

PDF hosted at the Radboud Repository of the Radboud University Nijmegen

The following full text is a publisher's version.

For additional information about this publication click this link.

<http://hdl.handle.net/2066/43639>

Please be advised that this information was generated on 2021-02-26 and may be subject to change.

Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2006.05.35

Amy Richlin, *Rome and the Mysterious Orient: Three Plays by Plautus, translated with introductions and notes.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. Pp. xiv, 288. ISBN 0-520-24274-2. \$45.00 (hb). ISBN 0-520-24275-0. \$12.95 (pb).

**Reviewed by Vincent Hunink, Radboud University Nijmegen, Netherlands
(v.hunink@let.ru.nl)**

Word count: 2482 words

One of the most interesting plays of the Roman comedy writer Plautus (ca. 200 B.C.), the *Persa*, opens as follows in the Loeb translation by Paul Nixon:

Enter Toxilus, in low spirits, from the forum. 'The lover that first set out on the highways of love with an empty purse went in for harder labours than Hercules. Why, I had rather wrestle with the lion, or the Hydra, or the stag, or the Aetolian boar, or the Stymphalian birds, or Antaeus, than with Love. Such a devil of a time as I'm having, just looking for a loan--and the people I ask, all they know how to answer is "Can't be done"'.

This is how the same passage reads in a new, exciting translation by Amy Richlin:

Bowman (to himself): 'The dude who first set out to go on the road of love without no dough, / this guy had to go through way more shit than all them Labors of Hercules. / Man, I'd rather duke it out with the lion, the snake, the deer, that A-rab mummy, / the birds that swamp in ancient Greece, or even with the Incredible Hulk, / than with Love; that's why I'm goin nuts and tryin to borrow some dough, / but folks I ask don't know how to say nothin to me but "ain't no way"'.

This small sample immediately shows some of the major characteristics of Richlin's daring approach: Plautus' Latin is not neutrally rendered as if it were no different from classical prose of the highest standards. Instead it is radically transposed into fully modern forms, in this case a rap text, with all the stylistic elements and effects that go with the genre, even down to the level of orthography. There is nothing dull or purely academic in these lines, but the text is lively and entertaining: Plautus has unquestionably been freshened up. In what follows I will first describe R.'s approach and underscore some of its most positive aspects. Next I will discuss some serious, methodological questions it raises.

Amy Richlin (hence: R.) is a distinguished scholar, who has taught classicists many things about the functioning of Roman humor, notably in her famous study *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor* from 1992. But examining the working of fun is one thing; making it actually work in texts is quite something else. R. is to be highly praised for accepting the challenge and having undertaken what may be considered the ultimate test in literary research into ancient texts: writing a translation. She has chosen three plays by Plautus, *Curculio*, *Persa* and *Poenulus* and translated them into current American English, with the explicit aim of providing material for actual performance on stage. The result is fascinating and may be warmly welcomed, not only by directors and actors, but also by students and scholars of Latin.

R.'s choice of plays is brilliant: all three plays in some way deal with the problem of 'other

cultures', an issue which is acutely relevant to contemporary western society. The almost camp-like title *Rome and the Mysterious Orient*, along with the brightly coloured cover of the book (in light pink, orange and green) add to the suggestion that these are texts that actually concern our modern world and are not merely monuments of the 'language museum' to which Plautus has often been relegated. The plays themselves have also been renamed, with *Iran Man* for *Persa* as the absolute winner, although *Towelheads* for *Poenulus* is not bad either. Furthermore, the protagonists and minor characters in the plays have all been renamed to bring out the comic effect and meaning of their original Plautine forms. I have already mentioned Bowman (Toxilus), who in the rest of the play meets, among others, Einstein (Sagaristio), Fat Jack (Saturio), Brain Muffin (Sophoclidisca), Georgia Moon (Lemniselenis) and the cheeky Toyboy (Paegnium).

All Plautine lines have been translated in verse, mostly in the equivalent of the original metres and with the same variety. The English idiom too shows great variation in style, from the streetlang of slaves and foreigners to the pompous, mock-epic diction of conceited persons. The *cantica* have not been given musical scores, but are marked as song texts or as rhymed rap, as in *Iran Man*.

The primary axiom of the translator has been that the plays must be funny in translation, and that to make them work, functional equivalents of original elements must be given, rather than literal translations. In other words, all kinds of features are transposed, transformed into modern elements, rather than rendered as literally as possible.

This clearly shows in many minor issues as well, such as references to food (we meet characters drinking 'beer') and money ('bucks' and 'cash' are normal here), all kinds of puns and intertextual references (modern film, pop music and American comedy are the most important sources). This drastic transformation is reinforced by stage directions concerning locations (*Towelheads* is set in Sarajevo), and dress (actors in *Weevil* are told to wear 'loud sports jackets and ties', with male actors' costumes intended 'to be on that unblushing borderline between preppie and garish, with a touch of Liberace' (p.65).

