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THE ART OF SAFE SPEECH: SCHÜNZEL'S *AMPHITRUO*

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Abstract: Roman comedies do not usually contain political criticism, so it is perhaps surprising to find political satire in adaptations of Plautus' *Amphitruo*, a *tragicomedia*, which retells the story of Jupiter's seduction of Alcmena as her husband, Amphitryon. Reinhold Schünzel's 1935 film adaptation, *Amphitryon: Aus den Wolken kommt das Glück*, parodies the Nazi regime. It is possible that Nazi censors did not anticipate the use of Roman New Comedy for political subversion and thus allowed the cinematic version of Plautus' farce. An analysis of the visual style and dialogue in specific scenes of Schünzel's film demonstrates that Schünzel proved a worthy heir of ancient rhetorical strategies for safe criticism.

Introduction

Greek New Comedy and the Roman comedies derived from it are not generally considered to be vehicles for political satire. In late 5th century Athenian Old Comedy, one expects Aristophanes' devastating attacks on contemporary intellectuals, politicians, and institutions. But by the early 2nd century BC no definitive political references are to be found in the comedies of Plautus (cf. Harvey 1986). Rather, both Greek and Roman New Comedy eschews the political in favour of the domestic (Christenson 2000: 3, 6). So it is perhaps surprising to find political satire in a 1935 German film adaptation of Plautus' *Amphitruo*, Reinhold Schünzel's *Amphitryon: Aus den Wolken kommt das Glück* (*Happiness from the Clouds*).

Plautus' original version is a mythological burlesque that retells the story of Jupiter's seduction of Alcmena, Hercules' mother-to-be. In terms of genre and content, scholars consider this play to be an anomaly, a dramatic departure from the usual Plautine comedy (Stewart 2000: 293). This uniqueness, in fact, may explain Schünzel's choice of this play to safely criticize the Nazi regime using "figured speech", a term coined by

Frederick Ahl to describe how ancient rhetoricians advised that one could safely "achieve reproach without committing oneself to an outright statement of reproach" (Ahl 1984: 178).

Plautus' Original

First, as the god Mercury informs the audience in a lengthy prologue in Plautus' *Amphitruo*, the performance is not a straightforward comedy, but a *tragicomoedia*. This newly invented genre and term are unique to this play – not just in Plautus' *oeuvre*, but in all of classical literature (Stewart 1958: 348). The incorporation of tragic elements into a comedic setting opens up rhetorical possibilities in terms of arguments by analogy. Is the representation of Jupiter just a mythological farce, or is he an allegory for the womanizing tyrant who abuses his power? Second, the central theme of the play is adultery, and, according to Erich Segal, it is the only adultery ever successfully consummated on the Roman stage in all of Roman comedy (Segal 2001: 205). While Plautine husbands may dream of adultery, they never successfully carry it off.

And yet, despite the scandal, no one surpasses Alcmena in her exemplarity as a respectable Roman *matrona*. Scholars have remarked that Alcmena is a heroine of tragic stature, that she is a paragon of virtue much like Penelope, and that she brings a high seriousness to the comedic text (cf. Phillips 1985: 121, for a summary of such comments). The great irony of the play is that Jupiter can only seduce this loyal and faithful wife by appearing to her disguised as her own husband, Amphitryon. Jupiter recognizes that Alcmena is a *univira*, a one-man woman, and it is this singular virtue that he perversely turns to his own advantage. So, in fact, the real story of Plautus' drama appears to be one about the amorality of the powerful and their brutal exploitation of the innocent.

Finally, the *Amphitruo* is Plautus' most popular play. It appears to have never fallen out of popularity and has been re-adapted in every age (cf. Duckworth 1952: 397-433; Shero 1956; Romano 1974; Segal 2001: 206). With each adaptation it has acquired shades of meaning that were not present in the original. Just to name a few examples of the intertwining links of this play's adaptations in various times, places, and languages, Rotrou's *Les Sosies* (1638), a French verse translation of the Latin *Amphitruo*, no doubt influenced Molière's *Amphitryon* (1668), which in turn influenced Dryden's English (1690) and Heinrich von Kleist's German (1809) versions by the same title. Giraudoux's title for his version, *Amphitryon 38* (1929), playfully underestimates the number of interpretations of this play that preceded his own. Perhaps, then, it is not

too surprising that Reinhold Schünzel chose this play as a vehicle for social and political satire of Nazi-era Germany in the form of a musical comedy.

