

6511
DUTSCH, D.
2008

PYTHAGORIZOUSA IN PLAUTUS' *POENULUS*?

By

DOROTA DUTSCH

In the last hundred years, correlations between New Comedy and Hellenistic ethical doctrine, especially that of the Peripatos, have received much scholarly attention¹. Pythagoreanism in Greek comedy was mentioned relatively recently in this context by Geoffrey Arnott in his commentary on the fragments of Alexis's *Tarantinoi* and *Pythagorizousa* (Arnott 1996). So far, however, little attention has been paid to this ideology – which was native to Italy – as a potential intellectual partner to Roman comedy². In the present essay I argue that Pythagorean echoes can be detected in one particular comedy, Plautus' *Poenulus*, and ask whether Plautus' audience might indeed have recognized them as such. Should the answer to the latter question be affirmative, we would be calling attention to a hitherto neglected nuance of the intellectual background of the *fabula palliata*.

1. *PUDOR MERETRICIUS*

My case study is the discourse of *pudor* put in the mouth of the prostitute Adelpheasium in the *Poenulus*, which I will compare to pseudo-Pythagorean letters and treatises circulating under the names of 6th- or 5th-century female philosophers of that school. These texts ascribed to Melissa, Phytis, and Theano contain primarily advice to women; they are almost certainly pseudonymous and have been dated between the fourth and third centuries BCE by Thesleff (1961)³.

¹ Peripatetic (e.g. Webster 1950: 195–219; Gaiser 1967: 8–38; Wehrli 1970: 147–152) and Stoic (e.g. Pohlenz 1940: 270).

² Arcelliaschi's discussion (1982) of the original performance of the *Amphitrurio* is, to the best of my knowledge, the only exception.

³ This dating has been challenged by several studies, both of particular authors of Pseudo-Pythagorica and of groups of texts (cf. Macris 2002: 79–85), but no such challenge has been set regarding the date of the texts (allegedly) authored by women, for example Plant 2001 accepts

Adelphasium ("Little Sister") and her sister enter the stage splendidly attired (210). They are on their way to the festival of Aphrodisia, and tell the audience that, in the hope of finding solvent clients at the festival, they have worked extremely hard on their appearances. Little Sister feels that their efforts were too much and launches into a critique of women's excessive grooming, eventually advocating her unique brand of moral excellence: *pudor meretricius*, or whorish virtue. Her program calls for shorter bath time, modest attire, and chastity, prescriptions in obvious conflict with her professional aspirations. For the purposes of this paper, I am not interested in Adelphasium's identity crisis and its implications (though they are fascinating), but will instead focus exclusively on the pedigree of the wisdom she preaches.

Her lecture begins with a joke. A man who wishes to take on loads of work (*uim negoti*) should buy himself either a woman or a ship. Why? Both must be outfitted countless times⁴. To explain what she means, Adelphasium describes the bathing, scrubbing, washing, and rinsing that kept both sisters and six other people busy from dawn till broad day⁵. The length of women's baths and the extent of women's spending are frequent objects of Plautine jokes, so this aspect of Little Sister's speech is in itself not particularly remarkable⁶. What is remarkable is the conclusion of her speech, which seems to refer to a specific ideal of purity (*Poen.* 228–232):

Postremo modus muliebris nullus est.
Neque umquam lauando et fricando
scimus facere neniam.
Nam quae lauta est nisi perculta est, meo
quidem animo quasi inluta est.

Thesleff's dating. As for the dates of the Pseudopythagorica in general, the opinion currently prevailing among scholars is that this type of writing flourished between third and second centuries BCE (so Centrone 1996: 148–150 and Kahn 2001: 74) but began in the fourth (Riedweg 2005: 122).

⁴ 214 f.: "Neque umquam sat istae duae res ornantur/ neque is ulla ornandi satis satietas est" ("These two things are never sufficiently outfitted, nor is there an end to outfitting them sufficiently"). For *sat* as a part of philosophical vocabulary in the second century, see Turpilus (fr. 144 Ribbeck): "Ut philosophi aiunt isti quibus quidvis sat est" ("As those philosophers say for whom anything is sufficient").

