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“Promise Me My Liberty:” Conventions of Roman Comedy and the Representation of Oppression and Resistance in the Tudor Interlude *July and Julian*

July and Julian is a mid-sixteenth-century (c.1547-53) play for boys, anonymous and with auspices unknown save that it appears to have been written for school production. The play has been very much neglected, apparently in its own period since it survives only in manuscript with no apparent printings, and in the present day in which it has had only one very basic edition (by Giles Dawson for the Malone Society in 1955, checked by Arthur Brown).¹ It has singularly lacked critical attention as well and somewhat unaccountably so, as it is not only an early example of the use and adaptation of classical comic conventions in English vernacular comedy, but also contains some dimensions of potential interest for the study of cultural history and ideology in the sixteenth century.

The paucity of contextual information in respect of the play's auspices and performance history is a problem in trying to discern the audience for which it may have been intended. As mentioned above, it is likely to have been for school production, the prologue stating, “We are come hither to troble yow as boyes, / and after sage thinges to shewe our trifflinge toyes” (7-8).² Schools in the sixteenth

century frequently used drama as an educational tool to promote eloquence and confidence in their pupils, and some schoolmasters, most notably perhaps Nicholas Udall who taught at Eton and subsequently Westminster, wrote plays or adapted classical ones for their pupils to perform.³ The school companies were often taken to perform at court and in the third quarter of the century, for instance, of the seventy-six payments for court performances the boys of St Paul's School received twenty-one, other schoolboy companies ten and the children of the royal chapels fifteen, as against thirty-two made to adult troupes.⁴ The plays of the juvenile companies frequently contained satirical, political and contentious material, the probable reasons for this licence being both the unlikelihood of the authorities to punish the boy actors and the fact of their more restricted, elite audiences. It is not known by which school or boys' company *July and Julian* was produced nor whether it was played at court, though this is a distinct possibility. Whatever its likely audience, the play does not shy away from trenchant social comment. Though there is a formal claim in the prologue that its purpose is "but to shewe ower witte, / in such exercise as for vs be fitte" (11-12), its narrative circulates around various forms of oppression and successful resistance to it, at least one element of which being the s

the young heir and the intrigue engineered by the slaves—are, of course, the conventional stuff of Roman comic drama. The play is, indeed, very much in the mould of classical comedy and the names of two its characters—Chremes and Menedemus—may have been based on those of two similarly named characters in Terence’s *Heauton Timorumenos*, though there is no other apparent debt to that play. However the way in which the narrative tropes are handled draws very selectively from or adapts the conventions found in Terence or Plautus. The departures are consistent with the particular emphasis placed on resistance to oppression found in the play. These two main strands of narrative are also connected with more minor strands, fairly incidental to the main plot, that help to maintain the thematic focus on this.

In Roman comedy, the social transgressiveness of the cross-class love match is part of the ethical challenge offered by this drama, which tends to plead for tolerance and compassion. However, this transgressiveness and therefore the challenge it poses to social mores is usually ultimately defused at the conclusion of these plays by the *deus ex machina* disclosure of the elevated or respectable birth of the lower ranked partner, always the female. This is the case at the conclusion of Terence’s *Andria* (incidentally translated as another anonymous school play earlier in the century called *Terens in Englysh*). In *Heauton Timerumenos* Antiphila, the apparently low-born lover of the son of a wealthy man is found to be after all of respectable birth, allowing the match to be legitimised. Plautus also uses this device on a couple of occasions, and in *Poenulus* a young man of a good family is ultimately enabled to marry his lover, who is at risk of being forced into prostitution, when it is found that she was stolen from her parents years previously and has a Carthaginian father with sound social standing. In *Cistellaria* the son of a good house wants to marry the daughter of a courtesan, and his father opposes the match until she is revealed to be a foundling,

