



# Terence in England: Literary Narcissism, Self-Reflexivity, and Metatheatrical Comedy in The *Parnassus* Plays

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## ABSTRACT

This article aims at exploring the Terentian influence on the group of academic dramas known as the *Parnassus* plays which was staged at the University of Cambridge from 1598 to 1601 in the context of literary narcissism. Identifying the literary narcissist paradigm as heir to the cultural politics of the *fin-de-siecle* and drawing on the revival of interest in metatheatricality in contemporary classical scholarship, first it will be argued that Terence's prologues not only further a bouletic manner of authorial intention but also generate a metatheatrical form of self-commentary. As a development on that point, the Terentian influence on the university stage in seventeenth-century England will be discussed. In identifying a visibly Terentian sentiment in the *Parnassus* plays, it will be maintained that the trilogy allows an early modern reading in self-reflexivity that is documented in the metafictional programme of the prologue. The anticipated conclusion draws on the point that the narcissistic agenda of the *Parnassus* plays signal a growing liberty taken with self-commentary at a mimetic level which, due to its Terentian background, facilitates a reproduction of metatheatrical comedy. The importance of this point lies within the fact that by reproducing the literary narcissism of Latin laughter, university drama under the Tudor rule secures the sardonic wit of its Roman forebearers as annexed to the mechanics of Renaissance authorship. In turn, it re-establishes the prologue as a paratextual act of metatheatricality which informs the character of its comedic structure.

**Keywords:** Literary narcissism, self-reflexivity, Terentian comedy, *Parnassus* plays, prologues



## Introduction

### **A fair *quid pro quo*: Narcissism, textual desire, and metafiction**

“Denn einzig in der engen Höhle / Des Backenzahnes weilt die Seele.”<sup>1</sup> These are the lines that the great German humourist Wilhelm Busch attaches to his visual description of a poet who suffers from an unbearable toothache in the Achtes Kapitel of his *Balduin Bählamm*. We learn from the description that the poet’s pain is so exceedingly unbearable that the Lebenskraft (life-force) is now directed inwards and the traditional attention he used to pay to the outer world becomes considerably insignificant. Not only is the price of butter and the taxes that are due payment are banished from his thoughts, but also any amatory engagement is cancelled until the foreseeable future. It is not a condition that he particularly embraces with open arms and yet once it arrives at the scene, it overwhelms the self and imprisons the psyche into the narrow cave of the molar. The self is now entirely disinterested in the external world while being over-concerned, or better put, obsessed with preserving its well-being.

Not only is Busch’s self-centred poet a post-Romantic hero as typical of *fin-de-siècle* literature but also, he is a narcissist. For this particular reason, it is hardly a means of amazement to find out that Freud echoes Busch’s lines concerning the ‘aching’ poet in his essay on narcissism where he considers the narcissist as someone who “withdraws *libidinal* interest from his love-objects” (Freud, 1957, p. 82) and “treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated” (Freud, 1957, p. 73). He also considers the poet’s concentration on his sickness as a marker of a fixated introversion through which he centralises the pain and suffering and abandons any interest in the outer world. But more importantly than that, the corollary between the condition of the poet and the somatic response to physical pain facilitates a clearer view of the psychic transaction that occurs in the narcissistic self. For the corporal pain,

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1 The entire stanza reads as follows: “Das Zahnweh, subjektiv genommen, / Ist ohne Zweifel unwillkommen; / Doch hat’s die gute Eigenschaft, / Daß sich dabei die Lebenskraft, / Die man nach außen oft verschwendet, / Auf einen Punkt nach innen wendet / Und hier energisch konzentriert. / Kaum wird der erste Stich verspürt, / Kaum fühlt man das bekannte Bohren, / Das Rucken, Zucken und Rumoren- / Und aus ist’s mit der Weltgeschichte, / Vergessen sind die Kursberichte, / Die Steuern und das Einmaleins. / Kurz, jede Form gewohnten Seins, / Die sonst real erscheint und wichtig, / Wird plötzlich wesenlos und nichtig. / Ja, selbst die alte Liebe rostet – / Man weiß nicht, was die Butter kostet – / Denn einzig in der engen Höhle / Des Backenzahnes weilt die Seele, / Und unter Toben und Gesaus / Reift der Entschluß: Er muß heraus!-“ See Busch (1907).

in his estimation, is met with a psychological reaction to that pain. The result is an unhealthy occupation with an ideal self which is, in return, a response to the loss of infantile narcissism (ideal ego) in the form of the reconstruction of the past in the present tense (ego ideal) since:

He is not willing to forgo the narcissistic perfection of his childhood; and when, as he grows up, he is disturbed by the admonitions of others and by the awakening of his own critical judgement, so that he can no longer retain that perfection, he seeks to recover it in the new form of an ego ideal. What he projects before him as his ideal is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal. (Freud, 1957, p. 94)

