

Terence and the *speculum uitae*: ‘Realism’ and (Roman) Comedy

What is ‘realism’? A mirror-like reflection of the mere appearances of reality? Or a representation of the truths or essences underpinning that reality? Or a combination of both, or something in-between? Does ‘realism’ aim at, or result in, deception, entertainment, and/or instruction? How are these issues addressed by ancient theorists, especially in relation to the ‘realistic’ genre *par excellence*: Comedy? In particular, how is ‘realism’ understood by critics of (Roman) Comedy, from comic dramatists such as Terence himself, to commentators such as Donatus, to modern scholars? These are some of the questions this article addresses.

My primary aims are: (1) to reexamine the key concept of ‘realism’ in ancient literary theory, using the reception of Roman comedy as a case-study; (2) to demonstrate that ‘realism’ is a highly elusive concept in (ancient) scholarship, which evokes different kinds of relationships between comedy and reality, and which can be manipulated by and underpin different theoretical frameworks; (3) to reveal how Terence’s own views on ‘realism’ appear to be dissimilar from, or at least more nuanced than, that of most scholarship on Terentian comedy.

I would like to state at the outset that my focus is not on realism in Roman Comedy, but rather on realism within the scholarship on and reception of Roman Comedy. Instead of exploring the supposed ‘realism’ of Plautine and Terentian comedy, I shall examine ‘realism’ as a category used (or implied) by ancient and modern readers of (Roman) Comedy; moreover, while discussing Plautus and Menander where appropriate, I shall focus primarily on aspects and receptions of the Terentian plays. Secondly, I shall not refer to realism as a discrete concept, especially in the first part of the article, but shall rather use realism as a ‘tag’

to refer to a broad range of concepts which imply relationships between literature, art, and theatre, on the one hand, and reality, truth, life, on the other. These relationships are exemplified in English by adjectives such as *realistic*, *naturalistic*, *vivid*, *credible*, *plausible*, and *lifelike*, and also, in a literary (or meta-literary) context, *true*, *real*, *authentic*, and *genuine*; Latin examples include words and expressions such as *imitatio* or *color uitae*, *uerus*, *uerisimile*, and *ex/de consuetudine*.

I can now begin my journey into the history of ‘realism’ and (Roman) comedy. This is a journey *à rebours*: I first provide a brief overview of modern scholarship on Terentian comedy (Part I), and then discuss ancient exegesis (Part II), and Donatus’ commentary in particular (Part III); finally, I tentatively reconstruct Terence’s own notion of comic realism (Part IV).

I. Modern Scholarship

The association of Terence with realism has almost become a dogma in the secondary literature; Terence is “weniger naiv, mehr auf realistische Wahrscheinlichkeit bedacht als seine Vorgänger” (Bieler 2012:I.45), and his drama is “restrained and naturalistic” (Leigh 2004:5), betraying “[il] tentativo di dare un nuovo impulso realistico al dramma Romano” (Haffter 1969:105). Terence is often presented as an author who restored or reintroduced realism within a genre which had been transformed (or corrupted) by Plautus “from a relatively realistic reflection of real life into a much more self-consciously theatrical performance” (Barsby 1999:15).

In Terentian scholarship, realism is normally defined by comparison with other authors, traditions, or genres. In contrast with Old Comedy and other dramatic genres such as tragedy, there are ‘realistic’ elements which Terence shares with New Comedy, in terms of stagecraft, plot, and themes. New Comedies feature unity of place, a standard setting in a street, ‘realistic’ costume (for example, a tunic instead of padding and phallus, and slippers instead of high-soled shoes), lifelike masks imitating ‘normal’ characters, no speaking chorus, no mythological parody, and no extraordinary events, such as talking birds or assemblies of women. New Comedies have ‘realistic and believable’ plots, involving ‘real’, ‘normal’ people, such as old men, slaves, prostitutes, soldiers, and so on.¹

Some scholars are so convinced of the ‘realism’ of Greek and Roman New Comedy that they have labelled ‘realistic’ even conventional aspects that would seem quite ‘un-realistic’, notably monologues (cf. Duckworth 1994:105 “solo speech was a racial characteristic of the Greeks and the Romans”), an outdoor setting (cf. Duckworth 1994:127 “the ancient Roman ... lived outdoors”), mythological references (cf. Furley 2009:155 “everyday life and conversation frequently involved comparisons with mythical personages and events”), stock plot events, such as the betrayal of maidens, the exposure of children, and the related *anagnorisis* (which “occurred in real life with considerable frequency” (Duckworth 1994:35; cf. also the passionate defense of Menander’s ‘realism’ by Post 1934:22² and Dunkin 1946:131n56).

¹ Cf. e.g. Webster 1950:216 (on Menander’s ‘realistic’ *ethopoiia*), Hunter 1985:11, Wiles 1991:1–8, Zagagi 1994:94–141, Payne 2007:8–9, Traill 2008:265, Miles 2013.

² “That Menander frequently has foundlings in his plays cannot be denied. But foundlings are not uncommon in life. (...) There is no reason to suppose that in this respect Menander did not take his material from life.”

Apart from those inherited from New Comedy, some features of Terentian comedy are allegedly ascribable to a distinctive ‘realistic’ agenda, and they accordingly distinguish Terence within the Roman tradition (Duckworth 1994:137):

Terence, striving to write a higher type of comedy that was devoid of farce and slapstick, took pains to avoid improbabilities of various kinds (Roman references, indoor scenes on the stage, buffoonery in connection with running slaves, violation of the dramatic illusion), and he aimed at a more realistic treatment of conversation and action; he was more restrained in his use of monologues and asides, and his handling of entrances and exits was usually very natural.

Or, to quote a more recent judgement (Fontaine 2014:538–539):

Terence boldly reformed Rome’s rich tradition of *comoedia*. (...) he all but eliminated its polymetric musical showpieces and its other perceived excesses—the varied singsong meters, rollicking jokes, general buffoonery, and above all its exuberant verbal style. (...) The result is greater realism in speech, ethics, psychology, and sentiment, heightened suspense, and thus—in a word—drama as we know it.

This summary of Terence’s ‘realistic’ features can be expanded as follows:

- **stagecraft:** no indoor scenes on the stage³; restrained use of monologues and aside;⁴ natural handling of entrances and exits; no explicit Roman references⁵; infrequent or absent breaking of the dramatic illusion, despite subtle metatheatrical references;⁶ Terence's prologues as the "first realistic roles in European theatre."⁷
- **plot, action, and themes:** attention to verisimilitude in plot construction and use of suspense (in contrast with Plautus⁸); no slapstick, but rather credible action⁹; less emphasis on intrigue and trickery; 'realistic' love and desires¹⁰.
- **'realistic' imagery**¹¹

³ Cf. Duckworth 1994:126–127.

⁴ Cf. in contrast Norwood 1963: 81, stigmatizing Euclio's monologue in *Aulularia* as "the silliest piece of stage-writing in the world"; see also Hunter 1985:55.

⁵ Cf. in contrast Duckworth 1994:279 on Plautus' 'unreal' admixture of Greek and Roman elements; cf. however Brown 2013:30–31 on Terentian passages in which Donatus identifies references to Roman customs.

⁶ Cf. Duckworth 1994:133, Knorr 2007:173, Germany 2016:11–17.

⁷ Cf. Gilula 1989.

⁸ Cf. e.g. Abel 1955:87–88, Hunter 1985:29 with note 14.

⁹ Cf. e.g. Franko in Augoustakis and Traill 2013:42.

¹⁰ Cf. Sharrock 2009:237 "(...) the amicable but no longer romantic relationship of recent former lovers (...) is unparalleled in Greek and Roman comedy, and provides a scene of extraordinary delicacy, humanity and realism."

¹¹ Cf. e.g. Barsby 1999:24 "[i]n general Plautus' imagery is striking, exaggerated, fantastic, whereas Terence's is closer to what we find in Menander and to what we may imagine was actually found in the everyday speech of the educated public".

- **characterization and psychology:** psychological ‘realism’;¹² no stock characters, but good-natured individuals;¹³
- **society and gender:** Terentian slaves do not unashamedly overpower their masters as in Plautus; women are more vulnerable to male domination.¹⁴
- **language, metre, and style:** ‘natural’ language and restrained style;¹⁵ spoken, conversational meter (iambic senarii), fewer ‘unrealistic’ songs.

The appraisal of realism within Terentian Comedy and New Comedy in general is not as unanimous and straightforward as the above list might suggest. Many scholars have

¹² Cf. e.g. Gellar-Goad in Augoustakis and Traill 2013:173 “Terence, who, more than Plautus or Menander, shows in a realistic way the psychological pain and familial strife that can afflict seemingly normal Roman families.” Maltby 1979:146–147 “(...) Terence did concern himself with finding an appropriate manner of speech to suit particular characters. (...) [he] was more interested in psychological realism than in the comic possibilities of caricature and farce.”

¹³ Cf. Haffter 1969:11–12, according to whom Terence marked, in this respect, a change from fantastic to realistic comedy.

¹⁴ Cf. James in Augoustakis and Traill 2013:177 “[i]n recognizing the vulnerability of women to male sexual force, Terence is more realistic than romantic and sentimental Menander or uproarious, farcical Plautus.”

¹⁵ Cf. Fontaine 2014:538 “[t]he colourful, alliterative language of Plautine comedy was in fact conventional, widespread, and traditional for comedy in Rome (...) Terence alone seems to have eschewed the tradition for a more realistic idiom”; Barsby 1999:20 “Terence’s language is restrained in comparison with the exuberance of Plautus’. (...) he was deliberately rejecting the theatricality of the Roman comic tradition for something more akin to the realism of Menander.” Cf. also Wright 1974, esp. 127–151, Caston in Frangoulidis, Harrison and Manuwald 2016:447.

emphasized ‘un-realistic’ aspects inherent in New Comedy, including the narrow range of plots and motives, its playfulness with artificial theatrical expectations, the rarity of graphic details, the social filter, the production of a cleansed version of upper-class life, the wishful, ‘feel-good’ or repressed nature of its escapist and sublimated ‘reality’, and the focus on ‘basic’ moral types rather than on individual psychologies.¹⁶ Moreover, several scholars have argued that scenes apparently added by Terence from a secondary model often involve ‘unrealistic’ farce and slapstick (e.g. the parasite’s monologue at *Eun.* 232–253, the boasting scene at 391–453, and the girl’s abduction in *Adelphoe* 155–196).

Despite this countercriticism, realism is nonetheless widely perceived in modern scholarship as a key attribute of Terentian (and Menandrian) comedy, in contrast with Plautine and Aristophanic material. An interesting point of departure for further study is the questions of which of the alleged ‘realistic’ features of Terentian comedy can in fact be deemed as such, what each scholar exactly means by ‘realism’, and why they respectively agree or disagree that ‘realism’ should be considered meritorious; these issues go beyond the scope of this article. I shall now discuss ancient exegesis, where one finds a similar prevailing belief on the ‘realism’ of Terentian and New Comedy, but with some important caveats; I shall also attempt to disentangle the semantic complexity of the concept of ‘realism’.

¹⁶ E.g. Hunter 1985:12 “(...) [t]his must not be understood to mean that New Comedy is in any sense a faithful representation of ‘real life’. It goes without saying that recognitions, comic misunderstandings and erotic melodrama do not represent life as it is lived.” Cf. also Goldberg 1980:120–121, Green 1994:77–78, Gutzwiller 2000, Batstone 2005 esp. 26, 38, and above all Petrides 2014:10–89, stressing the importance “to realise in how sophisticated a manner he [i.e. Menander] exploits New Comedy’s semblance of realism, and how deeply he implicates the spectator in reprocessing, out of this realistic departure, a fictional, ‘possible’ world” (42), and concluding that “Menander’s comedy is almost as fantastical as Aristophanes” (47).

II. Comic ‘Realism’ in Ancient Roman Scholarship

The idea that comedy is ‘realistic’ is also widespread in Roman sources, and particularly in the ancient reception of Menander and Terence. The ‘realistic’ label is variously attached to comedy as a genre, or to all comic dramatists indiscriminately,¹⁷ but Menander stands out as the champion of ‘comic realism’¹⁸ on the Greek side, as does Terence on the Roman one, who is often associated with Menander¹⁹ and contrasted with the ‘flawed’ Plautus.²⁰

Comments on comic ‘realism’ are attested in a variety of sources, often pinpointed by the terms *imago/imitatio uitae* and *ueri simile* (the ‘realistic tag’), and probably influenced by earlier and contemporary Greek scholarship, which generally defined (New) Comedy, and Menander in particular, as a μίμησις τοῦ βίου, portraying the πιθανόν, εικός, and/or βιωτικόν.²¹ As summarized by Petrides (2014:10–11): “Menander’s comedy was thought to

¹⁷ Cf. e.g. the words of the late grammarian Manlius Theodorus (GL 594 *Menander atque Aristophanes omnem humanae uitae imitationem persecuti sunt*); also Cic. *S. Rosc.* 47, Hor. *Ep.* 2.1.168–170 (quoted below).

¹⁸ Cf. Gellius 2.23.12, Quint. 10.1.69–71, Man. 474–476 (all quoted below).

¹⁹ Cf. the anecdote of Terence’s fatal trip to Greece in search of Menander’s plays (Suet. *Vit. Ter.* 5), and the famous epigrams of Cicero and Caesar (Cic. *Lim.* fr. 2, Caes. *Carm.* fr. 1 Klotz). Also, Evanthius 2.7 (ed. Wessner 1902) *haec νέα κωμωδία (...) praecipue Menandri Terentique est.*

²⁰ Cf. Evanthius 3.8 (ed. Wessner 1902) *illud quoque mirabile in eo (...) quod nihil ad populum facit actorem uelut extra comoediam loqui, quod uitium Plauti frequentissimum.*

²¹ Cf. in particular Aristophanes of Byzantium (quoted in note 25 below), D. H. *De Imitatione* fr. 31.2.11 (K–A Test. 87) Τῶν δὲ κωμωδῶν μιμητέον τὰς λεκτικὰς ἀρετὰς ἀπάσας (...) Μενάνδρου δὲ καὶ τὸ πραγματικόν

be brimming with ‘realistic’ character types, conventional but still individualized, and to present the living conditions of fourth-century Greeks (housing, dressing, socializing, travelling, conducting transactions of various sorts, etc.) in a manner true to life.” This view is itself related to the archetypal tenet of ancient (Greek) theory, according to which the goal, nature, and expectation of drama and art in general, both literary and figurative, are to *imitate* nature, with pleasant, uplifting, heuristic, and/or deceitful effects, according to the framework.²²

In the following discussion, however, I shall only focus on a selection of Roman texts, for reasons of space and scope, and also because Roman theory on ‘realism’ is relatively unstudied. Moreover, my material is not structured according to chronology, genre, language,

θεωρητέον; Theodos.Gr. page 58 (...) τὰς δὲ κωμωδίας βιωτικῶς, ἤγουν κατὰ μίμησιν τοῦ βίου· ἔστι δὲ κωμωδία μίμησις πράξεως καθαρτικῶν παθημάτων καὶ τοῦ βίου συστατικῆ τυπουμένη δι’ ἡδονῆς καὶ γέλωτος, οἷα ἢ τοῦ Ἀριστοφάνους ἢ τοῦ Μενάνδρου, *Scholia in Dionysii Thracis Artem Grammaticam* (GG 1.3) pages 172–3 κωμωδία (...) ἔστι δὲ εἶδος ποιήματος ἐν κόμαις κατὰ τὸν βίον ἀδόμενον. Διὰ τοῦτο καὶ «βιωτικῶς» λέγεται, (...) Ἡ «βιωτικῶς» κατὰ μίμησιν τοῦ βίου, (...) ἢ μὲν τραγωδία ἱστορίαν ἔχει καὶ ἀπαγγελίαν πράξεων γενομένων, ἢ δὲ κωμωδία πλάσματα περιέχει βιωτικῶν πραγμάτων. Cf. also Plut. *Mor.* 853e-f, *AP* 9.504, Syrian. 23.7. See also Marx 1904 on Lucil. fr. 1029, Petrides 2014: 10–18. On Menander’s reception in antiquity see Nervegna 2013.

