



A History of Roman Comedy

Much more survives of Roman comedy than tragedy. Comedy flourished in Rome in a variety of forms. The form from which we have the most surviving works are the so-called *palliatae* plays, which means plays in Greek dress. These plays (*fabulae*) were largely based on Greek models, especially the works of fourth-century Athenian playwright Menander. His works exemplify the period of comic writing known as 'New Comedy', the fifth century being the age of 'Old Comedy'. Menander's plays formed the principal models for Latin comic poets Plautus, Caecilius, and Terence. Themes that had been familiar from Old Comedy, such as Athenian politics and politicians, laws, and citizenship also appear in New Comedy. New Comedy was also characterized by plots revolving around scenarios such as love, relationships, family life, mistaken identities, the generation gap, and a variety of social tensions, such as town versus country, rich versus poor, free man versus slave. Menander frequently played with his audience's expectations: for example, traditionally unsavoury or lower-class characters turn out to be clever individuals who save the day, such as slaves outsmarting their masters. Stock characters included slaves, soldiers, stern fathers as well as more permissive fathers, extravagant sons, dutiful sons, courtesans and prostitutes, spongers (also known as parasites). Such were the characters and situations upon which Plautus, Caecilius, and Terence all modelled their plays, but Plautus and Caecilius were freer in their adaptations than Terence and incorporated more Roman elements into their works.

Another type of comic performance that flourished at Rome and became particularly popular during the early principate (the time of the emperors that began with Augustus) was mime. Actors in mime spoke (unlike what we think of today as mime) and the shows originally consisted of acrobatics, song, and dance, but became more like comedy sketch shows. The first recorded instance at Rome was in 170. Like comedy, mimes would parody city life, and themes included sex and relationships, or general comic scenarios, such as hidden lovers, situations gone wrong, rather like the baths episode in this speech as Cicero paints it (63). Similar to mime was the Atellan farce, named after its town of origin in southern Italy. It was a masked performance and primarily improvised with characters such as 'the Fool', 'the Glutton', and 'the Clown'. Both mime and farce, though popular, were considered lower forms of comic performance than comic theatre. Nevertheless, they



certainly proved popular. Cicero says the unsuccessful attempt to apprehend Licinius in the baths was more farce or mime than comic play, depicting it as ludicrously catastrophic and highly implausible.

Key Figures in Roman Comedy

Research Activity

Do some research and make some notes about these famous comic writers at Rome.

Plautus

Caecilius

Terence

Lucilius