The reconstruction of infantile self-love by the adult in Freud's thought as preceded by the Enlightenment ideal of subjectivity "imbues the subject with an unfathomable surplus of meaning" and "spiritualizes the subject and obscures the transparency of subject-object relations" (Mathäs, 2010, p. 19). Under this view, this spiritualisation, or better put, idealisation displays a comprehensive sketch of obsessive self-regard which has been viewed as neurotic and unhealthy even prior to Freud's take on the subject.<sup>2</sup> It is unhealthy due to the very contention that an overindulgence in self-love signals repression and "this ideal ego is now the target of the self-love which was enjoyed in childhood by the actual ego" (Freud, 1957, p. 94). It represents a paradise lost and found only at the expense of nostalgic revivification that is considered highly detrimental to the actual ego.

While Freud's narcissistic paradigm is imbued with negative connotations—one which is also possibly cemented in the rise of anti-Semitism in late nineteenth century Vienna which forced him to retreat from "the public political realm to focus on the interior world of the psyche, thereby opening up the creative imaginative space" (Ashplant, 2012, p. 32)—it breathes positive unorthodoxy into our understanding of fictional self-reflexivity. For, at a psychoanalytical level, the narcissistic self forms a transactional relation with the observable world where s/he trades for an ideal at the expense of reality. However, later s/he needs to come to terms with the illusiveness of the libidinal interests of the actual ego. Correspondingly and at a figurative level, this should mean that the mimetic self

2 See Mathäs (2010) and Drichel (2016). Drichel's inquiry into the Cartesian narcissistic fantasy "as a successful defense against the pain of emotional trauma" compels us to be suspicious about whether Freud's analysis of narcissism is simply an unprecedented nineteenth-century exposition of modernity's narcissistic state of neurosis.

also trades for an ideal of veracity at the expense of reality but should later come to terms with the illusiveness of the 'realistic' interests of its textual ego. In other words, the libidinal desire of the text which has been traditionally characterised by a desire for truthful representation since Aristotle needs to be repaired by self-reflexivity or auto-inspection.<sup>3</sup> In this literary sense, the narcissistic paradigm of the *fin-de-siècle* facilitates a reading of textual self-inspection which overcomes the conceptual limitations of an eons-old obsession with truthful representation. It alternatively suggests that literary narcissism calls for a self-examination of that mode of representation. Just as the standards set for narcissistic personality disorder reveal the need for the individual's engagement with her own self "making it the basis of more than just pathological behaviour" (Hutcheon, 1980, p. 1), the textual self's engagement with itself is more than a sign of an author's pathological intentions. If so, the self-reflexivity of Busch's narcissistic poet might not be simply considered a case of the vanity of human wishes but also the human wish to know, understand, and comment on herself.

It would hardly be fair to assume that the precepts of literary narcissism rest solely upon the psychoanalytical methods of Freud and his circle. After all, as Michal Beth Dinkler maintains, to acknowledge that would mean to admit to "the common view that narrative narcissism belongs to modernity" (Dinkler, 2017, p. 34) and affirm postmodern metafiction as its twenty-first century inheritor; a move which sweepingly excludes earlier forms of metafictionality. It would require us to leave behind earlier texts that display a self-conscious attire. Instead, important to our mission here is to understand that Freudian narcissism informs a paradigmatic shift in the critical reception of metafiction which altogether does not alter the very fact that narcissism is "the original condition of *narrative*" (Dinkler, 2017, p. 34). For *narrare*, the Latin root for narrative, signals a dialogic, if not dynamic, interpretative relationship between reality and any medium of artistic expression when *storia* refers to a pent-up exposition of artistic expression where the narrative is caught up in a historicised frame. To put it more clearly, narratives are forms of artistic self-inspection whereas stories are mainly concerned with providing finished accounts of such and such observations. The 'narrative condition' which exigently calls for narcissism, then, "is process made visible" (Hutcheon, 1980, p. 6) and veers away from the non-reflexivity and stativity of a story.

When considered from this perspective, literary narcissism allows us to think through metafiction as a mimetic umbrella term for this process of self-inspection. As Linda

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3 It could be speculated that this corresponds to the 'ego ideal' of a literary text.

