

Michael Fontaine, *Funny Words in Plautine Comedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. 328. ISBN 978-0-19-534144-7.

This book is based upon a dissertation on surprise and wordplay in Plautine comedy, which Michael F(ontaine) worked out at Brown University under the supervision of Adele Scafuro (May 2003). As the author writes in his preface, during his further studies he considerably changed his mind on fundamental matters¹: «This book offers readers interested in Plautus' Latin a mixture of literary and textual criticism that attempts to ... offer some new perspectives on his comedy» (ix). The material is presented in five chapters and a conclusion. We find a rich bibliography (257), an *index locorum* (271), an *index iocorum* (283), and a general *index* (291).

In his first chapter *Verba perplexibilia* (3 ff.) F. reminds us of the way Pl(autus) uses “nonce-words” as *virgidemia* (*Rud.* 636), a facetious blend of *virga* “rod, switch” and *vindemia* “vintage, harvest”, or the famous *faciet ... extemplo Crucisalum me ex Chrysalo* (*Bacch.* 362 f.), where the Greek name of the slave is deformed to fit the (typical Roman) punishment that awaits him from his master, or the double sense of *testes / intestabilis* (*Curc.* 32 etc.). In these cases the context clearly shows us that we are confronted with a “funny word”; from this solid basis F. proceeds to other passages, where such puns had not yet been detected by scholars (and by their ancient predecessors, as far as we know). One case is *sicilicissitat* (*Men.* 12), a verb which in its context (after *graecissat* and *atticissat*) seems to denote “*Sicule loquitur*” (but **sicilissat* would be regular); F suggests that the poet with the nonce-formation *sicilicissitat* facetiously refers to the *sicilicus*, the *geminatiois nota*²; using this word, he may point to the double plot and the twins of the *Menaechmi*. Even more difficult to prove is his next case, *Ter. Eun.* 30, where the *prologus* speaks of a *parasitus colax*, a character in the “Kolax” of Menander. F. rightly shows the linguistic difficulties of the usual translation as “flattering parasite” and suggests a pun, hidden in *colax*: like *procax, rapax, trahax* (*Pers.* 410; cf. 421) it could be a *hapax legomenon*, coined from *colere* (this verb being adequate for the relationship of a parasite with his patron). His third example, where F. suggests, that *Epidicazomenon* (*Eun.* 25) could mean “The man making himself into an Epidicus”, possibly is too courageous. F. uses these three examples to show the tendency of readers / scholars to accept statements of characters at face value and to overlook a lot of (hidden) humour. He has to concede that not even one of these examples really can be proven. But in every case he brings forward a lot of evidence and discussion. Very interesting and plausible are the chapters on the adjustment of names which in F.'s opinion has taken place in an early phase of the transmission of the plays. In the *Truculentus* he finds *Phronesium* to be the wrong name for a *hetaira*; so he makes a case for *Prunesium* (later spelled *Phrynesium*), following the name of the famous hetaira

¹ Fontaine has included in this book a lot of (modified) material that already has been published separately.

² Cf. already *Mnemosyne* 59 (2006) 95 ff.

Phryne of forth-century Athens. At v. 77 ff. Diniarchus, against the real character of this lady, facetiously connects her name with *phronesis*, “good sense”, and in the whole drama the mss. (and even Varro in a *testimonium*) offer *Phronesium* (i.e., *Pronesium* in Plautus’ time)³; but it seems possible that in the last third of the second century B.C. the first editor of Pl. (Aelius Stilo or Accius?) modified the name throughout the drama. F. makes a reasonable guess with regard to the name of Pseudolus as well: he tries to show, that in the Greek setting of Plautine drama all the *personae* had Greek names. In analogy to Aischylus, etc., F. pleads for a *Pseudulus* (later on written *Pseudylus*⁴).