As a Dutch translator of Greek and Latin texts, I am keenly aware of the manifold difficulties that R. has had to face, and I greatly admire her radical stand and her consistent choice for the target language (English) and the target audience (a contemporary American public). On the basis of her general starting points, there is nothing wrong with even the most drastic of her choices. For instance, there is the tricky area of 'swearing'. R. takes great pains to explain her choice for 'Jesus' (of 'Jeez' or the likes) for the common Latin *hercle*, *edepol* and her translations show many instances of 'goddamn', 'Jesus Christ', 'bloody', 'asshole' and similar, unacademic idiom. She even suggests that for a Catholic audience *di deaeque* might be translated 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph'.

This might seem shocking to some, but is, in fact, perfectly legitimate and well-chosen, given the aims of the translation. To future directors who feel less comfortable in this area, R.'s general, repeated advice to adapt her texts to their own circumstances to make the plays work, may come as a help or a consolation. I certainly cannot find fault with any form of modernization (or even anachronism), as long as it is functional and corresponds to a specific effect in the original text.

However, R.'s approach does have its drawbacks. These are, I would suggest, on a methodological level. In the remainder of this review I will discuss two main issues which imposed themselves upon me as I read the plays.

First, there seems a certain lack of balance in this book. R. has intended to give us a radically modern translation, but she seems so much concerned to justify her choices at every level that she has burdened the texts with much additional material: a 53-page introduction to the volume as a whole, separate introductions to the individual plays (of ca. 10 pages each) including minute directions as to setting, plot points, music, language, text, title, names and cast, scene and costume notes. Of course, all of this may seem justified (the general information is excellent and stimulating) and, moreover, it can easily be skipped by the reader. This is less so with the numerous endnotes. For

example, the 39-page translation of *Iran Man*, a play of 858 Latin lines, are supplemented with no fewer than 23 pages of explanatory notes, set in a small font. Some of these notes provide factual information or refer to secondary literature, but most of them concern the choices of the translator, providing literal translations, pointing to differences with the original Latin, and explaining puns and jokes. By numerous asterisks in the main text (there are already three of them in the few lines quoted at the start of this review) the reader is constantly reminded of such notes. This makes undisturbed reading nearly impossible.

Thus, R.'s book suffers from a surplus of academic scruples. It certainly proves that a translation can be presented along similar lines to a commentary or study, but it also shows that a combination of scientific and popular elements is not necessarily a happy one: academic users will miss the Latin original and detailed, full discussion of every noteworthy element, whereas the average reader is continually made aware that she or he cannot simply read and enjoy: time and again the text presents itself as something 'complicated' that needs further comment at every page. The reader is never left free to go ; R. steps on the brake at every turn. As an example of R.'s needless caution I refer to her treatment of the *cantica*. In the main text, these are rendered freely as lyrics. But as if we were going to reproach the translator for this act of creativity, she has added a literal translation of these same texts at the end of each play. I would suggest that such scruples threaten to spoil the fun.

My second point is rather more abstract. R.'s choice for radical modernization and adaptation to a specific contemporary culture seems perfectly legitimate, but it involves a paradox. It does bring an ancient text very close to present day readers, but on the other hand it also excludes very many such readers who do not share exactly the same cultural background. R.'s book seems intended for an educated, American, Anglo-Saxon, English-speaking audience of 2005 that is also thoroughly familiar with Hollywood movies and cartoons, TV and show business, and mass culture in general. But what will an audience make of this material ten years from now? Or how will it appeal to a non-American audience today?

If R. invokes the likes of 'Public Enemy' and 'Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back' to illustrate the music of a play (p.116), who will understand this in a few years time? Personally I do not get the point even today, since I know neither. R.'s survey of catchphrases employed in the book to parallel Plautus' allusions almost exclusively contains puns that seem very difficult to follow for a non-American audience. Likewise, the cast is characterized by detailed references to, I assume, modern American actors. For instance, in *Iran Man*, for the part of Einstein (Sagaristio), R. imagined Jason Lee: 'the lines are written for Lee's slightly whiny, smart-ass voice' (p.118), while she saw Brain Muffin as 'a smart-mouthed Chicana, like Rosie Perez in *White Men Can't Jump*' or, alternatively, as Marisa Tomei in *My Cousin Vinnie* or Ariyan Johnson in *Just Another Girl on the IRT* (p.119). Someone who is, as I confess to be, totally unfamiliar with all of these actors and names, might easily feel lost or even excluded and think: 'this is obviously not intended for me.' The translation, then, has become too specific, too much targeted for a special audience. The smarter and more up to date the translation, the greater number of readers it threatens to exclude.

