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Turence Staged in the Sixteenth Century

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Opening scene of an indoor Renaissance performance, from an edition of 1580. This is the Prologue of the comedy “Heauton Timorumenos” ("The Self-Tormentor") by Terence (159-155 B.C.) with an actor as the Prologue in a day-light theatre. This setting marks the beginning of a shift away from outdoor theatres to the modern indoor stage. To see the title page of the edition go to the Terence entry in Primary Renaissance Texts in this site’s Performance Bibliography.

STAGING TERENCE IN SHAKESPEARE’S TIME

About 1611 John Davies dedicated a poem to “Our English Terence. Mr. Will. Shakespeare” (Shakespeare Allusion Book, 1.219), and the comparison seems justified by Shakespeare's indebtedness to the classical writer of comedy and his characters of several of his comedies, such as the Lucentio/Bianca love plot in The Taming of the Shrew. The Riverside Shakespeare includes a French woodcut of a Renaissance performance of Terence in corroboration of his relevance to the Elizabethan stage (114). With this affinity in mind, in 1975, I purchased a sixteenth-century Latin text of Terence’s plays from the theatre collection at Andrew Block’s antiquarian bookshop at Barter Street in Holborn, London: Publius Terrentinus Afer, [Comediae]. Venice: Ioan. Gryphium,1580. The building of our website at U. C. Berkeley about the performance-history of Shakespeare’s plays, called shakespearestaging, included items about the structures and relationships of various types of theatres of his time in England, Spain, and Italy, such as those in London, Almagro, and Vicenza. Seemingly relevant to this structural consideration were two small, identical woodcuts in the edition of Terence showing the opening of two of his plays (Andria, at 1r; Heautontimorumenos, at 76v) apparently in a performance contemporary to the book’s printing in 1580. As first these images proved rather small, faint and limited for use on the website, but with the aid of various editing software we were finally able to enlarge, and clarify the woodcuts to the point that they became vivid illustrations of how the plays of Terence may have been staged (or at least visualized) in Italy in the late sixteenth century, in an indoor theatre roughly contemporary with the London Phoenix and Blackfriars. As far as I know, these woodcuts have not been reprinted since: the edition is described as “very rare” in English-speaking countries (though there are copies in Italian libraries). At very least they should be better known than is suggested by the Riverside illustration of the Renaissance staging of Terence, which is from the fifteenth century.

In a recent essay on “The Architecture of Italian Theatres Around the Time of William Shakespeare” Eugene J. Johnson confirms this impression of uncertainty when he writes: “All the theatres built in Italy during this period except three [all built after 1580] have vanished, as has most of the visual evidence. As a consequence, the study of Italian theatre architecture of early modern times has to be based almost entirely on written documentary sources. Only from these documents, which scholars continue to unearth, can we reconstruct in our imaginations what once stood” (24). He adds in a Bibliographical Note that in recent decades, as far as late sixteenth-century Italian theatres are concerned “there is almost nothing by English speaking scholars”, a gap which it is his goal to remedy (45). These 1580 illustrations provide another small increment in this progress.

Before coming to a discussion of the two woodcuts themselves (both clearly coming from use of the same block), it is appropriate to identify their context accurately for further reference. The title page of my edition exactly matches a recent description of the edition by the bookseller Phillip J. Pirages (51.0642), as follows: TERENTIUS AFER, PUBLIUS, [COMEDIAE]. (Venetiae: Apud Ioan. Gryphium,1580). Printer’s device on title page, decorative and historiared woodcut initials & a few woodcut scenes approx. 2” x 3”. This edition of the comedies of Terence published by Joannes Gryphius in Venice is set in Roman type. Woodcuts are included with the prologues of each play, and each scene is followed by the commentaries on that section of the drama by Donatius, Guido Cenomanus, and Petrus Marciun. Also included in the case of the Heautontimorumenos (The Man Punishing Himself) is the commentary of Joannes Calphurnius, a scholar of Brescia, first published in Treviso in 1474. The present edition is very rare, with no copy in American Book Prices Current for at least the last 26 years (National Union Catalogue NUC locates three copies). Listed in Johann Georg Theodor, Graunse Handbuch der allgemeinen Literaturgeschichte aller bekannten Völker der Welt, von der ältesten bis auf die neueste Zeit, Leipzig: Arnold. 1837-40, VI, 1, 58 (citing the Gryphius 1575 edition). [Twenty-one Italian copies are similarly listed on the website of UNIMARC: IFLA Universal Bibliographic Control and International MARC Core Programme.]

Though there are other woodcuts in the edition, including the standard Gryphius emblem on the title page, and still others around the first capital letter at the start of the prologue and first scene of each play, these are of no theatrical interest as the two imprints of a performance are made from the same block, I shall concentrate on the slightly better-inked one at 76v. As is evident from the reproduction of the full page containing the preferred sample, each woodcut is situated before the actual printing of the play script begins – fittingly, for the print seems to show a Prologue introducing its performance, as confirmed by the printing of the speech heading “Prologus” below each woodcut. However, the reuse of the same block for two plays suggests that the picture is not seen as uniquely relevant to either following text.

The figure of the Prologue is interesting in several ways. First, his great height and bold posture are imposing and masterful: the broad sweeping gesture of the right hand is both natural and authoritative. The costume, while not conspicuously Roman, suggests a flowing robe akin to a toga, rather more than the contemporary Italian dress of the audience, who seem to be male and mostly wearing hats. They may be sitting in four or five rows facing the stage, judging from the consistently even and lower level of the heads nearer the stage, in comparison with the eight much taller figures, who seem to be standing behind them. Alternatively, there might be a raked auditorium floor placing those standing in the rear higher than those in front. There are about thirty-five figures detectable in the pictured audience, but there are clearly other observers outside the frame, as the part of the auditorium actually shown is far narrower and shallower than the stage space presented. The artist’s point of view seems...
likely to be in the middle of a much larger audience, situated on both sides of him and perhaps to his rear. All those shown seem to be paying intense attention to the Prologue — except one at the rear who glances aside.

