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# ***Hic et Nunc: Amy Richlin's Iran Man and the Ethics of Translating Plautus***

Clara Daniel

## **Abstract**

Willing to challenge the classical tradition, Richlin (2005) adapted the Latin play *Persa* by Plautus to a contemporary context using American slang and pop culture. Richlin aims at making Roman comedy performable, popular and funny again whether onstage or in the classroom. Is her radical modernisation a form of domestication that is often criticized in translation studies for being unfaithful and unethical? Based upon a comparison between the original Latin text and Richlin's version, this paper questions the ethics of faithfulness which play a major role in translation terminology, a system determined by the traditional polarity between domestication and foreignization. By highlighting the ludic nature of Plautus' comedy (especially the ongoing joke with Greek culture and language), this paper argues that using modern transposition is a heavily Plautine strategy suitable for recovering the immediacy of comedy.

## **Key words**

Plautus, *Persa*, translation, performance, ancient comedy, 21<sup>st</sup> century, domestication, faithfulness, *ludus*, *realia*

In Brno, Czech Republic in November 2019, an international conference of scholars gathered to discuss the stakes of staging Plautine comedy.<sup>1</sup> Even though we have inherited an influential classical tradition that has defined Roman plays as literary texts, not theatrical scripts, since at least Erich Segal's study on Plautus (SEGAL 1968), many scholars have more frequently examined the context of performance, i.e. the Roman *ludi*. This performative shift has revealed that Roman comedy was first and foremost a popular, inclusive and festive event: it was not necessarily high culture and certainly not literary canon.<sup>2</sup> Nowadays, some scholars even try to compare Plautus' drama to modern entertainments such as Broadway shows or sitcoms (see GREGORIS and GÓMEZ 2011; CANDIARD 2019). Along these lines, Amy Richlin, an American classicist specialising in the study of Plautus, has denounced this 'classical' misappropriation. While her most recent work is a theoretical essay on 'slave theatre' (RICHLIN 2017), in 2005 she engaged in a translation project comparable to theatrical proposals by classicists.<sup>3</sup> She translated three Plautine plays: *Curculio*, *Persa* and *Poenulus* (RICHLIN 2005). In her critical introduction, she insists upon viewing Roman comedy as popular entertainment: 'We have to remember [...] that the most popular forms of entertainment during this period were the equivalent of stock car racing, professional wrestling, and the films of the Farrelly brothers' (RICHLIN 2005: 31). Not without humour, she evokes the modern paradox that the Latin playwright represents nowadays: 'Unfortunately in the early twenty-first century an ability to read Latin does not often go hand in hand with an appreciation of pro wrestling' (RICHLIN 2005: 31). In a severe conclusion she adds: 'During the past fifteen hundred years, the entirety of Roman culture has become the property of an intellectual elite' (RICHLIN 2005: 31).

Using modern American English and a background full of pop-culture references, her aim was to make Plautus accessible, performable and funny for today's audiences whether on stage or in the classroom. In her versions, which might be labelled as 'translations' or 'adaptations' in translation studies, Richlin chose to transform the cultural elements found in the original Latin plays in order to produce a familiar environment for modern readers/spectators. By translating Plautine *realia*, or words that refer

1 'Plautus from Page to Stage', 11–14 November 2019, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno.

2 See (MANUWALD 2019: 28): 'Since dramatic performances, like races in the circus, belonged to the festival entertainment provided by the organiser, there was no entrance fee. Performances were in principle open to everybody. Audiences therefore are likely to have been mixed as to background, social class, age, sex, and occupation, consisting of locals and visitors from elsewhere. Free citizens, slaves, married ladies, nurses with infants, prostitutes, attendants on magistrates, and ushers are mentioned as among the members of the audience in comic prologues (esp. Plaut. *Poen.* 5–35; Ter. *Hec.* 28–48). Dramatic poets seem to have taken the variety of social and intellectual backgrounds into account: they conveyed essential information in a straightforward format and produced scripts that could be received by different members of the audience on different levels, as the plays included both impressive stage action and discussions of complex topics.' Originally, the plays were ever-changing pieces destined for unique events: '[...] comedies were not published as books but passed on in the form of stage scripts from one stage director to the next' (FERRI 2014: 768).

3 For other recent retranlations in English, see (BERG and PARKER 1999; HENDERSON 2006; SLAVITT and BOVIE 1995). See also the NEH Summer Institute on Roman Comedy in Performance (summer 2012): this collective program aimed at creating multiple versions of scenes from Plautus and Terence by experimenting with translation and performance (JAMES, MOORE and SAFRAN 2015).

to culture-specific material elements, she undertook not only a linguistic process but also a cultural one that requires theorisation, since her bold approach challenges the generally established scholarly method of translating classical texts.<sup>4</sup> The first strong indication of this cultural process is the change of title: *Persa* becomes *Iran Man*. This nomination process functions as a programmatic signal of her strategy, because a geographical name is replaced by its modern equivalent (Persia – Iran) and the implied *paronomasis* is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the 1970 Black Sabbath song Iron Man.<sup>5</sup> In that respect, one might ask: is her project a form of domestication often criticized in translation studies for being unfaithful and unethical? With examples from this play, I will first present the general stylistic choices that preside over Richlin's project. Then, drawing on the notions of topicality and equivalence, I will study how she has adapted cultural elements. Finally, I will question the paradigm of faithfulness by examining how her translation challenges the traditional opposition between foreignizing and domesticating in order to recover Plautine comedy.

