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Intradramatic Mediation: The influence of Terence

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IN THIS PAPER I should like to make a few comments concerning the possible influence of Roman comedy, particularly Terence, on the mediation function of two plays, *Ralph Roister Doister* by Nicholas Udall and *Gammer Gurtons' Needle* by Mr. S. As has been tirelessly pointed out by theatre historians, although these two plays are rival contenders for the title of “first regular *English* comedy”, they are also among those which bear the most clearly discernible *Roman* influences.

Terence's plays and their graphic commentaries, written by Donatus and Charnius,¹ were studied with such intensity in grammar schools, and the plays were performed so regularly at Cambridge, particularly from 1548 to around 1575, that it seems hardly surprising to note such influences even in such a highly original corpus as the Tudor drama. But whilst the Roman influence on the structure and superficial strata of the two plays is obvious and without question, what I should like to try to discover is whether the deeper level—perhaps I could even say the “spirit” of the plays—bears traces of Terentian influence. One of the ways of reaching this deeper level may be to examine some aspects

1. See Altman, chap. 5 (“Terence and the Mimesis of Wit”), pp. 130-47, for an enlightening account of these commentaries.

of mediation in these plays and particularly the use of one or more mediating characters, variously known as plot-movers or stage-manager characters.

I shall not refer to any of the straightforward extradramatic mediation that occurs both in Terence and also in these two plays. There are a number of examples of direct and oblique audience address but I prefer to concentrate here on mediation actually within the plays. The main aspects to be examined will be, first, how a mediating character can be used as a focaliser for plot management, and, secondly, how such a character enables the organisation of stage action. Obviously, “intradramatic” does not necessarily mean “introspective”, and much of this kind of mediation reaches out to the spectators even if not directly addressed to them.

Intradramatic Mediation: Plot Management

It is common knowledge that in Terence’s plays the pattern consists of a basic plot founded on an error or a misunderstanding, which is fanned into life and made intricate by the use of a mediator. This mediator is usually a clever slave character engaged in knife-edge plotting, planning and scheming. He is endowed with the aim of furthering his young master’s love interests whilst preserving him from paternal wrath. Such plot management usually involves havoc almost being wreaked but averted through a number of narrow escapes. Through a rigorously established three-part structure, the initial misunderstanding soon becomes a knot of errors before being finally unravelled. In most cases, the mediator starts out as a much-decried rascal, who takes infectious pleasure in weaving the plot ever closer to danger. The tables turn, however, and at the end he receives a general pat on the back for having steered the play into its benign resolution, bathed in Terentian conviviality and magnanimity.

The influence of Terence’s play *The Eunuch* on Udall’s *Roister Doister* has been much discussed. Interestingly, though, Udall does not choose to adapt Terence’s prime plot-mover, the slave Parmeno, preferring for that task a character who can be more easily anglicised. So the parasite and flatterer, Gnatho, is chosen as the basis for Udall’s Matthew Merrygreek. In the same way, Gnatho’s patron Thraso, a lovesick, cowardly braggart soldier provides the basic outline for the character of Ralph Roister Doister. (Obviously, there is also some Plautine influence here, and, as Howard Norland has pointed out [p. 136], the character of Roister Doister incorporates a number of features from folk drama, chivalric

romance and conventions such as the lovesick knight.) Close similarities can be observed between the Roman and the anglicised versions of the characters. For example, Gnatho and Merrygreek both have an introductory monologue which takes the form of a sponger's boastful audience address. They both cover the topics of foolishness and wisdom, but Merrygreek puts the accent on being merry (a feature obviously inherent in his name and which can be linked with the numerous mentions of "mirth" in the Prologue). Both characters refer to the type of people they sponge from, but whereas Gnatho mentions social types, such as fishmongers, butchers, and poulterers, Merrygreek quotes a whole list of shady characters with thoroughly English-sounding alliterative names—for example, Lewis Loiterer, Watkin Waster, Davy Diceplayer and Tom Titvile. This list, and especially the last name, immediately connects Merrygreek with the English Vice character (often also a plot-mover). This authoritative position is further accentuated by the fact that Merrygreek's monologue is in a key place, just after the Prologue, whereas Gnatho's is in the middle of the play.

