

ADULESCENS AS VIRGO  
A NOTE ON TERENCE'S *EUNUCH* 908

Z M Packman (University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg)

Terence's *Eunuchus* has been the object of intensive study in a number of recent publications, among them: Stavros A Frangoulidis, "Performance and improvisation in Terence's *Eunuchus*" (1994); Louise Pearson Smith, "Audience response to rape: Chaerea in Terence's *Eunuchus*" (1994); Katerina Philippides, "Terence's *Eunuchus*: Elements of the marriage ritual in the rape scene" (1995); and Cynthia S Dessen, "The figure of the eunuch in Terence's *Eunuchus*" (1995). The purpose of this note is to call attention to the extraordinary case of the application of a female character designation, *virgo*, to a male character, an *adulescens*, in this drama, and to the context in which this application occurs; and to suggest that this linguistic event is relevant to arguments advanced in several of these recent publications.

The line in question is *Eunuchus* 908, and the story context, briefly, is this: A young man, Chaerea, has followed a young girl who caught his notice, and found that she's entered the household of a courtesan, Thais, to whom she'd been given as a gift by an admirer. Chaerea has gained admission to the same household by impersonating a eunuch, a gift from another admirer. His rape of the young girl inside the house is reported by him to a friend, and discovered by Thais and her maid Pythias, after his departure from her house. Chaerea meets Thais and Pythias in the street, still in eunuch's clothes for want of a place to change out of them, and reveals his true identity to them while they reveal to him the true identity of the girl he has attacked, now proven to be a marriageable young woman of citizenship status. Chaerea proposes marriage, but is unwilling to meet his prospective brother-in-law, now approaching, in eunuch's clothing. He begs to be allowed to hide himself in Thais' house, while the maid Pythias expresses ironic astonishment at his newfound sense of propriety. Here are lines 905 and following, in the Latin of Ashmore's text (1910):

*CH.* perii hercle: obsecro  
abeamus intro, *Thais*: nolo me in via  
in hac veste videat. *PY.* quam ob rem tandem? an quia pudet?  
*CH.* id ipsum. *PY.* id ipsum? virgo vero!

*Chaerea*: I'm done for, by heaven: I beg you,  
*Thais*, let's go inside: I don't want him to see me in the street  
in this clothing. *Pythias*: Why on earth is that? Because you're embarrassed?  
*Chaerea*: Exactly that. *Pythias*: Exactly that? *virgo vero!*

Ashmore's note suggests, for the last two words, "in truth a maid!", ironically applied to Chaerea, and Donatus' remarks on the line make it clear that this is his interpretation (Karsten 1912). Published translations of Terence, for the most part, agree. So Robert Graves (1962), "You blush like a virgin, Mr. Chaerea"; Douglas

Parker (1974), "A veritable virgin!"; F Perry (1929), "Here's a maid!"; and Frank O Copley (1967), "My! Innocent little boy, isn't he?"

Earlier translators and commentators, however, have sometimes interpreted the last words of Pythias' remarks in this exchange as referring to the young girl who has been the object of Chaerea's attentions. So H T Riley (1859), for the words *virgo vero*, understood by others to apply, ironically, to Chaerea: "But the young woman —." And the anonymous translator in Duckworth's compendium (1942) offers: "... and how about the maid?" A H Westerhoff and G Stallbaum (1831) offer this note on the line: *Haec cum stomacho dicta, q.d. Pudet se in via videri cum veste spadonis; virgo vero abs te vitata est, cuius te pudere debebat*, "This is spoken with anger, as if to say: It embarrasses him to be seen in the street with the clothing of a eunuch—but the girl was violated by you, which you ought to have been embarrassed to do." And N Camus (1758) punctuates line 908 with question marks (*Id ipsum? Virgo vero?*), and gives this paraphrase: *Virgo vero vitata an pudori fuit?* "The girl being violated, however, was that a matter of embarrassment?"

In the absence of argument, which I have not been able to find, for or against either of the interpretations of *Eunuchus* 908 described above, I would speculate that the earlier, and now as it seems less common, recommended itself to some scholars for two reasons, not entirely unrelated. One was that the application of the term *virgo* to a male character was unparalleled in Terence, Roman comedy in general, or even in Latin authors generally until the emergence of a Christian literature in that language. This seems to me certain in the case of Plautus and Terence, which I myself have searched for parallels. For other pre-Christian writers, I depend on the lexicographers: neither the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* nor any standard Latin dictionary in any modern language available to me gives any indication that the term *virgo* was ever so used. I stress the word "ever", as the standard dictionaries give no indication that Terence used the term *virgo* in such a way, either, and none cites *Eunuchus* 908. The lexicographers' entries under *virgo* would most naturally be understood to mean that they adopted what I have called the alternative interpretation of this line, as yet another place, among many, where that word refers to an unmarried girl. Alternatively, I suppose, they may simply not have wished to deal with the interpretation of this line, and omitted citation of it for that reason.