²² This is a vast and controversial topic, with an immense bibliography. See in particular Russell 1981:99–113, Halliwell 2002, 2012, Germany 2016; also Carey 2003:102–137 (on the contest of ‘realism’ between the painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius, as reported by Pliny, and in general on Pliny’s ‘naturalistic’ conception of (visual) art), Hunter 2009, esp. 107–127 (on Dionysus’ rhetorical version of *mimesis* in *De Imitatione*, an influential text in Rome), Wohl 2014 (esp. chapters 2–4, 8, 10). For a pithy overview, with an eye to Roman comedy, Sharrock 2009:2–7, with bibl.

or individual author,²³ but according to a ‘semantic’ criterion. I shall firstly present the features of comic ‘realism’ according to its most ‘extreme’ definition (*qua* ‘mirror of life’) (section II.1), and discuss its implications and ramifications, particularly relating to the traditionally positive outlook of (comic) ‘realism’, on aesthetical or ethical grounds. I shall then discuss some variations from this standard *speculum* framework, which create, within the notion of ‘realism’, a gap between ‘comedy’ and ‘reality’ or ‘truth’ (the ‘fiction-framework’, section II.2). Finally, I shall investigate the interpretation of ‘realism’ as implied by the counter-criticism against New Comedy, which contrasts ‘comedy’ and ‘truth’, yet without denying a broad relationship between ‘comic mimesis’ and (sensorial) ‘reality’ (section II.3).

II.1 Sense 1, the Speculum-Framework: ‘Realism’ qua ‘Transparent Reflection of Truth’ (and its Implications)

The most extreme conception of realism in ancient Roman scholarship is epitomized by the metaphor of comedy as a mirror of life, which posits a frictionless relationship between

²³ The same author can have a different notion of ‘realism’, and thus adhere to a different framework, in different contexts (cf. e.g. below note 41).

‘comedy’ and ‘truth’.²⁴ This idea is traceable in several sources,²⁵ but finds its most elaborate articulation in an excerpt from the Late Antique treatise *On Comedy*, which has been preserved as a preface to Donatus’ commentary on Terence’s comedies (see below, III); following many scholars, I consider it ascribable to Donatus himself.

Donatus *Excerpta de comoedia* 5.1, 5 (ed. Wessner 1902)

²⁴ The mirror metaphor does not of course imply *per se* this kind of relation; there are mirrors that present a beautified or distorted reflection of reality, mirrors that reflect only the surface of things, but not their inner truth (or vice versa), or mirrors that are only tools for illusionism (for an overview of mirrors in Western aesthetics and beyond see e.g. Grabes 1982, Pendergrast 2009; cf. also the following note). In the context of ancient scholarship on comedy, the mirror image is normally used in a positive sense to indicate a ‘physiognomic’ reflection of reality, which is accurate, revealing and truth-bearing (cf. e.g. Sen. *Nat.* 1.17.4 *Inuenta sunt specula, ut homo ipse se nosset, multa ex hoc consecuturus, primum sui notitiam, deinde ad quaedam consilium*).

²⁵ The first attestation of the ‘mirror of life’ image is apparently in the sophist Alcidas, although applied to Homer’s *Odyssey* and (crucially) qualified by the adjective ‘kalon’, which suggests a ‘beautified’ rather than ‘transparent’ kind of reflection (see note above); Aristotle reports the use, but states that the metaphor is too bold (*Rhet.* 1406b.12–13). The image is at the center of a famous (and controversial) argument in Plato’s *Republic* (10.596d–e; see Halliwell 2002: 133–141 with bibliography in note 42). In Greek sources it is not explicitly applied to Menander, but it is traceable in several judgements, including above all the famous question of Aristophanes of Byzantium (*Comm. on Hermogenes* II page 23 R., quoted in Syrian. 23): Ὡ Μένανδρε καὶ βίε, πότερος ἄρ’ ὑμῶν πότερον ἐμιμήσατο (“O Menander and Life, which of you took the other as your model?”). See Mette 1988:350–356 for an overview of mirror imagery in antiquity; Sinisigalli 2012:5–39 for ancient views on mirrors. The *speculum uitae* image is particularly productive in Late Antiquity (cf. e.g. Aldhelm *De Virginitate* 323, Augustine *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 118.6.1, Nouatianus *De cibis iudaicis* 3.47, Paulinus Nolanus *Epistula* 24.21, Venantius Fortunatus 6.2.61).

*comoediam esse Cicero ait imitationem uitae, speculum consuetudinis, imaginem ueritatis (...) aitque esse comoediam cotidianae uitae speculum, nec iniuria. Nam ut intenti speculo ueritatis liniamenta facile per imaginem colligimus, ita lectione comoediae imitationem uitae consuetudinisque non aegerrime animaduertimus.*²⁶

This is probably the most comprehensive definition of realism in the sense of transparent (or ‘naturalistic’, ‘lifelike’, or ‘mirror-like’) mimesis. As evoked by the mirror analogy, comedy reflects elements of real life, without any distortion or correction; these elements are taken from reality (not ‘invented’ by the poet), and are able and intended to be identified as ‘real’.²⁷ The ‘transparency’ of comic realism, *qua* faithful *reflection* of life, validates the accuracy of perceiving in comedy — ‘with no effort’ (*non aegerrime*) — imitations of real life, and thus ultimately the ‘lineaments of truth’ (*liniamenta ueritatis*). The word ‘truth’ (*ueritas*) is key; the ‘mirror’ of comedy reflects the surface of (sensorial) ‘reality’ (otherwise the perception would not be ‘effortless’), but also crucially reveals its inner ‘truth’. In the *speculum*-framework (as I shall henceforth call it), the image produced by comedy adheres to ‘reality’; this results in a virtual correlation between (1) ‘truth’ (*ueritas*), (2) its ‘appearance/outline’ (*liniamenta*), and (3) the ‘imitation/image’ itself (*imitatio/image*), as

²⁶ “Cicero says that comedy is an imitation of life, a mirror of custom, and an image of truth (...) and he says that it is a mirror of everyday life, and rightly so, for as when we look at a mirror we can easily collect through the image the lineaments of truth, so by reading comedy we can perceive with no effort an imitation of life and custom.” On this passage see Jakobi 1996:176–178, Halliwell 2002:288n7.

²⁷ For the idea cf. also Mart. 8.3.20 *agnoscat mores uita legatque suos*, Evanthius 4.2 (*quod ... in uita capessenda*), quoted in note 48.

reflected by the ‘mirror’. In summary: for the author of *De Comoedia*, the mirror of comedy is ‘physiognomic’; to gaze into it is to gaze into the truth of reality. An important implication of this argument is that ‘realism’ is an expected quality, and indeed a virtue, of comedy in four related but discrete senses.

II.1.1 ‘Aesthetic’ or ‘Technical’ Virtue

Firstly, the virtuosity of comic ‘realism’ (*qua speculum uitae*) has an ‘aesthetic’ or ‘technical’ dimension. This is illustrated by the following passage from Horace, claiming that the technical merit of a comic play is assessed in proportion to its capacity to reflect matters ‘as they are in real life’ (*ex medio*):

Hor. *Ep.* 2.1.168–170 (ed. Klingner 1959)

creditur, ex medio quia res accersit, habere

sudoris minimum, sed habet comoedia tanto

*plus oneris, quanto ueniae minus.*²⁸

Porphyry’s comment on these lines emphasizes the point:

Porph. *ad loc.* (ed. Holder 1894)

²⁸ “It is thought that Comedy, drawing its themes from daily life, calls for less labour; but in truth it carries a heavier burden, as the indulgence allowed is less.” (Transl. Fairclough).

*creditur, inquit, quia comoedia communia sectatur, atque de medio, minus habere difficultatis. ex hoc autem grauis, quod non nimis ignoscitur in mimico caractere peccantibus.*²⁹

According to Porphyrius and Horace, comedy consists of a ‘mimetic impression’ (*mimico caractere*) of common things (*communis*), anticipating the modern outlook of ‘realism’ as an ‘imitation of everyday life’.³⁰ If Porphyrius’s words (*sectatur, caractere*) evoke a more ‘fictional’ framework (see II.2), the verb *accersit* used by Horace is more in harmony with the *speculum*-framework; the ‘realistic’ elements of comedy are not invented by the poet, but rather are ‘imported’ from reality into comedy. This is a difficult task; since the playwright is ‘importing’ things which are familiar to all, readers and listeners can assess the quality of a comedy on the basis of how accomplished its ‘importation from reality’ has been. In the lines following the above passage, Horace criticizes Plautus’ farcical comedy for failing to fulfil comedy’s ‘realistic’ expectations (lines 170–176).

A similar criticism of Roman ‘non-realistic’ comedy, probably influenced by Horace, is found in Gellius’ comparison of Caecilius’ and Menander’s *Plocium/Plokion*.

Gellius 2.23.12 (ed. Marshall 1968)

²⁹ “People believe, he says, that because comedy imitates everyday things, and from daily life, it requires less effort. It is rather laborious because of that, since one does not easily forgive those who make mistakes in the mimic impression.”

³⁰ See esp. the classic Auerbach 1953.

*Caecilius (...) alia nescio qua mimica inculcauit et illud Menandri de uita hominum media sumptum, simplex et uerum et delectabile, nescio quo pacto omisit.*³¹

According to Gellius, the ‘realistic’ elements of Menander’s comedy (*simplex et uerum*), which had been ‘taken’ (*sumptum*) from real life (i.e. not invented), have inappropriately been substituted with Caecilius’ ‘farcical’ obtrusions (*inculcauit*), thereby producing an aesthetically inferior kind of play. Ironically, the term used by Gellius to refer to Caecilius’ ‘farcical’, ‘non-realistic’ additions (*mimica*, here associated with *mimus* rather than *mimesis*) is the same as that used by Porphyry to refer to the nature of ‘realistic’ comedy (*mimico caractere*); this exemplifies how the ‘realistic’ tag (*mimico*) is used in different senses, depending on different theoretical perspectives.

II.1.2 ‘Pleasurableness’

Gellius’ criticism introduces a second important feature of the traditional approbation of ‘realism’: its enjoyability or ‘pleasurableness’. Menander’s ‘realism’ is not just a technical accomplishment, but also a ‘delightful’ one (*delectabile*). The ‘hedonistic’ effects of comedy are widely discussed in ancient theory (see below, II.3), and are frequently stressed by

³¹ “Caecilius (...) has dragged in [i.e. into his Roman adaptations] some other farcical stuff; and what Menander took from actual life, simple, true and delightful, this for some reason or other Caecilius has missed.” (Transl. from Marshall 1968, adapted).

Donatus in his commentary³² (cf. III). The virtue of ‘realism’, however, is not solely aesthetic or hedonistic, as is clear in the following passage of Manilius.

Man. 5.474–476 (ed. Goold 1985)

quis in cuncta suam produxit saecula uitam
doctior urbe sua linguae sub flore Menander,
*qui uitae ostendit uitam chartisque sacrauit.*³³

As Goold’s translation signals, Manilius’ praise of Menander accords with the *speculum*-framework,³⁴ by accurately reflecting life, the mirror of comedy provides life itself with an opportunity to self-reflect (*uitae ostendit uitam*). This is a serious and purposeful undertaking; Manilius connects Menander’s ‘mirror-like’ reflection with ‘knowledge’ or ‘philosophy’ (*doctior*), and even imbues it with a ‘sacral’ hue (*sacrauit*).

II.1.3 Exemplarity

³² Cf. e.g. *ad Hec.* 415 *Alia ratio est currentis ad argumenta, alia actuum comicorum; sed perfecti poetae est ita seruire argumento, ut tamen spectator nouis delectationibus teneatur.*

³³ “In such plays, Menander made his own day live for all generations: a man whose eloquence surpassed that of his native Athens (and that when its language attained its richest bloom), he held up a mirror to life and enshrined the image in his works.” (Transl. Goold).

³⁴ On Manilius’ views on poetics, and their philosophical background, see Ramelli 2014:177–179.

The exact meaning of *sacrare* in the preceding passage is unclear, but its positive connotation ought to be associated with another aspect of the ancient approbation of ‘realism’: its truth-bearing ‘exemplarity’. The self-reflection provided by the mirror of comedy does not consist of an introspection into the idiosyncrasies of an individual psyche or circumstance, but rather in extracting, out of those idiosyncrasies, the universality of the *exemplum*. Rather than simply reflecting the appearances of life, the mirror of comedy reflects and reveals the ‘universal’ typologies to which life conforms, providing paradigms of human behavior.³⁵ This is further clarified by an important passage from Quintilian (10.1.69), in which he recommends the reading of Menander as a repertoire of *exempla* for rhetorical characterization:

Quint. 10.1.69–71 (ed. Winterbottom 1984)

Menander, qui uel unus meo quidem iudicio diligenter lectus ad cuncta quae praecipimus effingenda sufficiat: ita omnem uitae imaginem expressit, tanta in eo inueniendi copia et eloquendi facultas, ita est omnibus rebus personis adfectibus accommodatus (...) ego tamen plus adhuc quiddam conlaturum eum declamatoribus puto, quoniam his necesse est secundum condicionem controuersiarum plures subire personas, patrum filiorum, caelibum maritorum,

³⁵ For this function cf. Phaed. 3.Pr. 49–50 *neque enim notare singulos mens est mihi, uerum ipsam uitam et mores hominum ostendere* (here apologetically assumed by a non-realistic genre, yet often associated with comedy [see below II.2, II.3]).