It must be said that Udall's plot is a great deal less complex than Terence's, and therefore Merrygreek does not have as much to do as Parmeno. As well as being a fully-fledged comic character, in his quest for mirth and entertainment, he functions as a means of foregrounding and accentuating Roister Doister's natural foolishness. As in the case of Gnatho with Thraso, sequences of asides are used to illustrate these aspects. Another feature common to both plays is that the parasite gives advice to the soldier concerning his love affair, thereby manipulating him into foolhardy situations. But whereas Gnatho remains very much the inactive flatterer, Merrygreek spurs Roister Doister into action. The plot includes musical entertainment recommended by Merrygreek to help with the courtship, a mock requiem when Roister Doister becomes despondent, and a battle scene when he is rejected. In both plays, the braggart soldier issues threats when spurned: *Thraso*. "First I'll storm the house" (p. 201); *Roister Doister*. "Nay, dame, I will fire thee out of thy house/And destroy thee and all thine, and that by and by" (IV.iii.98-99). Thraso's threatened attack fizzles out to nothing, whereas, by secretly collaborating with the enemy, Merrygreek makes sure that Roister Doister engages in a full-scale battle, albeit a comic one, with kitchen utensils for weapons. This is a further ploy by the plot-mover to make Roister Doister into even more of a comic spectacle. The household character of the warfare seems, however, to have been inspired by Terence's play, where there is mention of fighting with a sponge, a kitchen squad and saucepans.

The plots of both plays end in a similar way, when both Gnatho and Merrygreek plead in favour of their respective benefactors in front of the whole company and play an active role in preventing them from becoming outcasts. Both Thraso and Roister Doister are sent out of earshot while their cases are discussed. Gnatho makes no bones about his main mercenary purpose but also points out the fun to be had by all from mocking Thraso. Merrygreek also uses the argument of mockery and mirth but, in the end, seems to have some genuine affection for Roister Doister. In both cases the soldier begins bragging once more: *Thraso*. “I’ve always found myself exceedingly popular wherever I’ve been” (p. 218); *Roister Doister*. “For why no man, woman nor child can abhor me long” (I.vi.8).

Gammer Gurton’s Needle has often been described as a competent blending of Roman and English elements. Its structure is an almost perfect accomplishment of an academic exercise in classical playwrighting, with its division into acts and scenes, its rhetorical demonstration in three parts and its respect for the classical unities. Its subject matter, on the other hand, is totally English. Immediately, from the first line of the Prologue, the play is steeped in English peasant life and this remains so until its concluding Latin-style request for applause.

As with *Roister Doister*, what I should like to try to determine is whether the Latin influence goes any deeper than the structure and, more particularly, whether any Latin influence be found on the level of mediation in the play.

Unlike Merrygreek, the mediating character, Diccon, does not appear to have been inspired by any one particular character from Terence. It is perhaps a commendable achievement on the part of Mr S. that he did not resort to direct borrowing but was able to fashion a completely new plot-manager from an almost seamless blending of influences.

Diccon is certainly as quick, as clever, and as thorough in his plot management as a Roman slave, even though the motivations he is endowed with, in particular the production of sport and mirth, remain typically English. Diccon is far-sighted in his plot management and able to plan ahead. He does this so thoroughly that when the moment is ripe, he can commandeer from a distance with what amounts almost to a “look, no hands” approach. In fact he is never present at any of the spectacular moments he has organised. His main achievement and the high point of the plot is the perfectly symmetrical confrontation between the neighbours Dame Chat and Gammer Gurton which takes place at the exact centre of the play. He achieves this by telling a carefully graduated set of lies to each neighbour, thereby setting them against each other.

As well as this aptitude for careful planning, Diccon is also endowed with the Roman slave's capacity to deal with unforeseen situations and to seize opportunities. This is what happens when he meets Hodge and realises he can influence him. It also happens when Dr Rat is called in to settle matters between the neighbours. Diccon is able to endow the plot with a new feature by setting up a trap for Dr Rat to receive a beating.

The plot ends with a confrontation which achieves a similar philosophical and humorous quality to that of the final moments of Terence's *Adelphi*. In both plays the conflict dissolves into Terentian benevolence, and the characters of both houses decide to be lenient with one another's faults. The good humoured blow administered to the slave Syrus in order to mark his newly granted freedom is imitated in *Gammer Gurton's Needle*. This gesture seems to have inspired Mr S. with a simple but rather ingenious and spectacular plot resolution, when, to the astonishment of the full gathered cast, Diccon's blow to Hodge's buttocks comically reveals the presence, in the seat of the servant's trousers, of the much sought-after needle.

Stage Management

Another aspect of intradramatic mediation could be described as stage management. A mediating character can be the means of organising the stage action from the point of view of movement, gesture, use of space and timing of actions. In the case of the two plays examined here, it is interesting to note how far each of them makes use of the potentialities offered by the Roman stage set.