Hutcheon suggests in her *Narcissistic Narrative*, when we leave behind the fact that literary scholars in the twenty-first century promoted metafictionality as a revisionary literary response of postmodern aesthetics and instead elaborate on it as a wider concept that rises above postmodernism's reception of artistic representation, metafiction itself would become a form of mimetic dynamism, a means of identifying a self-reflexive pattern in literature. In this wider context, then, metafiction would become something more than the crowning achievement of postmodern autotelism that celebrates the artwork's ability to transcend the very life it wishes to hold up a mirror to. It is the sign of a narrative which displays the overt awareness "in explicit thematizations or allegorizations of their diegetic or linguistic identity within the texts themselves" (Hutcheon, 1980, p. 7). Literary narcissism, so to speak, is a writing upon itself where "the distinction between literary and critical texts begin to fade" (Hutcheon, 1980, p. 15), producing metafictional auto-inspection. On this account, the following part will refer to an ancient *exemplar* whose comedic vision is built exactly around that blurred distinction which informs, as will be discussed, the narcissistic comedy of the seventeenth-century university drama in England.

### ***A palliatae* upon *palliatae*? The bouletic prologue of Terence**

Self-reflexivity in Roman comedy seems to be a rather novel distinction in classical scholarship since the focus used to be on "language, the establishment of a fixed text, and the question of the plays' relationship with their so-called Greek originals" that represents a "*Quellenforschung* on steroids" (Sharrock, 2019, p. 6). The almost grievous critical eye so readily searched for the Greek original and rarely gave a second thought to the unique linguistic, social, and cultural spaces of meaning in Roman comedy that it was forced into the shape of a *palliatae* within which no authenticity, let alone auto-referentiality resides as distinct from the traditionally revered standards of Greek comedy. However, since the current trends in scholarship have started to recognise the level of originality in Roman comedy not only has its innovation become distinguishable from the so-called Greek models but also the degree of self-reflexivity has garnered much scholarly interest. For that reason, the "poly-perceptive" slave (*multimodis sapiens*) (Plautus, 2008, p. 60) of *Miles Gloriosus* who is later defined in *Menaechmi* as one whose "nose knows more than all the city prophets" (Plautus, 2008, p. 83) has been growingly considered as part of the Roman playwright's "self-conscious awareness of theatrical convention in a new concept of comic heroism" which is elongated by the slave's "self-transformational power of the *versipellis* (skin-changer)" (Slater, 2000, pp. 11-2).

Terence's comedy, on the other hand, which is "no less determined by theatrical exigencies" (Goldberg, 1986, p. 60) and no less attentive to the need to inculcate the attention of the audience through self-explanation, does not appear to make a Plautine statement of self-reflexivity. For, although "he deserves to sit at the head of the table" of the metatheatrical party (Sharrock, 2019, p. 8), his methods of delivering his metatheatrical scheme validate the point the point that scholarship makes with regards to its subtlety. As distinct from Plautus, the metatheatrical delicacy of Terentian comedy seems to reside in his unwillingness to identify "the authorial voice closely with one character" (Sharrock, 2009, p. 141) by typically building up the clever slave as a skilled 'textual' draughtsman. Instead, he "allows his own presence as playwright, separately from any cipher, to intrude more directly on the plot" (Sharrock, 2009, p. 141). To achieve this point, he develops the traditional function of the prologue as an informative narrative device and transmogrifies it to proclaim his authorial control over the play as a dramatic assertion of self-referentiality.<sup>4</sup> The prologue becomes more than the Aristotelian ἀρχὴ λόγου (*archē logou*, beginning of a speech which functions as an introduction for a speech (Aristotle, 1926, p. 426-7)).<sup>5</sup> For instance, the prologue to *Andria* stands out as a reply to the playwright's critics who insinuate that his plays are the patchwork of his wealthy patrons and not his or are corrupted translations of Greek originals. In response, he produces a formidable attack on his opponents and continues:

faciuntne intellegendo ut nil intellegant?  
 qui quom hunc accusant, Naevium, Plautum, Ennium  
 accusant, quos hic noster auctores habet,  
 quorum aemulari exoptat neglegentiam.  
 potius quam istorm obscuram diligentiam. (17-21)

(But isn't their cleverness making them obtuse? In criticising our author, they are actually criticising Naevius, Plautus, and Ennius, whom he takes as his models, preferring to imitate their carelessness in this respect rather than the critics' own dreary pedantry.) (Terence, 2001, pp. 50-3)

4 The other methods are identified as the comedic reversal of the Plautine clever slave and the farcical mode of anti-realism. See Sharrock (2009).

5 Gianni Guastella notes that the ancient Roman actor who spoke out the prologue (Prologus) became so dominant a feature of Terentian comedy that it would later appear as Calliopius in the Carolingian manuscripts of Terence. See Guastella (2015).

