

SLIPS OF THE TONGUE  
Three Double Entendres in Terence  
(Adel. 215, Hec. 95 and 761)

Neither Plautus nor Terence indulge in the use of primary obscenities which is such a marked feature of Roman satire<sup>1</sup>. Plautus, however, is certainly not above a number of double entendres. Thus he frequently puns on the double senses of nouns such as *vasa* (Poen. 863, and cf. 847), *saltus* (Cas. 922, cf. 476; Curc. 56), *testis* (Curc. 31, 622, Mil. 1420, 1426), *opus* (Asin. 873), *officium* (Cist. 657), verbs such as *inforare* (Curc. 401–2), *divido* (Aul. 283–6), *utor* (Pers. 128), *scando* (Ps. 24), adjectives such as *morigerus* (Capt. 966, Cas. 463)<sup>2</sup>, not to mention jokes on swords and sheathes (Cas. 909, Ps. 1181), roots and cucumbers (Cas. 911),

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1) For Roman concepts of obscenity see Amy Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor* (rev. ed., New York 1992) 1–31. For sexual material in Plautus and Terence see E. Fraenkel, *Elementi Plautini in Plauto* (Florence 1922; repr. 1960) 31–2 and 46, George E. Duckworth, *The Nature of Roman Comedy* (Princeton 1952) 77, 292–95, 352; J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (Baltimore 1982) 218–19. See also Keith Preston, *Studies in the Diction of the Sermo Amatorius in Roman Comedy* (diss. Chicago 1916; repr. New York 1978) 33.

2) The context of Capt. 966 implies *pedicatio*, that of Cas. 463 *fellatio*.

ploughing (Asin. 874, Curc. 50–2, Truc. 149), and even *peculium* (Ps. 1188)<sup>3</sup>.

The practice of *fellatio* in particular offers Plautus a number of opportunities for double entendres of this sort<sup>4</sup>. Amph. 348–49 is the clearest example. Mercury and Sosia are slanging each other:

MER. *ego tibi istam hodie, sceleste, comprimam linguam. SO. hau potes: bene pudiceque adservatur.*

(MER. I'll check that tongue of yours today, you criminal. SO. You can't: I keep it nice and pure.)

In short, Mercury threatens to shut Sosia's mouth and Sosia takes it as a threat of *irrumatio*<sup>5</sup>. A similar joke is at Cas. 362 (between the old man Lysidamus, and the slaves Chalinus and Olympio):

LY. *tace, Chaline. CH. comprime istunc. OL. immo istunc qui didicit dare.*

MacCary and Willcock translate as: "LY. Be quiet, Chalinus. CH. Force him to be quiet. OL. You'd do better to force him. He's used to that sort of thing<sup>6</sup>." The context makes it clear that Chalinus is accused of furnishing oral services to his master<sup>7</sup>.

This joke of 'silence implies consent' to *fellatio* or *irrumatio* has a long run in Roman humour. Cf. for example, Cat. 74.5–6:

*nam, quamvis irrumet ipsum nunc patruum, verbum non faciet patruus*<sup>8</sup>.

3) Here I cite only examples of puns rather than euphemisms as such (e.g. *medium* in Cas. 326, *nubere* in Cist. 43–4).

4) See Fraenkel (see n. 1) 31–32.

5) See Adams (see n. 1) 126–7, who summarizes the exchange as "*irrumabo te*" "*non fello*", cf. 211; W. B. Sedgwick, *Plautus: Amphitruo* (Manchester 1960) 87 ad loc. For the sense of *pudicus/purus*, etc. referring especially to oral sex, see Adams 199; Richlin (see n. 1) 26–30, 53–54, 69, 99–100, 108–109, 232 n. 32, 235 n. 43, 281.

6) W. T. MacCary and M. M. Willcock, *Plautus: Casina* (Cambridge 1976) 141.

7) A similar joke at Rud. 1073–74 might refer to either *irrumatio* or *pedicatio*, while at As. 290–94 the tongue is personified as the slave's Leonida's *patrona*, whose goodwill in committing perjury for him he will lose if he "forces" her.

8) See Adams (see n. 1) 127, 211; Richlin (see n. 1) 149; K. Quinn, *Catullus: The Poems* (London 1973) 405, calls it a "hair-raising pun".

Or Mart. 3.96:

*lingis, non futuis meam puellam  
et garris quasi moechus et fututor.  
si te prendero, Gargili, tacebis.*

I.e. he will punish the effeminate rival by *irrumatio*. It is a joke of which Martial is very fond, cf. 10.67.10–11, 12.35.4, 14.74.

I want to examine three such jokes in Terence, only one of which has been noted by modern commentators. Terence, though generally milder in his language than Plautus, from time to time allows his lower characters, especially slaves, to make such jokes. One dirty joke which Donatus caught is at Adel. 214–15, where the slave Syrus is talking to the pimp Sannio:

*SY. adulescenti morem gestum oportuit.  
SA. qui potui melius qui hodie usque os praebui?*

(SY. One ought to be nice to the young man. SA. How could I have nicer today than by offering him my mouth?)

Sannio, as befits a pimp, not only takes Syrus' words about *morem gestum* as a Plautine reference to *fellatio* (cf. Capt. 966, Cas. 463) but adds his own joke on the double meaning of *praebeo os*: offer one's head to indignities (cf. Livy 4.35.10, Tac. Hist. 3.31.3) or offer one's mouth for the specific indignity of *irrumatio*<sup>9</sup>. So Donatus comments (2.48.11–13 W.): *Et morem gerere proprie lenonis est et meretricis, unde et ipse sic respondet, ut non fugiens κακέμφοτον dicat 'usque os praebui'*. Büchner agrees that the sense is obscene, though Martin is more cautious<sup>10</sup>.

