

## Terence's *Adelphoi*: A Revaluation

THE traditional view of the *Adelphoi* has been that it is Terence's masterpiece. Only one voice has so far been raised to question it, and that somewhat tentatively. Sir Gilbert Norwood<sup>1</sup> wonders whether the *Adelphoi* is fully equal to the *Hecyra*, but having said that, he does not press his case. In fact he awards the palm to it because 'it reveals the author as envisaging a wider problem' and his final verdict on it is that it is a 'wonderful drama'.<sup>2</sup> In the face of a tradition so strong one may well hesitate to 'step in where angels fear to tread', but I hesitate still more to accept the tradition without question. While far from denying the many excellences which the play possesses, I find in it flaws of a kind which impair the claim that it is 'wonderful' and 'magnificent' drama. The most serious of these flaws is an uncertainty of intention, arising, so it seems to me, from a conflict between the playwright's own predilections and the demands of his audience. I can think of few dramatists who were so ill at ease with their audience as Terence was with his. His prologues which provide ample evidence of this conflict are too well known to require more than passing mention. What is surprising, however, is that critics have not seen evidence of the conflict in the plays themselves. I must here draw attention to a fact of some importance—namely, that the *Adelphoi* was written after the *Hecyra* in which the conflict had reached its most acute and critical phase. For, as Terence himself tells us,<sup>3</sup> this play received a hearing only on its third presentation: on the two previous occasions the audience had walked out on it. It is not difficult to understand why this happened. The *Hecyra* was a play more serious than was suited to the temper of a Roman audience accustomed to the rollicking farces of Plautus. Indeed Plautus has so spoiled the palates even of Classical scholars for 'serious comedy' that critics have either condemned or overlooked the *Hecyra*—with the single exception of Sir Gilbert Norwood, who regards it as the 'purest example of classical high comedy'.<sup>4</sup> I wouldn't put it very 'high' at that, but would certainly agree that it was too high for the Roman mob.

However, what concerns me more for the moment is the effect on Terence's subsequent work of the failure of his *Hecyra*. Naturally Terence would not court a second failure as complete. He must either go out of business or, if he did continue, he must attune himself to his audience. This would require

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1. *The Art of Terence*, Ch. 7.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Hecyra*, Prologues.

4. *op. cit.*, Ch. 6.

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either a complete withdrawal from 'serious' drama—such a step was impossible for Terence—or a reconciliation between his own serious interests and the expectations of his audience. A playwright of genius usually succeeds in putting across his ideas in a form palatable to his audience without showing signs of conflict. Terence made the attempt in the *Adelphoi* but did not quite succeed.

An early hint of conflict in the *Adelphoi* will be found in the soliloquy with which Micio opens the play. Micio is presented in this play as a man of the world, a gentleman, possessing a shrewd knowledge of men and things, able to face facts, very tactful in the handling of his adopted son Aeschinus, acting on the principle that boys will be boys and should be allowed to sow their wild oats provided always they are open and frank with their parents. Yet this Micio will be found at the beginning of this play, in the course of an anxious soliloquy over his son's failure to return home the previous evening, expressing the following sentiment :—

'And I, what things I imagine from my son's failure to return!  
What anxieties torment me! Perhaps he's caught a chill or had a fall  
or broken a limb'.<sup>5</sup>

Of course even a man of the world may be worried about a son, but surely not to the extent of being tormented with anxiety in case he's caught a chill or had a fall? The inconsistency is all the more striking because it is unlike Terence, who was a much more scrupulous artist than Plautus. I can find no satisfactory explanation for this piece of absurdity except a tormenting anxiety on the part of Terence to provide his audience with food for laughter. That this was his intention here is borne out by the lines that immediately precede :

'It's better to suffer what an angry wife calls down on your head,  
or even thinks to herself, when you've gone out somewhere or return  
home late, than suffer as indulgent parents do'.<sup>6</sup>

The joke about the angry wife is a stock one on the Roman stage. It never palled. And here it leads up to an exaggerated expression of Micio's fears, suggestive of farce.

There is a further oddity about this soliloquy which is also suggestive. All the information conveyed in the soliloquy is conveyed much more dramatically in the scene between Micio and his brother Demea which immediately follows. Any modern producer of this play would almost certainly cut from verse 41 to verse 77, leaving out a not very interesting sermon by Micio on the difference between his brother's views and his own on the management

5. Act I, vv. 35 ff.

6. Act I, vv. 28 ff.

of children. Nothing would be lost, since the difference is dramatically presented in the quarrel between Micio and Demea which begins at verse 78. Now, it had not been Terence's habit in his earlier plays to convey information formally when he could do so dramatically. The fact that he does so in this play I would regard as further evidence that Terence was now anxious to accommodate himself to an audience which, as we may infer from the practice of Plautus, required a great deal of coaching.