⁵ It may be worth noting that the morning toilette is both described in eight verses and requires eight people – two girls + four maidservants + two slaves – and that the number eight was considered by the Pythagoreans "feminine"; cf. Burkert 1972: 469, esp. n. 18. Maurach (1975, *ad loc.*) notes another numeric peculiarity in the passage: the lines 210–253 form a harmonious sequence, with 210–232 falling into three sections of 5, 8, and 8 verses, and 233–253 into a sequence of four sections of 7, 7, 7, 6 lines respectively.

⁶ Dinarchus, for example, claims that Phronesium has spent more time in the water than any fish (*Truc.* 322–325).

After all, there is no such thing as feminine *modus*.

And we are never able to stop

Washing and scrubbing,

Indeed, a woman who is washed seems dirty to me, unless she is *perculta*.

The word *per-culta* is quite puzzling (cf. Maurach 1975) because, when taken to mean 'well-groomed', it directly contradicts the spirit of Adelphasium's diatribe against excessive grooming. This logical conundrum disappears if we notice that Little Sister says that the *perculta* is a woman who applies the abstract principle of *modus*, the right measure, to her appearance. In other words, her physical *cultus* reflects a meta-physical one. Adelphasium's point is thus that a woman, no matter how well she washes, remains dirty unless she is also decorous. In this context, the Latin adjective *per-culta* would thus seem to render the Greek term εὐκοσμία, 'decorous'. The ideal of εὐκοσμία is associated, in the most general sense, with orderly behavior in public'. Female εὐκοσμία in Athens and other Greek cities was the concern of male officials, the *gunaikonomoi*, who were in charge of curtailing luxury and supervising women's behaviour at feasts and funerals⁷. Εὐκοσμία was also a subject considered by male lawgivers (Aeschines, *In Tim.* 183) and philosophers (Aristotle, *Polit.* 1322b 39). What we witness in Plautus' *Poenulus*, however, is a woman voicing concern for women's εὐκοσμία. This is by no means a common literary device, and the only parallel to it is found in the *Letter to Cleareta*, attributed to the Pythagorean philosopher Melissa, to which I will soon return⁸.

For now, let us go back to Little Sister and her discussion of *modus*. As she continues her sermon, the Plautine *meretrix* insists that moderation is the best attitude to adopt in all matters: "Modus in omnibus rebus, soror, optimum est habitu" ("moderation is the best attitude to take in all matters", 238). The idea of moderation was a common element of Greek popular morality⁹. But Plautus' "Modus in omnibus rebus optimum est habitu" looks like a translation of the

⁷ Gold (1977: 3–5) offers an insightful history of the concept up to the fourth century BCE, stressing its political and military connotations.

⁸ On the *gunaikonomoi*, see O'Sullivan 2001 and her references.

⁹ Thesleff (1965: 115–121): Αὐτομάτως ἐμὴν φαίνη πλέονα τῶν καλῶν ἔχειν· τὸ γὰρ ἐσπουδασμένως ἐθέλειν τὸ ἀκούσαι περὶ γυναικὸς εὐκοσμίας καλὰν ἐλπίδα διδοῖ ὅτι μέλλεις πολιοῦσθαι κατ' ἀρετὴν ("You seem to be naturally filled with noble qualities. The fact that you so zealously desire to hear about proper conduct for women provides the noble hope that you will grow old in righteousness"). My Pandora search revealed twenty-four instances of εὐκοσμία of women discussed in Greek texts; the letter attributed to Melissa is the only example that features a female speaker discussing this notion.

