HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

TERENCE

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

(185 B.C.E.-159 B.C.E.)

Works

The Woman of Andros   (166 B.C.E.)
The Mother in Law (165 B.C.E.)
The Self-Tormentor (163 B.C.E.)
Phormio (161 B.C.E.)
Eunuchus (161 B.C.E.)
The Brothers. (160 B.C.E.)

Biography

Views differ on the birthday of Terence, some saying l95 B.C.E., others 185 B.C.E. He may have been born in Carthage, or in Greek Italy, from a slave woman taken there from Carthage. Terence's cognomen--originally a nickname, then a hereditary name—was *Afer*, which indicates he may have been from a Libyan tribe which the Romans called *Afri*.(Presumably he was taken to Rome as a slave.) This assumption, about Terence's birthplace and origins, is based on a fine point concerning the term *afer*, which, prior to the destruction of Carthage (146 B.C.E.) referred to the non-Carthaginian Libyco-Berbers—the present day Berbers--while after that destruction the term *afer* had a different meaning, referring to anyone from the land of the *Afri*, in present day Tunisia. It is therefore highly likely that Terence belonged to Berber ancestry. He was sold to a Roman senator, P. Terentius Lucanus, who was impressed by 'Terence's' abilities, and before long freed him from slavery. From this man, of course, 'Terence' took the name Terence, and presumably was launched into Roman society—where he became a member of the Scipionic Circle, a gathering of Phil-hellenic intellectuals and writers who were prominent forces in the thinking of the Roman Republic. What remains, of Terence's short and brilliant life, we know little. It seems he traveled to Greece at the age of 25, and never returned to Rome. It is believed that he may have died at sea, but all we are sure of, is that he had already put on six startlingly brilliant plays in Rome, before the trip to Greece.

Achievements

Mirroring society   Terence was born close to the date of the death of Plautus (254 B.C.E.-184 B.C.E.) ; the two men, therefore were the continuing founding legacy of Roman drama, which developed in tandem with the growing military development and internationalization—the Punic Wars, the debated invasion of Greece—that marked this formative period of the Roman Republic. Both Plautus and Terence brought the public that kind of popular self-mirroring which the person on the street wanted, charmed as ever to see comedy-shaped images of himself. Terence's achievement, as we see in any of his plays, partly involves the pleasure he gave the ordinary Roman citizen, who doubtless learned something about 'himself,' from seeing plays that showed him up close.

Heightening the comic art   Terence wrote a clear, concise, sharp Latin, which not only delighted his Roman audiences, but played an important role in his legacy to future centuries. His Latin was, for example, valued as a learning tool in mediaeval
monasteries, and used for instruction of youth in Latin grammar.(Though full of 'dangerous pagan thinking,' Terence's language was praised in the Middle Ages, for its clarity and euphony, and two of the earliest British comedies—*Gammer Gurton's Needle* and *Ralph Roister Doister* were heavily dependent on plotting borrowed from Terence.) But his legacy went far beyond that model for clarity, praised by the U.S. President, John Adams, who wrote that 'his (Terence's) language has simplicity and an elegance that make him proper to be accurately studied as a model.' Terence's

Woman of Andros became the model for Thornton Wilder's splendid novel of that name, published in l930. Such fine Afro- American writers as Phyllis Wheatley and Langston Hughes have paid tribute to this major ethnic African writer.

Characters

Formulaic types   By and large, Terence deals with a limited number of character roles—a young man hopelessly in love; an aged parent, lenient sometimes, severe at others; a cunning slave, a courtesan, a wife or mother, a maidservant, a parasite, a slave dealer, and a soldier; in short, if not a full-coverage display of the personality types of the society, a concentrated look at a vigorous cross section of sharply inter-involved figures. In the majority of these plays the action concerns a passionate love of young man for courtesan (or two young guys for two gals), the efforts of dad either to block or support the marriage prospects, and some kind of cunning slave trickery directed at promoting the slave's master's passions. Mistaken identity, late in the game recognition, and ironic interventions of fate: all these factors contribute to varying the formula situations into which the characters fall.

Individuals   The individual characters who enact roles in these action networks are not without individual and striking traits—for all their expected role playing. In *The Eunuch*, the young lover guilty of rape makes what, for the time and culture, is a startling *mea culpa*, followed by his expressed willingness to support and live with the girl. In the *Phormio* a complex character, friend and parasite at the same time, helps two young friends carry through their love affairs. In *The Mother in Law* we become acquainted with remarkably flexible female characters, who deal complexly with marital conflict, and, more than anywhere else in Terence's work, show us formulaic patterns of action and behavior, carried out by multi dimensional personalities. In *The Woman of Andros* the conniving slave, attempting to assist his master, instead only makes things harder for him. When we first meet the cunning Davos he is muttering out loud to himself—as he emerges from the house of his master, Simo. The muttering to himself is a kind of inquisitory experiment, on Davos' path to setting up a marriage between Simo's son, Pamphylus, and the girl, the sweetie, that Simo's son longs to marry. In order to promote that marriage, and to get Pamphylus off the hook of marrying the 'proper' girl his dad has destined for him, Davos needs to know what Dad's limits of tolerance are. Davos hopes to get a feel for that issue by letting Dad know indirectly, through the above muttering scene, how the land lies, and by thus bugging Dad into showing his own hand.