### **Stylistic choices: recovering comedy through radical modernity**

The history of Plautus' reception can be described as a long process of 'classicisation'. Until recently scholars had focused on philological and literary aspects, studying Plautine theatre as a written corpus, often viewed through the paradigm of *Quellenforschung*, or study of sources, which saw it compared with Greek models.<sup>6</sup> However, with the performative turn, ancient drama is nowadays often theorised in the framework of performance studies, and thus Roman comedy has been returned to the horizons of theatre and entertainment. Several classicists, often with experience in drama, have chosen to retranslate Plautus for the stage using this emphasis. Richlin's translation of *Persa* takes place in that general context. She prefaced her work with a substantial introduction presenting and justifying her approach (RICHLIN 2005: 1–53). In order to recreate a performable and funny play targeting modern and mass audiences, she makes radical stylistic choices which can be categorised into three elements: linguistics, poetics and performance.

4 On audience response among scholars, see (HOWARD 2006). While many classicists who are also engaged in performing Roman comedy were supportive of Richlin's work, some raised the issue of using her texts as 'teaching tools', such as Timothy Moore: 'I think there are others, and I'm among them, who will be cautious about how these translations will be used. It's a great text for performance. [...] I'd be a little wary of using this in a course where students are just reading Latin texts in translation' (HOWARD 2006: 7).

5 See the section in her introduction to *Persa* entitled 'the Title' (RICHLIN 2005: 117–118).

6 German classicists developed this paradigm in Plautine studies at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the most influential publication being (FRAENKEL 2007 [1922]). For a critical overview of this approach, see (HALPORN 1993).

## The linguistic dimension

Given her postulate of Roman comedy as representing popular culture, Richlin tries to 'de-classicise' Plautus. With this in view, the first step in her translation process was to question our modern perception of the automatic association of the Latin language with elite literature. In order to avoid translating Plautine plays as if they were highbrow drama, she took a strong linguistic stance by using a spoken and colloquial language:

[...] nonstandard English spelling and grammar in this translation reflect similarly nonstandard Latin spelling and grammar in Plautus. Readers of Plautus in the original have to get used to this and are usually taught to think of the Latin in terms of the classical and proper equivalents, but proper English does not really convey the tone of the original. (RICHLIN 2005: 117)

This linguistic register could be labelled American slang. Her decision is not only a stylistic choice: it also aims at reflecting the sociolinguistic environment in the original play, given the plot and the catalogue of lower-class *personae* in *Persa*. The main character is Toxilus, a slave who during his master's absence tries to buy his lover's freedom (Lemniselenis, an enslaved prostitute) with the help of another slave, his friend Sagaristio. What is notable is the absence of *domini* (masters). The main features of Richlin's slang include non-standard grammar, phonetic spelling, trendy catchphrases, interjections and swear words. She also specified that she tried to make her characters sound as if they were from 'New Jersey', where she is from.<sup>7</sup> Here is the result with the first *salutatio* of the play, between the two *servi*:

**TOXILUS.** *O Sagaristio, di ament te.*

**SAGARISTIO.** *O Toxile, dabunt di quae exoptes.*

*ut vales? TOX. Vt queo. SAG. Quid agitur? TOX. Vivitur.*

**SAG.** *Satin ergo ex sententia? TOX. Si eveniunt quae exopto, satis. [...]*

*Sed hoc me unum excruciat. SAG. Quidnam id est?*

**TOX.** *Haec dies summa hodie est, mea amica sitne libera,*

*an sempiternam servitutem serviat [...]. (16–34)*

**BOWMAN:** Yo, Einstein, you're looking good. **EINSTEIN:** Bowman, good to see you, dude.

How's it hangin? **BOW.:** Best I can. **EIN.:** Whussup? **BOW.:** I'm just getting by.

**EIN.:** Good enough for you? **BOW.:** If things turn out how I want, not bad. [...]

But there's just one thing that burns my ass. **EIN.:** Oh, yeah? What might that one thing be?

**BOW.:** Cuz today is the final day of decision, whether my girl goes free or slaves away forever and ever [...].

7 The author learned this in a personal conversation with Amy Richlin.

Richlin's translation is not a free adaptation, as the page layout makes clear; it is a line-for-line and even word-for-word translation, where both quantity and quality of text matter. However, the informal tone may unsettle a Latin scholar. We may wonder: given Richlin's strong position on 'slave theatre', did her school of thought influence her way of translating Roman comedy? Does her stylistic choice distort the linguistic register of the ancient play in order to prove that Plautus was popular? In fact, numerous studies have examined the colloquial nature of Plautine language (see LINDSAY 1907: 1–10; DUCKWORTH 1994 [1952]: 332–340; ADAMS 2016: 27–60). Richlin's radical option then does not necessarily indicate that her work is a deceitfully 'lower' version of *Persa* infused with her own politics. Besides, similarly to the original play, informal language does not equate to an absence of varied linguistic registers and poetic creativity.<sup>8</sup>

## The poetic dimension

The literary style of Plautus cannot be analysed without considering a major element of composition in *palliata*: poetry. In the context of this paper, I will not delve into the intricate details of Plautine poetic composition, which has been copiously studied.<sup>9</sup> To sum up the overall metrical structure, Roman comedies can be divided into two types of patterns: *diverbiium* (speech) and *canticum* (song). The difference is not only one of metre (iambic senarius being the verse of ordinary speech) but also in musical accompaniment, with the use of *tibia* reserved for *canticum*. In addition, the use of complex metrical patterns (*cantica multis modis*) must be viewed as full musical numbers, allowing us to label this theatre as what is today known as musical comedy.<sup>10</sup> To be consistent with Latin comedy, Richlin closely reproduced alternative patterns in English.