As much as the prologue emerges as a defensive means of explanation, it does not necessarily take on the role of an introductory speech. It is explanatory but certainly not introductory. The playwright seeks to drive off the accusation that his plays are repetitions upon Greek originals or Roman ‘translations’ of them and by acknowledging Plautus, Naevius, and Ennius as his dramatic models, he wishes to disregard the wrongly attributed role of a dramatic impostor, or even worse, a corrupter. In this context, the prologue’s defensiveness unfolds a self-reflexive tone which is highly conscious of the literary coordinates of the playwright’s works since the audience is asked to think of the play’s merit in relation to a literary tradition that precedes his newly started career. But also, it harbours an implicit declaration of the author’s inventiveness as it defines the mimetic and performative choices that the playwright wishes to make and does eventually. He declares that he would *prefer* to borrow a scheme of carelessness from his dramatic models rather than becoming a fastidious copyist. However, he does not guarantee to provide a verbatim ‘translation’ or re-arrangement of that carelessness which should mean that he is not particularly eager to re-produce their *negligentia*. This, in return and uneasily enough, casts a veil over his innovation which also explains why “he nowhere mentions that he has added material out of his own invention; for this, though true, was precisely what he did not want the crowd to know” (Beare, 1947, p. 74). But also, through that innovative bleakness the prologue implicitly makes a promise of originality which resists carelessness and the earlier addition “to the expository function of a prologue the trappings of a comic routine calculated to settle the crowd and make it tractable” (Goldberg, 1986, p. 60). Hence the threat that if they will carry on with their attacks the playwright will speak of his critics’ malpractices and will force them to admit to their own grievous designations (*dehinc ut quiescent porro moneo et desinant / maledicere, malefacta ne noscant sua*, 22-3) (Terence, 2001, p. 53).

In a parallel manner, the prologue to *Heauton Timorumenos* displays a need for explanation but not introduction. In addressing the playwright’s decision to credit an old actor with a role intended for young actors, the actor continues as follows:

nunc quam ob rem has partis didicerim paucis dabo.  
 oratorem esse voluit me, non prologum.  
 vostrum iudicium fecit, me actorem dedit,  
 si hic actor tantum poterit a facundia  
 quantum ille potuit cogitare commode  
 qui orationem hanc scripsit quam dicturus sum. (11-5)

(Now I will explain briefly why I have taken on this role. The playwright wanted me as an advocate, not as a prologue speaker. He has turned this into a court, with me to act on his behalf. I only hope that the eloquence of the actor can do justice to the aptness of the arguments which the writer of this speech has contrived to put together.) (Terence, 2001, pp. 180-1)

Here, the stage is likened to a courtroom (*iudicium*) where the defendant will respond to the complaints of dramatic contamination made about him or will, alternatively speaking, decide on the legal validity of those complaints. As a result of that, the audience is asked to act in the capacity of a jury so that the blamelessness of the playwright will be made clear although it creates the illusion of legal objectivity on the audience's part (*arbitrium vestrum, vostra existumatio valebit*, 25-6, Terence, 2001, p. 182). But also, much similar to the prologue to *Andria*, it is a statement of originality since it is not intended for the actor by the playwright to provide an expositional outline of the play as normally expected. Instead, the actor who recites the prologue acts in the capacity of a defender of the playwright's many narrative virtues. He makes a passing but decisive reference to the superiority of his talents and the play's:

facite aequi sitis, date crescendi copiam  
novarum qui spectandi faciunt copiam  
sine vitiis. (28-30)

(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.) (Terence, 2001, p. 183)

The Terentian prologue's obsession with invention shows that it intends to overcome the limits of a foreword. Due to this quality, it presents itself as a careful and innovative re-fashioning of a rhetorical βούλησις (*boulesis*, deliberation) (ὅ τι γὰρ ἂν βούληται εὐθὺ εἰπόντα ἐνδοῦναι καὶ συνάψαι, the speaker should say at once whatever he likes, give the key-note and then attach the main subject) (Aristotle, 1926, pp. 426-7) since it reflects on the dramatic deliberation of the author.<sup>6</sup> It would hardly be a convincing

6 Gianni Guastella discusses the novelty of the Terentian prologue with regards to the Aristotelian discussion of the prologue being an informative speech. It is an immensely valuable point, but we can hardly pass on Aristotle's preferred vocabulary with regards to the playwright's exertion of his wish or will over the play and the audience. Hence, my contention that Terence is a composer of bouletic prologues. See Guastella (2015).



