Controlling the Other: Hanno in the *Poenulus*

What are we to make of the *Poenulus*’ Hanno? After all, he is a Carthaginian character on a Roman stage at the end of or soon after the Second Punic War. Scholars have stressed the strong feelings amongst Romans of that period towards Carthaginians (Richlin 2005)—especially if the play coincided with the slave uprisings of the 190s BCE, in which Carthaginian slaves are known to have participated (Shaw 2001). Furthermore, scholars have noted that the prologue to the play emphasizes Hanno’s stereotypically deceptive nature, as well as his skill with languages, and also implies some inappropriate sexual behavior: his method of searching for his kidnapped daughters involves hiring prostitutes for the evening, and afterwards questioning them about their birthplace and family (106-10). However, some scholars do not believe that Hanno must have been portrayed entirely negatively. They point to his frequent pious remarks as evidence for a positive portrayal, as well as his untiring search to find his daughters—a point in stark contrast to the later stories of Carthaginian child sacrifice (Franko 1996, Starks 2000). In addition, Moore notes that Hanno is accompanied by the *tibia* for 27% of his lines, much more than is Lycus the pimp (the play’s major blocking character), and thus Hanno cannot have been considered entirely unappealing (Moore 2004).

This paper employs a new method to address the question of Hanno’s portrayal in this comedy. Previous study of the patterns of illusion-breaking language in Roman Comedy has demonstrated that low-status characters such as slaves and parasites are the most likely to enjoy direct contact with, or express knowledge of, the audience (and thus disrupt the dramatic illusion), although other characters may participate less frequently. (Reference removed.) Hanno, however, is excluded from audience interaction entirely, which is surprising because he not only behaves similarly to the figure of the clever slave but even more closely parallels a helpful *senex* who does employ theatrical language. Hanno, a unique figure on the Roman stage, shares characteristics with both powerless and powerful characters. While Hanno himself is a wealthy man, even controlling his nephew’s inheritance, he is rendered somewhat powerless by his different appearance and dissimilar customs. Furthermore, he demonstrates the same innate ability for and propensity towards deception that the clever slaves and parasites—the most frequent addressers of the audience—do (111-13). Moreover, even if we compare him to the wealthy *senex* Periplectomenus in the *Miles Gloriosus*—Hanno’s closest parallel in age and behavior—Hanno never uses the same limited theatrical language as does Periplectomenus. (For example, Periplectomenus also assists in the deception of a blocking character in the effort to gain access to a young man’s beloved, and mentions—perhaps revealing an awareness of his role on stage—how Palaestrio stands quite ‘comically’ [*comoedice*] at 213, unknowingly adopting the same language used by Palaestrio a little over 100 lines before.)

In contrast to Hanno, many other characters in the *Poenulus* enjoy a very explicit rapport with the audience: the freedmen Advocati, the slave Milphio, and Agorastocles himself all betray an interest in keeping the audience satisfied (the freedmen break the dramatic pretense to explain that the bags of money are nothing but lupine seeds at 597-9, both they and Milphio refuse to bore the audience by repeating information already known to them at 550-4 and 920-2, and Agorastocles prevents Hanno from delaying the progress of the play any further at 1224). The pattern of metatheatrical and illusion-breaking language in the Plautine corpus thus helps to demonstrate how Plautus balances his comedy’s subversive impulses: although he places a Carthaginian on stage and allows him to reveal his stereotypical skill at deception and language, Plautus never pushes things too far by letting Hanno speak to the audience, or develop much of a rapport with them. In this way Plautus manages to balance the requirements of his inherently subversive dramatic form with those of his more conservative audience.

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