Basically, all the passages that were spoken in the original (the senarii) are translated line-for-line into iambic senarii, or sometimes iambic pentameter. Most of the passages that were

8 See for instance the following passage in which a character is mimicking legal jargon and using a much more formal register:

'For whosoever shall do this for the sake of the public good 65a  
rather than for his own benefit, the conclusion can be reached  
that he be a citizen both faithful and good.  
{But I want this penalty established legally from now on:}\* 67a  
If anyone shalt fail to convict the lawbreaker, let him pay  
a fine of half to the public exchequer; and also in that law be it written:  
when a snitch shalt point the finger at a certain party, 70  
just so much the party of the second part shalt lay hand on the party of the first  
part in return,  
so that they shalt proceed in equal part to see the judge.' (RICHLIN 2005: 124–125)

9 See for instance (QUESTA 2007).

10 Here I am following Letessier's typology (DUPONT and LETESSIER 2017 [2012]), but others prefer dividing patterns into three categories: speech, recitative, and song (see BEARE 1964 [1950]: 219–232). On music in Roman comedy, see (MOORE 2012).

in recitative meters in the original – iambic septenarii and octonarii, trochaic septenarii and octonarii – are done here line-for-line into the same meters in English, without rhyme. (RICHLIN 2005: 116)

Her post-modern take is manifest in her choice for the lyrical parts: rhymed rap songs. In these specific passages, to favour rhythm and music, she sometimes has to distance herself from literality.<sup>11</sup> Here is an example from the *argumentum* of the play. In this section, her translation runs freely to successfully reproduce the acrostic of the title.

### **ARGUMENTVM**

*Profecto domino suos amores Toxilus  
Emit atque curat, leno ut emittat manu;  
Raptamque ut emeret de praedone virginem  
Subornata suadet sui parasiti filia.  
Atque ita intricatum ludit potans Dordalum.*

*Rap, but with touches of 'Iron Man,' by Black Sabbath:*

**I** am Iran Man-I'll tell you my story if I can.  
**R**ockin you today-is my friend named Bowman and his boss is away.  
**A** ho named Georgia Moon is his girlfriend-he's gonna buy her freedom in the end.  
**N**ot enuf to set her free-he got to fool her pimp with some help from me.  
**M**e, I'm his buddy, but I fake like I am-a bad foreign dude and I come from Iran.  
**A**nd I sell the pimp a stolen virgin-but really she's the daughter of a citizen.  
**N** get the cash and the girl is cool-and we get high and treat the pimp like a fool.

Since there are four sung numbers in *Persa*, this musical transposition allows the text not only to become rhythmic and melodious again (sometimes she even italicizes a stressed word to help the reader get the flow), but also to share a sense of closeness with a modern audience, especially teenagers or young adults. So if the rhythmical aspect is not always obvious on the page, her decision to respect intricate metrical patterns and above all to transpose songs into a prevalent musical genre of our time shows that her versions were not conceived for a written purpose but for live performances.

## **The theatrical dimension**

As Richlin states in the general introduction of her book, scholars had previously tended to forget that Roman comedies were not primarily written texts, but informative scripts destined to be performed onstage. Translators must care for that performative aspect by considering how plays will be staged. Recent scholarly receptions of Plautine

<sup>11</sup> To aid in understanding the intended meanings of her translation, more literal translations are offered at the end of the text (RICHLIN 2005: 160–182).

plays now demonstrate that shift, bridging the gap between the academic world and the theatrical world. Richlin's project is among them. First, in addition to the spoken script, she adds stage directions. Here are two lengthy examples drawn from the first scene about location, props and costumes:

*Scene*

Los Angeles [Athens].

There are two house fronts side by side: one house belongs to Bowman's master (who's away), the other to Dorkalot the pimp; Georgia Moon and Brain Muffin also live there. Onstage there needs to be a feature behind which first Einstein and Cherry and then Fat Jack can hide in act 4 – a dumpster would be appropriate; it needs to be stage R. Exit stage R = to the Harbor Freeway, exit stage L = to Down-town.

*Costume Note*

Several of the male characters – Bowman, Einstein, Fat Jack, Toyboy, and/or Dorkalot – should wear cowboy boots and ponchos or jeans jackets, to tie in with lines 123–25 here [...]. (RICHLIN 2005: 121)

These indications are not direct translations, i.e. they do not exist in the Latin manuscripts, which are devoid of any external stage direction –, but they work as a visual support either for a reader to reconstruct a fictional performance or eventually for a potential director to actually stage the play. It is worth noting that Richlin's version was indeed performed on at least three separate occasions (RICHLIN 2005: xiii).