¹⁰ Apparently, the seven sages offered to Delphic Apollo the concept of μηδὲν ἄγαν as the fruit of their collective wisdom; cf. Pausanias X 24, 1. The gnomon appears in Theognis (e.g. 1335; 401), Plato (e.g. 228e 3; 45e 1), and Euripides (*Hip.* 265); Plutarch (116D 11) cites a fragment from Pindar containing this proverb.

gnomon μέτρον δ' ἐπὶ πᾶσιν ἄριστον, which occurs in the corpus of Greek texts six times, each time associated with the Pythagoreans. Most importantly for our purposes, this proverb appears in the Pythagorean *Golden Verses*¹¹, a fourth-century poem in hexameter, whose Latin translation might have been in circulation in the second-century; the proverb also appears in Theano's *Letter to Callisto*, another pseudonymous Pythagorean text addressed to women¹².

Adelphasium's speech concludes with her own curious proposal of *pudor meretricius*, or "whorish modesty" (304–307):

Meretricem pudorem gerere magi' decet quam purpuram
magi'que id meretricem pudorem quam aurum gerere, condecet.
Pulchrum ornatum turpes mores peius caeno conlinunt,
lepidi mores turpem ornatum facile factis comprobant.

For a prostitute it is more fitting to deck herself with modesty than a purple robe.
And indeed to wear modesty rather than gold is more befitting a prostitute.
An ugly disposition stains a pretty dress worse than mud.
A beautiful disposition will easily earn approval for an ugly dress.

The very idea of a prostitute preaching chastity is of course hilarious, but Adelphasium's attitude, in addition to being a paradox, also appears to be a parody of Pythagorean advice for women. Melissa's *Letter to Cleareta* – which, as we saw, features a woman advising another woman on εὐκοσμία asserts precisely the opposite, namely, that purple and gold are fitting *only* for prostitutes. Wives – unlike prostitutes – do not need them because they are already adorned by modesty:

χρὴ ὦν τὰν σώφρονα καὶ ἐλευθέραν [...] ἡμεν δὲ τᾷ ἑσθᾷ λευκοσίμονα καὶ καθάριον καὶ ἀφελῇ [...] παραιτητέον γὰρ αὐτὰ τὰν διαυγῇ καὶ διαπόρφυρον καὶ τὰ χρυσόπαστα τῶν ἐνδυμάτων. ταῖς ἐταίραις γὰρ τάδε χρήσιμα ποττὰν τῶν πλεόνων θήραν, τὰς δὲ ποθ' ἓνα τὸν ἴδιον εὐαρεστούσας γυναικὸς κόσμος ὁ τρόπος πέλει καὶ οὐχ αἱ στολαί.

A modest and elegant woman [...] must wear a clean, white, and simple dress [...]. She must banish genuine purple dresses and those decorated with purple or gilded from her wardrobe. These things are useful for prostitutes [...]; character, not

¹¹ See *GV* (38b–39): μηδ' ἀνελεύθερος ἴσθι. μέτρον δ' ἐπὶ πᾶσιν ἄριστον./ πρᾶσσε δὲ ταῦθ', ἃ σε μὴ βλάψει, λόγισαι δὲ πρὸ ἔργου ("But don't be stingy. Measure is best in all things./ Do the things that will not harm you, always think before the deed"). Thom (1995: 162, n. 299) lists other references to this maxim in Greek literature.

¹² Thesleff (1965: 197 f.): καὶ γὰρ ἐπὶ τῶν θεραπειῶν ταυτὸν· ἡ μὲν ἄγαν ἄνεσις διαφωνίαν ἐμποιεῖ τῆς πειθαρχίας, ἡ δὲ ἐπίτασις τῆς ἀνάγκης διάλυσιν τῆς φύσεως. καὶ ἐπὶ τούτου δεῖ νοεῖν, μέτρον δ' ἐπὶ πᾶσιν ἄριστον. ἔρρωσο ("...and the same holds true about your maidservants. An excessively lax discipline makes [your] authority inconsistent, while an increase [in discipline] inevitably undoes [their] strength. You must keep in mind the proverb 'moderation is best in all things'. Farewell!").

clothing, is a fitting ornament for a woman who seeks to please only her own husband.