Reinhold Schünzel and Nazi-era Cinema

Reinhold Schünzel was a popular and successful actor and director at Universum Film AG, better known as Ufa, the principal film studio in Germany. However, because his mother was Jewish, in 1933 the Nazi regime racially classified Schünzel as half-Jewish (Schöning 2009: 73). In the same year, in a single day, Ufa terminated the contracts of twenty-seven of its Jewish staff members, thereby divesting itself of many of its best directors, actors, producers, composers, authors, and technical specialists (Kreimeier 1999: 209-11). Further personnel changes were imminent. Schünzel's racial classification meant that, despite his proven talent and excellent reputation, he needed a permit to continue his work in the film industry. This permit had to be renewed by the propaganda minister, Josef Goebbels, each time Schünzel began work on any new film (Schöning 2009: 73). The process of gaining approval for a film production itself was also rather cumbersome. The script had to be submitted to the censors before it could be approved by Ufa for production, and even after script approval the production could still be shut down. Despite, and perhaps because of, the many hoops through which writers, producers, and directors now had to jump, there were many loopholes in the system through which a clever artist might find a way to express satirical criticism.

According to Klaus Kreimeier, who wrote the definitive history of the German film company Ufa:

The far-flung net of political and ideological control in the Nazi state fostered the belief that film production was subject to a censorship system of implacable machine-like consistency. But the truth is that power on the defensive and without self-confidence developed an unwieldy system of discordant bureaucracies. From the point of view of the filmmakers, not everything was possible, but much was; and while what was possible was often risky, what was "impossible" was sometimes overlooked, silently tolerated, or even praised. (Kreimeier 1999: 231-32).

Cinematic art was required to conform to the political aesthetics of National Socialism and deemed appropriately "Aryanized" (Tegel 2008: 38-44).

Schünzel's *Amphitryon* and "figured speech"

Schünzel, perhaps the only Jewish director still working in Germany in 1934, wrote his own screenplay for the musical comedy *Amphitryon: Happiness from the Clouds*, based on the French playwright Molière's adaptation of Plautus' play, and Heinrich von Kleist's German adaptation of Molière's play. Like other top Ufa productions of the 1930s, *Amphitryon* was made simultaneously in French, and the French version premiered in Paris two months after the German version (Schöning 2009: 153-54). In the two different versions, Schünzel simultaneously pays tribute to Molière and the play that underscores the spirit of his own screenplay, and pays lip service to Kleist. (Although Kleist's work scarcely differs from Molière's, except that it was in German, the film scholar Karsten Witte has suggested that Kleist reintroduces the mingling of tragic and comedic present in Plautus's version, but removed in Molière's intermediate version. Witte sees tragic elements trivialized for comedic effect in Schünzel's film [Witte 1995: 92].) Kleist was one of the literary lights whose output fed the German nationalistic sentiment of the late 19th century, and the Nazi party capitalized on such nationalist fervour in Hitler's rise to power.

Molière had transformed Plautus' predictably slapstick comedy, rife with coarse pregnant lady jokes, ribald innuendo, and physical altercations into a sophisticated, courtly drama. In Molière's sensitive treatment, Alcmena is not pregnant, and Sosia, *Amphitryon*'s slave, becomes the beleaguered courtier of the royal court. Sosia's lines take on a certain poignancy in light of Schünzel's privileged but tenuous situation at Ufa:

The lot of underlings is far / More cruel when those we serve are great. / We lesser creatures are designed, they hold, / To serve their whims until we drop. / By day or night, in wind, hail, heat or cold, / They've but to speak and we must hop. / With them, long years of servitude / Will never stand us in good stead. / Their least caprice or change of mood / Brings down their wrath upon our head. / Yet foolishly we cling and cleave / To the empty honor of being at their side, / And strive to feel what other men believe, / That we are privileged and full of pride. / In vain our reason bids us quit our place; / In vain, resentment counsels us the same; / But when we stand before their face, / They cow us and deflect our aim. / And their least nod, or smile, or show of grace / Renders us dutiful and tame (Act 1, scene 1, Molière, *Amphitryon* [Wilbur 2010: 12]).