Furthermore, her concern for the performative dimension is not only embedded in staging considerations: it also justifies all her stylistic choices, from slang to rap music, because drama – and even more so, comedy – must share contemporary codes for an audience to relate and laugh. If the sole principle that guided Richlin through her translation process had to be summed up, it would be: how can Plautus be funny in a modern performance if the language is outdated, the poetry too formal or the references unknown?

Let us take the issue of onomastics. As is well-known, Plautine names were created from etymological roots, using appellations either found in Greek comedy or invented by the Latin playwright. The character names may be labelled as aptonyms or euonyms, with each comically indicating something of the *persona* which bears it. However, these original puns involving names can be lost in translation: because of linguistic barriers, the proper names are deprived of any humorous meaning in modern languages. To restore these lost references and their comic potential, Richlin reinjects meaning in onomastics by drawing upon ancient etymology to translate names into English. For instance, the aptly named *parasitus* Saturio (the Latin root *satur* means 'full') becomes Fat Jack. Richlin translated Sagaristio (which contains the root *sag-*, meaning 'wise') as Einstein: humour or irony is meant to be found as character's role-playing contradicts the expectations set up by his name.



As Umberto Eco theorised, unlike tragedy, humour is rarely universal: comedies are embedded in the cultural context which produced them (ECO 1985 [1981]). The loss of humour in translating Roman comedy is the main reason Richlin invoked to explain her modern take on Plautus.

The plays are comedies, after all, and I figured that the first thing necessary to convey their meaning to students was for them to be funny—which meant coming up with humor that is *the equivalent now* of what the plays' humor was then. When you do that, you need to know a lot about the ancient context, and you need to think about what is funny *to us*, and which 'us', and why. (RICHLIN 2005: 2)

Thus, rather than a mere option, modernisation may be an obligation. However, if everything is transposed to a modern background as it is in Richlin's translation, the linguistic issue also becomes a cultural one since Plautine *realia* have been adapted (i.e. cultural elements from the Greek and Roman societies). Given the perpetual debate in translation studies about the unethical process of domestication, we are left wondering: is Richlin's cultural transposition a valuable and legitimate approach to translating Roman comedy?

## A cultural matter: transposing *realia*

Plautus is no Aristophanes. The Latin playwright was not responding to any political agenda that would make his plays firmly embedded within the public affairs of his time and place. Still, he is a 'topical writer' (RICHLIN 2005: 17) insofar as his comedies seem to reflect a realistic canvas based upon Greek and/or Roman elements of everyday life referred to as *realia* in translation studies.<sup>12</sup> Verbal elements referring to people, places, things, events, etc. were transposed by Richlin so that modern readers/spectators, and primarily students of the Classics, could better grasp the socio-cultural issues depicted by Roman comedy. After describing her approach to translation, I will theorise the notion of equivalence and examine the issue of untranslatability.

## Working with equivalents

To describe Richlin's work with the period *realia*, it is useful to resort to the terminological tool of equivalence. On a case-by-case basis, every aspect of daily life in *Persa* was changed to familiar equivalents from today. Take geography: the city of Athens becomes Los Angeles, a modern cultural metropolis. As previously mentioned in re-

12 See (GRUEN 1990: 129): 'Plautus was alive to issues that engaged his contemporaries on the public scene in an age of overseas expansion and rapid internal change. [...] the plays could serve as vehicles to address, promote, mock, or satirize items that held public attention or provoked public debate. At that level Plautus' topicality, neither Aristophanic nor Menandrian, takes shape. The subjects of public discourse, rather than particular persons or incidents, find an appropriate outlet on the stage.'

gard to the title, Persia is replaced by its geographical equivalent: Iran. History is also affected: when Saturio (Fat Jack) uses famous historical figures like King Philipp and Attalus to make a joke, Richlin (2005: 170) replaces them with King Saddam and the Saudi family, given that '[the ancient names] would signify the East, power, and wealth, and need to be represented by modern equivalents.'

*Mirum quin regis Philippi causa aut Attali  
te potius vendam quam mea, quae sis mea.*  
(339–340)

Well, it'd be weird if I sold you on account of  
Saddam or the Saudis,  
and not on the account of me – you are mine, after all.

According to the author, the cultural matter of the three particular plays she chose is xenophobia.<sup>13</sup> Mentioning Said's research on Orientalism, she evokes clichés about the 'East' as lascivious and barbaric people in the Western popular imagination. Since ethnic stereotyping is a prevalent element, the translator's duty is to find a strategy to render it. Equivalence is Richlin's bold choice. It may be argued this is the best solution if the translator wants a modern audience to fully grasp this ideological dimension and be able to reflect upon it. However, finding modern stereotypes also runs the risk of the choices made being viewed as offensive humour.<sup>14</sup> This emerges as a prominent issue in a domesticated translation of *Persa*, with the use of characters disguised as Persians. When Sagaristio arrives disguised on stage, he lists a fake genealogy, using exotic-sounding names including Latin puns. Amy Richlin aimed at domesticating Arabic names using readily recognizable cultural references which would sound funny to Western ears based upon similar English puns:

*Vaniloquidorus Virginesvendonides  
Nugiepilouquides Argentumexterebronides  
[Tedigniloquides Nugides Palponides]  
Quodsemelarrripides Numquameripides.*  
(702–705)

My name is Osama bin Blabbin, son of Baima-i-Sistra,  
son of Ali Blabba, son of Sheikh Daoun,  
son of Yomammed, son of Khayyam Allah Khan,  
son of Whataisteali, son of Younevergetbacki.