Both passages indicate that gold and purple are inappropriate for women who are already bedecked with decency. However, whereas Melissa gives this advice to wives, Little Sister appropriates it for her perverse discourse of *pudor meretricius*. Incidentally, her slogan, "Decency (*pudor*), not clothing, is a fitting ornament for a woman", echoes a motto found in yet another of the pseudo-Pythagorean texts addressed to women mentioned above, *Περὶ γυναικὸς σωφροσύνας* (*On Woman's Self-control*), attributed to Phytis¹³.

The similarities between advice to women found in pseudo-Pythagorean texts and the Plautine lesson of whorish morality are so persistent that one is tempted to postulate that the *Poenulus* deliberately pokes fun at the virtues proposed in these texts. First, however, we need to ask if it is historically feasible for Pythagorean concepts to have found their way into the *Poenulus*.

2. PYTHAGORA, CIVIS ROMANUS

The Pythagorizing woman is a figure attested to in several fragments and titles of Greek comedies, including those by Alexis¹⁴. Since Alexis happens to be the author of the *Karchedonios*, the main model for Plautus' *Poenulus*¹⁵, it seems perfectly reasonable to conjecture that his play mocked some pseudo-Pythagorean instructions for women, such as those from the texts that came down to us under the names of Theano, Phytis, and Melissa, and that some of that humour found its way into the Latin comedy.

While this may be an interesting piece of trivia, the real question for a historian of Roman theater is what Plautus' audience would have made of such reminiscences, if, indeed, they are such. Needless to say, it would be naive to pretend that pseudo-Pythagorean texts attributed to women were widely read in early second-century Rome. But it would be equally naive to claim that Pythagorean lore was unknown to Plautus' audience. In the third century BCE, the Romans

¹³ Thesleff (1965: 153): χρώματι δὲ φαιδρύνεσθαι τὰν ποτῶπα μὴ ἐπακτῶ καὶ ἀλλοτρίῳ, τῷ δ' οἰκῇ τῷ σώματος δι' αὐτῷ τῷ ὕδατος ἀπολουόμεναν, κοσμεῖν δὲ μᾶλλον αὐτὰν αἰσχύνῃ ("And she should brighten her face not with an imported and foreign colour but with the natural colour of her own body; having washed with water, she should adorn herself with modesty"). Cf. also Iamblichus' rendition of Pythagoras' address to women (*VP* 11, 56).

¹⁴ See fr. 201 and 202 Kassel and Austin (= K–A); cf. also Cratinus, fr. 6 and 7 K–A, Antiphanes, fr. 133 and 225 K–A, and Aristophanes, fr. 223 K–A.

¹⁵ Cf. Arnott 1996: 284–287; Alexis was a native of Magna Graecia known for exploiting Pythagorean motifs in at least two of his plays, *Pythagorizousa* and *Tarantinois* (see above). The fragments of the *Tarantinois* show the playwright's conscious irony towards Pythagorean views, which is comparable with the ridicule of the discourses of virtue and abstinence in the *Poenulus*.

honoured Pythagoras by erecting his statue in their Forum (Pliny, *NH* XXXIV 26). A spurious, but tenacious, tradition associated Pythagoras with Rome's legendary king Numa. In 181 BCE, someone tried to capitalize on this connection, orchestrating a "discovery" of Pythagorean books allegedly authored by the king, which the senate immediately ordered to be burned¹⁶. The attempted forgery would seem to indicate that not only Pythagorean ideas, but also pseudo-Pythagorean writings, were a phenomenon well-known in early second-century Rome. Another potential medium for disseminating Pythagorean ideas – especially among women – could have been the Bacchanalian cult suppressed in 196 BCE, which, as Walter Burkert argues, could have contained elements of both Orphism and Pythagoreanism¹⁷.