argument to make that the bouletic move of Terence is not heir to the oratorical principles of Cato and Cicero where individual talent declares its independence from tradition where capturing the attention, good-will, and appreciation of the audience is of perennial importance (Goldberg, 1986, pp. 41-5). However, the rhetorical principle is accompanied, if not overshadowed, by Terence's narrative deliberation since the prologue establishes itself as a 'deliberative' playground where originality expresses itself through knowing self-commentary. This, in return, establishes a new comedic standard. For, however oratorical the form and content of the prologue might be, it does not simply strive for persuasion; it expresses emphatic authorial control over the textual design while also rendering it a bouletic comedy. A comedy of this sort, then, falls in line with the thoughtful comedy described in *Tractatus Coislinianus* where the anonymous author writing in line of the Aristotelian tradition portends that not all comedies share the same characteristics and only in some do we observe "instances of thought, character, and spectacle" (Janko, 1984, p. 39). If so, the self-commentative prologues of Terence emerge as instances of thought and spectacle where affirmations of originality coincide with autotelism. In other words, narcissistic fits of deliberation produce thoughtful comedy. In the end, the bouletic intervention bears a couple of dramatic consequences: first it helps the playwright assert his own deliberation in the re-furbishment of older material which makes the sincere promise of dramatic unorthodoxy in the guise of a defence. Second, it helps averting the eyes of his audience from the comic routines of Menander and Plautus by "embroiling them in a controversy" (Goldberg, 1986, p. 60) which "metathetically [*sic*] points out to his audience that he has transformed standard comic routines into something fresh and funny" (Knorr, 2007, p. 172). Far from promoting the image of an apologetic scrivener, the prologue promotes Terence's textual ambitions as the endeavours of a literary narcissist through which comedy is promoted as a source of textual self-consciousness. Drawing on this conclusion, I will now turn to university drama under the Tudor rule and elaborate on how it carves a vernacularised form of high-Roman comedy out of the Terentian marble.

### **The narcissistic comedy and the comedy of narcissism in The Parnassus Plays**

Terence might not have been eager to "clarify his method of composition or to advance a literary theory" but the bouletic motive in his prologues reveal a literary narcissistic technique which adorns him with "the easy grace of a master, not the labored fidelity of a pedantic copyist" (Goldberg, 1986, p. 51). For this reason, it is hardly surprising

to find out that through the vernacular reception of Terence in fifteenth and sixteenth century Italian comedies known as the *commedia erudita* (learned comedy), the university drama in England became a major medium for the theatrical production of Terentian drama since “the most natural public for Roman comedy in the original was to be found in an academic environment, among those who taught and studied the texts as part of the humanist educational package” (Andrews, 1993, p. 31). But the neo-Roman revival in Italy which was later passed on to England was further met with the medieval English university’s earlier dramatic practices which revolved around academic celebrations such as Feast of Fools, the Lord of Misrule, Christmas Prince where

Small communities graded in the rigid fashion necessary to collegiate and semi-clerical institutions must have taken keen delight in the ‘inversion of status’ common to these various forms of revelry, and in the creation of mock dignitaries who bore for a time undisputed sway. (Boas, 1914, p. 4)

In connection with this point and due to the revived interest in classical learning—whether it was a product of Renaissance humanism or not<sup>7</sup>—Oxford and Cambridge which “were ideally suited to become centres of a neo-classic dramatic art” with their “stately buildings and ample endowments” (Boas, 1914, p. 13), already hosting vernacular forms of ludic entertainment, Terentian comedy made a swift but natural entry to the university stage. Despite the limited critical commentary and archival research on university registers, documented evidence points towards an Oxford production of *Eunuchus* at Merton at 1566 and 1567, and Cambridge productions at Jesus and Trinity between 1562 and 1564 as part of a larger cycle of reproduction of Roman drama between 1549 and 1592 (Boas, 1914, pp. 386-90). In other words, historical evidence allows that the academics’ vernacular interest in a carnivalesque break from their studies caused a fusion between the ludic relief on the university stage that was later to be informed by a growing interest in Roman comedy under the Tudor rule and beyond.

Due to this revival of interest and the formation of what can be called an Anglicised *commedia erudita* (Brand, 1995, p. xxix), the anonymous *Parnassus* plays which were staged at St. John’s at Cambridge between 1598 and 1601 display a similar Roman interest in seventeenth-century England. Upon closer inspection, it becomes clearer that the plays which “were all of them Christmas toys” (Leishman, 1949, p. viii) elongate

<sup>7</sup> Since newly found evidence suggests that the scholarly attribution of post-medievalism to university drama in England is “due to narrow definitions of “dramatic activity,” which often privilege plays written in a dialogic format” and “fail to consider the range of texts that were performed at the medieval university.” See Meacham (2020).

the prological argument of Terence where it is employed as a narcissistic device for self-reflexivity.<sup>8</sup> In freely adapting Terence's method, the first play of the trilogy, *The Pilgrimage to Parnassus* starts off with the following act of deliberation:

SPECTATORS, take youe noe severe accounte  
Of our twoo pilgrims to Parnassus' mount.  
If youle take three daies studie in good cheare,  
Our muse is blest that ever shee came here.  
If not, wele eare noe more the barren sande,  
But let our pen seeke a more fertile lande. (1-5)

