The Reception of Roman Comedy in Early-Modern Italy and France

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Much like today, at the end of the Middle Ages, Roman comedy was alive mostly in schools and universities. Several important discoveries, such as that of twelve Plautus comedies by Nicholas Cusanus in 1429 and that of Donatus' commentary on Terence by Giovanni Aurispa in 1433, fuelled the interest of scholars in Roman comedy.[1] In the Renaissance, European universities and schools provided the matrix for a new kind of theatre based on ancient models: ancient plays by Plautus and Terence were read, studied, translated and performed there, so that scholars were progressively replacing the theatrical paradigm of medieval farce and morality plays with a new one and thus played a key role in the birth of modern comedy.

Plautus and Terence in Schools

In Italian universities and schools, from the fifteenth century onwards through the entire early-modern period, the plays of Plautus and Terence were primarily valued for their linguistic benefit. Despite being in verse, they were seen as good examples of everyday conversation. Terence was particularly prized for the purity of his language and Plautus for his variety and inventiveness, which had already been praised by Cicero.[2] The fictional situations of Roman comedy, which stages young men facing their own passions against the opposition of their fathers, were also used for moral teaching, although often only after much expurgating and

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[1] On Donatus see Manuwald in this volume.
[2] Cicero, *de Officiis* 1, 104. See Hurka in this volume.

rearranging. Lastly, the performance of Roman comedies was, along with more edifying, religious texts, considered good training for diction, physical attitude and public speech.

In renaissance France, while Terence was prominent in the syllabus at the Université de Paris and its secondary-teaching *collèges*, Plautus was often kept for the more advanced classes or not taught at all. This may partly be due to Horace's harsh judgement of Plautus as crude and unsubtle, for his influence on French humanists was particularly strong.[3] Terence's texts were generally used for grammar teaching in the first years of secondary school. In the seventeenth century, he was the most frequently studied Latin author, along with Cicero, in the *Petites Ecoles* of Port-Royal (a prestigious, innovative teaching system set up by Jansenist intellectuals at Port-Royal-des-Champs, outside Paris), and the second author to be published in the collection of classical texts created for the education of the dauphin, the heir apparent to the French throne. The only exceptions are Jesuit schools, which accounted for one third of secondary schools in early-modern France, for which Ignatius of Loyola expressly forbade the use of texts from Roman comedy, arguing that they could be morally disturbing for young souls; but the reluctance of Jesuit masters to comply with this ban led to its abolition in 1703, and shows the fundamental place Terence held in classical education. As late as 1775, Diderot emphasised the Latin playwright's importance in his own education, remembering how he was 'from a very young age raised on the milk of Homer, Virgil, Horace, Terence, Anacreon, Plato, Euripides, blended with that of Moses and the prophets'.[4]

In both Italy and France, the strong presence of Roman comedy in school syllabi played a significant role in the development of national comedy that contrasted with the medieval theatrical genres. Indeed, reading and commenting on ancient texts from a very young age allowed the cultivated public to be familiar with the domestic plots and characters in Roman comedy, which soon became the basis of most Italian and French comedies. During the whole early-modern period,

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[3] Horace *Ars Poetica* 270-274.
[4] Diderot, 1971, XI, 797.

Roman comedy operated as a theatrical paradigm through the vehicle of secondary school, which most playwrights and even some actors attended, and was thus able to impose a set of standards and audience expectations which then served as backdrop for innovation and experimentation.

In addition, the very first modern performances of ancient comedies occurred in schools and universities: the first we know of was a performance of Terence's *Andria* in Florence by the students of Giorgio Vespucci's school in 1476, which was followed by several similar events in Italy during the 1480s. In France, it seems that such performances were less frequent, although there are testimonies of a few performances of Roman comedies, such as an undetermined play by Terence that was performed by the students of the Verdun cathedral school in 1514. Such theatrical experiments had limited audiences, all the more since the plays were performed in Latin by young amateurs in a pedagogical context. However, they did directly inspire the more lavish productions which took place in princely courts shortly afterwards, particularly in Italy, in cities such as Ferrara, Florence, Mantua and Rome.