*militum rusticorum, diuitum pauperum, irascentium deprecantium, mitium asperorum. in quibus omnibus mire custoditur ab hoc poeta decor.*³⁶

According to Quintilian, Menandrian comedy offers an excellent collection of ‘realistic’ models for the *orator*’s impersonations, thanks to its comprehensive ‘realism’ (*omnem uitae imaginem*). The *exempla* revealed by the mirror of comedy are useful not only in artificial contexts, but above all in real life.

II.1.4 Moral benefit

The last ‘virtuous’ quality of comic ‘realism’ is its moral benefit, again exemplified in Donatus’ *De Comoedia*:

Donatus *Excerpta de Comoedia* 5.1 (ed. Wessner 1902)

³⁶ “And a careful reading of Menander alone would, in my judgement, be sufficient to develop all the qualities I am recommending: so complete is his representation of life, so rich his invention and so fluent his style, so perfectly does he adapt himself to every circumstance, character, and emotion. (...) Nevertheless, I think he has even more to contribute to declaimers, because they have, according to the terms of their exercises, to play many different roles: fathers, sons; bachelors, husbands; soldiers, farmers; rich men, poor men; the angry and the submissive; the gentle and the harsh. In all these, this poet preserves propriety marvellously.” (Transl. Russell).

*comoedia est fabula diuersa instituta continens affectuum ciuiliu ac priuatorum, quibus discitur, quid sit in uita utile, quid contra euitandum.*³⁷

According to Donatus, because comedies ‘realistically’ portray a vast range of characters as they ‘really’ are in life, either admirable or despicable, they provide models of human behavior either to imitate or to avoid. Moral comic *exempla* are therefore also profitable in real life, granting comedy its moral and thus pedagogical potential.

In conclusion, comedy offers, according to the ‘*speculum*-framework’, a comprehensive (*omnem*), and a truth-bearing (*uerum*) and mirror-like (*speculum*) reflection of the basic behavior of human beings in real life (*de uita hominum media*), which is (1) technically accomplished, (2) enjoyable (*delectabile*), (3) exemplary, and thereby (4) morally beneficial. This *speculum*-framework finds its best embodiment in Donatus’ *De Comedia* and Manilius, but is partially traceable in other sources, discussed above; I say ‘partially’, because (some of) the virtues of comic ‘realism’ (1–4) are also upheld by different frameworks which, however, construe the relationship between ‘comedy’ and ‘reality’ in quite different senses.

II.2 Sense 2: Separating ‘Comedy’ and ‘Truth: ‘Realism’ as a Fictional Imitation of Reality (the ‘Fiction-Framework’)

³⁷ “Comedy is a play that comprises many diverse practices of public and private disposition, by which one learns what is useful in life and conversely what one ought to avoid.”

In order to problematize the definition discussed above ('realism' *qua speculum uitae*), and to introduce some of its variants, I refer again to the aforementioned passage of *De Comedia*, which explicitly refers to Cicero as a source (*Cicero ait*). The iconic phrase *speculum uitae* or *consuetudinis* is not attested in extant Ciceronian texts³⁸. However, Donatus' Ciceronian source is presumably a passage from *Pro Sexto Roscio Amerino*:

Cic. *S. Rosc.* 47

*et certe ad rem nihil intersit utrum hunc ego comicum adulescentem an aliquem ex agro Veienti nominem. etenim haec conficta arbitror esse a poetis ut effictos nostros mores in alienis personis expressamque imaginem uitae cotidianae uideremus.*³⁹

(ed. Clark 1905)

Donatus may claim to have faithfully reproduced Cicero's views, but this is not entirely accurate; in contrast to Donatus' *speculum*-framework, Cicero's phrasing inserts into 'realism' (*imaginem uitae*) the notion of 'fictionality' (*conficta, effictos*)⁴⁰. The difference is not insignificant. In Donatus' *De Comoedia*, the root *fingere/fictus* (and derivatives) is never used, and, in his *Commentary*, it always evokes the idea of 'lying' and 'falsity', in contrast

³⁸ Cf. however Cic. *Pis.* 71 *eius* [sc. the Epicurean poet Philodemus] *delicatissimis uersibus expresserit, in quibus, si qui uelit, possit istius tamquam in speculo uitam intueri* (ed. Clark 1909).

³⁹ "and certainly it makes no difference to the argument, whether I quote the name of this young man in the comedy or of anyone from the territory of Veii. I think, in fact, that these fictions of the poets are intended to give us a representation of our manners in the characters of others and a vivid picture of our daily life." (Transl. Freese).

⁴⁰ Cf. Goldberg 2005:91–92, with note 10.

with ‘truth’.⁴¹ This is the case also in the (few) instances in which the term is associated with Terence’s art.⁴² As we have seen, in Donatus’ *speculum*-framework, the ‘realism’ of comedy is not described as an ‘invention’ of the playwright, but rather derives from a frictionless (though artistic) adherence to reality; it reflects, adheres to, and reveals the *uerum*. By contrast, in Cicero’s ‘fiction-framework’, comedy is a fiction contrived by the poet, which ‘looks like’ (rather than ‘reflects’) reality. The metaphor underlying Cicero’s words is not that of the mirror, but rather that of the sculpture or the painting (*effingo, confingo, impressum*). Because the poet does imitate reality, the *imago* of life is still (profitably) visible in the painting, but not as frictionlessly as in the mirror; a gap is introduced between reality and comedy, and between fiction and truth.

This ‘fiction-framework’ is further illustrated in two other important passages:

⁴¹ Cf. e.g. *ad An.* 334 *fit quod uerum est, fingitur quod falsum est, Ph.* 429 *DISSIMVLAT fingit, mentitur, Eun.* 104 *‘fictum’ totum sine uero sed uerisimile*. Also, *ad Ad.* 236, 570, *An.* 76, 120 (*uultum sibi fingere multi possunt, formam nemo*), 707 (*utrum hoc uerum dicit an fingit*), *Hec.* 109, 826, *Ph.* 141 *μίμησις dicitur, ubi non uerba modo, uerum etiam gestum uocem que fingamus alienam*

⁴² Cf. *ad Ad.* 252 *aduentus in proscaenio personarum cum consulto consilio fingantur a poeta, An.* 470 *et hoc est, quod ab euentu fingit poeta; non enim in Dauo est sic errare nunc senem, Eun.* 57 *concessum est in palliata poetis comicis seruos dominis sapientiores fingere*. In all the above cases Donatus is contrasting ‘truth’ with the playwright’s ‘unrealistic’ poetic licenses; that is, in these cases Donatus is not describing Terence’s art through the lens of the *speculum*-framework. As also shown by his comments on *Eun.* 104 and *Ph.* 141 (quoted in the previous note), Donatus is well aware that a lie can be ‘realistic’, and that ‘mimesis’ is/can be fictional: however, with the exception of the above cases, this is not the truth-bearing ‘realism’ which he normally highlights in Terentian comedy.

Rhet. Her. 1.13 (ed. Caplan 1954)

*Fabula est quae neque ueras neque ueri similes continet res, ut eae sunt quae tragoediis traditae sunt. Historia est gesta res, sed ab aetatis nostrae memoria remota. Argumentum est ficta res, quae tamen fieri potuit, uelut argumenta comoediarum.*⁴³

Cic. Inu. 1.27 (ed. Hubbell 1949)

(...) *argumentum est ficta res, quae tamen fieri potuit. Huiusmodi apud Terentium ‘Nam is postquam excessit ex ephebis (...)’.*⁴⁴

According to *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, later quoted by Cicero, ‘stories’ (*argumenta*) such as those of comedies, and of Terence in particular, contain ‘realistic’ elements (*ueri similes res*);⁴⁵ however, the ‘realism’ of these stories is not construed as a ‘reflection of truth’, but rather as a ‘fiction’ (*ficta*), a representation of the ‘possible’ (*tamen fieri potuit*)⁴⁶. Its contrast with the ‘truth’ of history marks its difference with the *speculum*-framework; comedy is not

⁴³ “The tale comprises events neither true nor probable, like those transmitted by tragedy. History is an account of exploits actually performed, but removed in time from the recollection of our age. *Argumentum* recounts imaginary events, which yet could have occurred, like the plots of comedies.” (Transl. Caplan 1954, adapted).

⁴⁴ “*Argumentum* is a fictitious narrative which nevertheless could have occurred. An example may be quoted from Terence: ‘For after he had left the school of youth’ (..).” (Transl. Hubbell 1949).

⁴⁵ On the Hellenistic developments in Greek literary terminology which are reflected in these passages see Meijering 1987:84–87.

⁴⁶ On this cf. Arist. *Poet.* 1451b12–13, arguing that comic poets construct their plots on the basis of *eikos* (διὰ τῶν εἰκότων). See Wohl 2014.

the realm of the *uerum*, but that of the *ueri simile*, which does not adhere to the *uerum* as in the *speculum*-framework, but is somehow detached from it.

Another example of a deviation from the *speculum*-framework is evident in the writings of one of the most enthusiastic admirers of Terentian comedy, the Late Antique scholar Evanthius, whose work has been partially preserved, together with Donatus' commentary.

Evanthius *De Fabula* 3.4 (ed. Wessner 1902)

*tum personarum leges circa habitum, aetatem, officium, partes agendi nemo diligentius a Terentio custodiuit. quin etiam solus ausus est, cum in fictis argumentis fidem ueritatis assequeretur, etiam contra praescripta comica meretrices interdum non malas introducere (...).*⁴⁷

The view presented in this passage is not fully compatible with the *speculum*-framework. While reiterating the association between 'Terence's comedy' and 'truth', Evanthius states that (1) Terence brought about only the "credibility of truth" (*fidem ueritatis*), and not 'truth' *per se*; and, above all, that (2) this "credibility of truth" was conveyed in 'fictional' plots (*fictis argumentis*).⁴⁸ Again, the idea that comedy's plots are 'fictitious' inventions is

⁴⁷ "No one else respected the rules concerning the costume of characters, their age, function, and role, more diligently than Terence. Rather, he was the only one to dare to introduce at times, against the conventions of comedy, well-behaved prostitutes, while succeeding in bringing about, in fictional plots, the credibility of truth."

⁴⁸ Cf. also *ibidem* 2.4 *etenim per priscos poetas non ut nunc ficta penitus argumenta*, 4.2 *quod in tragoedia fugienda uita, in comoedia capessenda exprimitur; postremo quod omnis comoedia de fictis est argumentis, tragoedia saepe de historia fide petitur.*

not in full harmony with the view that comic ‘realism’ is a mirror-like imitation of ‘the whole of reality’ (including ‘realistic and believable plots’⁴⁹), and not a ‘fiction’. Moreover, by praising Terence’s unconventional portrayal of well-behaved prostitutes, Evanthius implicitly casts doubt on the ‘realism’ of traditional comic typologies, which contrasts with an important tenet of Donatus’ *speculum*-framework, that comic typologies mirror real universal behaviors (cf. section III).

In summary, the above passages seem to introduce, whether intentionally or not, a gap (if not yet a break) between ‘realism’ and ‘truth’, a gap which is not present or foregrounded in the *speculum*-framework. It would be incorrect to oppose the ‘*speculum*’ to the ‘fiction’ framework (the former is instead a radicalization of the latter), but the two nonetheless are not identical. A passage from Priscian’s translation of an influential rhetorical handbook (*progymnasmata*), attributed to Hermogenes of Tarsus (2nd c. AD), clarifies this difference further.

Priscian *Praeexercitamina* 1 (ed. Passalacqua)

*Fabula est oratio ficta uerisimili dispositione imaginem exhibens ueritatis. (...) et pertinet ad uitae utilitatem et fit uerisimilis si res, quae subiectis accidunt personis, apte reddantur.*⁵⁰

⁴⁹ See below III, and cf. Bureau and Nicolas 2013:103 [In Donatus’ view] “Il faut que cette intrigue soit non seulement intéressante, mais qu’elle obéisse, tant dans sa construction que dans sa présentation à des règles vraisemblables.”

⁵⁰ “*Fabula* is a fictional story displaying by ‘realistic’ arrangement an image of truth. (...) and it concerns what is useful for life; and it is ‘realistic’ if the events happening to the characters are presented appropriately.” Cf.

This passage may appear to be a paraphrase of Donatus' definition of the *speculum*-framework, but the framework is in fact completely different. This is not only because, according to Priscian, the content of a *fabula* is 'made up' (*ficta*), and not 'taken' or 'imported' from life; in particular, the 'realistic' *fabula* to which Priscian refers is *not* 'comedy', but rather the 'fantastic' fable of Aesop and sim. (*Aesopica*).

This is not an eccentric view; in ancient thought, the notions of *imitatio*, *imago*, and *mimemisis* do not necessarily imply a 'mirror-like' imitation of sensory reality (as per the *speculum*-framework). As Plato in particular was aware,⁵¹ not every representation or imitation of reality (*mimesis*, *imitatio* or *imago*) is necessarily 'mirror-like'; there are also 'non-realistic' representations, such as those of non-figurative art and animal fables. These superficially 'non-realistic' representations, by directly imitating the 'idea' or 'substance' of reality rather than mimicking its sensorial appearance,⁵² can express an image of 'truth'

[Hermog.] prog. 2.11-12 R. Ψευδῆ μὲν αὐτὸν ἀξιοῦσιν εἶναι, πάντως δὲ χρήσιμον πρὸς τι τῶν ἐν τῷ βίῳ· ἔτι δὲ καὶ πιθανὸν εἶναι βούλονται. The idea is common in late antique Greek scholarship: cf. e.g. Teon prog. 72.28 Sp. (= Aphth. prog. 1.6 R.) Μῦθος ἐστὶ λόγος ψευδῆς εἰκονίζων ἀλήθειαν; Nicol. prog. 6.9-10 F. Μῦθος τοίνυν ἐστὶ λόγος ψευδῆς τῷ πιθανῶς συγκεῖσθαι εἰκονίζων τὴν ἀλήθειαν; Sopat. apud Sard. in Aphth. prog. 6.5-8 R. (= Doxap. in Aphth. prog. 156,24-27 W.) Μῦθος ἐστὶ πλάσμα πιθανῶς πρὸς εἰκόνα τῶν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ συμβαινόντων πραγμάτων συγκείμενον, συμβουλὴν τινα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἢ ὑπογραφὴν πραγμάτων ποιούμενον; Doxap. in Aphth. prog. 159.25-27 W. 'Εικονίζων ἀλήθειαν' τουτέστιν οὐκ ἀλεθεύων, ἀ ἔμφασιν μόνον καὶ εἰκόνα ἀληθείας παρέχων.

⁵¹ See in particular Halliwell 2002:37–71.