drawn from classical models, or translations of Roman plays—such as John Jefferes’s *Bugbears* (1563-6), George Gascoigne’s *Supposes* (1566) or the anonymous translation *Terens in Englysh* (1516-33)—the servant figures may be slaves but no issue is made of their status, and they remain entirely functional in the narratives. In other vernacular plays based more loosely on classical models—such as *Jack Juggler* (1553-8), *Misogonus* (1564-77), or Nicholas Udall’s *Ralph Roister Doister* (1552-4)—the figures are clearly servants rather than slaves. In Henry Medwall’s *Fulgens and Lucrez* (c.1497) the servants seek employment, and there is a similar implication in *Damon and Pithias* (1564-8). What is unusual in *July and Julian* for English comedy is the strong insistence on the slave status of the servant-intriguers, and of Julian. This is despite the fact that the two servant-intriguers are, in accordance with a recurrent English dramatic convention, given English names, Fenell and Wilkin, while the other male protagonists have a mixture of classical and English names. In Roman comedy proper there is naturally no other category of servant figure, and the presence of slaves in the drama merely reflected current social practice. However, the fact of the availability to the sixteenth-century English drama of the category of unbonded servant does give a potential significance in a play that not only represents the servants clearly as slaves but places a focus on the oppressive behaviour of authority figures. The play is relatively unusual among interlude dramas in giving voice to this issue and, though the oppressiveness of those in authority is occasionally a peripheral subject of this drama, probably the most eloquent articulation of the idea in the early drama is to be found in the cycle rather than interlude drama, and specifically the Wakefield *Second Shepherd’s Play*.⁵

The egregious insistence in *July and Julian* on the fact of the bonded status of the slaves implicitly brings to the fore the question of bodily ownership and control,

something that is present in all the narrative strands in the play that deal with oppression and resistance to it. The rigours of the life of the slaves are expressed in very physical terms, something that is echoed in the treatment of the two younger children in the family. These two motifs are connected in turn to the play's problematising of the right of Chremes and Maud, the master and mistress of the household, to the ownership and disposal of the bodies of their slave Julian (through sale) and their son July (through marriage). To this extent it articulates the increasing interest in the body as a source of social identity, basis for power and locus of political contestation in the period.

The discontent of the slaves in the play is made a prominent feature right from the start. The opening lines consist of Fenell's extended speech of complaint about his situation, giving a graphic account of the manifold misfortunes of his life and the extent of his physical suffering:

Who so is present and wold gladly knowe
 the numerall number of mischefous all of a rowe,
 which wer ever felt, hard, seen or understodd,
 yet be not, wer not, nor ever can be goodd,
 hither lett him comm, and lern them all of me,
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My master makes me trudge, hit is don strayght way.
 The hoar damsell sayes, my dame sendes me sumwhether,
 I ron, and comme a gaine, by and by comes a nother,
 wait on mr Dicke to the schole, and hye a gaine
 to the markt, to the colpitt, in cold snow and raine,
 to wait vpon a mare all th[e wh]ole day longe.
 If I applye not this, I am plied wth cogels stronge.
 Durtshod, wetshod, haliday, and workenday,
 and when all is don, all is to do, with me alway.
 (68-76)

He is, in fact, worse treated than the household pet and working horse:

My dames puppye is a gentelman in respeck of me.
 I durst not compare with old baiard, buy yet she can scarce se,
 for when she hath served vs, then we serve her with meat
 but when I haue don oght, I can get noight to eat.
 (77-80)

The question of the ill-treatment of slaves is an issue which crops up in the plays of both Plautus and Terence. In Plautus's *Asinaria* the slaves are unhappy in their bondage and the issue of the treatment of slaves also features in *Captivi*, while conversely in *Rudens* a positive representation is given of compassion in a master. However, the matter is never as insistently represented as it is in *July and Julian*. Here the motivation of the slaves Fenell and Wilkin in engineering the intrigue that leads to the success of July's marriage-quest plot is overtly their manumission. Early on Fenell resolves to resort to duplicitous ways to achieve his freedom:

. . . with crafty flattery will I deall.
 for men now a daies therby do get ther weall,
 . . .
 with cappe, & kne at every word, with ye sir, nor fye,
 god save your faier face, said ye so? Oh how wittely.
 how say you, am not I fyt for this fine occupacion?
 (85-91)

