

HOW TERENCE'S *HECYRA* FAILED

It is often repeated that at the unsuccessful productions of Terence's *Hecyra* the audience left the theatre in order to see, on the first occasion, boxers and a tight-rope walker, on the second, a gladiatorial contest.¹ The other view, that the spectators remained but demanded other entertainment, is to my mind clearly correct and deserves restatement since the mistaken one is so widespread.

The only evidence is that of the Terentian prologues. What L. Ambivius Turpio said, at the third attempt to have the play performed, was

quom primum eam; agere coepi, pugilum gloria (funambuli eodem accessit expectatio) comitum conuentu', strepitu', clamor mulierum fecere ut ante tempus exirem foras.	35
uetere in noua coepi uti consuetudine in experiundo ut essem: refero denuo: primo actu placeo; quom interea rumor uenit datum iri gladiatores, populu' conuolat,	40
tumultuantur, clamant, pugnant de loco: ego interea meum non potui tutari locum.	

The last four lines are correctly interpreted by J. Sargeaunt in his Loeb edition: 'on a cry that there was to be a gladiatorial show, in flocked the people with uproar and clamour and a struggle for seats with the result that I could not hold my ground'. Similar versions are given by C. Carrier in P. Borie, C. Carrier and D. Parker, *The Complete Comedies of Terence* (New Brunswick, 1974), and B. Radice, *The comedies of Terence* (Harmondsworth, 1976).

It should be clear that not a part only, but the whole of these four lines describe the scene in the theatre. Turpio does not speak of unseen occurrences somewhere else where a gladiatorial show was expected; fighting for places does not stop a play unless the places are in the theatre where it is being performed.

Possibly the widespread view which the translators and I reject has been encouraged by disbelief that the theatre could be used for gladiatorial combat. It is true that there is no reliable evidence for such use at Rome, for Donatus' statement 'hoc abhorret a nostra consuetudine uerumtamen apud antiquos gladiatores in theatro spectabantur' may be no more than inference from Terence's text; even so, the text must have been understood as I understand it. But at Athens the theatre of Dionysus was the scene of gladiatorial contests, admittedly much later than the time of Terence (Dio Prus. 31. 121). In any case, whatever was in fact done at Rome in the early second century, it would be no matter for surprise if the crowd at the funeral games of L. Aemilius Paullus in 160 B.C. thought it possible that such a show would be presented in the theatre. This would be a temporary wooden structure, erected for the occasion, of

¹ A dozen references, not an exhaustive list, will suffice: W. Beare, *The Roman Stage*,¹ p. 82 (but non-committal in 2nd edn, p. 163 and 3rd edn, p. 173); K. Büchner, *Das Theater des Terenz*, p. 15; G. E. Duckworth, *The Nature of Roman Comedy*, p. 60; R. C. Flickinger, *Philological Quarterly* 6 (1927), 241, 267; R. Graves on p. xi of foreword to Echard's translation; H. Haefter, *Museum Helveticum* 10 (1953), 10; Kiessling-Heinze, *Q. Horatius Flaccus, Briefe*⁶, p. 231; F. Leo, *Geschichte der römischen Literatur*, p. 236; J. Marouzeau, *Térence* (Budé edition), i. 16; Schanz-Hosius, *Geschichte der römischen Literatur*, i. 105; A. Sloman, *P. Terenti Phormio*, p. 15; A. S. Wilkins, *Horace Epistles*, p. 278.

uncertain form, but providing a stage and seating for spectators. Particularly at such a one-off event as funeral games one would expect their organizer to use the 'theatre' for any suitable kind of spectacle: it was not sacred to dramatic art. A few years before, 166 B.C. or thereabouts, at the victory celebrations of L. Anicius, a programme which had begun with music by the best players of the *aulos* from Greece continued with two dancers in the *orchestra* who accompanied four boxers who fought upon the stage (Polybius 30. 13. 22 = Athenaeus 14. 615a-e).² Even in the time of Augustus boxing, then a brutal and bloody business which he thought unsuitable for women to watch, was often put on in the theatre (Suetonius, *Augustus* 44. 3).

Nor does Turpio say anything about a stampede of the audience from the theatre when *Hecyra* failed at its first presentation in 165 B.C. On the contrary, it was he who had to leave ('exirem foras'). Doubtless many of the spectators behaved in the manner described by Horace in *Epistles* 2. 1. 183 ff., where he says that the serious dramatist is discouraged because those who are

numero plures...
...et depugnare parati
si discordet eques, media inter carmina poscunt
aut ursum aut pugiles

Terence's audience had heard that there was to be tight-rope walking, were looking forward to it ('expectatio funambuli'), and had come to the theatre with their minds full of the prospect:

populus studio stupidus in funambulo
animum occuparat,

as it is put in the first prologue. Tight-rope walking in the theatre is evidenced by Apuleius *Florida* 18, Augustine *Ep.* 120. 5, *de diuinatione daemonum* 8, and possibly Horace *Epist.* 2. 1. 210. It was the presence of enthusiasts for this kind of display that prevented the play's being heard ('neque spectari neque cognosci potuerit'); their departure would not have prevented its performance for the benefit of the residue who had better taste.

The first prologue may say nothing of the boxers because the speaker's object there is to depreciate the audience's taste, and funambulism was an art less widely acclaimed than pugilism. Boxing was understood and watched by the educated as well as the general run, as is shown by the descriptions to be found in poetry. In the second prologue Turpio more tactfully implies that the renown of the boxers was an adequate cause for the failure of the comedy.

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² F. W. Walbank, *Commentary on Polybius*, 3. 32.