⁵² For the idea (of Platonic ancestry) cf. e.g. Cic. *Orat.* 8 *Sed ego sic statuo, nihil esse in ullo genere tam pulchrum, quo non pulchrius id sit unde illud ut ex ore aliquo quasi imago exprimatur. Quod neque oculis neque*

(*imaginem exhibens ueritatis*), and can thus, in Priscian's terms, be in essence 'realistic' (*uerisimilis*). In Priscian's view, the patent fictionality of fables does not prevent them from having all the positive features associated with comedy in the *speculum*-framework: the inherent 'realism' (of course not *qua* 'mirror-like reflection of reality'), the revelation of *ueritas* (*imago ueritatis*), and even moral benefit (*ad uitae utilitatem*).⁵³ The key assumption behind the view of Priscian and others is the dichotomy between imitation of 'sensory appearances' and imitation of the 'essence' of reality. A *fabula* can be 'unrealistic' regarding the former, but 'realistic' regarding the latter, without necessarily compromising the representation of 'truth' and its moral utility. This dichotomy between 'sensory appearances' and 'essence' is already present *in potentia* in the fiction-framework of Cicero and others. Once the notion of 'fictionality' has been inserted into 'realism' (with reference to *oratio*, *argumentum*, and sim.) and a gap between 'reality' and 'comedy/art' has thus been opened, the value of (superficial) 'realism' is potentially dispensable, and one can therefore think in

auribus neque ullo sensu percipi potest, cogitatione tamen et mente complectimur. Itaque et Phidiae simulacris (...) (ed. Hendrickson 1939); Sen. *Ep.* 65.7 *His quintam Plato adicit exemplar, quam ipse 'idean' vocat; hoc est enim ad quod respiciens artifex id quod destinabat effecit. Nihil autem ad rem pertinet utrum foris habeat exemplar ad quod referat oculos an intus, quod ibi ipse concepit et posuit. (...) Tamquam in statua (...).* "Plato adds a fifth cause,—the pattern which he himself calls the "idea"; for it is this that the artist gazed upon when he created the work which he had decided to carry out. Now it makes no difference whether he has his pattern outside himself, that he may direct his glance to it, or within himself, conceived and placed there by himself. (...) Just as in the case of the statue (...)." (Ed. and transl. Gummere 1917). The idea will be at the center of Neo-Platonic aesthetics (see e.g. Lobsien and Olk 2007, esp. the chapters by Halfwassen, Haug and Lobsien).

⁵³ Cf. also above note 35. On fables in ancient literature and scholarship see e.g. Van Dijk 1997.

terms of a truth-bearing fiction (an oxymoron according to the *speculum*-framework), and of a falsity-bearing ‘realism’.

II.3 Sense 3, ‘Realism’ as a ‘False’ Artifice: Problematizing the Relationship between ‘Truth’ and ‘Realism’

The gap between ‘realism’ and ‘truth’, which presents itself in the fiction-framework, widens into a fissure in what one might call the ‘counter-criticism’ against New Comedy. Although comic ‘realism’ was normally described in positive, if not enthusiastic terms, there are traces of other critical traditions which objected to the exaltation of the supposedly truth-bearing and exemplary ‘realism’ of comedy.⁵⁴ An interesting example is found in Marcus Aurelius:

Marc. Aurel. *Med.* 11.6.2 (ed. Haines 1916)

μετὰ δὲ τὴν τραγωδίαν ἢ ἀρχαία κωμῳδία παρήχθη, παιδαγωγικὴν παρρησίαν ἔχουσα καὶ τῆς ἀτυφίας οὐκ ἀχρήστως δι’ αὐτῆς τῆς εὐθυρρημοσύνης ὑπομιμνήσκουσα (...) μετὰ ταύτην <δὲ> ἢ μέση κωμῳδία καὶ λοιπὸν ἢ νέα πρὸς τίποτε παρείληπται, ἢ κατ’ ὀλίγον ἐπὶ τὴν ἐκ μιμήσεως φιλοτεχνίαν ὑπερρῦη,

⁵⁴ A possible joke on the light-hearted artificiality of Menander’s comedy may be detected in Ovid (*Trist.* 2.369 *fabula iucundi nulla est sine amore Menandri*; cf. also *Am.* 1.15.17-8 *dum fallax seruius, durus pater, improba lena | uiuent et meretrix blanda, Menandros erit*).

ἐπίστησον. ὅτι μὲν γὰρ λέγεται καὶ ὑπὸ τούτων τινὰ χρήσιμα οὐκ ἀγνοεῖται· ἀλλὰ ἡ ὅλη ἐπιβολὴ τῆς τοιαύτης ποιήσεως καὶ δραματοουργίας πρὸς τίνα ποτὲ σκοπὸν ἀπέβλεψεν;⁵⁵

Marcus Aurelius recognizes Menander's 'realism', but dismisses it as an 'ingenious mimicry', a 'mimetic artifice for its own sake' (τὴν ἐκ μιμήσεως φιλοτεχνίαν), in contrast with the 'educative freedom of speech' of (non-realistic) Old Comedy.⁵⁶ In sharp contrast with the traditional exegesis of comedy as a 'mirror of life', Marcus Aurelius implies that the result of Menander's mimesis was actually that of 'losing contact with the real world'.⁵⁷

An analogous criticism is found in Macrobius, who emphasizes the inherent 'falsity' of *fabulae* (here including both comedies and fables), and admonishes the purely gratifying intent of Menander's 'realistic' comedies, in contrast with the moral potential of the 'non-realistic' fables of Aesop:

⁵⁵ "And after Tragedy the old Comedy was put on the stage, exercising an educative freedom of speech, and by its very directness of utterance giving us no unserviceable warning against unbridled arrogance. In somewhat similar vein Diogenes also took up this role. After this, consider for what purpose the Middle Comedy was introduced, and subsequently the New, which little by little degenerated **into ingenious mimicry**. For that some serviceable things are said even by the writers of these is recognized by all. But what end in view had this whole enterprise of such poetical and dramatic composition?" (Transl. Heines).

⁵⁶ Cf. Halliwell 2002:276.

⁵⁷ Nesselrath 1990:57; for analogous views in modern scholarship cf. Ehrenberg 1962:37–42 (esp. 42 "Life in New Comedy apes life, but was shut off from reality"), Petrone 1983, esp. 144, according to whom reality is 'precluded' to Menander's comedy, as if it were separated from the rest of the world by a 'pane of glass'.

Macrobius *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis* 1.2.7–8 (ed. Willis 1970)

*Fabulae, quarum nomen indicat falsi professionem, aut tantum conciliandae auribus uoluptatis, aut adhortationis quoque in bonam frugem gratia repertae sunt. Auditum mulcent uel comoediae, quales Menander eiusue imitatores agendas dederunt (...) hoc totum fabularum genus quod solas aurium delicias profitetur, e sacrario suo in nutricum cunas sapientiae tractatus eliminat.*⁵⁸

Like Priscian, Macrobius distinguishes between the ‘uplifting’ Aesop and the purely ‘hedonistic’ Menander. However, in contrast with Priscian, Macrobius acknowledges no open trace of ‘truth’ in either of the two authors; all fables are ‘false’,⁵⁹ and most especially Menander’s comedies, which are completely dissociated from *sapientia* (cf. in contrast the *doctus Menander* of Manilius’ *speculum*-framework).

A similar emphasis on the ‘falsity’ of *fabulae* is expressed by Isidore of Seville.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ “*Fabulae* — their very name is an admission of falsehood word acknowledges their falsity — serve two purposes: either merely to gratify the ear or to encourage the reader to good works. They delight the ear as do the comedies of Menander and his imitators; (...) this whole category of fables that promise only to gratify the ear, a philosophical treatise avoids and relegates to children’s nurseries.” (Transl Stahl 1990).

⁵⁹ In fact, Macrobius does acknowledge a degree of truth in a sub-category of fictional fables, that is the allegorical (or allegorized) myth, which “rests on a solid foundation of truth” (1.2.9) and involves “a decent and dignified conception of holy truths, with respectable events and characters, (...) presented beneath a modest veil of allegory” (1.2.11). On allegorical myth in antiquity see e.g. Brisson 2004, Obbink and Most’s chapters in Copeland and Struck 2010 (with bibl.), Lambertson 1986; on medieval developments Dronke 1974.

⁶⁰ On Isidore, his sources and thought, Fontaine 1959 is still useful (cf. esp. 176–180, on the quoted passage); see also Pirovano 2012, esp. 237–242 (on chapter 40, *De Fabula*).

Isidor. 1.40.1, 3 (ed. Lindsay 1911)

*Fabulas poetae a fando nominauerunt, quia non sunt res factae, sed tantum loquendo fictae. Quae ideo sunt inductae, ut fictorum mutorum animalium inter se conloquio imago quaedam uitae hominum nosceretur. (...) Fabulas poetae quasdam delectandi causa finxerunt, quasdam ad naturam rerum, nonnullas ad mores hominum interpretati sunt. Delectandi causa fictas, ut eas, quas uulgo dicunt, uel quales Plautus et Terentius conposuerunt.*⁶¹

Plautus' and Terence's plays are dismissed as mere 'hedonistic' fictions, and contrasted with the knowledge-bearing potential of Aesop's ethical fables (*imago quaedam uitae hominum nosceretur*), and also of the stories of traditional myth (which present, in accordance with Stoic doctrine, allegories of physical truth). Moreover, for Isidore, the 'realistic' label of *imago uitae* is detached from comedy's superficial 'realism', and ascribed to the 'fictitious' fables of Aesop.

⁶¹ "Poets named 'fables' (*fabula*) from 'speaking' (*fari*), because they are not actual events that took place, but were only invented in words. These are presented with the intention that the conversation of imaginary dumb animals among themselves may be recognized as a certain image of the life of humans. (...) Poets have made up some fables for the sake of entertainment, and expounded others as having to do with the nature of things, and still others as about human morals. Those made up for the sake of entertainment are such as are commonly told, or that kind that Plautus and Terence composed." (Transl. Barney and al. 2006).

The passages above testify to the existence of a strand of Roman scholarship which distinguished between the notions of ‘realism’ and ‘truth’, and either implicitly or explicitly invalidated some of the assumptions of the *speculum*-framework. These are (1) the close relationship between ‘mirror-like imitation’, ‘truthfulness’, and ‘exemplarity’ (Menander effectively imitates reality, and yet this is a purely self-referential exercise, which is not truth-bearing or exemplary); (2) the opposition between ‘fiction’ and ‘truth’ (moral truth can also be conveyed through the non-realistic fables of Aesop or the fantastical comedy of Aristophanes); (3) the harmony between ‘appearance’ and ‘substance’ (Menander’s mirror only reflects the appearance of reality, but its underlying moral truths are better conveyed by other, non-realistic literature), (4) the unity between ‘aesthetic satisfaction’ and ‘moral benefit’ (Menander’s mimesis is gratifying, but does not provide ethical knowledge). The ‘realistic’ framework of the above passages is radically different from the *speculum*-framework of Donatus; both imply a relationship between ‘art’ and ‘reality’, but, whereas in the former the relationship is a deep one, involving a ‘physiognomic’ mirroring and revelation of underlying truths, in the latter the relationship is only superficial, and thus ultimately misleading.

This strand of argument is found not only in Roman sources, but can be traced back to Greek philosophical and aesthetic discourses, particularly relating to the questions of whether ‘truth’ lies beyond or within sensory reality, and whether poetry is considered to have heuristic potential or not;⁶² the scope of this article does not permit a full discussion of these

⁶² See e.g. Halliwell 2011.

discourses.⁶³ It is nevertheless clear that the same ‘realistic’ label, and particularly the ever-present *imago uitae*, can be used in different senses, and can be applied to different entities.

All the counter-criticism against comic ‘realism’ was presumably reactive, arguing against the widespread tradition according to which Menandrian comedy provided an accomplished, gratifying, and truth-bearing (mirror-like) imitation of real life. I shall now discuss the most representative embodiment of this tradition, the commentary of Aelius Donatus, as well as some exegetical foundations and applications of the *speculum*-framework.

III. Donatus on Terentian ‘Realism’

Donatus’ commentary is one of the most extensive pieces of Latin exegesis preserved from antiquity, although its transmitted form shows clear signs of later rearrangement.⁶⁴ In the manuscript tradition, it is frequently prefaced by a short *Vita Terentii*, derived from Suetonius’ *De Poetis*, followed by Evanthius’ *De Fabula* and by excerpts of the aforementioned *De Comoedia* (presumably by Donatian). As already discussed, these excerpts describe ‘realism’ as a *speculum uitae*, as a defining virtue of Terentian comedy, and

⁶³ See in particular Halliwell 2002, Germany 2016:72–94, and above note 22.

⁶⁴ See Zetzel 2018:254 with bibl., Pezzini *forthcoming*. On the ‘art’ of *Commentum Donati* see Jakobi 1996, esp. 158–175 (on *ethopoiia*), 176–178 (on the *speculum uitae*), Maltby 2014, Demetriou 2014. On Donatus’ views on dramatic fiction, see also Bureau and Nicolas 2013; this work was unknown to me when this article was originally drafted, but I was glad to find out that their analysis and conclusions are often in line with my core argument (as pointed out below).

as aesthetically gratifying, truth-bearing, and morally beneficial. This *speculum*-framework appears to inform the commentary itself, which abounds in notes (ap)praising the ‘realistic’ features of Terentian comedy, emphasizing their derivation from, rather than imitation of, real life (*ex* or *de consuetudo*), and thus ultimately their inherent ‘truth’ (*ueritas*). Cf. e.g.

ad An. 470⁶⁵

*pulchro colore uitae inducto poeta ostendit non minus falli suspiciosum, quam qui stultus est.*⁶⁶

The expression ‘(*pulcher*) *color uitae*’ has strong rhetorical precedents, and is recurrent in the commentary; it could be rendered as ‘the beautiful complexion of life’, or perhaps even ‘beautiful realism’.⁶⁷ According to Donatus, Terence’s ‘beautiful realism’ consists primarily of use of language. An example is Donatus’ note *ad Eun.* 91, on the elliptic expression *quid missa?* (sc. *dicis*, ‘how do you mean ‘forget it’?’):⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Donatus’ quotations are from Wessner’s edition (1902–1905).

⁶⁶ “by introducing the beautiful color of life, the poet shows that the suspicious man is no less mistaken than the stupid.”

⁶⁷ *Color* is a productive term in the Roman rhetorical tradition, especially Quintilian, denoting ‘the appearance of truth’, or more precisely the ‘gloss’ smeared by the orator or writer on (fictional) words or behavior, in order to make them look or sound ‘real’. Cf. e.g. Quint. 3.8.44–45

⁶⁸ On ellipsis as a feature of colloquial language according to Donatus cf. also *ad An.* 361, *ad Ad.* 292.