While asking for the attention of the audience, the prologue furthers a negation unto itself: although it dictates that the Muses would be content with a three-day study "in good cheare," it identifies the pilgrimage to Mount Parnassus a trivial one which, in return, trivialises the Parnassian endeavour it promises to narrate. In a self-reflexive manner, it comments on its own 'artifice' of failure as a narrative design which promotes a pre-exposed uneasiness. This uneasiness is later furthered by the presentation of Consiliodorus, father to Philomusus and uncle to Studioso who prepares the young gentlemen for their pilgrimage to Parnassus although he knows that "Learninge and povertie will ever kiss" (1.76). He offers seemingly thoughtful insight into the many advantages of bathing their "drye and withered quills" (1.38) and washing their "tounge in Aganippe's well" (1.42) knowing that "fortune will with schollers nere abide" (1.78). Conscious of the futility of learning, Consiliodorus insistently asks them to "Returne triumphant with your laurell boughes" (1.107). In a similar manner, although Philomusus and Studioso are seemingly convinced of the gravity of the pilgrimage, Philomusus asks:

*Philom:* Come, Studioso, shall wee gett us gone?  
Thinks thou oure softe and tender feet canne bide  
To trace this roughe, this harsh, this craggie waye  
That leadeth unto faire Parnassus' hill? (1.117-20)

Drawing on the minutest instances of hesitation, the play has it that the pilgrimage becomes a suspicious affair, a pointless endeavour. Later, our readerly suspicions are

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8 I am not referring to prological argument as inclusive of the *argumentum* as is the case with Plautus since "Unlike Plautus, Terence made the prologue independent of the play and gradually eliminated the *argumentum*." See Cioni (2018).

certified when we observe Philomusus and Studioso's entrance into the land of "Logique" (1.31), where they are immediately welcomed by a certain Madido who passionately recites Horace's *Epistles* and yet is a staunch critic of the pilgrimage to Parnassus since he believes "one pinte of wine shall inspire youe with more witt than all they nine muses" (2.260-1). Second, they enter the realm of "Rhetorique" (3.293) where they run into a Stupido who speaks of the rhetoricians "diabolicall ruffs and wicked great breeches full of sin, that it would make a zealous professor's harte bleed for grife" (3.364-5). To document his claim in experience, he leads them to an Amoretto who is an ardent reader of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*. But Amoretto proves himself as another frivolous wanderer when he explains the motive behind his love for Ovidian poetry and says: "I love thee, Ovid, for Corinna's sake, / Thou loves, Corinnia, as turtle loves her make" (4.392-3). Even worse, through his influence, Philomusus declares that he "alwayes was sworne Venus' servitoure" (4.462) and Studioso expresses his wish to "staye somewhat longer in this lande / To cropp those joyes that Amoretto speakes of" (4.500-1). Contrary to Consiliodorus' advice, they both revel in sensual pleasure and blame "poetrie's faire baites" (5.526) for the delay in their journey. Later, once they step their feet upon the territory of philosophy, they are once more reminded of the pointlessness of their endeavour. Ingenioso, a student of philosophy, tries to unconvince them that the pilgrimage is of any value. When Studioso asks him to join them in their pilgrimage, Ingenioso replies:

What, I travell to Parnassus? why, I have burnt my bookes, splitted my pen, rent my papers, and curste the cooseninge harts that brought mee up to noe better fortune. I, after manie years studie, havinge almost brought my braine into a consumption, looking still when I shoulde meete with some good Maecenas that liberallie would rewarde my deserts, I fed soe long upon hope, till I had almoste starved. (5.615-22)

And not disheartened at all by Ingenioso's words, we hear Philomusus' final remarks on their seemingly never-ending, scholarly aptitude for learning:

*Philom:* Let vulgar witts admire the common songes,  
I'le lie with Phoebus by the Muses' springes,  
Where wee will sit free from envie's rage,  
And scorne eache earthlie Gullio of this age. (5.726-9)

Their eagerness to continue with their journey strikes us as an unexpected move since scholarly ingenuity, hypocrisy, and metatheatrical commentaries on the vainness of the pilgrimage are not exactly catalysts for a heroic travelogue. Its only expectedness descends from the bouletic prologue's narcissistic influence on the play which growingly widens the conceptual gap between the mock-pilgrimage and the illogicality of the renewed hopes of Philomusus and Studioso.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the prologue uncovers the process of comedic failure according to which the travelogue is knowingly trivialised.