Cicero's references to an eclectic Pythagorean poem authored by Appius Claudius Caecus and to the Elder Cato's familiarity with memory exercises, which he knew from the *Golden Verses*, corroborate the impression that Pythagoreanism would indeed have been popular among the Roman elite in the third and second centuries BCE¹⁸. In fact, Cato not only demonstrates knowledge of the Pythagorean literature on diet in *De agri cultura*¹⁹, but is also believed to have brought Ennius, whose *Annales* and *Epicharmus* reflect Pythagorean beliefs, to Rome²⁰. Ennius was a poet who relied on patronage and accepted commissions to write works for specific benefactors, including *Ambracia*, which was written for Fulvius Nobilior, and *Scipio*, written for Scipio Africanus²¹. The Pythagorist philosophizing present in Ennius' works thus gives testimony to something more than his own predilections – the interests of his elite Roman contemporaries. One of his patrons, Fulvius Nobilior, the author of *De fastis* and founder of the temple of "Hercules the leader of the Muses"²², almost certainly shared the poet's interest

¹⁶ For an authoritative discussion of the affair, see Gruen 1990: 163–168.

¹⁷ On Orphic, Bacchic, and Pythagorean syncretism, see Burkert 1972: 125–135.

¹⁸ *Tusc.* IV 4: "Mihi quidem Appii Caeci carmen [...] Pythagoreum videtur".

¹⁹ See Boscherini 1970: 9–91 on the influences of Greek letters and sciences in *De agri cultura*. According to Pliny (*NH* XXXV 160), Cato's *De agri cultura* frequently draws upon the Pythagorist text *Liber Plantarum*, attributed to Sulpicius Gallus (2nd cent. BCE). Dietetics was, according to Iamblichus (*VP* 29), the most important part of Pythagorean medicine. According to Diog. Laert. VIII 47, Pythagoras himself was a physician.

²⁰ The initial lines of the *Annales* tell of Ennius' dream (fr. 2), which involves his meeting with a weeping Homer (fr. 3) and his recollection of a former life as a peacock (fr. 11); cf. *somnia Pythagorea* in Hor. *Epist.* II 1, 50–52 and Porphy. *ad loc.* See also Lucr. I 124–126; Pers. 6, 9–11. Skutsch offers a balanced discussion of the Pythagorean themes in Ennius' dream, concluding that they would have been inspired both by Hellenistic literature and local legend (Skutsch 1985: 148–150).

²¹ Cf. Plin. *NH* VII 114 and Claud. *Stil.* III 23.

²² Fulvius' *De fastis* apparently influenced Ovid's *Fasti*, as well as the Pythagorean excerpt in the *Metamorphoses*; cf. Kahn 2001: 87.

in Pythagorean symbolism²³. Needless to say, as the famous *autodafé* of "Numa's books" attests, not everyone in Rome would have approved the mingling of Pythagorean concepts with Roman morality. Yet, advocated by some, rejected by others, Pythagoreanism was *the* philosophical doctrine most likely to be familiar to Plautus' educated contemporaries.

CONCLUSION

Let us now go back to the *Poenulus* and ask what, if anything, can be gained through reading Plautus alongside pseudo-Pythagorean texts. On the one hand, the humor of the scene featuring a prostitute preaching chastity stands on its own. The spectators could have laughed at Adelphasium's ambition to be chaste, whether or not they could detect any Pythagorizing allusions. On the other hand, however, Plautus' ideology of whorish chastity seems to subvert the discourse of *εὐκοσμία*, and includes a translation of a proverb from the *Golden Verses*. These features were probably derived from Alexis' *Karchedonios*, but Pythagorean concepts were also in vogue in second-century Rome²⁴. Could this be a mere coincidence, or are we entitled to postulate that some cognoscenti in the audience – perhaps not numerous, but possibly influential – might have appreciated Adelphasium's lecture as a parody of Pythagorean discussions of women's virtue? If so, by reading the *Poenulus* with pseudo-Pythagorean texts, we gain a glimpse at a figure we did not expect to find among the stereotypes of Roman comedy – a Plautine version of the *précieuse ridicule*. We do not know how the *perculsa puella* and her fashionable pythagorizing related to the intellectual pursuits of women in early second century Rome, but it is a pleasure to be able to ask such a question.