Although, as Charles Whitworth points out, *Roister Doister* was almost certainly written for a royal performance and would therefore probably have benefited from a lavish stage production, the play text requires only one house façade on stage, that of Dame Custance, which is first pointed out deictically by Roister Doister "She dwelleth in that house" (I.ii.78). The house is used for connoted exits and entrances and for the servants to sit outside performing their household tasks, but it never serves in the same way as in a play by Terence. In *Roister Doister*, the stage management is chiefly organised by means of stylised character groupings, rhythmic exchanges, synchronised movements—almost choreographic in fact—interspersed with song and dance. These aspects are strengthened by the fact that Merrygreek has a whole squadron of characters to marshal

around. Merrygreek is the chief mediator here (though not the only one—for example, Dame Custance is used to organise the proxemics of the servants).

Merrygreek's intradramatic mediation produces a number of effects. In a similar way to Terence's mediating slaves, Merrygreek is used to create the effect of split staging (usually by pretending not to see someone or by spying). This technique is often accompanied by asides (usually disparaging comments). In this way, Merrygreek is used to help shape the character of Roister Doister for the benefit of the audience. These techniques also involve the use of gesture, voice modulation in order to bring out Roister Doister's vanity, his cowardice and his general foolishness. A similar result is obtained through Merrygreek's hyperbolic flattery, which in fact has the effect of further disparaging Roister Doister—for example, when he likens him to great legendary heroes such as Sir Lancelot, Hector, or Samson (I.ii.114-36).

In his mediating capacity, Merrygreek is also used to bring out the full comic benefit of certain stage iconography, as when Roister Doister takes the toothless old servant Madge Mumblecrust in his arms and whispers in her ear. The stage direction ("*Here let him tell her a great long tale in her ear*") insists that this pose should be held across the break between two scenes (I.iii-iv), so that when Merrygreek enters he can reap full comic benefit from it by pretending to take Madge for Roister Doister's fiancée. He augments the effect by calling her pet names like "sweet lamb and cony" (I.iv.24) and "pigsnye" (42).

Another technique is to push Roister Doister around physically whilst feigning solicitude for his well-being—for instance, when Merrygreek officiously and ostentatiously pretends to flick off specks of dust and pluck hairs from Roister Doister's clothing. He also uses the opportunity to throw in a few insults for good measure, saying that he has found a fool's feather that fell from Roister Doister's head or a lousy hair from his beard (I.iv.96-98). Merrygreek becomes more aggressive when he combines pretending not to see him with an aside and a push: "I will not see him but give him a jut indeed. *Bumps Roister Doister*. I cry your mastership mercy" (III.iii.8-9 and SD).

Merrygreek becomes positively violent during the battle, when, as he feigns to attack Dame Custance, his blows land each time on Roister Doister, who responds with a chorus of "thou hittest me" (IV.viii.29-31).

Another way Merrygreek underlines Roister Doister's foolishness is by giving him advice—for example, on how to speak: "But up with that heart and speak out like a ram/Ye speak like a capon that had the cough now" (I.ii.28-29).

There is more advice on how to act: “Up with that snout man” (III.iii.127). Similarly, when he supervises Roister Doister’s conversation with Dame Custance, he begins by giving him an order, “Look partly toward her and draw a little near” (III.iv.5), and gradually ends up taking over the whole discussion, which culminates with his masterstroke of reading Roister Doister’s love letter with the wrong pronunciation. (This device is used for teaching rhetoric, as an example of ambiguity, in Thomas Wilson’s *Rule of Reason*.)

The character of Merrygreek is also used to provide the cues for music and song. He does so in Act I, Scene ii, lines 177–78, supposedly to enhance Roister Doister’s “wooing force”. In Act I, Scene iv, he upbraids Roister Doister’s men for leaving him without music for so long, saying, “Whoso hath such bees as your master in his head/Had need to have his spirits with music to be fed” (I.iv.93–94). He ends this scene with the order, “Then sing we to dinner” (140). Merrygreek also organises the bell-ringing ceremony in another of his masterstrokes, the mock requiem (II.iii.48ff).

Gammer Gurton’s Needle provides a very different exploitation of the Roman stage set. The setting is much more highly connoted than in *Roister Doister*, and both houses are required, as is generally the case in Terence plays. Diccon deictically indicates Gammer Gurton’s house in line 10 of his first monologue and then Dame Chat’s at the end of Act I, Scene ii. In fact, in true Terentian manner, Hodge and Diccon disappear simultaneously into the respective houses at the end of that scene.