In the second chapter *Parapraxis and Parechesis* (37 ff.) F. wants to show that “Freudian slips” may be found in passages which are not as clear as the errors of the concupiscent *senex* in the *Casina*. And they may be connected with visual effects: in *Rud.* 420-22 the slave Sceparnio erroneously calls the body of young Ampelisca *subvolturium* to correct it immediately to *subaquilum*, a rather frigid joke for a reader, who does not see the hydria on the head of the girl (*subaquilum* denoting “a bit swarthy”, but possibly also “beneath the hydria”). We never will know how far Pl. goes in these allusions, whether he really points to an **urnatus* (again with reference to the *hydria* / *urna*) by Ampelisca’s *ornatus* in *Rud.* 428, as F. suggests, or even an *apsentem comēsse* (“to be with an absent”) in the case of the difficult passage *Most.* 11–16 (pp. 49–53). A special case are the so-called Mondegreens⁵ (57 ff.), misinterpretations of words / sentences: (for instance γέρραον “a crane” instead of γ’ ἔρανον “a picnic” in a fragment of *Epicharmus*). F. reminds us of the well-known “misunderstanding” of *adsum* (I am there) / *assum* (roasted) in *Poen.* 279 f., and the joke with *ventum* (wind / arrived) in *Curc.* 314 ff. Important again are F.’s suggestions regarding the names of *dramatis personae*: so *Curculio* would just be a Latin distortion of the Greek name Γοργυλίωv (Mr. Γόργος), in *Curc.* 586 f. (facetiously) explained by *curculio* “weevil”; how Pl. really spelled this name (*Corculio*?; cf. *Congrio* for Γογγρίωv in the *Aul.*) we will never know⁶. Similarly (and also with some plausibility) F. thinks *Saturio* in *Persa* to be derived from Σατυρίωv (the ‘Double-Riddle-Pun’ *Saturio-Essuri* -*Saturio* in *Pers.* 101 ff. being analogous to the famous *umbra* - *Sarsinatis* - *Umbra* in *Most.* 769–71). En passant I would like to refer to some interesting suggestions which introduce *hapax legomena* or words which only occur many centuries later (77 ff.): *iumentum* (from *iuvare*: *Amph.* 327 f.), *coquīnare* (*Ps.* 853 “to cheat; cf. French *coquiner*).

In the chapter *Equivocations and Other Ambiguities* (91 ff.) I want to refer to a very interesting suggestion on *Pers.* 623 ff., where both interlocutors connect the ‘name’ of

³ Only the old manuscript D writes *prunesium* at v. 188 (F. includes a fine photo of this reading).

⁴ I am not yet convinced by F., that we should introduce the names of the second century AD in our editions (the time of the basic edition of the so - called “*fabulae Varronianae*”).

⁵ p. 57: «It comes from the phrase ‘laid him on the green’, misheard as ‘Lady Mondegreen’ in the ballad ‘The Bonny Earl of Murray’».

⁶ F. in this case uses the spelling *Gorgylio*.

the Virgo, who allegedly is being sold to a pimp (*Lucridi* in the mss.) with *lucrum*; Pl. instead would have written / understood *Locridi* (the Locrians, we are told by Justinus, are said to have prostituted their daughters as does Saturio in the “Persa”). If F. is right in his explanation of *Pers.* 515 ff., the greedy Dordalus misinterprets Toxilus’ *lūciferam* (515) as well, understanding *lūcriferam*, an interpretation which would give the passage a lot of punch; and by a series of misunderstandings it would contribute to the characterization of Dordalus and his partners as well. Another important proposal regards the name of the parasite *Peniculus* in *Men.* (102 ff.), whose name in the course of the play repeatedly is interpreted as “brush, sponge” (78 f., 285 f., 389 ff.); F. in a very good discussion suggests instead an archaic transliteration of a Greek *Penicylus* ‘Mr. Headpiece’ (πηνίκη “toupee” is attested in fragm. ad. 225 K.-A.; F. also brings forward some archeological evidence). Under the heading *Sight gags and Ironic Meaning* (115 ff.) F. inter alia introduces us into the field of castration, an extreme punishment for adulterers; now and then in Pl. we find jokes with *testes* / *intestabilis, vasa*, which are clear innuendos for his audience and also for us, the readers. But F. goes further and wants to suggest that *Mil.* 1407 *dispennite* alludes to *penis* (“de-penis the man”) and even that 1422 “*ne sis frustra*” suggests *frusta* (“that you not be cutlets”), witty, but not plausible. Very interesting are his ideas about the function of “code - switching”: In *Ps.* 481–84 the Greek words ναὶ γάρ could function as a kind of double sense (v. 480 Pseudolus had said he would answer his master as clearly as the Sibylla of Delphi whose responses, as we know, can be ambiguous): in hellenistic Greek these words would come close to *nēgare*. In this case Pseudolus would mumble “yes” and “no” simultaneously (the code- switch giving him this possibility). F. asks himself whether Pl.’s characters sometimes subvert meter to make a joke; a possible candidate would be *Trin.* 970 ff., where the name *Charmides*, against the strict rules of the verse-end may have been pronounced to suggest a *Char - mī - des* (973/975; cf. 977; 985).