Printed Publications and Modern Translations

The spread of Roman comedy, fostered by schools and universities, really took a decisive turn with the first printed publications of Plautus' and Terence's plays. The very first edition of Terence's six comedies was printed in Strasbourg in 1470 (then a free imperial city of the Holy Roman Empire), and this was followed shortly afterwards by several publications in Italy – particularly in Venice – as early as 1471. Plautus' twenty comedies were then published soon afterwards in Venice, in 1472.

Terence's works were particularly popular in both Italy and Spain in the early-modern period. Between 1470 and 1600 alone, they appeared in no fewer than 520 editions, two-thirds of which were printed in Italy and France. Although Italian publishers were a little ahead of their French counterparts, editions of Terence flourished in Lyon and Paris from the 1490s onwards. A French

translation of his six comedies (*Therence en françoys*) was published in Paris in 1503, followed by several other scholarly publications such as the translation Terence's *Andria* by Charles Estienne in 1542, which featured an explanatory introduction on the performance of comedies in antiquity.

Plautus, on the other hand, took longer to reach the French public. Although regularly published in Italy since the end of the fifteenth century, in France his works first appeared in print in Lyon in 1513, through a pirated version of an Italian edition, probably brought by Italian merchants and bankers who flocked to the city during the Renaissance. The first truly scholarly edition of Plautus' twenty comedies by Robert Estienne (Paris 1530) was reprinted less frequently than his edition of Terence published the year before. What is more, Plautus' complete works were not translated into French before Michel de Marolles' bilingual edition in 1658; until then, Plautus' plays were largely inaccessible to anyone who did not read Latin fluently. This French disinterest for Plautus contrasts with the playwright's great popularity in Italy, where several translations in prose and in verse came out as early as the mid-1520s.

There are several explanations for this difference in reception. Readers' preferences for certain ancient authors for example might have been groomed by the school syllabi. The main reason, however, is probably the different status of comedy and of theatre in general in Italy and France. In Renaissance Italy, ancient comedy (along with other forms) was soon considered to be a vehicle for princely families to display their power advantageously. Between 1486 and 1505, the Duke Ercole d'Este had no fewer than fourteen comedies by Plautus and Terence performed in Italian translation in front of his courtiers, enriched by musical interludes and ballets. Thus, at a very early date, Roman comedy was integrated into national and local cultural life, and this allowed Italian readers and spectators to appreciate fully the comic efficiency of Plautus' plays.

The situation was completely different in France, where comedy remained the domain of scholars and pedagogues until the end of the sixteenth century. French humanists, who leant on ancient texts in order to give their national literature more aesthetic poise and moral value, mostly approached the two

Roman playwrights from a theoretical angle. On the whole they deemed Terence to be more refined and morally edifying than Plautus. Montaigne considers him 'much more gentleman-like',[5] while Jacques Peletier du Mans criticizes Plautus for 'carrying jokes to the point of scurrility'.[6] Even after the Renaissance this marked preference of French scholars for Terence remained, as is illustrated by d'Aubignac's *Pratique du Théâtre* (1657), which describes Terence as 'the better model'.[7] In Italy, however, both Plautus and Terence functioned as key models for writing comedy. Thus, in his *Mémoires*, Goldoni mentions reading 'Plautus, Terence, Aristophanes and Menander's fragments' eagerly in his youth, already planning to write for the theatre as a grown-up.[8]

A Model for Playwrights

Indeed, the general interest for Roman comedy in the Renaissance was not limited to reading plays and examining ancient theatrical practices. Soon after the first publications of Roman comedy, and much like the reception of other literary genres such as epic and lyric poetry, humanists adopted it as the new example to follow in order to give their national theatre more quality and prestige. French poet Joachim Du Bellay thus writes to his imaginary ideal disciple:

> *As for comedies and tragedies, if kings and republics would restore them to their ancient dignity, which farces and morality plays have usurped, I would like you to work on them, and if you will do it to adorn your national language, you know where you must find their archetypes.* [9]

Although Du Bellay never wrote any drama, many Renaissance playwrights used the plays of Plautus and Terence as archetypes in order to reform contemporary theatre. The *palliata* was actually put forward as the chief model for the newly

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[5] Montaigne, *Essays*, 2, 10.
[6] Peletier du Mans, 1555, II, 7.
[7] D'Aubignac, 2001: 333.
[8] Carlo Goldoni, 1787, part I.
[9] Joachim du Bellay, 1549, I, 4.

formed '*comédie régulière*' ('regular comedy', i.e. following ancient rules and models of composition, as opposed to medieval comic genres like farce).

 This explains why, during the whole early-modern period, Roman plays were often rewritten and adapted for modern audiences. In Florence, Machiavelli borrowed the plot from Plautus' *Casina* to write his *Clizia*, published in 1525 but probably performed ten years earlier. The Venetian playwright Ludovico Dolce produced a series of plays inspired by Plautus: *Il Ragazzo* (*The Boy*, 1541) also based on *Casina*, *Il Capitano* (*The Captain*, 1545) based on the *Miles gloriosus*, *Il Marito* (*The Husband*, 1560) adapted from *Amphitruo*, and *Il Ruffiano* (*The Pimp*, 1560) adapted from *Rudens*. Even some cultivated political leaders, following Ercole d'Este in Ferrara, tried their hand at modernising ancient comedies, such as Lorenzino de' Medici whose *Aridiosa* (1536) is a modern version of Plautus' *Mostellaria*. Some of these adaptations are more complex, mixing elements from two or three Roman plays in one comedy in the same way that Roman comedy often 'contaminates' (uses) several Greek models to create a single new play. This is the case with Ariosto's *Suppositi* (*The Changelings*, 1509), performed at the Este court in Ferrara, which borrows from both *Captiui* and *Eunuchus*. Although contemporary testimonies suggest that the Italian courtiers were more interested in the spectacular interludes featuring professional musicians, singers and dancers than in the plays themselves that were performed by learned amateurs, these adaptations nevertheless represent a serious effort to update ancient material for the contemporary stage: plots are transposed to an urban Italian context with servants instead of slaves, and the text, generally in prose, is designed to recreate the natural tone of everyday conversation.

 Frequently, French playwrights from the Renaissance followed the Italian example. When Jean-Antoine de Baïf adapted Plautus' *Miles gloriosus* in *Le Brave* (*The Braggart*) in 1567, he set the play in Orléans, gave his characters French-sounding names like 'Taillebras' ('Arm-cutter') for the braggart soldier and 'Finet' ('Crafty') for the cunning servant, and wrote his play in octosyllables, which was the common verse for farce. Baïf's *L'Eunuque* (1573), based on Terence's *Eunuchus*, and in Jacques de Cahaignes' *L'Avaricieux* (*The*

Curmudgeon, 1580), which is a modern version of Plautus' *Aulularia* both follow the same process. Such rewritings, however faithful to their Latin originals, should be carefully distinguished from scholarly translations: whereas the latter, published under the Latin author's name, were aiming to make ancient plays accessible to the public and to preserve their original significance, the former were usually written for the stage, presented under their modern author's name, and intended as new creations, not as reconstructions of ancient drama.