The second play, *The Returne from Parnassus* is a development on the first play's prological self-reflexivity although its sense of authorial control gains larger emphasis since it includes "first-person references to the narrator or author as a narrating self" (Dinkler, 2017, p. 39). The Stage Keeper refers to the playwright as a local of "Chessire" (11) who vainly studied in Germany, but he also narrates his dramatic influence:

*Stage Keeper.* Howe gentle? saye, youe cringing parasite,  
That scraping legg, that doppinge curtisie,  
That fawninge bowe, those sycophant's smoothe tearmes,  
Gained our stage mucche favoure, did they not?  
Surelie it made our poet a staide man,  
Kepte his proude necke from baser lambskins weare,  
Had like to have made him senior sophister.  
He was faine to take his course by Germanie  
Ere he coulede gett a silie poore degree. (1-9)

The provocative first-speech pokes fun at the playwright. For, the suggestion is that the playwright dramatises the vainness of his own "poore degree" which prolongs the theme of the pointlessness of scholarly ambition as part of his own real experience. Due to this elongation, not only the moralistic imperative that lurks behind the comedic design is exposed but also the enforcement of the idea that "wit is but a phantasm and idea, a quareling shadowe" (1.1.170) which comments on the playwright's personal disillusionment. And yet, instead of producing feelings of tragic frustration, the play turns it into a means of metatheatrical commentary that is intertwined with its comedic mode of self-inspection. Thus, the prologue applauds the efforts of the playwright in gaining the stage "much favoure" due to his auto-inspectional honesty which fortifies the central comedy in the

9 There is ample textual evidence to assume that Philomusus' ambitious ignorance is a response to Marston's elitist Philomuse in *What You Will* which, in return, explains the self-reflexive comedy of the play.

play. Taking the prological model as its example, the storyline furthers the comedic journey of Philomusus and Studioso who are now portrayed as disillusioned travellers who have left the tower of learning empty-handed. Studioso is resentful that “wee, foolish wee, have sacrificed our youth” (1.1.93) and Philomusus refuses to dip his quill in Hellicon (1.1.129). Ingenioso resents that he has more in his head than he has in his purse (1.1.168-9) and seeks for the support of a wealthy patron although he later resigns from his office since the Patron gives him “a ungratious nodd” (1.1.347).<sup>10</sup> This sense of disillusionment later catches the end of a “melancholicke that our departure from Parnassus doth create” (1.1.445-6). Not surprisingly, however, the graver the company’s sense of melancholy becomes, the greater the play’s self-reflexive comedy becomes visible, implying that the superficiality of the melancholic layer that the playwright adds to the play is also a lurid expression of scholarly futility. The self-mockery reaches its climax when Studioso declares in a mock-Shakespearean manner: “Fairewell, Parnassus! farwell, faire content!” (1.1.481)<sup>11</sup>

As much as the play’s self-deprecating mood furthers a literary narcissistic comedy, it also invents a comedy of narcissism. A complaint is issued by a Draper, a Tayler, a Tapster, and Simson at the beginning of Act 2 who are promised payments by Philomusus, Studioso, and Luxurio. However, they are never paid properly, and the honesty of the townsmen (2.1.569) is ill-treated by the scholarly company who wander around with a “blacke frise coat” (2.1.587) philosophising about the fickleness of Fortune rather than paying them back. This is followed by scenes that depict Philomusus as a newly hired sexton to the clownish Percevall, Studioso as a servile tutor to an aristocratic “dandipratt” (2.1.766), and Ingenioso as a fake eulogist in service of a Gullio who can never afford to be “seene at the courte twice in one sute of apparell” (3.1.930). Added to their dishonesty is their speeches on the “vanitie” (2.1.809) of their employers which results in their akratic behaviour, rendering them consciously blind to their own vanities. In hope of defying Fortune and looking for financial means of providing for themselves, they commit intellectual debauchery. In a cyclical manner, the play concludes itself with the exact frivolity which is looked down upon by the speaker of the prologue. As an extension on that point, it also shows us that a narcissistic comedy is made possible by a dramatic unveiling of the comic hero’s over engagement with herself; that ironically speaking, “true good witts have badd memories” (3.1.1037-8).

10 This is a point which deserves special treatment with regards to the afterlives of Maecenas in Elizabethan/Jacobean literature. For a very recent and illustrious treatment of the subject see Gowers (2024). *Rome’s Patron: The Lives and Afterlives of Maecenas*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

11 Compare and contrast with Othello’s “Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content, / Farewell the plumèd troops and the big wars / That makes ambition virtue!” (3.3.353-5).