A second reason for the earlier, alternative interpretation of *Eunuchus* 908 might well be the usage of the word *virgo* elsewhere in this play. Forms of the word *virgo* appear more often in *Eunuchus* (thirty-six occurrences) than in the other five plays of Terence combined (thirty-one), and in at least thirty-five of those cases—leaving aside the line here under consideration—the word is applied exclusively to the young girl who is the object of Chaerea's attentions. Moreover, no alternative comedy-female designation is applied to her in the text: not *mulier*, a term used of women of every category in the text of Terence, including those otherwise designated *virgo* in *Andria* (133 *et alibi*), *Hauton Timorumenos* (231 *et alibi*) Phormio (307 *et alibi*) and *Adelphoe* (647); nor *meretrix*, although she is attached, however newly, to the household of one such; nor *ancilla*, though she's believed to

be a slave. If it would be surprising to find the word *virgo* applied to a male character in any Roman comedy, this comedy is perhaps the one where it seems most surprising.

On the other hand, the principle of the *lectio difficilior* might be applied to interpretation in the case of *Eunuchus* 908, and if the more surprising and uncommon interpretation—that the word *virgo* is in fact applied to the male character addressed in the line—is accepted, it seems to me to promote a meaningful reading of the play. For one thing, it links the false eunuch, Chaerea, with the true eunuch, Dorus, described in *Eunuchus* 357—by Chaerea himself—as *senem mulierem*. The use of the term *mulier* to describe a man, even a eunuch, is nearly as rare as the similar deployment of the word *virgo*—the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* cites this line of *Eunuchus*, along with Plautus *Bacchides* 845 (*non me arbitratur militem sed mulierem*, “He thinks me not a soldier but a woman”) and Catullus 63.27 (*Attis ... notha mulier*, “Attis ... a false woman”)—and there is a pleasing balance in finding that the young man who has applied the term *woman* to an elderly eunuch is himself described as *girl* after donning the eunuch’s costume.

Moreover, the single application of the term *virgo* to the *adulescens* Chaerea in a play where that term is otherwise used exclusively of the young girl pursued and assaulted by him, it seems to me, represents a significant form of reversal in the drama that is to some extent a reversal of expectations as well. Rather than an identification with the aggressor on the part of the victim, this is an identification with the victim experienced by, or at least perceived in, the aggressor. The way to the Roman-comedy happy ending, in which the interests of rapist and victim are reconciled in marriage, is prepared by a stage in which the rapist shares some of the characteristics and feelings of the victim. The following scene, where the maid Pythias spins out a fantasy in which Chaerea is himself made a victim of sexual assault, explores some of the implications of this reversal.

And if the application of the term *virgo* to males is unparalleled in pre-Christian authors, the attribution of maidenly qualities to them is not. That is the basis of Donatus’ gloss on *Eunuchus* 908, as referred to above: *quasi ... virginali verecundia*, “of, as it were, maidenly modesty”. So also, with the author’s approval, of Persius in Probus’ *Vita* (32: *fuit morum lenissimorum, verecundiae virginalis, famae pulchrae*, “He was very gentle-mannered, of maidenly modesty, of excellent repute”) and with the speaker’s approval, of a young man in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* (23: *speciosa habitudine ... virginali prorsus verecundia*, “of good appearance—and truly maidenly modesty”). And so, more pertinently, with an irony at least as furious as Pythias’ in *Eunuchus*, Cicero of his opponent in *pro Quinctio* 39: *homo timidus, virginali verecundia*, “a timid person, of maidenly modesty”. Terence’s deployment of the term *virgo* in *Eunuchus* 908 can easily be understood as a stronger version of this more familiar expression—a case of metonymy, rather than simile, but within a familiar figure-of-speech field.

Like the lexicographers, interpreters of Terence’s *Eunuchus* may have omitted reference to line 908 because they shared some earlier editors’ and translators’ belief that the word *virgo* referred in that line, as elsewhere, to a young woman in the

play, rather than to the young man addressed by the speaker of the line. But if the word *virgo* is understood as most twentieth-century editors and translators have understood it, as applying ironically to that young man, and if the observations made above hold good, then the line is pertinent to interpretations of the *Eunuchus* advanced in recent publications.

With reference to the studies cited at the beginning of this note: Smith (1994) presents evidence in support of the proposition that the character and behaviour of the young Chaerea are reprehensible in ways that would have been as pertinent to an ancient audience as they are to today's readers. Among other things, she observes that Chaerea's excuse for his assault upon the young woman who had attracted his attention—*conservam esse credidi*, "I thought she was a fellow slave", line 856—is undermined by its assumption of a shared slave status which is not in fact his own, and I would add to this that, prior to pronouncing this line, he has only once referred to his victim by the term *conserva* (line 366), while describing her eight times as what she turned out to be: *virgo*, a free and citizen-class girl (lines 293, 313, 342, 565, 577, 583, 592, 601)—five of those times while describing his attack upon her (lines 565, 577, 583, 592, 601).