Even after the Renaissance, when Italian and French drama had developed their own original styles and repertoires, playwrights still occasionally revisited the ancient corpus. Jean de Rotrou explicitly proclaims his admiration for Plautus in the preface to his comedy *Clarice* (1643), and had previously already adapted three Plautine plays: *Menaechmi* with *Les Ménechmes* (1631), *Amphitruo* with *Les Sosies* (*The Sosias*, or *The Doubles*, 1636) and *Captiui* with *Les Captifs* (1638). Even Molière, in order to put an end to being despised as a mere popular farce writer, chose to link his work with that of his prestigious antecedents: in 1668, he produced two successive plays adapted from Plautus' corpus, *Amphitryon* and *L'Avare* (*The Miser*, based on *Aulularia*). Although Molière introduced several new elements, such as the character of Cleanthis, Sosie's wife, in *Amphitryon*, or Harpagon's love interest for Mariane in *L'Avare*, the Latin originals still shine through strongly. This is particularly so in some passages the details of which are very similar to the contemporary Plautus translation by Michel de Marolles.

The situation is somewhat different with Moliere's 1671 play *Les Fourberies de Scapin* (*Scapin's Deceits*). The plot is based on Terence's *Phormio*: two young men, whose fathers are away travelling and have entrusted them to their servants' care, fall in love. One marries a poor orphan girl and the other tries to find money to free his beloved from the hands of her masters. When the fathers come back, both young men are in a predicament: one needs to make his father accept his marriage, and the other needs to obtain money from his parents. Their servants manage to trick the two old men and steal money from them, while – after a recognition scene - the marriage turns out to be fully legitimate. Not only

the general plot, but also many scenes and even cues are directly borrowed from Terence's play, which Molière read in Michel de Marolles' 1647 translation. However, Molière also made several significant alterations, particularly regarding the main characters. Indeed, whereas in Terence's comedy the slave Geta and the parasite Phormio play all the tricks, the eponymous servant of Molière's *Scapin* is the true star of the comedy and the main trickster (although on occasion assisted by Sylvestre, another servant). By concentrating the tricks in one character, Molière adapts the play to the common practice of seventeenth-century French theatre probably aiming to give himself star billing as *Scapin*. Moreover, the Neapolitan setting of the play, its three-act division and its main character Scapin (inspired by Scappino from the *commedia dell'arte*) tend to eclipse its ancient origins to such an extent that this comedy was received more as an Italian-inspired farce than a respectable comedy based on Terence. In this way, Molière made sure to keep his audiences entertained despite his 'high-brow' classical model.

A century later, Beaumarchais' adaptation of *Casina* into his *Mariage de Figaro* (*The Marriage of Figaro*, 1784) goes even further. While clearly borrowing its general plot from Plautus (a married man trying to seduce his wife's maid and being fooled by his wife and servants), the Roman source is concealed by a very modern setting replete with many allusions to contemporary French society, which allows the play to be perceived as an innovative and subversive story.

Remarkably, when surveying early-modern adaptations of Roman comedies both in Italy and France one notices that a large majority of them are based on plays by Plautus. This clearly contrasts with the predominance of Terence in French syllabi and publications, and is not only caused by the greater number of plays in Plautus' corpus, but is also a symptom of the fact that theatre practitioners and scholarly theorists were holding very different views of Plautus. Indeed, whereas the latter generally praise Terence for his superior refinement and morality, the former value Plautus' inventiveness and efficacy on stage, particularly his *uis comica* (comic force). Even d'Aubignac, while asserting his preference for Terence, admits that Plautus' plays were generally better received:

His plays, which were much more action-packed and less serious than
Terence's, were always more successful in performance, although the
others are more agreeable to the reader, having more honest characters,
better conducted passions and more elegant speeches.[10]

As professional playwrights for prominent theatre companies, Rotrou and
Molière's partiality for Plautus is understandable: concerned with the success of
their plays, they appreciated his sense of fun and professional competence.