In Terence, the houses are used for characters to dodge in and out of or to be quickly hustled into by a mediating slave in order to avoid trouble. They are also used for the technique of teichoscopy. An example of this is when a character in the street looks in at the door or window and points out, or speaks to, a character inside. In this way, also, young women are heard but not seen when giving birth. This technique reaches new heights in *Gammer Gurton’s Needle*, when sequences are actually played out in the interior of the house, which is brought to the spectator’s mind’s eye by means of word pictures—for instance, the game of cards which can be heard taking place inside Dame Chat’s house. The most “spectacular” example of this technique is when Hodge and Cock are noisily searching for the needle on the upstairs level of Gammer’s house. Suitably terrified by Diccon’s talk of evil spirits, Hodge mistakes the cat’s eyes in the dark for sparks of bewitched fire. The result is an ingenious piece of stagecraft whereby the spectators are riveted to stage action which they do not actually see.

Again controlling from a distance, Diccon sets up a sequence of teichoscopy with Dr Rat in the hole in the side of Dame Chat's house. This way the spectators hear Dr Rat being beaten inside whilst still being kept in suspense as to the identity of the culprit. Though it is used in a completely different way, Mr S. could have found the inspiration for this idea in Terence's *Adelphi*, where Demea suggests making a hole in the wall in order to join up the two houses and live as one family.

One of the most vital elements of both the plot and stage management in Terence's comedy is timing. For example, in his *Andria*, the slave Davos says, "No time for slackness and go slow methods; I must look out and look sharp" (p. 48). Later Simo says to Davos: "There's something wrong with your timing, Davos, your pupils don't seem to know their parts" (p. 61).

Timing is also of the essence for Diccon's planned battle. Sometimes the characters he is stage-managing become impatient. For example, he has to hold Dame Chat back when she wants to rush off and fight before Diccon has prepared Gammer:

Well, keep it till she be here, and then out let it pour;
In the meanwhile get you in, and make no words of this.
More of this matter within this hour to hear you shall not miss. (II.ii.74-6)

The same thing happens with Gammer Gurton ("Dame Chat, Diccon! Let me be gone, chill thither in post haste!" [II.iv.24]) and with Hodge:

Diccon. By the morrow at this time, we shall learn how the matter
goeth.
Hodge. Canst not learn tonight man? Seest not what is here? (II.iii.28-34)

Diccon goes as far as to let the audience in on the secret of his timing:

Ye see, Masters, that one end tapped of this my short device;
Now must we broach t'other too, before the smoke arise.
And by the time they have awhile run, I trust ye need not crave
it,
But look, what lieth in both their hearts, ye are like, sure, to
have it. (II.iii.1-4)

The technique is as finely honed as that of a Terentian slave, but, once again, the main difference is the purpose. Just like Merrygreek, Diccon seeks mirth, sport and pastime from his stage management.

Given the known and presumed scholarly pursuits of Udall and Mr S., it is not surprising that their plays in a general way, and their stage-manager characters in particular, bear the stamp of Latin theatre. Each playwright used this influence according to his own individual style and considerations and with different results. *Diccon* is above all a finely-tuned instrument of planning and timing, a means of organising all the play's characters into patterned proxemics involving full use of the twin-house stage set. *Merrygreek* is endowed with a more fully developed character showing a marked talent for irony. He, too, ends up mobilising the entire cast into diverse stage spectacles, but this effect is obtained chiefly through his manipulation of a single character, Roister Doister.

However, if the similarity of these two “sister” plays to Latin comedies is apparent, the differences which can be noted are equally remarkable. Both plays feature a predominant proportion of “low” characters, masculine and feminine, often in key roles. Nearly all of them engage in physical action, which ranges from the synchronised and stylised to knockabout farce, clowning and down-right brawling. In both plays, the rhetorical demonstration is not an end but rather a means. It is therefore more loosely constructed and less bent on achieving a sparkling intellectual result for its own sake than in, say, a Terence play.

But in my view, this has nothing to do with what would be designated somewhat colloquially today as “dumbing down”. It rather has to do with using the Latin techniques, neither as a variant nor as a new style, but as a means of boosting or providing a new slant on successful stage formulae—in other words, adopting some new techniques without radically altering the spirit of English theatre. This almost boils down to employing Latin techniques to enhance the Englishness of mid-century theatre. And this meant using them to boost the impact of all the spectacular effects so popular with English audiences.

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