Furthermore, deities and mythological figures often appear in Plautus in the form of volitive or emotive utterances (i.e. blasphemous interjections), showing that religious life was an integral part of Roman daily life. Because these codified locutions translated literally would sound artificial, the author systematically replaced them by familiar blasphemies in the Western Christian world.

13 See (RICHLIN 2005: 3): 'The plays include ethnic slurs – this is the point of translating these plays in particular, to trace the history of xenophobia.'

14 See for instance one issue regarding the performance of the play *Poenulus* under the title *Towelheads* as chosen by Richlin (HOWARD 2006: 6): 'Ms. Richlin "gets right to cutting-edge and possibly offensive humor," as Mr. Tatum of Dartmouth puts it. "In fact, I know for sure it's offensive, because I talked with students involved in the Muslim students' association here and they expressed some concern about having a play called Towelheads just go on the boards.'"

My feeling is that to make these plays really understandable, the artificial gentility of ‘By Pollux, go to a bad place, you rascal!’ needs to be replaced by what the Latin really meant, which is (roughly) ‘Jesus, get lost, asshole!’ Since nobody has sworn by Pollux or Hercules for a long time, English translations need to pepper the plays with ‘God,’ ‘Christ,’ ‘goddamn,’ ‘bloody,’ ‘Jesus,’ and so on—as people actually do speak now, even godless humanists; once you substitute ‘Jesus’ for every *hercle* on a page, suddenly it starts to sound like people talking. (RICHLIN 2005: 47)

Food also provides subject matter in Plautine comedy. When Toxilus (Bowman) asks for a banquet to be prepared, he enumerates Greek dishes which must have sounded exotic to a Roman audience. Providing explanations in her notes, Richlin opts for Hispanic foods in her translation:

*Commisce mulsum, struthea †coluteaque appara,  
bene ut in scutris concaleat, et calamum inice.*  
(87–88)

Mix up the **sangria**, get out the **nuts** and  
the **guacamole**  
heat up the platters and throw on some  
**fajitas**.

This transposition allows her to keep the sexual double entendre (*struthea* is a variety of quince sometimes used for male genitalia), which shows how everything, whether linguistics or culture, can be used for comedy in Plautus. In the end, the global impact of these isolated equivalents results in a play integrated into modern American imagery. Poor workers are living in Los Angeles, drinking beer and eating McBurgers they will buy with stolen bucks, fearing lethal injections or kidnappings at gunpoint, and joking about *Star Wars* or Michael Jackson. More than just modern culture, Richlin exhibits a special taste for pop culture, especially when characters are joking or teasing one another.

*TOX.* [...] *disne advorser? quasi Titani cum  
eis belligerem  
quibus sat esse non queam?* (26–27)

**BOWMAN:** [...] Can I take on the superheroes? Can  
I make war  
on beings that I can't match up to? What is this,  
*Clash of the Titans?*

Here, the mythological Titanomachy is reduced to its Hollywood version, a kind of tongue-in-cheek comment on the complex relationship between antiquity and modernity: pop culture, far from being mass entertainment devoid of any purpose, revives this connection with a new approach. But, on a theoretical level, how to better describe Richlin's process of equivalence?

## The same or the other? From equivalence to comparison

The equivalence paradigm is a commonly discussed feature of translation studies.<sup>15</sup> In the context of this paper, I will not dive into different conceptions of equivalence. Instead, I would like to offer a specific view of the notion with regard to classical literature, as Richlin's work relates to the global treatment of Greek and Roman legacies. During a symposium on Plautus' *Miles gloriosus*, Jean-Pierre Mazières, who translated the play into French, summed up the issue concerning translating ancient texts as 'an endless struggle to reduce, as much as possible, what might be named the "gap" of meaning – and sense(s) – in respect to the original' (MAZIÈRES 1993: 83).<sup>16</sup> This 'gap of meaning' is induced by the ever-growing cultural distance between the Ancients and us. The putative need to preserve the authenticity of classics while still maintaining their relevance in the contemporary world creates a strong double bind for translators.

The dilemma of the 'gap of meaning' involves an archetypal polarity in human existence between universality and topicality. Through time and civilisations, the same characteristics from different societies would persist. That would explain why, for instance, Greek philosophy or Greek tragedy still belong to our shared cultural horizon. This relates to the Same, or the idea of universality. On the contrary, topicality defines the realm of the Other: located elements pertaining to specific societies and times. That is why, except for specialists, understanding topical references from classical texts may be laborious if they are not mediated through translation.<sup>17</sup> This universality-topicality polarity may lead to an impasse in translating Plautus today. Universality in translation is not per se an option: if cultural elements are suppressed to only retain generic elements, the specificity of any literary work would disappear. A translator can try to create a 'universal human comedy' through Plautus and audiences may laugh, but the play will not really be the work of the Roman poet. On the other hand, if his plays are literally translated, and its ancient-situated elements maintained at all costs, a modern reception – especially in the case of a live performance – is put at risk being too difficult and reserved for classicists only. The entire Western history of the reception of Roman comedy is in fact full of examples of how performances have generally been limited to educational environments (CANDIARD 2019: 351–5).