Influence on Farce and *Commedia Dell'Arte*

Furthermore, and despite the relatively small number of his published works
compared to those of Terence, Plautus was particularly prized by '*irréguliers*'
practitioners (i.e. not strictly following ancient rules and models of composition),
whose ambitions were more practical than literary. The Paduan actor and
playwright Ruzzante, considered one of the main forerunners of the *commedia*
dell'arte, adapted *Rudens* into *La Piovana* (*The Rain*, 1532) and *Asinaria* into *La*
Vaccaria (*The Cows*, 1533). *Commedia dell'arte* actors themselves, who were
indeed much more erudite than is usually thought, were often enthusiastic readers
of Plautus, and even borrowed his plots for their scenarios. Even French farce
actors used Plautus as one of their chief models. At a time when few of his
comedies had been translated into French, Gaultier-Garguille, a farce star from
Paris, advised his colleague Turlupin to read 'the French translations of Plautus'
comedies, along with a few Italian and Spanish authors' when searching for
inspiration for his own productions.[11]

Paradoxically, when comparing '*régulières*' comedies to contemporary
'*irrégulières*' productions, one finds the latter to be closer to the aesthetics of
Roman comedy, particularly regarding their dramaturgy and their systems of
characters. Indeed, while Italian *commedia erudita* ('learned comedy', written and
played by erudite amateurs) and French Renaissance playwrights tended to

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[10] D'Aubignac, 2001: 333.
[11] *Testament de Gaultier-Garguille* (1634), included in Edouard Fournier (éd.), 1858, p. 156.

compose unified plots in which every scene forms part of the general narrative, the *commedia dell'arte* and the French farce showed a predilection for one-off effects, which did not always fit with in the general scheme of the narrative. Such digressive passages were common enough in Roman comedy, the best known examples probably being the *seruus currens* scenes in which the slave enters the stage running, offends everyone and calls for his master without realising that he is already on stage with him.[12] These scenes that only delay the progress of the plot have no narrative function: the slave actually holds up the plot by postponing his encounter with his master. They only serve to create highly spectacular moments in which the slave occupies the stage with virtuoso movements (probably carefully choreographed). The *commedia dell'arte* actors were particularly fond of such passages that gave them opportunity to show off their skills and mastery. Each of them usually had a stock of digressive scenes prepared in advance that they regularly inserted in their shows. These intensely comic scenes called *lazzi*, which took place in a loose narrative framework, formed the basis of *commedia dell'arte* plays and often also of an actor's fame. It is quite significant that such passages cannot be found in *commedia erudita* and French Renaissance comedy: usually staged by amateurs, these genres are generally more literary and less influenced by theatre practitioners. For passages of high entertainment value such as the Roman *seruus currens* scenes or the *lazzi* from *commedia dell'arte* could only be performed successfully by highly-trained professional actors.

Likewise, the *commedia dell'arte* and farce both gave much more prominence to the star characters of Roman comedy such as cunning slaves, miserly old men and braggart soldiers, than learned comedy (*commedia erudita*) did. The *commedia dell'arte*'s structured system of *tipi fissi* ('fixed types', stock characters) adopted the typecasting of Roman comedy masks: an average Italian theatre company was usually composed of two lovers, one or two old men (the

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[12] Examples of *seruus currens* scenes can be found in Plautus' *Asinaria* (267-295), *Mostellaria* (348-365), *Trinummus* (1008-1073), *Mercator* (111-134), *Stichus* (274-314) and in Terence's, *Andria* (338-374), *Phormio* (178-230 and 841-883) and *Adelphoe* (299-354). On Slaves in Comedy see Fitzgerald in this volume.

Venetian merchant Pantalone and the Bolognese Doctor), one or two *zanni* (servants from Bergama, one cunning and one clumsy), one *servetta* (young maid) and one *capitano* (braggart soldier), figures which roughly correspond to the Roman *adulescens* (young lover), *uirgo* (beloved), *senex* (old man), *seruus* (slave), *ancilla* (maid) and *miles* (soldier). While there is no real equivalent to the ancient comedy's *parasitus* (parasite) in Italian comedy, the figure of the glutton Pulcinella comes closest to fulfilling that function.