There is a similar allusion to *irrumatio* at the beginning of the *Hecyra*. Here the prostitute Philotis is telling the slave Par-

9) For *morigerus* referring specifically to *fellatio*, cf. Suet. Tib. 44.2. Mart. 2.72.3 makes the same joke of "blow to the face" equals *irrumatio* as did Julius Caesar (Suet. Iul. 22.2; cf. Adams [see n. 1] 128, Richlin [see n. 1] 150). For similar jokes where *os* implies *fellatio* or *irrumatio*, cf. Cic. Cael. 78, Suet. Gram. 23. For a list of such veiled threats, see W. A. Krenkel, *Fellatio and Irrumatio*, WZ Rostock 29 (1980) 77–78.

10) K. Büchner, *Das Theater des Terenz* (Heidelberg 1974) 373; R. H. Martin, *Terence: Adelphoe* (Cambridge 1976) 137.

meno about her two years in service to a soldier where she was not allowed to say anything except what the soldier wanted. Parmeno retorts (95–6):

*haud opinor commode  
finem statuisse orationi militem*

Translations like, “I should like to see the soldier who could stop you talking, my dear<sup>11</sup>,” miss the mark, for Parmeno’s taunt is not about the garrulousness of prostitutes but rather the practices commonly associated with them. For the line means literally, “I think the soldier put an end to your talk in no nice manner.” The context – a slave talking to a prostitute – makes it clear that Terence is giving free rein to exactly the double entendre of enforced silence = *irrumatio* that one sees in Plautus and later authors. For *fellatio* as especially the job of a slave or prostitute, cf., for example, in literature: Lucil. 334–35 (Marx), Mart. 3.75, 9.4, 11.40, 11.61.5, 12.55; and in real life: CIL IV 1969 (Diehl 467), 2028, where the price is specified, or IV 2259, 2268, 2273, 2275, 2278, from a brothel, etc.<sup>12</sup>. Further, for *fellatio* as the most desirable activity for the recipient and the most humiliating for the giver (hence the sense of *haud commode*; cf. *bene* at Amph. 349 above), cf. Pr. 35, Mart. 2.84, 9.4, 40, 67, 11.40, 43, 45–46, 12.35, 12.85; cf. Gallus AP 5.49, Dio 62.13.4, Suet. Nero 35.4<sup>13</sup>.

Donatus, though he misses the point here, is aware of the implications that talking about ‘mouth’ and ‘tongue’ to a prostitute might have<sup>14</sup>. Later in the play, Laches is begging the courtesan Bacchis (who is higher up the social scale than Philotis) to swear to the two women, Philumena and her mother Myrrina, that she has not been sleeping with his son Pamphilus since his wedding. Ev-

11) B. Radice, Terence: The Comedies (Harmondsworth 1976) 296.

12) Of course, some of these graffiti might not be actual advertisements; nevertheless, even as jocular insults, they depend on the passer-by’s knowledge that *fellatio* is a servile activity, degrading to a freeborn person. Cf. also, where the social status of the woman is not directly stated: Mart. 1.72, 1.94, 4.50, 84, 8.87, etc.; CIL IV 1388, 1389 (Diehl 657), 1510, 2292 (Diehl 658), 4192: (*fellatrix*); 1427 (Diehl 660), 1651, 2402, 2403, 2421, 4158, 4185 (Diehl 659), 4434, 5095, etc.: (*fellare*); 1425 (Diehl 649): (*lingit*).

13) See Ramsay MacMullen, Roman Attitudes Towards Greek Love, *Historia* 31 (1982) 492–3 and n. 27.

14) Donatus ad loc. merely comments: ‘*haud opinor commode*’ pro ‘*blande*’ et ‘*bene*’, ut (v. 33) ‘*numquam tam dices commode*’ (2.210.25–6 W.) and ‘*finem statuisse orationi militem*’ argute ‘*militem*’, quia quasi inimicus est orationi, quae in pace plurimum potest (27–29), which, of course, has nothing to do with the case.

everything depends on his tact and he announces, rather clumsily, that he is going to take special care not to insult her even unintentionally (736–40) for which Bacchis gives him ironic thanks (741–42). This is, of course, exact what he proceeds to do throughout his speech, ending by saying he won't threaten her and then threatening her (765–67)<sup>15</sup>. Thus, when Bacchis swears that she has kept her old lover away since he got married, Laches replies (761): *facilem benivolumque lingua tua iam tibi me reddidit*, literally “Your tongue has made me kind and benevolent to you.” That even Donatus, not the most perceptive of critics, is aware of the dangers of speaking about ‘tongue’ to a courtesan, is shown by his comment: *‘lingua tua’ consuetudine magis quam ratione dixit* (2.327.4–5 W.), i.e. he spoke without thinking.

Although Terence, in keeping with his general toning down of the Plautine exuberance of language, employs word-play less often than Plautus, he still likes the occasional pun. As Donatus notes (on Hec. 475, 2.274.1 W.), “παρονομασίαι *sunt Terentianae*” and this extends to a few mild sexual double entendres in the mouths of bantering slaves or maladroit old men. Even the *amator puri sermonis* is not above the odd slip of the tongue.

Cincinnati

Holt N. Parker

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15) For this scene, see Büchner (see n. 10) 157–59.