In Philippides' article (1995), she argues to somewhat the opposite effect, identifying aspects of the ancient marriage ceremony which have been incorporated into the story of Chaerea, preparing the way for the marriage arranged at the end of the play. She cites, among other such features, Vidal-Naquet's observations to the effect that the Greek adolescent's initiation into marriageability was dramatized through disguise in feminine attire, and that Chaerea's assumption of eunuch's clothing represents this kind of transitional experience. Dessen's study (1995) discusses boundary blurring and boundary transgression, especially in terms of gender, in the *Eunuchus*. Philippides and Dessen focus on terms applied in particular to Chaerea—*adulescens* and *vir*, in one case; *vir* and *homo*, in the other. I would suggest that the single application to this same character of the term *virgo* amounts to an emphatic internal confirmation of the theme of gender roles and gender reversal under consideration by these scholars.

In Frangoulidis' article (1994), attention is drawn to the two-plays-within-the-play represented in *Eunuchus*, first, by the courtesan Thais' plot, inadequately supported by her present lover Phaedria, to charm a former lover into giving her as a present a slave-girl known to her from a shared childhood; and, second, by the slave Parmeno's plot, overenthusiastically supported by his master's son Chaerea, to introduce that young man into Thais' household so that he may gain access to that same young girl. I would suggest that the maid Pythias' plot to punish Parmeno, which she carries out single-handed, represents a third example of play-within-this-play: a reversal and correction of the Parmeno plot where, albeit in fantasy, the victimizer in the one plot becomes the victim in the other—and victim of a matching form of assault. The crucial point in the formation of Pythias' plot is her own recognition of Chaerea's vulnerability. In the scene under consideration, Pythias has continued to view Chaerea, against his assurances and her mistress's, as an agent of violence—until, at the end of the scene, she sees that the youth is

genuinely embarrassed to be seen in eunuch's clothing by respectable persons. It is then that she dubs him *virgo*, and it is then that she becomes able to imagine him as an object, rather than a perpetrator, of violence.

In summary: there are two ways of interpreting the word *virgo* as it appears in line 908 of Terence's *Eunuch*: as applying to the young woman referred to by that term in its every other appearance in the text of that play, or as applying to the young man addressed by the speaker of the line—and the absence of citations of this line in dictionaries and literary studies suggests that many modern scholars consider the question unresolved. In favour of the first interpretation is the fact that the word *virgo* is not otherwise applied to a male in any known text prior to Christian times. On the other hand, there are loose parallels to such application in other texts which use the word *mulier* in such a way, or where qualities attributed to males are modified by the adjective *virginalis*. Editors and translators of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries sometimes took the view that the word *virgo* in *Eunuchus* 908 did in fact refer to the young woman in the play, but the majority of more recent editions and translations interpret the word as applying to the young man addressed, and that was also the view of the first commentator whose view is preserved—Donatus. As this interpretation is shown to be consistent with the thematics of the play as described in recent scholarship, it is recommended that it be accepted, and treated as evidence of the author's aims and methods in his composition.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anonymous 1942. The Eunuch. In Duckworth, G (ed), *The Complete Roman Drama*. New York: Random House.
- Ashmore, S G 1910. *The comedies of Terence*. 2d ed. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Camus, N 1758. *P. Terenti Carthaginensis Afri comoediae sex*. London: Hitch and Hawes.
- Copley, F O 1967. *The comedies of Terence*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Dessen, C S 1995. The figure of the eunuch in Terence's *Eunuchus*. *Helios* 22:123–137.
- Graves, R 1962. *The comedies of Terence*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing.
- Frangoulidis, S A 1994. Performance and improvisation in Terence's *Eunuchus*. *QUCC* n.s. 48:121–130.
- Karsten, H T (ed) 1912. *Commenti Donatiani scholia genuina et spuria*. Leiden: Sijthoff.
- Parker, D 1974. The Eunuch. In Bowie, P (ed), *The complete comedies of Terence*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Perry, F 1929. *The comedies of Terence*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Philippides, K 1995. Terence's *Eunuchus*: Elements of the marriage ritual in the rape scene. *Mnemosyne* 48:272–284.
- Riley, H T 1859. *The comedies of Terence*. New York: Harper & Bros.

- Smith, L P S 1994. Audience response to rape: Chaerea in Terence's *Eunuchus*. *Helios* 21:21-38.
- Westerhoff, A H & Stallbaum, G 1831. *P. Terentii Afri comoediae sex*. Leipzig: Hartmann.