There is no sign of a proscenium arch, no doubt because the picture stops short of the top and sides of the stage, or perhaps because there was none and the set is simply established in a large interior room, as Eugene Johnson says was the case in 1565 when “the enormous Salone dei Cinquecento in the Palazzo Vecchio was fitted out by Giorgio Vasari for a performance of La Cofanario of Francesco d’Ambra to mark the marriage of the heir to the duchy [of Florence], Francesco, to a Hapsburg princess, Giovanni d’Austria.” (28) He adds later that “another troupe worked in a private house fitted to accommodate the plays”(35) and in Genoa in 1572 the Celos used a room which “had a capacity of only one hundred and fifty gentlemen (no gentlewomen apparently).” (36) Such a room may be in question in the woodcut.

The stage level in our illustration is at a height just above the heads of the front rows of the audience, and the stage seems to be raked because of the high finishing point of the perspective which it creates — either that, or the artist’s point of view is much higher than if he were standing at the audience’s floor-level. For already “in the decades before Shakespeare’s birth, the modern notion of an illusionistic setting for the action had been developed by Italian painters and architects” (Johnson, 23). In our woodcut the set seems very similar to that behind the central arch of the Vicenza stage: a receding series of building facades with doors and an upper level of small windows. The set construction seems ordered to suggest a greatly intensified visual recession rather than the actual distance available, which appears to be closed off to the rear by a flat canvas showing a distant roof, tower, and a rural landscape with trees, mountains, and a cloudy sky. However, this set still looks usable by actors right back to that canvas, unlike the Vicenza theatre’s townscape in which actors “at the end of a street would tower over the flanking palazzi” according to Johnson (41).

The most astonishing thing about the whole stage picture is that, while there are only two buildings fully developed at stage right, there are four at stage left, so that there are four possible entrances from stage right, but no less than seven from stage left. That all these seven spaces are substantial, not illusionistic is demonstrated by the fact that the stage is clearly lit only from stage left, as shown by the shadows on either side of each entrance and window on that side, and also by the fact that at stage left the inner walls, floors, and sills of each entrance are well lit — unlike inner spaces at stage right which remain dark. The almost certain conclusion is that each entrance at stage left is lit by natural light from a window concealed from the audience and that those lights fall right across the stage, as confirmed by the brighter texture on the far outer walls at stage right than those at stage left. The shadow of the Prologue himself also clearly falls to his right. This natural method of stage lighting is confirmed by the complete absence of any other form of illumination in this picture, such as we can see in woodcuts of English indoor theatres in the seventeenth century with clearly drawn candle-holders or single candle-holders. This absence is the more striking in that as early as 1519 Raphael had designed a set for a performance of Lodovico’s I Suppositi in a room at the Roman home of a Cardinal for Pope Leo X. This staging was illuminated by special candelabra spelling out “LEO X. PON. MAXIMUS” which Johnson calls “a dazzling early moment of having one’s name in lights” (25). So the supposed 1580 Terence performance was almost certainly during daylight and probably in a large interior hall with a row of windows on its south side (stage left).

The 1580 woodcut in is startling contrast to the much earlier one from Harvard College Library used in the Riverside edition to illustrate “A Renaissance performance of Terence, from Terence: Comœdies (Lyons, 1493). This Terence edition is almost a century earlier in date than the Venetian one and far closer to medieval outdoor theatre-in-the-round than Renaissance indoor theatres, such as the Phoenix and Blackfriars, which, though decades later, are still more nearly contemporary with the Grifflus edition. This Lyons illustration in the Riverside edition may account for the central hut-like construction which provided the total set for the Royal National Theatre’s 1994 production of Volpone in London (with Michael Gambon in the title role) — for the vast, empty Olivier stage comes close to an undefined medieval open space. However, I would suggest that the 1580 illustration might be used better to show what much Renaissance neo-classical staging actually looked like in Shakespeare’s lifetime. There are two later, more elaborately designed theatres surviving at Sabbioneta and Vicenza, which are closer in plan to the original classical semi-circular theatres. Though they too are compressed indoors, they do not match earlier ad hoc performance staging in the interior of regular halls, such as this one seems to be.

Perhaps the greatest interest of this 1580 woodcut is precisely its modesty, dictated by the small size of the woodblock. The picture appears like a casual modern photograph of a live performance, rather than a carefully documented study of theatrical design and performance methods. Moreover, the picture eludes Eugene Johnson’s censure of the deficiencies of most theatre data, in that this single print of the Terence edition combines all the basic elements of performance: text, actor, audience, theatre and set structure. It may well deserve to stand next to Longeáz’s Titus Andronicus and Utrecht’s Swan Theatre drawings, by preserving a glimpse of elements of Renaissance neo-classical staging in an early indoor theatre. (C.) Hugh Macrae Richmond

Works Cited


Renaissance neoclassical staging in an early indoor theatre. (C.) Hugh Macrae Richmond and set structure. It may well deserve to stand next to Longeáz’s Titus Andronicus and Utrecht’s Swan Theatre drawings, by preserving a glimpse of elements of Renaissance neo-classical staging in an early indoor theatre. (C.) Hugh Macrae Richmond

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