  Commedia dell'arte developed the servant characters in particular, which played surprisingly insignificant roles in learned comedy despite their prominence in Plautine and Terentian plays. At an early date, the roles of the *Zanni* (originally a popular form of 'Giovanni') were moulded, along with that of the *Magnifico* (the old Venetian merchant who later became the Pantalone), forming the staring couple of Italian professional theatre: a farcical servant contrasting with a quick-tempered old man. The sevant's role, which was later divided between a cunning and deceitful *zanni* (sometimes called Brighella or Scappino), and a second stupid and clumsy *zanni* (most of the time called Harlequin), remained prominent in more elaborate plays, performing scenes of jesting, buffoonery and deception similar to that in the *seruus*'s scenes in Plautus' and Terence's plays. In the same way, and probably under the influence of Italian companies that settled in Paris, the French farce started to employ similar characters from the beginning of the seventeenth century onwards: the star farce trio of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, the official Parisian company, consisted in Gaultier-Garguille, a French version of Pantalone, Gros-Guillaume, a fat, naïve servant with flour on his face, and Turlupin, a cunning, mischievous servant who enjoyed playing tricks on the other two.[13] Even in the streets, on the Pont-Neuf to be precise, a charlatan called Mondor sold his miracle cures with the help of Tabarin, a comedian who starred as the cunning servant in short farces he improvised with a small group of actors.[14]

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[13] An example of the trio's farces is the *Farce plaisante et récréative, tirée d'un des plus gentils esprits de ce temps* (Anonymous, 1622: 28-33).

[14] Contemporary transcriptions of Tabarin's farces feature in the collection edited by Gustave Aventin (1858).

This remarkable development of servants' parts in professional productions contrasts with their limited prominence in learned comedies (*commedia erudita*) in both Italy and France. *Commedia erudita* playwrights preferred highlighting the lovers' parts, especially the one of the young *amorosa* ('girl in love'), who devises schemes and dresses up as a boy so as to follow the man she loves.[15] In French comedy, servant characters only developed in an important way in the middle of the seventeenth century, once '*comédie régulière*' started being played by professional actors. Significantly, the first French comedy actor to specialise in servants' roles was the former farce actor Jodelet. That actual ability of actors to perform virtuoso roles and scenes made a decisive impact on the way the Roman model was brought to Italian and French stages.

Indeed, the absence of professional actors capable of performing highly spectacular scenes accounts in part for the discrepancy between the claim of *commedia erudita* and French Renaissance comedy playwrights who generally cited Roman comedy as their chief model and their actual plays, which hardly showcase anything ancient.[16] Although a few general characteristics from Roman comedy feature such as domestic plots and love complications opposing younger and older generations but terminating in marriages Plautine and Terentian models are often not recognisable. Besides *commedia erudita's* non-professional contexts, which lead to the omission of demanding scenes, the use of other models contributes to explaining this fact. The very first Italian *commedie erudite* (excluding those that were translations of Roman plays) were already mixing several sources. Mantovano's *Formicone* (*The Ant*), performed in Ferrara in 1506 and generally considered to be the first original comedy written in Italian, partly based its plot on Apuleius' *Golden Ass*. Ariosto's *Cassaria* (*The Box*), performed in 1508, was derived partly from Roman comedy, partly from Italian novellas, like the ones collected by Boccaccio in his *Decameron*, and partly from contemporary

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[15] See the Sienese comedies *Gl'Ingannati* (1532), *L'Ortensio* (1561) or Alessandro Piccolomini's *L'Alessandro* (1544).

[16] See for instance Jean de La Taille's 1562 prologue: 'A true comedy you shall see, and not a farce nor a morality play, for we do not fool about with such base and silly things, which only show the pure ignorance of our old Frenchmen. You shall see a comedy made on the pattern and the model of ancient Greeks, Latins and a few new Italians…'

everyday life, the elements of which were reinforced by the plays the realistic urban scenery. In France, similar reasons help to explain the inconsistency between the playwrights' claim to follow ancient models and their actual plays, which owe much more to the conventions of medieval drama than is usually admitted by the authors. Thus Etienne Jodelle's *Eugène* (1552), generally considered to be the first French '*comédie régulière*' ever performed, evolves around an adulterous plot involving a priest, which is typical of medieval farce. Resultingly, although early-modern Italian and French comedy takes its name from the ancient dramatic genre, it is in fact a complex compound of several models and influences.