*magna uirtus poetae est non sententias solum de consuetudine ac de medio tollere et ponere in comoedia, uerum etiam uerba quaedam ex communi sermone, <unde> est quod ait nunc quid missa?*⁶⁹

The phrase *magna uirtus* epitomizes Donatus' high regard for 'realism', and the phrasing *tollere et ponere*, in accordance with the *speculum*-framework, stresses that Terence does not 'invent', but rather 'imports'. The expression *communis sermo* is also important; in Donatus' view, Terence's imitation of everyday life (*de consuetudine ac de medio tollere*) is especially manifest in his *Umgangssprache*.⁷⁰ Many 'colloquial' features are identified by Donatus as markers of 'real' speech, and more generally as reflections of 'general practice' in real life (*consuetudo, ueritas, or sim.*). Cf. e.g.:

- *unus* with superlative force (Ferri and Probert 2010:34)
ad An. 118 (on *unam aspicio adolescentulam*) **ex consuetudine** dixit 'unam', ut dicimus *unus est adulescens. tolle 'unam' et ita fiet, ut sensui nihil desit, sed consuetudo admirantis non erit expressa.*
- Infinitive of purpose
ad An. 484 (on *dari bibere*)
date consuetudine quam ratione dixit pro: date ei potionem.
- Ethical dative (Adams 2013:347–348)

⁶⁹ "it is the great virtue of the poet not only to take precepts of everyday life and insert them in comedy, but also [to take] some expressions of common speech, which is why he says here *quid missa?*"

⁷⁰ Cf. Ferri and Probert 2010:33–37.

ad Ad. 476 (on psaltriam nobis)

τῶ ἰδιωτισμῶ; sic enim dicimus. et est consuetudinis peruulgatae.

- Metaphoric phraseology (Hofmann and Ricottilli 2003:322–325)

ad An. 937 (on uix sum apud me)

consuetudine magis quam ratione dicitur.

- Expressions of endearment (Hofmann and Ricottilli 2003:277–304)

ad Hec. 770 (on noster socer)

‘noster’ blandientis dictum est. (...) magis hoc consuetudine dictum est quam integritate.

- Euphemism (Hofmann and Ricottilli 2003:304–314)

ad Hec. 551 (on exeuntem aut introeuntem [sc. ad amicam])

mollis est ἐξουθενισμός criminis de consuetudine: non enim dixit ‘amplectentem amicam’.

- Rhetorical questions

ad Ad. 433 (on tu rus hinc abis?)

qui consuetudinis memor est, animaduertit has interrogationes non inquirendi causa poni, sed admonitionis loco esse apud eos, quos uelimus abscedere.

Most of the above features are also labelled as ‘colloquial’, ‘informal’, or ‘low-register’ by modern linguistics, and especially by scholars such as Hofmann, who considered colloquialisms as an ‘affective’ use of language to convey emotion.⁷¹ Donatus himself

⁷¹ Hofmann and Ricottilli 1985. See also Dickey and Chahoud 2010, esp. 3–11, 42–68.

explicitly associates Terence's *Umgangssprache* with emotional expression,⁷² and also with linguistic characterization, another area often labelled as 'realistic' in modern Terentian exegesis.⁷³ An example of this is found in Donatus' note on *Ad.* 432, in which he remarks on the bad manners of the old-fashioned *senex* Demea:

πρὸς τὸ '<numquid> uis' respondit **agresti ueritate**; nam respondendum erat 'recte' aut 'ualeas'.⁷⁴

Demea responds to his interlocutor in a brisk manner, and this is considered by Donatus a case of 'rustic truth' (*agresti ueritate*; 'à la façon d'un vrai paysan' [transl. Bureau and Nicolas]). The word *ueritas* evokes a framework — the *speculum uitae* — in which comic 'realism' adheres to 'truth' to such a great extent that the two notions are interchangeable.

Aside from language, Donatus is keen to identify 'realism' in many other aspects of Terence's dramatic art, and particularly in plot construction. A pertinent example is Donatus' note on *Eun.* 360 *numquamne etiam me illam uidisse* ("To think that I've never yet set eyes

⁷² Cf. e.g. *ad Hec.* 214 (on *tu ... mulier*) τὸ 'mulier' ἔμφασιν *malitiae habet et omnino expressio consuetudinis est ad indignationem*; *ad Eun.* 560 (on the fact that the exclamation precedes the greeting) *O FESTUS DIES HOMINIS AMICE SALVE decet a salutatione incipere luculente dicturum; illum autem ueri simile est et percussum re noua et audiendi cupidum immemorem exstitisse salutandi.*

⁷³ E.g. Maltby 1979:146–147.

⁷⁴ "He responds to 'do you need anything else?' with rustic truth: in fact, one should have replied 'I'm fine' or 'goodbye'."

on her!”), uttered by the young man Chaerea.⁷⁵ In *Eunuchus*, Chaerea is going to dress up as a *eunuchus*, in order to sneak into the house of the courtesan Thais, and rape a slave-girl with whom he has fallen in love. A potential flaw spotted by Donatus is the fact that Thais is a neighbor of Chaerea’s family; how is it possible that Thais does not see through Chaerea’s disguise, and then lets him into her house? The solution to this apparent implausibility lies, according to Donatus, in the fact that Thais has never met Chaerea, because she has only recently moved in, and Chaerea had previously spent a period of time at the Piraeus (*Eun.* 360). By providing this information, Terence manages to make the following development of the plot *uerisimile*, ‘realistic’. This ‘realistic’ technique is described by Donatus as an outstanding artistic accomplishment (*nimio lepore*), which goes beyond the standard ‘realistic’ artifice of comedy (*artificiose*).⁷⁶ A similar case occurs in *ad Eun.* 563, in which another apparent improbability of the plot is explained by Donatus in ‘realistic’ terms (*ueri simile*).⁷⁷

⁷⁵ *ad Eun.* 360 *artificiose inculcat poeta τὸ πιθανόν. sed nimio lepore Terentiano iam illud agitur. nam hic ostenditur uerisimile esse pro eunucho creditum apud uicinam meretricem Chaeream, qui adeo ignotus sit mulieri, ut nec ipse eam nouerit, quod erat facilius et promptius. et additur color, quod et illa non diu uicina est et quod adulescens in Piraeo primum commoratus est.* Cf. Bureau and Nicolas 2013:107–109.

⁷⁶ As noted by Bureau and Nicolas (2013:108) “Donat envisage en quelque sorte deux strates de vraisemblable, l’une qui s’impose à tout poète comme indispensable à la crédibilité de l’argument, l’autre qui relève du génie propre de Térence”.

⁷⁷ Don. *ad Eun.* 563 NOVI NEMPE [UT] OPINOR THAIDEM *uerisimile est haec scire Antiphonem, qui adeo sit familiaris Chaerae.* On this note see Bureau and Nicolas 2013:107. Cf. also *ad Eun.* 359, *ad Ad.* 321 (Geta does not recognize Sostrata because he is enraged); also Eugraphius *ad An.* 79, *ad An.* 125.

Donatus identifies Terence's quest for verisimilitude in several other aspects of his plays, such as chronology, social convention, and psychology. For example, in his note on *An.* 69 (*abhinc triennium*), Donatus explains the reference to a period of "three years" as an effort by Terence to make *ueri simile* the crowded narrative of Chrysis' story.⁷⁸ A case of psychological 'verisimilitude' is identified by Donatus at *Eun.* 446 (*siquidem me amaret tum istuc prodesset Gnatho*), where the soldier Thraso, by using the counterfactual subjunctive *amaret*, reveals *en passant* that he is aware that the courtesan Thais does not reciprocate his love. Donatus addresses a possible objection:⁷⁹ how can it be 'realistic' that, at the end of *Eunuchus*, the soldier Thraso accedes to 'share' the pleasures of Thais with the young Phaedria? He does so because he already knows that Thais has never loved him and never will, as Terence allegedly reveals at *Eun.* 446; therefore, according to Donatus, this short line (*uersiculus*) is appropriately inserted by Terence for the sake of 'verisimilitude' (*qua uerisimile fit*).⁸⁰

In Donatus's view, Terence's 'realistic' art is also visible in his respect for social norms. At *ad An.* 483, Donatus clearly refers to a social convention which Terence (and/or Menander)

⁷⁸ *ad An.* 69 [*abhinc triennium*] *artificiose triennium dixit, cum posset plus minusue temporis ponere, ut sit uerisimile unum annum fuisse pudicae parcaequae uitae, sequentem condicionis acceptae, tertium mortis.*

⁷⁹ *ad Eun.* 446 *hic uersiculus personam militis et Gnathonis continens pro oeconomia inducitur, qua uerisimile fit facile militem ferre posse anteponi sibi Phaedriam, qui se semper intellexerit non amari. nam si hoc tollas, aut excludendus est Phaedria aut ex dolore militis in hac fabula fit exitus tragicus.*

⁸⁰ For other cases of psychological or emotive verisimilitude cf. *ad Ph.* 405 (the anguish of Pamphilus explains his silence), *ad Eun.* 968 (the doubts are required by the necessities of realism), *ad Eun.* 98, *ad Ph.* 158.

allegedly respects, despite the unjust criticism of some *imperiti*.⁸¹ Moreover, the note testifies to the existence of an exegetical debate, which focuses on Terence's 'realism' or lack of it, and equates the latter with *imperitia*, a 'lack of (dramatic) skill' or perhaps, as suggested to me by Peter Brown, 'ignorance of what happens in the real world', or possibly both.

Donatus also identifies 'realism' in Terence's metatheatrical elements, which never openly break the fourth wall in Terentian comedy. Even a blatant metatheatrical reference such as that of *Hec.* 866–867 (*placet non fieri hoc itidem ut in comoediis | omnia omnes ubi resciscunt* ("I don't want what happens in comedies to happen here, where everybody finds out everything") is labelled by Donatus with approbation, as an outstanding (*mire*) instance of 'realism', nullifying the gap between 'comedy' and 'reality' (*quasi haec comoedia non sit sed ueritas*).⁸²

Donatus also identifies 'realism' in Terence's supposed tendency to highlight his innovations to the comic tradition. Donatus' note on the opening line of the fifth act of *Hecyra* (727 *Non hoc de nihilost quod Laches me nunc conuentam esse expetit* "It's not for nothing that Laches wants to get in touch with me now") illuminates this interesting feature of Terence's realism.

ad Hec. 727

⁸¹ ad An. 483 *imperitiae notantes Menandrum aut Terentium ipsi ultro imperiti inueniuntur, nam et ille «λοῦσαι ἄτην»* *dicens a consuetudine non recessit, cum lauisse sexum lauisse pro parte totum significans, et Terentius propius ad significationem accessit ista dicendo, ne pudenda nominaret.* For a fuller analysis of this problematic note, see Cioffi 2018:329–332.

⁸² Cf. Sharrock 2009:271–272, pointing out that *mire* is Donatus' standard term of approbation.

*Rarus hic uitae color in hac allocutione miscetur a poeta, nam meretrix loquitur et senex et, quod est admirabilius, bona meretrix, mitis senex, ut intellegas laborasse Terentium, ut et a lege comicorum recederet et in actu tamen consuetudinem retineret.*⁸³

This line introduces a scene featuring a dialogue between two characters who are ‘astonishing’ (*admirabilius*), according to the standards of both comedy and life: a good prostitute (*bona meretrix*) and an apparently lenient old man (*mitis senex*). These are the courtesan Bacchis and the old man Laches, who then engage in conversation. Before this begins, however, each character delivers a short aside. Bacchis, who is in fact a *bona meretrix*, reveals that she is not at all surprised that Laches is angrily looking for her, and guesses his purpose. She is aware of the standard behavior of her ‘colleagues’, the *meretrices*, who are by default *malae* and chase young men in search of profit. Conversely, Laches, who is in fact an angry *senex*, tells himself to restrain his anger, and to pretend to be *lenis*; he has a request to make to Bacchis, and does not want his anger to put her off. He wants Bacchis to stop seeing his son, since he is convinced that she is the one responsible for his son’s falling out with his wife. Donatus recognizes in these two asides an ‘exquisite’ (*rarus*) sample of *color uitae*. But what exactly does the *color uitae* ‘blended’ (*miscetur*) by Terence consist of in this scene? Paradoxically, according to Donatus, it is present in the fact that Bacchis explicitly highlights Laches’ behavior as ‘realistic’ (since prostitutes normally (mis)behave in the way

⁸³ “The poet blends in this dialogue an exquisite ‘realism’; in fact, a prostitute and an old man are speaking, and what is more astonishing, a good prostitute and a lenient old man; you must understand that Terence has strived to keep away from the law of the comedians, but at the same time to respect common practice in the action.”

he envisages, and this justifies his anger), and thus implies that her own ‘good’ behavior is ‘unrealistic’.

Donatus’ view is clarified in a note on a later passage, again featuring the *bona meretrix* Bacchis commenting on the peculiarity of her own behavior (*Hec.* 756 *faciam quod pol, si esset alia ex hoc quaestu, haud faceret, scio* ‘I’ll do what I’m sure nobody else of my profession would do’). Donatus comments:

ad Hec. 756

*Vigilanter poeta, ne non uerisimile uideretur id ullam fecisse meretricem, ipse lectorem praeuenit. Et sic fere in omnibus Terentius, quae minus peruulgata sunt quaeque abhorrent a consuetudine, agit.*⁸⁴

Again, according to Donatus, the very fact that Bacchis describes her behavior as exceptional allows Terence ‘vigilantly’ (*uigilanter*) to preserve the ‘verisimilitude’ of the situation (*ne non uerisimile uideretur*), thereby preventing criticism from the reader (*lectorem praeuenit*).⁸⁵ In his note, Donatus refers to Terence’s unconventional innovations as things *quae minus peruulgata sunt quaeque abhorrent a consuetudine*; the phrasing is revealing, and

⁸⁴ “The poet vigilantly anticipated the reader, so that it would not seem unrealistic that a prostitute could ever do that [i.e. behave selflessly]. And Terence does the same almost in all cases which are less familiar [i.e. in comedy] and deviate from common practice [i.e. in life].”

⁸⁵ Cf. also Donatus’ notes *ad Hec.* 729 *quia non erat uerisimile beniuolum esse patrem meretrici interturbanti, reddit rationem senex, cur agat mitius, ne uideatur personae modus non esse seruatus, ad Hec. Praef.* 1, *ad Ph.* 58, 834.

suggests that Donatus has in mind both ‘standard theatrical types’ (*peruulgata*) and ‘standard behavior in real life’ (*a consuetudine*);⁸⁶ the former reflect the latter, as expected in the *speculum*-framework, and thus the two can be grouped together.⁸⁷

A fundamental aspect of Donatus’ notion of ‘realism’, rooted in his *speculum*-framework (cf. II.1), is its standard association with ‘universal’ features of human beings, reflected in conventional comic characters. According to Donatus, Bacchis’ ‘verisimilitude’ does not depend on her adherence to the expectations raised by her idiosyncratic psychology; rather, her ‘realism’ is measured according to her adherence to the ‘standard’ (and ‘realistic’) moral and comic typology to which she belongs, that of the ‘bad prostitute’.⁸⁸ In this respect, Donatus’ view differs from the one found in Evanthius (cf. II.2), according to which Terence’s ‘realism’ consists of the ability to diverge from comic ‘unrealistic’ conventions by portraying ‘realistically’ good prostitutes; by contrast, Donatus identifies Terence’s ‘realism’

⁸⁶ As discussed above, in Donatus *consuetudo* normally refers to ‘common practices’ in real life (from language to forms of behavior).