July's servant, Wilkin, later makes even more explicit that the price of his involvement in the plot to achieve his master's ends is the gaining of his freedom:

Promise me my liberty

his complaints suggests at least in part a metaphorical role. As Mark Thornton Burnett has remarked, “The male domestic servant lent himself to a range of metaphorical uses. Across a variety of literary forms, the representation of this type facilitated an exploration of a perceived crisis in service, as well as providing a means of addressing broader insecurities.”⁸

In Roman comedy the conflict is freque

(228-29)

Her role as junior family member is even blurred with that of a servant:

First we must be fine, tricke, handsome, & neat,
smal midled, well mad, frolick and feat.
Hed, ye, hand, hill, nor noight most be a wry.
For the lest of thes (I warrant you) der we must a by.
We must also locke vnto ye kichen, and buttery,
and se that albe well, but specially all huswiffery.
(232-37)

She actually ends up being more sympathetic to the suffering of servants, something she resolves to address when she is eventually in charge of her own household, “Well, when I am lady wenches shall haue more ease. / Till then I must never be well at ease” (238-9).

July’s younger brother, Dick, is given even more space to express his discontent, in his case the harsh treatment he received from his schoolmasters. As with the Nan episode, this element is gratuitous to the main narrative and appears to have been included as a means of broadening the picture of oppression in the play and rendering more negative the representation of the parents. Dick pours forth his anguish:

Amonge all creatures less or mo,
we pore litle boyes abyd muche wo.
At whom, at schole, and every where,
we sylie ones are put in fere.
(133-36)

This situation is aggravated by the unsympathetic attitude of his parents:

Men may do what thei lyst god wott, so cannot we.
For if I laughe, my father a wanton calles me.
Yf I be sadd, my mother saith, I am dumpish and sorlye.
Of all livinge thinges, men be worst to pleasee.
Of all mankind, boyes be lest at easse.
Of all boyes, I dare say, none can be worse then I:
both my parentes, & masters, handle me so shrewdly.
(147-53)

but you will tell me nothings, nay hit shall not skill.
(209-15)

Fenell again addresses the audience at the opening of Act 1 scene 5 pointing up the cruelty of his mistress towards her daughter and making a direct comparison between the ill-treatment meted out to Dick by his schoolmasters, and the treatment that he himself receives from his master:

How say yow masters, is not my dame a shrewe,
I dare not say it my selfe, but ile be iudge by you
how she canvassed litle Nane before your face?
And what knaves be thes scholmasters in like case:
they pay litle master Dicke, as my master paies me.
For I for mhy part go not always skotfre.
I had rather be in heven then live such a livinge.
(248-54)

The other intriguer-slave, Wilkin, comforts July after his complaint about his parents' oppressive stance towards his proposed match; thereafter he goes on to console Dick on his suffering at the hands of his schoolmasters. He advises him to stick with his brother who will try to help him. If July marries Julian and sets up his own household, Dick will be able to go and live with them. He thus fulfils a conventional classical comic role as an engineer of intrigue, while at the same time cementing the supportive bonds (especially in the eyes of the audience) between the powerless victims.

It is not just the sympathetic approach of the slaves to others in the play that helps to align audience response with them. A feature of Roman comedy that is brought into play here is the direct rapport that slave-intriguers often have with the audience, through direct address and other means.¹¹ Fenell's direct speech to the audience is the extended one that opens the play and he addresses the audience on several other occasions as Wilkin does shortly after his first entry, having the whole

Roman comedy, they not only offer comment but also engage the audience by being the principal source of information about the machinations of the intrigue plots.

A complication in English drama is that skill in intrigue is usually *ipso facto* a

benevolence of both the cunning slaves, Fenell and Wilkin, might possibly be seen in the context of this as a means of avoiding inappropriate associations.