The third play, *The Returne from Parnassus, or The Scourge of Simony's* prologue takes a rather unconventional shape since it is spoken by the Boy, the Stagekeeper, Momus, and Defensor in the form of a lengthy dramatic dialogue instead of a monologue. However, the verbal dominance of Momus is particularly eye-striking who acts out the role of a humbling figure as is usual with his mythological demeanour. He frowns upon the play itself as "not good inuention" (50) which he foresees will be "pittifull drie" (62). The Defensor later silences Momus and outlines the core of the final conflict. However, Momus's judging remarks with regards to the play's dryness and unoriginality defines again our readerly response to the final chapter of Philomusus and Studioso's journey and beyond. For, the travellers to Parnassus are seen trying their hand at becoming "Phisitians" (1.4.439) while Ingenioso is seen as a penniless satirist and a follower of Juvenal, and Amoretto an irredeemable bribe-taker and impostor. As a final act, the pitiful dryness of the narcissistic comedy repeats itself when we are introduced to Philomusus and Studioso's aspirations to become actors at Richard Burbage's theatre but to no avail. Will Kempe puts it to Philomusus that he "wilt do well in time, if thou wilt be ruled by thy betters, that is by my selfe" (4.3.1872-3) and yet the closing scene voices Philomusus' desire to become a shepherd at Kent (5.4.2190) upon deciding that a theatrical career and the fame it might bring will soon be forgotten once they are "coopt vp in silent graue" (4.3.1917). As two characters in search of their 'author,' they are finally humbled by the Momian prologue, the "paultry Crittick" (11). Therefore, the unorthodox unveiling of the comic journey becomes an extension of the prological act that partially furthers a moralistic dictum. But aside from its vernacular moralism, the prological act lays bare "a supreme philosophical game" reminding us that "humour is a *cold* carnival" (Eco, 1984, p. 8); one which extends the Chessire-man's Momian criticism.

The bulk of textual evidence presented above allows us the conclusion that the prologues of the *Parnassus* plays are narcissistic constructs which offer narrative spaces of self-engagement with the process of artistic creation. Rather than assuming the role of introductory speeches, they assume the role of deliberative speech-acts contributing to the meaning-making processes of the plays since the prologue "has as its chief function to ensure that the text is read properly" (Génette, 1997, p. 197). It is a paratext that is only seemingly external. In fact, it provides internal evidence for the plays' narrative strategies. In addition,

Although we do not always know whether these productions are to be regarded as belonging to the text, in any case they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world (...). (Génette, 1997, p. 1)

Along with the stylistic contribution of the bouletic prologue, it is hardly an escapable fact that the paratextual status of the prologue in university drama is a cultural symptom of the Elizabethan/Jacobean fascination with solidifying textual authority. From this perspective, its use coincides with the Renaissance “link between humanist antischolasticism and experimental discovery” that “was complicated by a continuing search for a revitalized political telos in the relationship of things and thoughts, outer and inner sources of articulation” (Wiemann, 1996, p. 108). Aesthetically and historically speaking, then, the neo-Terentian prologue in the *Parnassus* plays is a proclamation of *auctoritas*, an outlet for a self-crowning achievement as modelled after the fact that “the Renaissance stage was an experimental, not a propitiatory, institution” (Agnew, 1986, p. 110). To put it more clearly, in a world which growingly enabled an experimental culture of literary autonomy the prologue became a paratextual space where individual assessments of theme, structure, and plot became possible. To achieve this point, the anonymous writers of the trilogy turn to a Roman comedic authority only to establish/deliberate their individual presence on the stage. Although the historical and socio-economic components that go into the making of both periods differ from one another, the final effect remains similar: they lay claim to comedic unorthodoxy and self-inspection by imposing narcissistic deliberation on the text.

## Conclusion

Taking its cue from twentieth-century psychoanalysis, literary narcissism primarily refers to the self-occupational status of a literary text. However, when considered in a wider context, it transcends the limits of a psychoanalytical framework and exposes the autotelic universe of a literary text. As an expression of this autotelism and in the context of early modern English drama, the prological paratexts emerge from the *Parnassus* plays as markers of this literary narcissistic endeavour where they do not simply imply a solipsistic self-engagement but also contribute to “the creation of rhetorically effective discourse structures” (Alcorn, 1994, p. 17). In accordance, the prologues of the anonymous *Parnassus* plays play a significant rhetorical role and



provide clear outlines of authorial deliberation. Following in the footsteps of Terentian comedy, they emerge as markers of a narcissistic dramatic tradition in seventeenth-century English drama since they veer away from the Plautine use of introductory speeches. Since out of this Roman fabric the English “comic writers learnt to cultivate a more intellectual species of wit in place of their former crude buffoonery” (Hale, 1920, p. 129) as accompanied by the English university’s effervescent culture of festivity, the academic group which contributed to the composition of the trilogy inherits from Terence a mode of narcissistic self-commentary. As a distant marker of the neo-classical adaptation of the Terentian inheritance, the *Parnassus* plays employ the prologue as a subversive narrative device which reproduces a metatheatrical culture of self-reflexivity. Through that, the prologue becomes an intimate space of textual and physical performance where the playwright provocatively takes the lid off the comedic product and lays bare the comedic process. Eventually, the innovation of the *Parnassus* plays lies in the fact that they declare the emergence of a self-centred comedy on the university stage in the seventeenth-century out of whose body a self-criticism and poetic source of authority can easily flow if it chooses to take a narcissistic look into the artistic pond that is called theatre.

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