⁸⁷ Cf. also *ad Eun.* 198 *hic Terentius ostendit uirtutis suae hoc esse, ut peruulgatas personas noue inducat et tamen a consuetudine non recedat, ut puta meretricem bonam cum facit, capiat tamen et delectet animum spectatoris.*

⁸⁸ Cf. Bureau and Nicolas 2013:122 “Etre vraisemblable, pour un argumentum c’est donc être semblable au vrai, mais surtout, dans sa résolution par la parole, faire droit aux règles qui régissent la communication dans le réel.” This of course not only a Donatian idea; cf. Traill 2008:84 (“We may be more likely to see figures who depart from a stereotype as individualized and therefore realistic, but it was an accepted convention among ancient audiences that ‘realism’ meant conforming to familiar types.”), referring to Arist. Poet. 1451b12–13, 1455a33–4. See also Petrides 2014, esp. 157–169.

in his attribution as ‘unrealistic’ the very portrayal of a good prostitute, which goes against the ‘realistic’ conventions of Roman comedy (‘the bad prostitute’). Therefore, Donatus posits a close (‘transparent’) relationship between ‘real moral types’ and ‘comic characters’, between ‘comedy’ and ‘reality’, which is a key tenet of the *speculum*-framework (II.1).⁸⁹ Whenever this relationship is complex or problematic, as in the case of the good prostitute, Terence needs to highlight it in order to ‘maintain verisimilitude’.

The same ‘universal’ dimension of Donatus’ notion of ‘realism’ is found in the topic on which Donatus most frequently comments: Terence’s ability to depict ‘standard’ human behavior. For instance, at *Ph.* 153, the young man Antipho reacts to the news of his father’s return, which could have been a joyful event if Antipho had not married the poor orphan Phanium, against his father’s wishes. Donatus identifies here an instance of *color uitae*, a depiction of an experience which is considered ‘universally’ human, as also suggested by a plural reference (... *uitae eorum qui* ...).⁹⁰ A similar case is evident at *ad Ph.* 231, where Donatus comments on the confrontation between the angry Demipho and the slave Geta, and interprets the scene as an *exemplum uitae*, a ‘reflection’ of a ‘universal’ human experience.⁹¹ The phraseology used by Donatus is effective (*exemplum ... in quo spectatur*) in evoking the

⁸⁹ Cf. Bureau and Nicolas 2013:116–117 “Le vraisemblable de l’argument tient certes à la conformité de cet argument aux données de la vraie vie, mais aussi à une forme de conformité avec les règles qui gouvernent le monde spécifique et fictif de la comédie.”

⁹⁰ *ad Ph.* 153 *in hac scaena color uitae est eorum, qui quicquid immodice concupierint, spernunt postquam uenerit.*

⁹¹ *ad Ph.* 231 *hic exemplum uitae est, in quo spectatur (...) nullam esse tam iustam et gratam iracundiam patris, quin uero et fiducia defensoris et interuallo temporis euanescat.*

association between ‘comic realism’ and ‘exemplarity’ typical of the *speculum*-framework, which underlies his commentary. There are numerous other cases in which Donatus comments on Terence’s exemplary ‘realism’.⁹² One further example, from his note *ad Hec.* 789,⁹³ shows well, in its conciseness, how Donatus assesses realism on the basis of ‘universal’ standards; in real life, and thus ‘realistic’ comedy, *all* wives and mistresses *always* have a run-in. If Terence did not carefully highlight the apparent failure to adhere to this ‘universal’ truth, this scene would not be *uerisimile*. Therefore, in Donatus’ view, Terence’s ‘realism’ always has a universal, ‘intersubjective’ dimension, since it reflects the ‘universals’ of real life, embodied in comic character types.

In summary, Donatus anticipates modern scholarship on Terence’s ‘realism’ in many respects; he very rarely comments on stagecraft because, in his view, Terence’s plays are principally texts to read, not scripts to perform,⁹⁴ but several of the ‘realistic’ features which he identifies are also considered as such by modern scholarship, including language and plot construction. In two important aspects, however, Donatus differs from modern scholarship.

⁹² Cf. *ad Ad.* 963 (on Syrus’ humorous claim to have satisfactorily educated Demea’s children) *ridicule adduntur, sed tamen consuetudine, quia imputantur etiam facta prae pro bonis*; *ad Ph.* 315 (Terence proposes a paradigm of the basest parasites) *in hac scaena de parasitis uilioribus Terentius proponit imaginem uitae, ut in Eunucho de potioribus et his qui nuper processerunt, id est de assentatoribus. animaduertendum autem huiusmodi genus hominum magis a Terentio lacerari.*

⁹³ *ad Hec.* 789 NAM NUPTA MERETRICI HOSTIS EST *caute etiam hoc praestruit poeta, ne non uerisimile uideatur potuisse maritatum concorditer cum pellice agere.*

⁹⁴ On Donatus’ (disputed) concern for performance see Jakobi 1996:7–14, and recently Demetrious 2014, Da Vela 2017.

Firstly, (1) in line with ancient exegesis, Donatus identifies the most ‘realistic’ element as characters’ behavior; (2) secondly, in contrast with modern sensibility, Donatus identifies an element as ‘realistic’ if it has a universal, intersubjective, non-idiosyncratic dimension. This also reiterates, against possible misunderstandings, an important feature of the *speculum*-framework, at least in Donatus’ version. According to Donatus, Terence’s ‘realism’ does not only consist of the faithful imitation of surface-level outer elements (such as language, social conventions, plots, and so on), although this remains a primary and meritorious feature of his comedy; Terence’s mirror additionally and fundamentally reflects and reveals ‘deep’, inner elements of reality, such as moral standards and universal behaviors. Terence’s comedy is thus ‘realistic’ in both appearance and substance, justifying its artistic and pedagogical merit in Donatus’ view.

It would be interesting to trace the philosophical ancestry of these ideas. Here I will only say that Donatus’ rhetorical pedigree is presumably a key factor, in the context of Late Antique *progymnasmata* (see above II.2) and their interest for *ethopoiia*;⁹⁵ moreover, Peripatetic views on (comic) *ēthē*⁹⁶ are archetypical in many respects, although mediated by centuries of Roman scholarly tradition (in which Cicero and Quintilian are important), and elaborated by Donatus’ own criticisms and his rhetorical and pedagogical agenda in the *Commentum*.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Cf. Jakobi 1996:58–75. On *ethopoiia* in Late Antiquity, between fiction and reality, see Amato and Schamp 2005.

⁹⁶ See e.g. Cinaglia 2014, esp. 147–193, Petrides 2014:173–188 with bibl. Also, Webster 1950:217–219, Diggle 2004, esp. 1–27, and with caution, Janko 1984.

⁹⁷ See Jakobi 1996, esp. 1–6.

A final *nota bene*: despite his *speculum*-framework, Donatus is of course aware of the inherent ‘artificiality’ (*artificiose*) and ‘fictionality’ of Terentian comedy;⁹⁸ nevertheless, in articulating the principles of his mirror-like ‘realism’, and particularly the accordance between comic and ‘real’ typologies, ‘Donat oublie momentanément un élément dont il a par ailleurs pleinement conscience, le caractère purement conventionnel de la Néa’ (Bureau and Nicolas 2013:111).

I shall now explore Terence’s own relationship to the concept of ‘realism’, which was markedly different from that of most of his critics.

IV. Terence on Comic ‘Realism’

Scholars are aware of an interest in ‘realism’ in Classical Greek drama, at times metatheatrically expressed (especially in Euripides,⁹⁹ Aristophanes¹⁰⁰ and Menander¹⁰¹), and also of the playwrights’ own awareness of the deceitful and corrupting effects of ‘realism’. By appearing but not being real, ‘realistic’ entities can mislead us into wrong conclusions or illusory knowledge, and, by imitating the lower layer of reality or society, they can inspire

⁹⁸ Cf. above note 42.

⁹⁹ Cf. e.g. Pucci 1967, Michelini 1987:187–230, Castiglioni 2012.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. e.g. Henderson 2000:444–450, Slater 2002:154–158, Ruffell 2011, esp. 29–53, 314–360, Wright 2014:161–162.

¹⁰¹ See in particular Cinaglia 2014, esp. 23–41; also Traill 2008, esp. 83–86, Petrides 2014:10–89.

base imitative behavior. Terence's concern for, and problematization of, 'realism' has attracted some scholarly attention, especially in recent studies by Sharrock (2009, esp. 145–146, 156–162) and Germany (2016, esp. 28–48).¹⁰² Here, I shall build on these recent works, and offer a concise but comprehensive overview of Terence's views on comic 'realism'.

IV.1 'Realism' as a Technical Accomplishment

A range of evidence suggests that Terence considered 'realism' to be a defining feature of a good comedy. In the prologues to his plays, describable as the earliest pieces of Roman literary criticism, Terence attacks an unnamed rival (presumably Luscus Lanuvinus) by reprimanding alleged flaws in his comedies.

Ter. *Eun.* 7–13¹⁰³

qui bene uortendo et easdem scribendo male

ex Graecis bonis Latinas fecit non bonas,

idem Menandri Phasma nuper perdidit,

atque in Thesauro scripsit causam dicere 10

prius unde petitur, aurum qua re sit suom,

¹⁰² Cf. in particular Sharrock 2009:157 “[t]he interest Terence has in realism is not a straightforward reflection of reality but a theatrical signification of it, part of which involves gaps and fudging around the interplays of different levels of fictionality and representation.”

¹⁰³ All Terence's quotations are from Kauer and Lindsay's OCT edition, with minor adjustments.

*quam illic qui petit, unde is sit thesaurus sibi
aut unde in patrium monumentum peruenerit.*¹⁰⁴

As noted by ancient and modern commentators, the point of Terence's criticism is that "it is customary in a court of law for the plaintiff to speak before the defendant, not vice versa" (Barsby 1999:84); the fault of Luscius' comedy, according to Terence, is lack of 'realism' (cf. Don. *ad loc. contra consuetudinem*). The assumption underlying this criticism is in harmony with the *speculum*-framework; it is a formal expectation of comedy to provide an accurate imitation of reality, and, since in the real world the plaintiff speaks before the defendant and not vice versa, it is a technical vice to portray a different, 'unrealistic' practice.

A concern for 'realism' is also traceable in the prologues of *Phormio* (4–8) and *Heauton Timorumenos* (28–32). In the former passage, Terence disparages the same rival for staging a young madman talking to a flying doe (*Ph.* 4–8):

*qui ita dictitat, quas ante hic fecit fabulas
tenui esse oratione et scriptura leui:
quia nusquam insanum scripsit adulescentulum
ceruam uidere fugere et sectari canes*

5

¹⁰⁴ "By translating well and at the same time writing poorly he has made bad Latin plays out of good Greek ones. Just recently he ruined Menander's "Apparition," and in his "Treasure" represented the defendant as putting his case for the possession of the gold *before* the plaintiff explained how the treasure belonged to *him* and how it came to be in his father's tomb." (Transl. Barsby).

*et eam plorare, orare ut subueniat sibi.*¹⁰⁵

According to Terence, such ‘fantastic’ events are not suitable for ‘realistic’ comedy (cf. Maltby 2012:130).

In *Heauton Timorumenos* (28–32), the lack of ‘realism’ noted by Terence is less patent, but still deserving of a reprimand:

*Facite aequi sitis, date crescendi copiam
nouarum qui spectandi faciunt copiam
sine uitiiis. Ne ille pro se dictum existumet 30
qui nuper fecit seruo currenti in uia
decesse populum: quor insano seruiat?*¹⁰⁶

This passage, and line 31 in particular, are among the most problematic of the play; however, as argued by Goldberg (1986:17), it seems clear that the *uitium* of Luscius’ play

¹⁰⁵ “He keeps on saying that the plays our author has previously written are thin in style and light in content, just because he has nowhere portrayed a lovesick youth who sees a hind in flight with hounds in pursuit, begging and beseeching him to come to its aid.” (Transl. Barsby).

¹⁰⁶ “Make sure that you are fair, and give those writers a chance to flourish who give you the chance to see new plays not marred by faults. The playwright who recently portrayed a crowd making way for a running slave in the street should not imagine that I am including him in this: why should anyone defend a madman?” (Transl. Barsby).

consists of the ‘unrealistic’ absurdity of a crowd (or audience?) of people making way for a running slave. ‘Incidentally’, the *seruos currens* motif is one of the paradigmatic scenes of New Comedy, and especially of Plautine comedy,¹⁰⁷ which later in the prologue Terence claims to have dispensed with;¹⁰⁸ the motif is in fact traceable in his plays, but more sparsely and in a more limited form.¹⁰⁹

IV.2 Metatheatrical Deconstructions of Realism

Terence’s interest in ‘realism’ is not only found in his prologues, but also in his comedies themselves. An example in *Andria* (215–225) is a monologue of the slave Dauos, taking the side of the lovers Pamphilus and Glycerium against the old man Simo. The monologue begins with a deliberative section, about whether Dauos should support his young master or not. Dauos subsequently recounts the love story between Pamphilus and Glycerium, giving new and important information to the audience.

Ter. *An.* 215–225

ad haec mala hoc mi accedit etiam: haec Andria, 215
si ista uxor siue amicast, grauida e Pamphilost.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. e.g. Pl. *Curc.* 280–302, and see Csapo 1989, Marshall 2006:193–194, Lowe 2009.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. also *HT* 35–40 *date potestatem mihi | (...) | ne semper seruos currens, iratus senex, | (...) | auarus leno adsidue agendi sint seni | clamore summo, cum labore maxumo.*

¹⁰⁹ Cf. *HT* 512–513, *An.* 338–339, *Ph.* 179–182, 841–845, *Ad.* 299–320.

audireque eorumst operae pretium audaciam

(nam inceptiost amentium, haud amantium):

quidquid peperisset decreuerunt tollere.

et fingunt quandam inter se nunc fallaciam

220

ciuem Atticam esse hanc: "fuit olim quidam senex

mercator; nauim is fregit apud Andrum insulam;

is obiit mortem." ibi tum hanc eiectam Chrysidis

*patrem recepisse orbam paruam. **fabulae!***

*miquidem hercle non fit ueri simile; atque ipsis commentum placet.*¹¹⁰ 225

The passage employs several metatheatrical devices, including the use of the verbs *fingere* (cf. II.2) and *comminisci* (OLD *s.v.* 2 ‘to fabricate (a falsehood)’), the narrative stock phrase *fuit olim* (‘once upon a time’), the asyndetic style of lines 221–223, and particularly the exclamation *fabulae* (224), which is the technical term in Terence for ‘comic play’ (cf. e.g. *An.* 3, 16)¹¹¹. The story concocted by Pamphilus and Glycerium is the (stereo)typical plot in New Comedy, featuring the recognition (‘anagnorisis’) of an orphan girl as a marriageable

¹¹⁰ “And that’s not the end of my troubles, because this girl from Andros [i.e. Glycerium], whether she’s his wife or his mistress, is pregnant by Pamphilus. And just listen to what a nerve they’ve got! It’s the project of loonies, not lovers! They’ve decided to let the baby live, whatever it turns out to be! And now the pair of them are making up some bogus story that she’s a citizen of Attica: ‘Once there was an old man in the import–export business; he was shipwrecked off the island of Andros; he lost his life’— and then she was washed ashore and taken in by Chrysis’ father as an orphan child! Rubbish! I certainly don’t find it plausible, but they’re pleased with their story!” (Transl. Brown).