Indeed, Molière's 1668 production of the play was surrounded by scandal when some claimed that Molière was criticizing the affairs of Louis XIV (Molière 1950: x-xiv). Others (perhaps thereby demonstrating

the safety of Molière's criticism by its very ambiguity) deny that his *Amphitryon* was about the amours of Louis XIV and Mme. de Montespan (Forehand 1974: 206). The monarch attended a production of the play in the Tuileries, and Molière suffered no ill consequences (Molière 1950: viii). It is just possible that neither Louis XIV and his court nor, later, the Nazi censors anticipated the use of Roman New Comedy as a vehicle for political subversion, and thus allowed the Plautine comedy, considered innocuous, to be performed and enjoyed by the public.

The adaptation of an ancient drama for the cinema screen, the classicizing architectural set models, and the plot itself (cleaned up so that Jupiter never sleeps with the virtuous Alcmena, by a series of evasions somewhat reminiscent of those in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*) were deemed appropriate for Aryan art (Hobsch 2010: 134). Indeed, there are documentary photos of Goebbels and Hitler at Ufa studios in January of 1935, looking approvingly at the plaster of Paris set model for Schünzel's *Amphitryon*. To the casual observer, the film might appear to be a typical Nazi era film. And in fact, the American Jewish Congress and the Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League picketed the French version of *Amphitryon* at its 1937 premiere in New York City for having been financed by the Nazi government (Schöning 2009: 66; Hake 2001: 141).

There are, however, some traces in classical rhetorical treatises that point to just this kind of covert and therefore safe criticism being conveyed through drama, usually tragedy. According to the AD 1st century Roman rhetorician Quintilian, there are three situations which produce figured speech: (1) if it is not at all safe to speak forthrightly, i.e. survival is at issue; (2) if it is not in good taste to speak openly, e.g. owing to considerations of politeness and decency; and (3) when it is adopted only for pleasurable effect, and delights the audience by its novelty and variations more than direct expression would, i.e. it demonstrates the cleverness of the speaker (Quint., *Inst. Or.* 9.2.66).

Of the three situations necessitating figured speech, both the safety of the speaker and witty repartee were apropos of Schünzel's working conditions and his authorial intent. Schünzel's chosen vehicle for political and social satire, however, was musical comedy rather than tragedy. By adapting Plautus' *fabula palliata* (Roman comedy "in Greek dress") to the medium of cinema, the filmmaker, preserving his neutrality, could make the excuse that "film reality took shape in dimensions of time and space beyond the Third Reich" (Toeplitz 1987: 1209).

According to Kreimeier:

Some stubborn types consciously exploited their neutrality to test the options open to them and to stick a few needles into the despised regime if

they could. Reinhold Schünzel was good at this, and he let his delight in subversion shine through in the quid pro quo of the sexes in *Viktor und Viktoria*, in the radically feminist film, *The Girl Irene* (which Goebbels called a really terrible, forced, and disgusting thing), and, most of all, in *Amphitryon* (Kreimeier 1999: 284).

Among other ancient rhetoricians, Quintilian describes strategies that allow open statements against tyrants, provided such statements could also be understood another way:

You can speak well and make open statement against the tyrants we were discussing, provided the statement can be understood in another way. It is only danger you are trying to avoid, not giving offense. If you can slip by through ambiguity of expression, there's no one who won't enjoy your verbal burglary (Quint., *Inst. Or.* 9.2.67: transl., Ahl 1984: 193).

It was not the giving of offence as such but rather the danger of being detected that was to be avoided. If one could successfully conceal criticism of the powerful with ambiguity of expression, such a feat would bring all the more pleasure to the audience, who would delight at such cleverness.

If Schünzel succeeded in his use of safe criticism in his earlier films, including his *Amphitryon*, he went too far in his 1937 escapist operetta *Land der Liebe* (*Land of Love*). His biting satire in this film cost him Goebbel's favour and hastened his departure from Germany to the United States (Kreimeier 1999: 284-85).