Perhaps the status of English as the *lingua franca* all over the world is part of the problem here. Many readers will initially feel that an English translation is accessible to them, whereas in fact it may be meant for local and temporary use.

At this point it has to be added that R. is aware of the problem. She argues that these plays need to be translated often (p.33), and even that her own translation is to be repeatedly updated and will have to be thoroughly reworked by a current production company that wishes to stage a play 'so that it will sound funny on the day it is performed, in the place where it is performed'. As R. adds, 'it is my hope that the translations I offer will serve as jumping-off point for a lot of improvisations' (p.32). So if a reader finds something that does not work, here is R.'s advice: 'populate these plays with the people who make you laugh and see what happens' (p.48). And for the setting 'please do choose a city well known to your audience' (p.40). Right at the start, the

reader is strongly encouraged 'to work out your own version': 'please go ahead and plug in what works for you' (p.2).

That is, make your own version and do as suits you best. This seems suggestive of nearly total freedom and wide, personal choice, but in the end leaves the work entirely up to the reader and offers precious little to hold on to. In the end, R.'s radical, postmodern approach to translation leaves readers alone to sort things out, instead of presenting them with a more or less authoritative text. For what is the status and identity of R.'s translation? It is no more than a proposal, a possibility, an entirely provisional text, open to all sorts of change. I would suggest that this is too little to justify its publication in the static form of a book. Why not present such material on a dynamic website? And if the English text is to be entirely reworked to stage a play, why would I have to use R.'s translation at all, instead of making my own version directly from the Latin original, or from another English translation, possibly or even preferably one that is old-fashioned, tedious and rather literal, such as Nixon's old version in the Loeb series?

In my opinion, a translator should make a conscious effort to bring the text to as large an audience as possible and hence to avoid references that threaten to be understandable only by a very small group, or, to put my point in the most extreme terms, only by herself or himself. Even a Plautus translation should perhaps be more than a kit to be used and changed according to every reader's personal taste. Or do we have to translate every play of Plautus in a thousand different versions for every possible audience in every country and age? That would be impractical, to say the least.

To conclude: R.'s exciting, creative translation is a fine piece of textual craftsmanship, and forms a breath of fresh air in Plautine studies. It convincingly shows that these archaic pieces can be brought to life again, and gives a taste of the vitality, wit and quick pace of their Latin. Plautus does not belong in the language museum but on stage and in the hands of readers! Meanwhile, the chosen approach of translation and presentation also raises serious questions as to the function and status of these texts and to the nature of this kind of translation. In the end, R.'s translations, brilliant as they are, seem too provisional to appeal to a worldwide audience or to remain directly relevant in their present form. Perhaps they will largely serve as inspiring examples of how ancient plays can be approached in our own time.

[Read Latest](#)

[Index for 2006](#)

[Change Greek Display](#)

[Archives](#)

[Books Available for Review](#)

[BMCR Home](#)

Rome and the Mysterious Orient. Three Plays by Plautus. Pp. xiv + 288. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2005. Paper, £8.50, US\$12.95. ISBN: 0-520-24275- [Book Review]. Homosexuality in Greece and Rome. A Sourcebook of Basic Documents . Pp. THREE PLAYS BY Plautus. Translated with Introductions and Notes by Amy Richlin. Copyright Date: 2005. Edition: 1. Published by: University of California Press. Pages: 302. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pnf2h> Still funny after two thousand years, the Roman playwright Plautus wrote around 200 B.C.E., a period when Rome was fighting neighbors on all fronts, including North Africa and the Near East. These three plays-originally written for a wartime audience of refugees, POWs, soldiers and veterans, exiles, immigrants, people newly enslaved in the wars, and citizens-tap into the mix of fear, loathing, and curiosity with which cultures, particularly Western and Eastern cultures, often view each other, always a productive source of comedy. Amy Ellen Richlin (born December 12, 1951) is a professor in the Department of Classics at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). Her specialist areas include Latin literature, the history of sexuality, and feminist theory. Born in Hackensack, New Jersey on December 12, 1951 to parents Samuel Richlin and Sylvia Richlin, her grandparents all immigrated to the US from Lithuania and Belarus. Neither of her parents were in the classic field with her father pursuing careers in music, poetry and Rome and the Mysterious O has been added to your Cart. Add gift options. Buy used She translates Roman laughter into American laughter. From its ingeniously banal title onwards, Rome and the Mysterious Orient brings three remarkable and rarely performed comedies to life on the page and one hopes, often the stage." James Tatum, author of Plautus: The Darker Comedies. About the Author. Amy Richlin, Professor of Classics at the University of California, Los Angeles, is author of The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor (revised edition, 1992), editor of Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome (1992), and coeditor, with Nancy Sorkin Rabinow