The framework of equivalence approach offers a solution to this polarised tension so that universality and topicality are not doomed to be irreconcilable opposites. They can be reworked into a functional dialectical relationship. Indeed, finding 'equivalents' means accepting as a prerequisite both the unique nature of each culture and a possible contemporary understanding through translation within a later culture. In that view, literary translation may be defined as a universal operation consisting of searching for similar topical elements. Similarity is neither the Same nor the Other, but an

15 For a recent article summing up relevant discussions, see (PANOU 2013).

16 Translated from French by the author of the present article.

17 The means of mediation can be very different, from an explicative footnote to the adaptation of the text.

in-between reality that exists through the gesture of comparison. As Michael Silk argues in an article on Aristophanes in translation:

Modern performance of Aristophanic drama seeks, should seek, to transpose a notional past to an immediate presence, and to conquer the cultural distance by whatever equivalence and transposition is judged necessary and appropriate [...]. In this transposing, one does not try and evade modern realms of reference: one explores them. What you don't know is assimilated to what you do know: *this* is like *that* [...] – like, but also, necessarily, unlike (because, if there is no unlikeness, you must have, not likeness, but identity). (SILK 2007: 291–2)

The connection established by this powerful *like* reconciles the two opposites of human existence, universality and topicality, by displacing the idea of the universal. Universality does not lie in the cultural elements themselves, which are always topical (*this* is not *that*), but in the possibility of their comparison, the idea of a possible cultural transfer, a universal *like* in human societies and their artistic productions. What Silk describes here can be applied to Richlin's translating gesture: when the giant Antaeus becomes the Hulk, the translator operates a cultural comparison that navigates between universality and topicality, between the Same and the Other. Two topical elements (a Greek mythological character and an American superhero from comic books) are linked by common denominators (two creatures with superpowers, known for their special strength, and made famous through popular stories).<sup>18</sup> Finding equivalences allows for a transposition of topicality.

### Defying comparison: untranslatable elements?

In translation, the transposition of *realia* rests upon the gesture of comparison. But what about topical elements so ingrained in a specific culture that equivalence seems problematic or unattainable? In the case of Roman comedy, a translator must indeed deal with a 'range of roles and institutions that defy transposition' as Richlin admitted herself, namely Greek and Roman *realia* that are largely irrelevant for our lives outside of a history class (RICHLIN 2005: 44). One of the most compelling examples would be the ancient slavery system, abundantly represented in Roman comedy when the main characters are slaves and constantly joke about fearing punishment such as battering and crucifixion. Slavery as a systematic socioeconomic tool protected by laws in ancient societies has no modern equivalent, especially since modern slave systems are enmeshed in racial considerations. In *Iran Man*, Amy Richlin can use *boss* to translate *dominus* or *erus* (slave master). In doing so, she transfers the reality of slavery into the field of employment, since 'boss' implies 'employee', i.e. a paid worker. One could find this choice of transposition questionable because at first, it does not seem to involve a similar social imagery at all. But in some dialogues when

18 1.4: *Antaeo* is translated as 'the Incredible Hulk'.

Plautine slaves speak of doing chores for someone or evoke their inferior social status, 'boss' becomes a functional equivalent. Even when the characters are joking about lethal punishment or torture, the modern substitute still works, even if it turns the linguistic meaning from denotation to connotation: in Plautus, the joke is literal (punishment of bad slaves is legal and socially acceptable); in the modern transposition, the joke works on a metaphorical level (a tongue-in-cheek meta-comment on the crushing system of capitalism).

Because of the gap of meaning, a translator must choose between two realms of reality, or sometimes alternate between the two, as Richlin does: either keep a foreign element (the ancient reality of slaves) or a modern equivalent (paid work). But what must be pointed out in that process is the importance of *contextual meaning*: in the context of a specific dialogue, 'boss' may work while 'slave master' may not. As Eco argued, translation does not operate among linguistic synonyms provided by bilingual dictionaries (ECO 2001: 9). Comparable elements need only work in a cultural and literary context. That is why comparison is not an abstract or universal operation, but a very practical gesture to overcome the putatively untranslatable. Every 'equivalence in meaning' (ECO 2001: 9) is necessarily an imperfect one, because it is always a contextual choice. To explain this, Eco forged the two notions of incommensurability versus comparability (ECO 2001: 12–3). Incommensurability in languages does exist, i.e. languages as systems can be incommensurable. But translation does not manifest a relation between two linguistic systems; it is a relation between two specific cultural productions. In this context, perfect untranslatability is virtually non-existent, as comparability belongs to all human experience. Hence the famous line from Terence: *Homo sum, et humani nihil a me alienum puto*.<sup>19</sup> If Richlin's practice can be theorised through the fruitful notion of comparison, one matter fundamental to translation studies remains: the ethics of faithfulness.