The impression of uneasiness conveyed so early in the play is confirmed as the action develops. There is a sad inconsistency in the portrayal of Aeschinus' character, which cannot be dismissed as immaterial, because it touches a very important scene. Aeschinus is a young man who, on his first appearance in Act II, in order to help his somewhat spineless brother Ctesipho, has broken violently into the house of the slave-dealer Sannio and abducted the girl with whom his brother was in love. When Sannio follows him protesting vociferously, he has him socked on the jaw.<sup>7</sup> Yet this same Aeschinus in Act IV is overcome by a feeling of diffidence and hesitation hardly consistent with his bravado in Act II. In Act IV Aeschinus is in some difficulty. News of his abduction of a slave girl has reached the ears of his mistress, and he is suspected of having played her false. He stands on her doorstep hesitating to enter and clear himself. Now it would not be unnatural for a young man in such a situation to feel some nervousness, but the nervousness shown by Aeschinus is out of all proportion to the difficulties of his position, which are (1) that he cannot clear himself without exposing his brother Ctesipho's little intrigue;<sup>8</sup> (2) that he doubts whether he'll be believed even if he does tell the truth.<sup>9</sup> As for (1) it is difficult to see how his brother would suffer through his confiding the secret to his mistress. The only person who has to be kept in the dark is Ctesipho's father Demea. In the case of (2) his doubts seem stupid in view of his good standing with his mistress and her mother—a point carefully established in Act III, vv. 292 ff.

But apart from the exaggeration of the problem there is exaggeration also of Aeschinus' state of mind:

'What torture to be confronted out of the blue with such a calamity! I don't know what to do with myself, how to act. *My limbs are paralysed with fear, my mind dazed with apprehension.* Not a single idea that will stay fixed in my head. Confound it how shall I get out of this mess?'.<sup>10</sup>

Here surely is exaggeration suggestive once again of farce. How is it possible with such language to take Aeschinus seriously? And yet in view

7. Act II, vv. 172-174.

8. Act IV, vv. 625 ff.

9. Act IV, v. 627.

10. Act IV, vv. 610 ff.

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of later developments the scene is one that ought to have been serious. For this scene leads up to the encounter between Micio and Aeschinus<sup>11</sup> in which Micio (who by now knows Aeschinus' secret), pretending not to know about it, gently leads Aeschinus to the point at which he makes a clean breast of everything and is overcome with shame at his failure to reciprocate his father's indulgence and understanding with the frankness that he expected. It is clear that the scene is one of the key scenes in the play, since by it Micio's method of handling a son is justified as against Demea's. It was in fact to provide for this scene between Micio and Aeschinus that Aeschinus was kept hanging on the doorstep until Micio came out of the house that Aeschinus was attempting to enter. The surprising of Aeschinus by Micio at that point is effective and the scene that follows is as excellent as it has usually been considered. But in order to achieve this Terence has had to exaggerate the nature of Aeschinus' difficulty in entering the house, and has queered the pitch for a serious scene by an almost farcical introduction to it.

But there is a still more serious defect. The final act of this play is, to say the least, disconcerting. It is undiluted farce, and therefore inconsistent with the whole tenor of the play up to that point. In the first four and a half acts, Terence traces the conflict between Micio and Demea over their theories of education and the effect of this conflict on the fortunes of two young men. Micio is consistently presented in a much more sympathetic light than Demea, and his theory is justified in its results. For Demea, who rails at his brother for corrupting Aeschinus by his indulgence, is confronted by the rude discovery that Ctesipho, the apple of his eye and the product of his stern discipline, is more rotten than Aeschinus. For what Aeschinus does openly Ctesipho does on the sly, and has not even the spirit to act on his own behalf but must shelter behind a brother and a slave. Besides, though Aeschinus, in spite of his father's indulgence, has withheld his confidence from him on an important matter, he is at least man enough to confess and has the grace to blush. All this is brought out in that excellent scene which I have already referred to in the previous paragraph.<sup>12</sup> In fact that scene could have had no purpose except to establish this point. Now if the play is to be taken seriously it must end on a note harmonious with the position established in the first four and a half acts. Such a conclusion would in fact have been provided at the end of Act V, scene 3, *if Terence had ended the play there*. When all the sins of Aeschinus and Ctesipho have come to light there is a final passage at arms between Micio and the infuriated Demea.<sup>13</sup> It is noticeable that on this occasion Micio does not dismiss Demea's recriminations as scornfully

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11. Act IV, vv. 636 ff.