Competing Theoretical Texts

The main reason why Italian and French comedies were not just formed as modern avatars of Roman comedy is that the very idea and function of the theatre had undergone fundamental changes between antiquity and the early-modern period. Whereas Roman drama was part of a religious ritual that gave it sense and form, early-modern drama was a problematic practice that did not have a clear function and suffered the condemnation of parts of the Catholic Church. Accused of being misleading and morally corruptive, comedy needed to justify and to defend itself.

Indeed, whenever French and Italian playwrights and theorists claimed to imitate ancient models, they did not only mean ancient comedy, but also a whole theoretical corpus including Aristotle's *Poetics*, Horace's *Ars Poetica* and Donatus' *De Comoedia* as well as his commentary on Terence. Handed down with much glossing and interpretative commentary, these texts provided early-modern authors with a moral justification for writing comedy. The necessity to justify writing comedy had a major impact on theatrical production, particularly in France, where most new plays were performed in a scholarly context and accompanied by theoretical reflection. In Italy, however, where writing and performances of new comedies started half a century before the first theoretical

publications and took place in the festive context of princely courts, the productions seem to be less directly linked to aesthetic doctrine.

One major principle to which most early-modern theorists subscribe is the idea of theatre as imitation (Aristotle's famous concept of *mimesis*), which was corroborated by Euanthius' description of comedy (which became attached to Donatus' commentary) as 'an imitation of life, a mirror of habits, an image of truth'.[17] This concept allowed the defenders of drama to point to the instructive virtues of comedy: as an 'imitation of life', comedy was viewed to be a pedagogical tool to describe human nature and the rules of society. This helps us understand that early-modern comedy in both Italy and France tends to mix contemporary elements from daily life into its Roman models in order to produce an impression of reality. This also accounts for the near-disappearance of the ancient parasite character from the plays as it had no direct counterpart in the early-modern world, and in turn also explains the rise of the braggart soldier, who could easily be employed to parody the highly militarised societies of sixteenth and seventeenth century Italy and France.[18]

In addition, Roman comedy's depiction of slavery and its lack of respect for social hierarchies could prove problematic:

> *Those ancient plays are usually based on the tricks of slaves only, and on the various devices they use to swindle old men and to find money for their young masters' debauchery: since we do not have slaves, and all their means to take money from fathers are not in use anymore, we do not relate to their way of living and thinking, and thus can neither approve them nor feel for them.[19]*

D'Aubignac emphasises the dichotomy between the conventions of Roman comedy and the neo-Aristotelian demand for verisimilitude and blames the historical distance between ancient Rome and seventeenth-century France for this divergence. For this reason, as long as the production of French comedy was

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[17] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1, 1447a and Euanthius, *de fabula*: *excerpta de comoedia*, 5, 1.
[18] Tristan L'Hermite's *Le Parasite* (1654) constitutes one notable exception. On the braggart soldier, see Boughner, 1954.
[19] D'Aubignac, 2001: 466.

almost entirely dependent on pedagogical and scholarly circles cunning servants remained non-existent.

Playwrights (and even actors) also cited comedy's purported purpose of moral edification in its defence: in order to justify its existence, comedy claimed to offer an equivalent to Aristotle's tragic *catharsis* (purgation) on the grounds of a rather vague link with a passage from Horace (*Ars Poetica* 343-344) that urges poets to 'mingle profit with pleasure, by delighting and instructing the reader at the same time'. For Molière and many *commedia dell'arte* artists this meant that the function of comedy was to denounce and to ridicule human faults in order to correct them. For others, especially religious circles, it also implied that any actions and characters in comedy ought to be free from dishonesty. In both cases, the triumphing wily slaves, debauched young men and frequent immorality in Roman comedy did not correspond to the theory's edifying ideal. In order to satisfy the demands of a Christian society, Roman plays needed to undergo a few adjustments such as the disappearance of their most infamous characters: pimps and prostitutes.