## 'Faithfulness to playfulness': Plautus and *ludic* theatre<sup>20</sup>

### The ethics of foreignization

In the Western tradition, the history of translation has mainly been theorised as a domesticating process, i.e. societies assimilating foreign texts into their own literary heritage. And this movement cannot be only viewed as a cultural process: it always manifests ideology. Behind the idea of literary adaptation lies an ideology of ethnocentrism in which cultural equivalents are to be used instead of foreign elements so as to negate the presence of the Other (the original text and its author). So with the rise of translation studies, domestication has been vividly criticized for its unethical implications.

19 'I am human, and I think nothing human is alien to me' (Ter. *Heaut.* 77).

20 'Faithfulness to playfulness' is an expression I borrowed from (HERSKOVITS, LANGWORTHY and SELLAR 2004).

Violent metaphors borrowed from the political reality of colonization are used to describe cultural adaptation: annexation, assimilation, naturalization. An unethical translation would completely naturalize the text for the target culture at the expense of its foreign quality. In that process, the operation of translation is negated, and the translator's name made invisible. On the contrary, an ethical translation would aim at foreignization by remaining faithful to the letter of the original text, and its foreign cultural implications.<sup>21</sup>

Condemning the systematic process of domestication for resting upon an underlying ideology of ethnocentrism was a necessary gesture that allowed translators to become more self-aware of their ethical duty towards the Other. But does it follow that foreignization should become the sole categorical imperative? The issue with defending a single principle in translation is that it cannot take into account the specificity of each text on one hand, the contextual needs of reception on the other. In the present case, namely Roman comedy, what is the translator's duty to display Plautine poetics? Two related dimensions are fundamental: humour and performance. In that perspective, Richlin's adaptation was a strategy to recover ancient theatrical effects when a literal translation might not have been able to do so. Indeed, when a play is translated, a translator has to be aware of the 'immediacy of the theatrical dialogue which, happening *hic et nunc* during the performance, must be immediately understood by the audience' (REGATTIN 2004: 160).<sup>22</sup> This notion of immediacy is essential both for drama and for humour: *the audience must get it* becomes the sole imperative of performing Roman comedy, a goal that always entails a level of adaptation. Jean-Michel Déprats, a famous French translator of Shakespeare, explained that even if a translation attempts to stay faithful to the original play, if a literal translation is not understood by an audience (whether due to lexical archaism or other arcane references) it is useless for public performance. Words that 'do not cause an immediate effect, that are indecipherable, are dead words in a theatre' (DÉPRATS 1993: 95). Adaptation is a legitimate strategy to overcome 'dead words' or, in Plautus' case, 'dead jokes'.

## Plautus and *ludus*

My initial reasoning was primarily dependent upon the modern context of reception: domesticating Plautus would be an accommodation for a general audience. Yet another argument will help us theorise Richlin's project in a different light, one taken from the ancient context. I will argue that *Iran Man*, instead of being disrespectful of the Plautine script, is very faithful to its fundamental core: *ludus*. Florence Dupont, a specialist of ancient drama who translated Plautus and Seneca, forged the term 'ludism' to define Roman comedy. *Palliata* is a translation of *Néa* (modern Greek comedy) into a new performative context, the Roman *ludi* (scenic games).

21 On this polarizing paradigm and the links between the history of translation and ideology, see (VENUTI 1995; BERMAN 1999).

22 Translated from French by the author of the present article.

The text of a Roman comedy is not, in the modern sense of the word, a translation of a Greek comedy, but the transfer of a performance from Greek theatres to Roman *ludi*. The goal of this transfer was not to give Roman spectators the equivalent of what Greek spectators could experience, but to create a new performance (*ludicrum*) in the context of scenic games.<sup>23</sup> (DUPONT 2007: 191)

This specific context of Roman comedy explains its tone, which Dupont defines as a 'refusal of seriousness'. In Plautine poetics, the goal is to perform trickery against one or several characters ('ludification').

It follows that, in the ludic paradigm, there cannot be any referential function: Plautine comedy is structurally ludic, or metatheatrical.<sup>24</sup> Plautus does not aim at creating a mimetic illusion of reality but rather a playful effect on reality. This means that the various realistic elements of his plays are not part of a cultural background that must be preserved at all costs: they function as metatheatric tools in the realisation of the comic performance. In other words, the 'topical' content of the play is subjected to the playful dimension. In this interpretation, adapting *realia* becomes rather than a consequence of a thoughtless domestication a Plautine strategy of recovery by means of the translation of topicality, or, simply, Plautine *ludus*. To quote a French specialist of Plautus, the 'rule of comedy is less to *faire vrai* (be realistic) than to *faire drôle* (be funny)' (TALADOIRE 1956: 160). If the language and references must be adapted to modern conventions, it is precisely for this purpose of entertainment which encompasses the poetics of Roman comedy that modern audiences can then enjoy.