¹¹¹ Cf. Compagno 2002:51, Knorr 2007:169, Sharrock 2009:145.

daughter of an Athenian citizen. Aside from its metatheatrical force, the passage's final verdict is revealing: "*I certainly don't find it realistic, but they're pleased with their story!*". According to Dauos' critical judgement, comic plots are 'non-realistic' (*ueri simile*) fictions (*commentum*).

Does Dauos' opinion voice that of Terence, and should it be related to the prologues' criticism against 'non-realistic' playwrights? Certainly not: most of Terence's comedies feature a version of the very *anagnorisis* plotline disparaged by Dauos, including the *Andria* itself. As argued by Knorr (2007:168–169), Dauos' remark therefore ought to be interpreted as a subtle metatheatrical joke, exposing the 'falsity' of the comic world, a falsity which nevertheless has a 'pleasing' effect (*placet*), and is implicitly considered to be an inherent convention of comedy.

Terence also jokes about the other fundamental aspect of the traditional appraisal of comedy: its exemplarity. Two particular passages deserve attention.

Ter. *HT* 213, 217–222

quam iniqui sunt patres in omnis adolescentis iudices! (...) 213
mihin si umquam filius erit, ne ille facili me utetur patre;
nam et cognoscendi et ignoscendi dabitur peccati locus:
non ut meus, qui mihi per alium ostendit suam sententiam.
perii! is mi, ubi adbibit plus paullo, sua quae narrat facinora! 220

*nunc ait “periculum ex aliis facito tibi quod ex usu siet”:
astutus. ne ille haud scit quam mihi nunc surdo narret fabulam.*¹¹²

This is an extract from a monologue of the young man Clitipho, which follows a conversation with his father Chremes. Chremes is seemingly a *homo humanus*, always ready to sermonize on *humanitas* (*HT* 77) and the necessity of a ‘true life’ (*uere uiuitur*; cf. *HT* 153–154), and to urge his son to improve his morals by learning from the behavior of fellow men (*HT* 200–210). In fact, Chremes is a hypocritical busybody, as Clitipho reveals in this monologue. In doing so, Clitipho dismisses his father’s sanctimonious philosophy of learning from others’ *exempla*; his father is unaware, but Clitipho is turning a deaf ear to his *fabula*. As shown, in Terence, the word *fabula* has strong metatheatrical resonances; here, Clitipho’s remark might thus be construed as a humorous deconstruction of the supposed exemplarity of *fabulae*, standard in ancient exegesis (cf. II.1).

A similar joke is traceable in *Adelphoe*, in a passage where the stern old man Demea explains his paternal pedagogy to his slave Syrus, using, significantly, the iconic mirror-metaphor.

¹¹² “How unfair fathers always are when they sit in judgement on boys! (...) If ever I have a son, I promise he’ll find me an easy-going father: there’ll be room to discover if he does something wrong, and to forgive him—not like my dad, who uses someone else’s case to show me what he thinks. I can’t stand it! Think of the exploits he boasts about to me when he’s had a bit too much to drink! But what he says now is ‘Make other people’s experiences a useful test for yourself!’ Clever Dick! Little does he know what a deaf ear I turn to his tale-telling!” (Transl. Barsby).

Ter. *Ad.* 414–429

DEMEA *Nil praetermitto; consuefacio; denique*

inspicere, tamquam in speculum, in uitas omnium 415

iubeo atque ex aliis sumere exemplum sibi

hoc facito. SYRUS *Recte sane.* DE. *Hoc fugito.* SY. *Callide.*

DE. *Hoc laudist.* SY. *Istaec res est.* DE. *Hoc uitio datur.*

SY. *Probissume.* DE. *Porro autem ...* SY. *Non hercle otiumst*

nunc mi auscultandi. Piscis ex sententia 420

nanctus sum: ei mihi ne corrumpantur cautiost:

nam id nobis tam flagitiumst quam illa, Demea,

non facere uobis, quae modo dixi: et quod queo

conseruis ad eundem istunc praecipio modum:

hoc salsumst, hoc adustumst, hoc lautumst parum: 425

illud recte: iterum sic memento. Sedulo

moneo, quae possum pro mea sapientia:

postremo tamquam in speculum in patinas, Demea,

*inspicere iubeo et moneo quid facto usus sit.*¹¹³

¹¹³ “DEMEA I take trouble over it: I don’t overlook anything; I get him into the habit. In fact I tell him to look into everyone’s lives, as if into a mirror, and to learn from the example of others: ‘Do this!’ SYRUS Quite right! DE. ‘Don’t do that!’ SY. Clever! DE. ‘This is praiseworthy’. SY. Just the thing! DE. ‘This is blameworthy’. SY. Excellent! DE. Furthermore SY. (*interrupting*) Look, I really haven’t got time to listen now. I’ve got the fish I wanted; I must make sure nothing goes wrong with them. That’s just as disgraceful for us, Demea, as it is for you not to do as you were just saying; and to the best of my ability I give instructions to my fellow slaves just

Demea's words are in accordance with the *speculum*-framework discussed in II.1, here evoked (whether intentionally or not¹¹⁴) by the mirror-analogy (415 *tamquam in speculum*); by examining the behavior of others (just as in the mirror of comedy), his son is supposed to recognize different characters' typologies (the debauched as opposed to the obedient *adulescens*), and to conform to the one assigned to him by his father's imperatives (the latter).

Demea's 'moral of the mirror' is, however, immediately mocked by the slave Syrus, who belittles it by comparing it to his own exhortations to his fellow slaves 'to look into the dishes as if into a mirror'. Given the status of the *seruos* as an icon of Roman comedy, Terence might be metatheatrically implying the notion of a trivialization of Greek moralistic comedy into Roman farce, anticipating the views of much of modern scholarship.

IV.3 The Deceptiveness and Bad *exemplum* of 'Realistic' Entities

Aside from metatheatre, the way in which 'realistic entities' are described and operate within the fictional world of the comedies also illuminates Terence's views on comic

like the instructions you give: 'This is over-salted; this is burnt; this one hasn't been properly washed. That one's right: remember to do it like that next time.' I take trouble to teach them as well as my wits allow. In fact I tell them to look into the dishes, Demea, as if into a mirror, and I teach them what needs to be done." (Transl. Brown)

¹¹⁴ It is well possible (although indemonstrable) that the *speculum* image was already familiar to Terence and his audience, given its (implicit) appearance in Hellenistic sources, from Aristophanes onwards (see above note 25).

‘realism’. I use the term ‘realistic entity’ in a broad sense, to refer to any artefact, character, action, or circumstance which looks (intentionally or not) like another, real referent, and which looks or pretends to be real or true.

A pertinent example is *Eunuchus* 580–591, a scene which has recently been the object of an extensive study (Germany 2016).

Ter. *Eun.* 580–591

CHAEREA “ego” inquit “ad cenam hinc eo.” 580

*Abducit secum ancillas: paucae quae circum illam essent manent
nouiciae puellae. continuo haec adornant ut lauet.*

*Adhortor properent. Dum adparatur, uirgo in conclauis sedet
suspectans tabulam quandam pictam: ibi inerat pictura haec, Iouem
quo pacto Danae misisse aiunt quondam in gremium imbrem aureum.* 585

*Egomet quoque id spectare coepi, et quia consimilem luserat
iam olim ille ludum, inpendio magis animu’ gaudebat mihi,
deum sese in hominem conuortisse atque in alienas tegulas
uenisse clanculum per inpluuium fucum factum mulieri.*

At quem deum! “qui templa caeli summa sonitu concutit.” 590

*Ego homuncio hoc non facerem? Ego illud uero ita feci—ac lubens.*¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ “CH. ‘I’m off to a dinner party’ she said, and took her maids with her. A few young ones stayed behind to attend the girl. Presently they made preparations for her bath. I urged them to hurry. While things were being got ready, the girl sat in the room, looking up at a painting; it depicted the story of how Jupiter sent a shower of gold into Danae’s bosom. I began to look at it myself, and the fact that he had played a similar game long ago

In the passage, the young man Chaerea, dressed like the eponymous *eunuchus*, has been admitted into the private rooms of his girl. His impersonation is particularly convincing, i.e. particularly ‘realistic’, because his costume, beauty, and age perfectly conform to the stereotypical expectations of his impersonated character (in contrast with the real eunuch, who is old and ugly).¹¹⁶ This ‘realism’ is very dangerous for the unaware girl, and eventually results in an act of violence. If the dangers of ‘realistic representation’ (Chaerea’s impersonation of the real eunuch) are not evident enough, Terence highlights them by inserting a micro-ekphrasis of a painting, representing the rape of Danae by Jove (583–585). Chaerea recognizes himself in the episode, and takes it as an *exemplum* for his behavior; Chaerea thus suffers what Germany has pithily called ‘mimetic contagion’.

The scene features different layers of embedded ‘realistic’ entities; a ‘realistic’ (but not real) *eunuchus* is watching a mimetic representation of a mythological event, and recognizes in it a plausible *exemplum* for his own real behavior. Therefore, this scene integrates what would become two key features of traditional comic scholarship in the *speculum*-framework — ‘realism’ and ‘exemplarity’ — but (re)presents them as ‘cognitively’ dangerous; the household misjudges Chaerea as the eunuch, and Chaerea misjudges supposedly divine behavior as morally exemplary.

made me all the more excited: a god had turned himself into human shape, made his way by stealth on to another man’s roof, and come through the skylight to play a trick on a woman. And what a god! The one who shakes the lofty vaults of heaven with his thunder! Was I, a mere mortal, not to do the same? I did just that—and gladly.” (Transl. Barsby).

¹¹⁶ Cf. *Eun.* 375 *Praeterea forma et aetas ipsast facile ut pro eunucho probes.*

A second example is from *Heauton Timorumenos*, and is related to the central event of its plot, namely the ruse against the old man Chremes by the slave Syrus. Amidst all the details of this intricate ruse,¹¹⁷ it is important to emphasize here that, at its core, there is the exploitation of a ‘realistic’ circumstance. In the play, it is ‘realistic’ that the prostitute Bacchis is having an affair not with Chremes’ own son Clitipho, but rather with his friend Clinia.¹¹⁸ Throughout the play, Syrus enhances the misleading ‘realism’ of this situation, and eventually exploits it to convince Chremes to give some money to Clitipho, in the following climax:

Ter. *HT* 799–804

CHREMES *Quin egomet iam ad eam deferam.* SYRUS *Immo filium*

iube potius. CH. *Quam ob rem?* SY. *Quia enim in eum suspiciost* 800

translata amoris. CH. *Quid tum?* SY. ***Quia uidebitur***

mage ueri simile id esse, quom hic illi dabit;

et simul conficiam facilius ego quod uolo.

Ipsa adeo adest: abi, ecfer argentum. CH. *Ecfero.*¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ See Lowe 1998.

¹¹⁸ Cf. in particular *HT* 332–336 (Syrus’ exposition of the plan, glossed by Clitipho’s *fabulae* [336]), 521–535, 749–756.

¹¹⁹ “CH. In fact, I’ll take her the money myself. SY. No. Better tell your son to. CH. Why? SYR. Because he’s the one who’s now supposed to be in love with her. CHR. So? SYR. Because the story will be more realistic if it’s he who gives her the money. And at the same time I’ll achieve what I want to achieve more easily. But here he is. You go and bring out the money. CH. I will.”

As noted by Sharrock (2009:159–161), Syrus’ ruse depends on the manipulation and exploitation of ‘realistic’ elements.

This kind of exploitation of the unreliability of ‘realism’ is not found just in *HT*; this is in fact a prototypical feature of comedy, which capitalizes on the clash between reality and appearance.¹²⁰ Most Plautine and Terentian plots depend in particular on the unreliability of ‘realism’, and particularly so in the ‘comedy of errors’, which revolves around the misunderstandings originating from extreme ‘realism’. This topos is epitomized in the ‘twin’ motif, which finds an iconic embodiment in Plautus’ *Menaechmi*, and an articulate definition which explicitly evokes the mirror-metaphor (1062–1063).¹²¹

The comic potential of ‘realism’ is also at the core of the ‘comedy of intrigue’, which normally depends on illusive, ‘realistic’ impersonations. Chaerea’s impersonation in Terence’s *Eunuchus* and its mimetic influences have already been discussed; *Amphitruo* provides another example, in the iconic scene in which the slave Sosia is bamboozled by an aggressive doppelgänger, the god Mercurius (439–445), aptly described as Sosia’s mirror-image.¹²² Again, the mirror-image (*Amph.* 442 *in speculum*) is used to posit a notion of

¹²⁰ See e.g. Petrone 1983, Duckworth 1994:305–330 (on Roman comedy). Also Lowe 2008:1–17, Halliwell 2008, esp. chapters 5 and 8 (on Greek and comedy in general).

¹²¹ Pl. *Men.* 1062–1063 MESSENIO *Pro di immortales, quid ego uideo?* SOSICLES *Quid uides?* MES. ***Speculum tuom.*** | SOS. *Quid negoti est?* MES. *Tuast imago. tam consimilest quam potest.*

¹²² Pl. *Amph.* 439–445 MERCURIUS *Vbi ego Sosia esse nolim, tu esto sane Sosia;* | *nunc, quando ego sum, uapulabis, ni hinc abis, ignobilis.* | SOSIA *Certe edepol, quom illum contemplo et formam cognosco meam, | quem ad modum ego sum (saepe in speculum inspexi), nimis similest mei; | itidem habet petasum ac uestitum:*

‘realism’ much bleaker than that of the traditional *speculum*-framework.

In both Plautine and Terentian comedy, ‘realism’ is in fact a unreliable and misleading quality, often equated to ‘illusionism’, as the prototype of the comical *seruos callidus* (Pseudolus) claims in the following famous passage.¹²³

Pl. *Pseud.* 401–405¹²⁴

*Sed quasi poeta, tabulas cum cepit sibi,
quaerit quod nusquamst gentium, reperit tamen,
facit illud ueri simile, quod mendacium est
nunc ego poeta fiam: uiginti minas,
quae nusquam nunc sunt gentium, inueniam tamen.*¹²⁵

In *Heauton Timorumenos*, we find an extreme development of the topos; Syrus is the only slave in Roman comedy that manages to trick the old man of the play without telling a single lie, as he boasts explicitly in another metatheatrical passage:

*tam consimilest atque ego; | sura, pes, statura, tonsus, oculi, nasum uel labra, | malae, mentum, barba, collus:
totus. quid uerbis opust?*

¹²³ On this passage see e.g. Slater 2000:97–120.