In the forth chapter *Innuendo and the Audience* (149 ff.) in his efforts to find out the educational level of Pl.’s audience F. wants to “break new ground” in the question of Greek words in Pl. Extensive and very sophisticated, possibly even too sophisticated, are his investigations on the name of *Lycus* (*Poen.*) which he connects not only with the wolf (*lykos*), but also with the predacious wolf - fish, a scatophage (a good comparison for a “dirty” pimp), and with the *lupinum* (a bean, used for stage - money, *aurum comicum*; cf. v. 596)⁷. In the pages *Funny words for parasites* (169 ff.), besides the well-known Calques *coepulonus* (*Pers.* 100; i. e., παρίσιτος) and *viris capitonibus* (*Pers.* 58–60 Woytek, i. e. ἄνδρες κεστρεῖς) F. wants to suggest that we may find some allusions to the βωμολόχος as well; but *aram occupabo* (*Most.* 1094) simply refers to the turbulent action of the exodus and *arcessitum* (*Sti.* 196) will not really suggest to an audience the words *ara + cessare*.

⁷ «By means of *lupina* (stage money) the *lupus* is caught».

In another chapter F. seems to be right in suggesting that Plautus' audience has been rather elite; many of these people would be able to catch the point of some puns (e. g. *lucrum* in the sense of *τοκος* with reference to the child Hercules in *Amph.* 14). Such an audience certainly would understand the point of the name *Prunesium* / *Phrynesium* (if that suggestion has been correct). However, I would not connect the allusions to the *Bacchae* with the Greek originals: here we are mostly on Roman ground (*Casina*, *Amphitruo*, *Bacchides*, *Aulularia* are late plays as far as we know and come close to the *Bacchanalia*-affair of 186 B.C.). Even if our evidence is modest, the audience of Pl. seems to have been aware of important allusions to Greek literature, as F. shows. But there remains the possibility that the allusions to the famous ode of Sappho (*φαίνεταιαί μοι* etc.) in *Mil.* 1246 ff. and *Curc.* 167 f. exclusively go back to the Greek originals (*Acroteleutium*, as F. shows, is a good name for a woman 'representing' Sappho, who allegedly jumped from the Leucadian rock). We must assume at least, that Pl. would not have brought forward such allusions for an audience without any knowledge of Greek literature.

In the fifth chapter *Double Entendre* (201 ff.), which concerns sexual allusions (*κακέμφατον*) F. brings forward many examples which are already well known, and he considers a series of puns regarding mostly parasites. Much in this chapter seems correct and reasonable. Possibly he has even solved the riddle of *Rud.* 146 f., where F. tries to connect the 'innocent' *tritico curat Ceres* with *terere* ("rub" in an obscene sense; **triticus* would be used in the sense of "one who is passionately devoted to rubbing"). Most of the Plautine parasites in some way are connected with pedication (216 ff.), so that we can look for "double entendre" even in "innocent contexts" as *Pers.* 131 f. (*norit*), *Capt.* 84 (*ligurriant*), 477 (*sese omnes amant*), *Sti.* 231 (*inanem*, to connect with *anus?*); F. has to admit that many of these 'double entendres' are difficult to prove.

These are my modest ideas regarding this book. The material F. adduces is very rich and his discussions are thorough. Since F. is really "breaking new ground" (many of his approaches to Plautine wit are new, many of his examples have not been discussed before), his achievements are important. Without his engagement and his courage to try the improbable and even the impossible, such a book could never have been written. Every reader of this work will find out for himself what to accept, what to doubt and what to refuse. But all the scholars who are interested in Plautine comedy should read this innovative book.

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