## Plautus and translation

The fact that Roman comedies are translations of Greek comedies is not a cultural situation hidden by Plautus. On the contrary, the Latin playwright spends a great deal of his time exposing that transfer and playing with his Greek models, especially in the way he introduces his comedies in the prologues.<sup>25</sup> Rodrigo Tadeu Gonçalves theorises that with this 'translation game' on Plautus' part, the 'palimpsestic blending of the layers of texts [becomes] involved' (GONÇALVES 2015: 18). Roman comedies exhibit a Greek spatiotemporal frame. Greek characters are identified by their Hellenic-sounding names and sometimes their social status (*meretrix* is a Greek prostitute). A Greek play then, but in a Latin context, written in Latin for a Roman audience. This ludic situation of translation is exploited by Plautus, who exhibits this dual universe. That is why his comedies are filled with Greek words and cultural references, as well as bilingual puns

23 Translated from French by the author of the present article.

24 In Dupont's theory, ludism defines the specificity of Plautine metatheatre. See also (SLATER 1985: 169): 'The Plautine process of composition is the very paradigm of metatheatre: he imitates not life but a previous text. Plautine theatre, then, is not mimetic in nature but metatheatric.'

25 A programmatic declaration of translation is offered by Plautus in his prologues, which mention the Greek models and Latin titles. See (MCELDUFF 2013: 66–73; GONÇALVES 2015: 32–4).



involving both Latin and Greek. In that hybridizing process, the ludic atmosphere of Plautus becomes obvious. Indeed, when he describes Greek society through a Roman perspective (or the other way around), he does not valorise realism. What some critics have named 'hyper-Hellenization' is accomplished by exaggerating the Greekness of characters and situations. But this is not meant to be a precise historical or cultural representation: Plautus creates a 'utopic Greece' destined to make his spectators laugh at the expense of the Greeks or at themselves.<sup>26</sup> Richlin chose to attempt to reproduce this hyper-realistic phenomenon by transposing it to another bilingual context, one comparable in its geographical and cultural closeness: Americans and Mexicans. *Iran Man* is punctuated with Hispanic elements, as Plautus did with Greek language/culture, in order to achieve a similar kind of exotic and funny effect. Here are several examples taken from her text (see also the banquet *supra*).

**TOX.** *Basilice agito eleutheria.* (28)

**BOW.:** Right now I'm royally **loco**, just like **Cinco de Mayo**, dude.

**SAT.** *Pothen ornamenta?* (159)

**FAT JACK:** *De donde* costumes?

**SAG.** *Nunc ego huic graphice facetus  
fiam.* (306)

**EIN.:** And now I'm gonna look **mucho** cool for him.

**TOX.** *Euge, euge, exornatu's basilice.* (462)

**BOW.:** Royal disguise there, **hombre!**

## Conclusion: Plautus and ludic translation

Translating Roman comedy through anachronistic transposition seems to be a strategy doubly justified: in the frame of modern performance, the performative needs of comedy involve a certain level of adaptation to the target. But in the original context, this process also makes sense: Plautine comedy itself was a cultural translation of another drama relocated to a new context of performance. Moreover, in Plautus, cultural elements serve a ludic function exhibiting the hyper-realistic Greek/Roman society. Thus, reimagining Roman comedy today is neither unfaithful nor unethical: transposition appears to be a valuable strategy to recover Plautine poetics in a modern world. By challenging the reductive duality in translation studies (domestication vs foreignization), Richlin practices ludic translation just as Plautus did when he transferred Greek comedy to Roman *ludi*. Even though her approach does not appear at first glance 'scholarly', her creative work is the product of her scientific expertise on Roman comedy and its contexts. This type of hybrid project, bringing theory and practice closer together, has become a major critical tendency in recent Plautine studies, as shown, for example, by the Plautine conference referred to at

26 For instance, see Plautus' use of the derogatory Greek term *barbarus* ('uncivilised') to describe Roman or Italian customs: *poetae barbaro* (*Miles gloriosus* 211), *mores barbaros* (*Stichus* 193), *barbaricae urbes* (*Captivi* 884). On 'hyper-Hellenization', see (MOORE 1998: 50–66; DUPONT 2005: 203–6; FAURE-RIBREAU 2012: 160–2).

the beginning of this paper in which performances and workshops intertwined with academic papers.

One last issue deserves mention. Richlin's translations are not meant to last, as slang, referential jokes and catchphrases are de facto situated, generational and often promptly outdated. She shared this anecdote about publishing her work:

When I was pitching the translation to presses [...], one of the readers said of the slang I used, 'This stuff has the shelf-life of yogurt'. I replied that I thought the plays should be re-translated every five years. The press was not amused. But I think that now, in these days of open-access and online publication, it might be possible to set up a kind of morphing text.<sup>27</sup>

That publisher missed the point: the performance of popular comedy is ephemeral, and permanent re-translation is always necessary. That is why in her book and in her classes Richlin has urged directors and students to constantly readapt the text of her own translations according to new contexts of reception. Beyond stylistic considerations, the success of her approach reflects an open and cooperative method. The play becomes a work-in-progress, an editable script, a 'morphing text' never meant to reach a final form. Being open to endless translation in order to reunite the Ancients with the Moderns is a democratic and hybrid gesture such as of the type Hardwick (2008) theorised about regarding Greek drama revivals – and one that may also assure a comeback for the dramas of Plautus. This permanent reworking undermines the classical ideology of a 'text frozen in time' (RICHLIN 2005: 3), which in the case of Plautus would be a historical misinterpretation. As George Fredric Franko points out, 'Plautus's pervasive use of *hodie* ("right here, right now") proclaims and encapsulates an underlying spirit of transitory immediacy' (FRANKO 2014: 409). Roman comedy shines in the poetics of here and now.

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27 The author learned this in a personal conversation with Amy Richlin.

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