The drive towards a more realistic and moral type of comedy was all the more influential for playwrights since it was linked to good taste and literary poise. In order to assert their superiority over farce and medieval comic genres in general, writers of comedy and actors needed to avoid all coarseness and scurrility. This led many playwrights, such as Corneille and even Molière, to abstain from employing the traditional buffoons of comedy and write a number of plays that do not feature any braggart soldier or cunning servant. Corneille, in the '*Examen*' ('Foreword') of *Mélite*, his first play, prides himself on having written a comedy 'which made people laugh without any ridiculous characters, such as buffoon servants, parasites, braggarts, doctors, etc.'. More generally, writers tended to be less explicit than the Roman originals and avoided obscene gestures and formulations. In addition, ancient texts provided theorists with a series of formal principles, such as the unities of time, place and action derived from Aristotle, and the division of plays in five acts, according to Horace, or three acts, according to

Euanthius in Donatus' commentary.[20] The ancient model for comedy, from the Renaissance onward, combined both the actual plays and these theoretical principles so that they came to be perceived as one homogenous corpus.

In conclusion, although Roman plays inspired Italian and French comedy with their themes, plots and system of characters, early-modern sensibility in turn shaped the way in which Roman comedy reached the cultivated public. In both Italy and France comedy was accompanied by a theoretical arsenal that greatly influenced the way Roman comic texts were taught, translated, adapted and imitated. The demand for verisimilitude and morality even occasionally eclipsed the original purpose of comedy: the pursuit of laughter.[21] Thankfully, drama theory did not completely submerge the original spirit of Roman comedy. For whenever comedy found a professional context that was commercially lucrative enough to resist the pressures of religious and learned circles, as it did in the Italian *commedia dell'arte* or the French seventeenth-century comedy, it revived the original brilliant cheerfulness of its ancient ancestor.

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[20] The five-act rule (taken from Horace, *AP*, 189-190) was generally adhered to in France, whereas Italian playwrights more often followed the three-act rule (derived from Donatus, *Exc. de Com.*, VII, 1). The division of Roman comedy in five acts that appears in medieval manuscripts does not go back to Plautus or Terence.

[21] The idea of laughter being only of secondary importance in comedy was developed by the Dutch scholar Daniel Heinsius in his *Ad Horatii de Plauto & Terentio Judicium Dissertatio* included in his edition of Terence's comedies (1618). Heinsius' idea was quite influential in France, where it was taken up by Corneille in the preface to his heroic comedy *Dom Sanche d'Aragon* (1650).

Further reading

H. W. Lawton (1926) analyses the reception of Terence's plays in French Renaissance education, drama and literary theory, while R. F. Hardin's article (2007) constitutes a recent comprehensive survey on Plautus's reception. M.T. Herrick (1960), L. G. Clubb (1989) and R. Andrews (1993) cover Italian renaissance comedy, both scholarly and popular, and its reception of earlier writers. B. Jeffery (1969) and P. de Capitani (2005) handle French renaissance and seventeenth-century comedy, demonstrating the influence of Italian drama on the evolution of French comedy during this period. A. Nicoll (1963) provides an illustrated history of Italian *commedia dell'arte*, both within Italy and outside, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. G. P. Shipp (1973) studies Molière's plays' relation to classical comedy, while D. C. Boughner (1954) concentrates on one specific type of character, the braggart soldier, from his first appearances in ancient comedy to medieval and renaissance comedy. European comic theory in the Renaissance is thoroughly explored by M. T. Herrick (1950), and its French peculiarities are reviewed by H. W. Lawton (1949).