12. Act IV, vv. 636 ff.

13. Act V, vv. 790 ff.

and casually as he did in their previous disputes.<sup>14</sup> Demea is treated seriously as having a right to be aggrieved since, as he sees it, Micio has corrupted not Aeschinus only but Ctesipho too. Consequently Micio is sweetly reasonable in his argument with Demea,<sup>15</sup> and does in the end succeed in persuading Demea that the boys are still sound at heart and that he must make the best of what has happened. Demea consents to 'give himself over to his brother for this one day'<sup>16</sup> and agrees to his son's marriage with the dancing girl, but promises to pack off to the country the next day with his son and his son's wife. In reply to Micio's quip<sup>17</sup> 'mind she don't run away', Demea, with a spark of his old fire, retorts 'I'll see to that. And out there, I'll make sure, what with cooking and grinding, that she's all smothered in ashes, smoke and flour. Yes, I'll put her to gather stubble at midday, I'll make her as black and charred as a charcoal'. And with a little more exchange of badinage the two brothers go in to celebrate the wedding. This would have provided a perfectly natural final curtain. The problems of the young men have been solved, the conflict between Micio and Demea is over. Everyone is happy except Demea, who, however, agrees to call it a day. But then, just at this point, where the action reaches a natural pause,<sup>18</sup> Terence begins another scene which is long enough to constitute another act. Demea, it appears, is suddenly converted to Micio's philosophy of life, and decides to make himself universally loved by imitating his brother's indulgent ways. He begins by being polite to the slaves Syrus and Geta, goes on to heap favours on Aeschinus, urging him to expedite his marriage by pulling down the wall that divides his house from that of his mistress (this is in fact done), and ends up by stampeding the confirmed old bachelor Micio into a marriage with Aeschinus' mother-in-law-to-be, into giving the slave Syrus his freedom and an elderly relation Hegio a gift of an estate. The whole scene is excellent farce in the best Plautine manner, but hopelessly at odds with everything that has preceded. I must confess I cannot see it, as Sir Gilbert Norwood does, as the 'legitimate fruit of the whole play'.<sup>19</sup> I would draw attention to the following points:—

- (1) The joints between this scene and the previous one positively creak. At the end of Act V, scene 3, Demea is unconverted. At the beginning of Act V, scene 4, he is converted, though nothing has happened to make such a change probable.

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14. *cf.* vv. 120 ff. and vv. 720 ff.

15. *cf. esp.* vv. 806-835.

16. vv. 838-9.

17. vv. 845 ff.

18. End of Act V, scene 3.

19. *op. cit.* end of Ch. 7.

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- (2) There is uncertainty in this scene as to whether Demea is really converted or merely pretends to be converted in order to have Micio hoist with his own petard. Demea's opening soliloquy suggests that Demea is serious. There is genuine bitterness of feeling in it over his unpopularity as compared with Micio's popularity.<sup>20</sup> The purpose of his conversion is explicitly stated in this soliloquy. It is to be loved and valued by his own as Micio is. There is not even a hint at this stage of an intention to 'cut Micio's throat with his own sword', as he later puts it.<sup>21</sup> The first hint of that intention is given only at verse 913, where he chuckles with glee at the thought of how much his generosity is going to cost his brother. The intention is explicitly stated only at verse 958 ('I cut his throat with his own sword') and at the very end of the scene in Demea's lecture to Micio. But the point is that this idea seems to have come to Demea (as I think it came to Terence) in a sudden flash of inspiration as the scene developed, and it superseded the intention with which the scene began. It would seem as though Terence either (a) suddenly saw how he could give the audience what they wanted or (b) suddenly decided that having written four acts and three-fourths of the fifth with fairly serious intentions, he would now show them in a final one-fourth act how well he could out-Plautus Plautus if he wanted to. He may even have been indulging in indirect satire at the expense of Plautus and his audience.
- (3) Micio's behaviour in this final scene is altogether inconsistent with his character as presented consistently in the rest of the play. A man of the world like Micio is hardly likely to marry a wife merely because his brother wanted him to and 'the boy desires it'. It was true he indulged the boy, but that indulgence was presented as part of a reasoned philosophy not as mere weakness of will.

This one scene makes such mockery of the rest of the play that it is difficult to resist the conclusion that Terence has turned a somersault for the gratification of an audience which had once walked out on a serious play of his to witness a rope-dancing act.<sup>22</sup> The gradual progression in the *Adelphoi* from early hesitation between pleasing the audience and pleasing himself to this final cataclysmic surrender to the audience is highly suggestive.

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20. *cf. esp.* vv. 865 ff.

21. v. 958.

22. See *Hecyra*, 1st prologue.