By contrast, in *July and Julian* what further justifies the subversion of authority and the deception of the parents, Chremes and Maud, is the uncompromisingly negative terminology in which these authority figures are represented. If the slaves exude sympathy, the parent figures demonstrate a range of moral failings and rebarbative characteristics that are insisted upon right from the prologue which announces that, “the matter with crafte ys so conveyed, / that Chremes in his dronkennes with avarice [ys] deceyed” (33-4). At her first entry Maud displays cantankerous attitudes and behaviour that amply bear out the complaints uttered by Fenell earlier:

Maud: Here it, trip to the schole qickly, or Ile twidge your dock

Dick: I tarry but for fenell forsoth, whom you sent of an arrant

Maud: Ye must haue a man still, I faith ile be a treavaunt.

Thei servautes in this howse, be the slothfull lubbers a live.

If I shuld tarry but halfe so long, I wold thinke never to thrive.

Why fenell where a bowt go yowe?

Fenell: To fetch whit poddinges for your breackfast, I cold get but thes to.

Maud: Yt is well provided, geve them to Iulian, mak hast

that Dicke were had to ye schole, it is vi of ye clock, & past.

(111–19)

On her second appearance Maud then strikes her daughter on stage. She later shows no hesitation in betraying her maid, Julian, just after having apparently had proof that Julian had been true to her. Driven entirely by a profit motive, Maud’s financial rapacity takes precedence over any consideration of loyalty to her servant. When her husband announces that he has had a letter making an offer to purchase Julian and asks what she thinks, Maud responds:

Ser, brefly my iudgment is, that she shuld go,

yf yow may haue for here inogh money.

All though I like here well, y[e]t so I say,

both because money cometh never amysse,
and although she now be faithfull ywysse,
yet, as the vse is, she may not leaue,
and herafter both of vs deceaue.
As for me, I can get as good a maid as she,
againste tomorow nyght, if ned be.
Tak time, whill time is, for time will away.
At no time, is any time, to refusse money.
(691-701)

Chremes also reveals, almost in passing, that he has committed a misdemeanour for which he has incurred a fine, as yet unpaid, “in forfeit for fiteing with ser robart Rose” (705). It is this to which the money gained from the sale of Julian will be put. The final execution of the intrigue plot devised by the slaves involves a feast to which Chremes will be invited by his neighbour, Bamford, to be told that Bamford had the previous evening accommodated a wealthy guest with a marriageable daughter. This man will be claimed to have lands bordering those of Chremes, and a daughter (in fact Julian in disguise) available for marriage to July. The success of the deception depends on Chremes being tripped up by his own indulgence and greed. Drinking too much will compromise his judgement and the apparent opportunity to acquire land adjacent to his own will do the rest: “When his wittes with drinke waxeth bare, / we will traine him to your fancies, avarish shall be our snare” (1049-50).

point of ideological and dramaturgical interest in the piece is the way that the author uses the conventions of Roman comedy to legitimise the subversive agenda of the play. Not only do these comic conventions become a means through which the audience sympathy is aligned, but the classical frame of reference also affords

tary. / These men say is for the best, we fynde it contrary. / Thus ar husbandys opprest, in ponte to myscary.” “Secunda Pastorum,” lines 15-22, *The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle*, ed. A. C. Cawley (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958), 43.

⁶ Niall Slater notes that this is characteristic of a clever slave. *Plautus in Performance: The Theatre of the Mind* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1985), 82-83.

⁷ K. McCarthy, *Slaves, Masters and the Art of Authority in Plautine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 212.

⁸ M. Thornton Burnett, *Masters and Servants in English Renaissance Drama and Culture: Authority and Obedience* (London: Macmillan, 1997), 79.

⁹ For an account of this issue in both the drama and elsewhere, see Grantley, 164-67.

¹⁰ Fenell and Wilkin rescue Julian by a trick which involves substituting a free-born girl for her, and then claiming her from the person to whom she has been sold, on the grounds of the illegality of the sale. The source for this element may be Plautus’s *Persa*, in which a similar trick is played.

¹¹ Timothy Moore observes of Plautine slave-intriguers: “Monologues, audience address,

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