¹²⁴ Text and translation of Plautus is from De Melo’s Loeb Edition.

¹²⁵ “Yet just as a poet, when he takes writing-tablets, looks for something that doesn’t exist anywhere, but finds it nonetheless and makes *ueri simile* what is a lie, I shall now become a poet: even though the twenty minas don’t exist anywhere, I’ll find them nonetheless”.

Ter. *HT* 709–712

SYRUS *Huic equidem consilio palmam do: hic me magnifice ecfero,*
qui uim tantam in me et potestatem habeam tantae astutiae 710
uera dicendo ut eos ambos fallam: ut quom narret senex
*uoster nostro istam esse amicam gnati, non credat tamen.*¹²⁶

The misleading plausibility that Bacchis is Clinia’s girlfriend enables Syrus to bamboozle Chremes even when he does actually tell the truth. In fact, the whole of the *Heauton Timorumenos* could be construed as a metatheatrical essay on the unreliability of ‘realistic’ appearances.

In other cases, ‘realism’ does not facilitate tricks and deceptions, but rather introduces an estrangement between characters, a prototypical theme of Terentian comedy which was presumably inherited, at least in part, from Menander; this is illustrated by the following passage from *Heauton Timorumenos*.¹²⁷

Ter. *HT* 985–993

CLITIPHO *Quid id ergo?* SYRUS *Sic est: non esse horum te arbitror.* CL. *Quid*
istuc, Syre? 985
satin sanus es? SY. *Ego dicam quod mi in mentemst: tu diiudica.*

¹²⁶ “SY. I award my plan the first prize. I congratulate myself with great pride on possessing so much power and being capable of so much cunning that I can deceive both of them by telling the truth. When your old man tells ours that Bacchis is his son’s mistress, he still won’t believe it.”

¹²⁷ On social estrangement and its resolution in Menander see e.g. Bodei 1984, Traill 2008, esp. 51–56 with bibl.

*Dum istis fuisti solus, dum nulla alia delectatio
quae propior esset, te indulgebant, tibi dabant; nunc filia
postquamst inventa vera, inuentast causa qui te expellerent.*

CL. **Est ueri simile.** SY. *An tu ob peccatum hoc esse illum iratum putas?*

CL. *Non arbitror.* SY. *Nunc aliud specta: matres omnes filiis
in peccato adiutrices, auxilio in paterna iniuria*

solent esse: id non fit. CL. **Verum dicis.** *Quid ergo nunc faciam, Syre?*¹²⁸

In this scene, the cunning Syrus manages to convince the disgraced Clitipho that he is not the natural son of his parents, on the basis of the ‘realism’ of his situation. Syrus’ final syllogism is particularly revealing; all mothers help their sons in their misfortunes, and so, since Clitipho’s mother does not do so, she is not his mother. This misled transformation of ‘realism’ (Clitipho *looks like* an adopted child) into ‘truth’ (Clitipho *is* an adopted child) is achieved by a reference to a supposedly ‘universal’ type of behavior. Therefore, in sharp contrast with Donatus and others, Terence here presents ‘universal realism’ as a misleading entity, which creates a separation between characters, and in this case between a son and his

¹²⁸ “CL. So what is it? SY. It’s this. I don’t think you’re their son. CL. What are you saying, Syrus? Are you in your right mind? SY. I’ll tell you what’s occurred to me; you can decide for yourself. While you were all they had, while they had no other source of delight closer to them, they spoiled you, they gave you things. But now that they’ve found a real daughter of their own, they’ve also found a reason to get rid of you. CL. It sounds realistic. SY. Do you reckon it’s this misbehaviour of yours that has made him angry? CL. I don’t think so. SY. Here’s another point to consider. All mothers tend to stand by their sons when they misbehave and defend them against their fathers’ ill-treatment. That’s not happening. CL. You’re right. So what shall I do now, Syrus?”

parents, which is shortly thereafter resolved in the play's denouement.

There are many analogous situations in Terence. *Hecyra*'s plot, for instance, revolves around the erroneous interpretation of a 'realistic' circumstance under the misleading influence of a supposed 'universal'. It is 'realistic' that Pamphilus' wife has left home because of the misbehavior of his mother Sostrata, the eponymous mother-in-law of the play.¹²⁹ But the truth is different, and Sostrata will fight hard to contradict the 'realistic' misconceptions of her fellow characters and of the audience, which are grounded on supposedly 'universal' typological behaviors.

In summary, in Terentian and Roman comedy in general, 'realism' does not have the strongly positive connotation which it carries in the *speculum*-framework; rather, anticipating in many respects the critiques of Macrobius and others, Terentian comedy exposes the 'fictionality' and 'falsity' of 'realism', disparages its supposed exemplarity, and exploits its 'cognitive' unreliability in the creation of prototypical comic situations. However, as his prologues show, 'realism' nonetheless remains for Terence an essential formal quality of the genre. How do we reconcile this apparently contradictory evidence?

V. Conclusion

The fact that 'realism' can have a positive connotation in theory and form (Terence's prologues describe 'realism' as a formal quality of comedy), but a negative connotation in practice and content (Terence's plots problematize the 'cognitive' role of 'realism'), is

¹²⁹ Cf. in particular *Hec.* 198–210.

contradictory only if one assumes the *speculum*-framework. As discussed in II.1, this framework, epitomized by Donatus' mirror-image, considers comedy to be a transparent, truth-bearing reflection of both the *appearances* and the *truth* of reality, particularly regarding its underlying typologies of human behavior (cf. also III). The *speculum*-framework thus posits a close relationship between 'truth' and 'realism', which is at the origin of comedy's exemplarity and pedagogical potential. This relationship, however, was considered contentious by many ancient theorists, especially from Plato onwards.¹³⁰ Scholars such as Priscian and Marcus Aurelius were aware that 'truth' could be also found in 'non-realistic' genres, that comedy's 'mirror-like' imitation of reality could be illusory (cf. II.3), and that something 'realistic' (*uerisimile*) could be a complacent and self-satisfied lie (*fictum, falsum*) (cf. II.2). A mirror can reflect the appearances of reality, but may distort its inner truth, and the more accurate the surface-level reflection, the more difficult it might be to perceive inner distortions.

This awareness is also found in Roman comedy, together with an explicit association of 'deceptive realism' with comedy; the metatheatrical force of *Pseudolus* 401–405 (as the speaker's name, 'the liar', suggests) is illuminative in this respect. The comic poet is the one who invents lies and makes them look 'realistic', as does the iconic comic slave through his comic inventions; according to Plautine *Pseudolus*, Roman comedy is 'deceptively realistic' in both form and content, as is also argued by many modern critics.

What, therefore, is the 'purpose' of this deceptive 'realism'? A first answer would be

¹³⁰ See Halliwell 2002, esp. 118–147, and above notes 22 and 23. Cf. already Hesiod *Theog.* 27–28, perhaps reflecting ideas implied in the *Odyssey*'s depiction of Odysseus as a poet-liar. I owe this point to Stephen Halliwell.

purely ‘hedonistic’; echoing the criticism of Macrobius and Isidore (II.3), the purpose of comic ‘realism’ is simply to ‘please’ the ear, and to provide either (1) the self-referential pleasure derived from the appraisal of a well-executed mimetic artifice (τὴν ἐκ μιμήσεως φιλοτεχνίαν), or (2) the psychological pleasure derived from a controlled deception. Pleasure can be taken in seeing someone else fooled by an optical illusion, as well as being fooled ourselves, provided that this is done within the controlled environment of theatre, and not in reality.¹³¹ Just as the comic slave invents lies to deceive characters for the pleasure of the audience, so the comic poet invents lies to deceive the audience for their own pleasure, as long as the dramatic illusions last.

Plautine comedy can certainly be associated with this ‘hedonistic’ conception of comic ‘realism’, and especially with its second type (2),¹³² and there seem to be traces of it also in Terence, as discussed above. Positing a neat dichotomy between Plautus and Terence is always dangerous. This is because, if Terence is innovating Roman comedy as I believe, he does so ‘from the inside’, still largely adhering to the conventions and expectations of traditional Roman (Plautine) comedy,¹³³ and it is also because several Plautine comedies, especially those with a Menandrian model, display features traditionally associated with ‘serious’ Menandrian and Terentian comedy.¹³⁴

The ‘hedonistic’ explanation of ‘realism’ is sufficient to explain the apparent contradiction

¹³¹ Cf. e.g. Lowe 2008:1–17 with bibliography.

¹³² See in particular Petrone 1983.

¹³³ Cf. e.g. Brown 2006:150–153, Franko in Augoustakis and Traill 2013.

¹³⁴ Cf. e.g. Papaioannou 2016:167 ‘[t]here are distinct similarities in structure, language, themes and characters between these unconventional Plautine plays, especially the *Trinummus*, and Terence’s comedy.’

which I have identified in Terence's 'realistic' framework. Comedies need to be 'realistic', to make lies 'verisimilar', because this is what comedy ultimately consists of; the goal of this 'realism', however, is everything except the communication of truth (lies are lies, and are exposed as such at the end of the dramatic illusion). Accepting this 'hedonistic' interpretation would mean to disown that longstanding tradition (the *speculum*-framework), epitomized by Donatus' *De Comoedia* and his commentary, which, as seen, is obsessed with the identification of truth-bearing, morally-beneficial features of Terence's 'realism'.

However, some aspects of the *speculum*-framework cannot be completely discarded. Terentian comedy does make a step forward (or backward) from a purely 'hedonistic' conception of comedy, towards a partial reconciliation of 'realism' with 'truth'. As we have seen, Terence reflects on 'realism' as a source not just of entertaining deceptions, but above all of unpleasant cognitive misconceptions, which engender social estrangement. In Terentian comedy, the deceptions of 'realism' are not all funny or entertaining, but often result in a serious misunderstandings and alienation between characters (husbands and wives, fathers and sons, and so on). All of Terence's comedies begin with alienation, which originates in deceptive 'realism', and conclude with its resolution through the exposure of the 'realistic' deception. No Terentian comedy ends with the triumph of deceptive 'realism', as several Plautine comedies do,¹³⁵ but all eventually result in its exposure and resolution. Therefore, Terence reflects more seriously on the comic dangers of deceptive 'realism', rather than (simply) exploiting and celebrating them. Both Plautus and Terence knew that 'realism' is inherently misleading and deceitful, and were aware of its strong comical potential; but, whereas Plautus normally exploits this potential to distil *uis comica*, Terence also uses it to

¹³⁵ *Pseudolus* above all, but also *Amphitruo*, *Asinaria*, *Casina*.

(self-)reflect on its inherent cognitive unreliability. There are, of course, traces in Plautus of a problematization of ‘realism’ which is not only ‘hedonistic’ and complacent;¹³⁶ as already discussed, the traditional dichotomy between Plautus and Terence is always a simplification.

Terence nonetheless seems to be more interested than Plautus in warning about (rather than reveling in) the gap between ‘realism’ and reality, and ultimately in resolving it in the denouement of his plays, when the ‘realistic comedy’ ends. Where does Terence’s problematization of ‘realism’ originate? Menander is an easy answer, and Terence’s main ‘model’ is certainly interested in misperceptions engendered by ‘realistic’ typologies,¹³⁷ as well as in the recomposition of social alienation.¹³⁸ However, in the extant works of Menander, the unreliability of ‘realism’ is not as often and as explicitly pinpointed as it is in Terence (cf. in particular *HT* 799–804 or 985–993, discussed above).¹³⁹

If one is to seek ‘wisdom’ (*sapientia*) in Terentian comedy, some ‘truth’ is reflected by his

¹³⁶ Cf. e.g. *Epid.* 382–385, quoted below. The motif of ‘realistic’ inventions becoming true in the denouement of the play (apparently attested e.g. in Terence’s *Andria*) is also productive in Plautus (e.g. in *Poenulus*).

¹³⁷ Cf. e.g. Traill 2008, esp. 79–129, Petrides 2014, esp. 24.

¹³⁸ See above note 127.

¹³⁹ I am here dangerously approaching the *uexata quaestio* of Terence’s relation with his model(s) (see Brown 2014 for an overview); this is a complex, and perhaps impossible question: internal evidence suggests that Terence’s adaptation of Menander could be both (1) faithful (cf. e.g. *Ad.* 10–11) and (2) innovative (cf. e.g. *HT* 16–21); therefore, in the absence of the direct originals, any feature of his comedies can be virtually considered (more or less convincingly) as either (1) inherited or (2) original. Without necessarily deprecating studies à la Lefèvre (e.g. 1994), I have here preferred to assess (and savor) Terence’s comedy as an accomplished dish, without worrying too much about the origin of its ingredients.

comic mirror (as predicated by the *speculum*-framework), namely the paradoxical truth that ‘realistic’ appearances can be misleading. Terentian comedy thus does not feature only the ‘transparent’ mirror of traditional scholarship’ (for better or worse), but perhaps also the ‘x-ray mirror’ which the Plautine Periphanes mentions:

Pl. *Epid.* 382–385

PERIPHANES *Non oris causa modo homines aequom fuit
sibi habere speculum ubi os contemplant suom,
sed qui perspicere possent [cor sapientiae,
igitur perspicere ut possint] cordis copiam.*¹⁴⁰

To conclude: Donatus and the *speculum*-framework combine the *os* and the *cor*, and regard Terentian comedy as a mirror which reflects (and reveals) the outer and inner layer of human life. Marcus Aurelius and other ‘anti-realistic’ critics stigmatize the mirror of comedy for reflecting only the *os*, but not the *cor*, and for precluding the truth of reality as if it were a pane of glass. Modern scholarship, with due qualifications, cares about the outer reflections, without extensively problematizing the inner ones. Finally, Terence views his comedy as a mirror which metapoetically reflects its own inner distortions: specifically, Terentian comedy may be described as a two-layered entity comprised of: (1) a *speculum oris*, accurately but deceptively reflecting

¹⁴⁰ “PER. It would be good if people had mirrors not just for the sake of their faces, so as to look at their faces in them, but also mirrors with which they could see into the heart of wisdom so that they could see into the resources of their hearts.”

appearances, and thus superficially 'realistic', and designed to entice and enthrall his audience; and (2) an 'x-ray' *speculum sapientiae* (a *fabula* in the Priscian sense), which operates by reflecting on the cognitive dangers of the *speculum oris* itself, and which is therefore deeply and positively 'realistic'. The paradoxical 'truth' reflected by Terence's 'realistic' *fabula* is that 'realism', in both comedy and life, is not the truth. However, just as the above passage is textually problematic, this is certainly not the end of the *fabula*.

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