University of California, Santa Barbara

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arcellasi 1982: André Arcellasi, *Amphitryon* 187, RFL LX 1982, pp. 128–138.
 Arnott 1996: W.G. Arnott, *Alexis: The Fragments. A Commentary*, Cambridge 1996.
 Boyancé 1955: Pierre Boyancé, *Fulvius Nobilior et le dieu ineffable*, RPh XXIX 1955, pp. 172–192.
 Boscherini 1970: Silvano Boscherini, *Lingua e scienza greca nel "De agri cultura" di Catone*, Roma 1970.

²³ Cf. Cic. *Arch.* 27; to the Pythagoreans, Heracles was the personification of highest wisdom, cf. Martina 1981: 64 f.; on the Pythagorean nature of the temple of *Hercules mousagetes*, see also Boyancé 1955: 180–183.

²⁴ As Gruen (1990: 171–176) has demonstrated, the Roman mistrust of philosophy in the third and second centuries BCE has been somewhat overstated.

- Burkert 1972: Walter Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, Cambridge, Mass. 1972.
- Centrone 1996: Bruno Centrone, *Introduzione a i Pitagorici*, Roma 1996.
- Gaiser 1967: Konrad Gaiser, *Menander und der Peripatos*, A&A XIII 1967, pp. 8–40.
- Gold 1977: Barbara K. Gold, *Eukosmia in Euripides' Bacchae*, AJPh XCVIII 1977, pp. 3–15.
- Gruen 1990: Erik Gruen, *Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy*, Leiden–New York 1990.
- Kahn 2001: Charles H. Kahn, *Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans: A Brief History*, Indianapolis 2001.
- Macris 2002: Constantinos Macris, *Jamblique et la littérature pseudo-pythagoricienne*, in: Simon C. Mimouni (ed.), *Apocryphité. Histoire d'un concept transversal aux religions du livre. En Homage à Pierre Geoltrain*, Turnhout 2002, pp. 79–85.
- Martina 1981: Mario Martina, *Aedes Herculis Musarum*, Dialoghi di Archeologia III 1981, pp. 49–68.
- Maurach 1975: Gregor Maurach, *Plauti Poenulus. Einleitung, Textherstellung und Kommentar*, Heidelberg 1975.
- O'Sullivan 2001: Lara O'Sullivan, *Philochorus, Pollux and the Nomophylakes of Demetrius of Phalerum*, JHS CXXI 2001, pp. 51–62.
- Plant 2001: I.M. Plant, *Women Writers of Ancient Greece and Rome: An Anthology*, Norman 2001.
- Pohlenz 1940: Max Pohlenz, *Grundfragen der stoischen Philosophie*, Göttingen 1940.
- Rawson 1985: Elisabeth Rawson, *Intellectual Life in Late Roman Republic*, London 1985.
- Riedweg 2005: Christoph Riedweg, *Pythagoras: His Life, Teaching, and Influence*, Ithaca–London 2005.
- Skutsch 1985: *The Annals of Quintus Ennius*, edited with introduction and commentary by Otto Skutsch, Oxford 1985.
- Thesleff 1961: Holger Thesleff, *An Introduction to the Pythagorean Writings of the Hellenistic Period*, Åbo 1961.
- 1965: *The Pythagorean Texts of the Hellenistic Period*, Åbo 1965.
- Thom 1995: Johan C. Thom, *The Pythagorean Golden Verses*, with introduction and commentary, Leiden–New York 1995.
- Webster 1950: T.B.L. Webster, *Studies in Menander*, Manchester–New York 1950.
- Wehrli 1970: Fritz Wehrli, *Menander und die Philosophie*, in: *Ménandre*, Genève 1970 (Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique 14), pp. 145–155.