour depends on close interplay between script and stagecraft and that the description of Callidemides—fictional, even within the stage world—probably matched the costume and mask of Parmeno as he appeared on stage for the production of the *Hecyra*. Parmeno's complete lack of self-awareness generated the scene's comedy and further underscored the tension between the suggestion of Parmeno as *seruus callidus* and the reality of his character. This interpretation, therefore, seamlessly aligns this scene with the broader thematic elements at work in the *Hecyra*.

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