Schünzel's *Amphitryon* and Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens*

In a diary entry dated Sept. 27, 1935, Thomas Mann records that he saw Reinhold Schünzel's *Amphitryon* and Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*) as a double feature in a theatre in Zurich, Switzerland (Hobsch 2010: 134). It is not unreasonable to imagine the two directors side by side in a double billing. However, Schünzel's film clearly parodies Riefenstahl's well-known documentary of the 1934 Nuremberg party rally. *Triumph of the Will* has become so iconic for its stock images of the Third Reich prior to the outbreak of war that clips from the film have been used as a sort of visual shorthand of Nazi Germany:

Such clips have become very familiar: a godlike Hitler descending from the clouds; adoring crowds of women, some in folk costume; children shyly gazing up at the Führer; Hitler's motorcade moving slowly through the Nuremberg streets lined with admirers; wave upon wave of uniformed

men goose-stepping to martial music; torchlit parades; low-angle shots of Hitler addressing his followers from the podium against the backdrop of a large swastika flag or the Prussian eagle (Tegel 2008: 75).

Schünzel's cinematic parody, following very close on the tails of Riefenstahl's production, contains nearly all of these elements, thus reinforcing the stereotype. However, his film contains a cast of differently named characters, dressed in a variety of elegant Greek costumes, and it is set in ancient Thebes and on Mt. Olympus rather than 1934 Nuremberg, Germany. Thus, Schünzel's film simultaneously employs the idiom of Nazi-style cinema, adopting its visual language while undermining the intense fervour of such propagandistic messages by consciously following the Plautine convention, i.e. distancing himself from the satire by setting the locale in a different time and place and clothing his 20th century characters in ancient Greek dress (the literal translation of *fabula palliata*).

The very title of Schünzel's film, *Amphitryon: Happiness Comes From the Clouds*, is a parody of the opening scene of Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, which rhapsodizes Hitler's arrival by plane in Nuremberg as practically the apotheosis of a semi-divine figure. In Schünzel's version, though, the effect of a god's descent to earth is highly comedic. Mercury wears roller skates to flit about Olympus, and his and Zeus' descent via umbrella through the clouds, ending with a bird's eye panorama of the city, shares common features with Riefenstahl's visual perspective.

However, Schünzel's choice of music and his lyrics make clear that any similarities are sarcastic. The music itself evokes a carnival atmosphere, if not a circus, and Jupiter sings of his eagerness for another adventure and an affair with a "sweet little woman." It is quite clear that farce is intended.

Already familiar, too, from a level of repetition approaching saturation in Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* are backdrops of classicizing architecture in which military parades take place, met by cheering crowds. All too familiar, as well, are those scenes in which Hitler or another of his henchmen delivers a speech to masses of troops or the population at large. These elements are parodied in Schünzel's film as well. The exuberantly cheering crowds of onlookers, particularly women, welcoming the victorious Theban troops returning home by sea can barely be held back by the police ordered to keep the crowd at bay. We hear from various sources that Hitler's own personal bodyguard – 200 men in all – were lent to Schünzel to play the Theban soldiers in his film.

In Schünzel's film, the return of the soldiers is welcome indeed, as, in the opening scenes of the film, there had been a near riot when a public assembly of Theban women had asked the corpulent and imperturbable

war minister about the welfare of their men. His replies are entirely unsatisfactory to them, and it is only the appearance of the heroic and virtuous figure of Alcmena that preserves the civic peace.

The end of her speech is most compelling, and it disperses the crowd. In its apparent sincerity and poignancy in this context, it is perhaps a satire of the attitude expected of the "patriotic" German warrior's wife. This, perhaps, is the only tragic element preserved in Schünzel's version of Plautus' self-described *tragicomoedia* (cf. Witte 1995: 91-93). Alcmena counsels her fellow countrywomen:

Be brave in hard times. Our men are fighting a bloody battle. And he who dies out there in battle, he dies for the fatherland as a hero. Be brave, stop complaining, we must be worthy of our husbands. They fight for us, for wife and child. Don't forget, we are Theban women.

According to a recent film historian, the censors removed several of Alcmena's lines at the very last moment (Schöning 2009: 74). In a scene from the film, an overly fat man in elaborate costume (clearly a parody of Hermann Göring), "the minister of war", delivers a tribute to the Theban heroes. Immediately after his speech Alcmena says, "in front of so many people you easily say things that afterwards you no longer believe yourself" (Schöning 2009: 74). And with this line she effectively undermines everything heroic and patriotic she had said to the assembly of Theban women earlier.

Goebbels allowed such a parody of Göring and his wife in this film perhaps because Göring was his rival. When Juno (played by the inimitable Adele Sandrock) tells Mercury that he may address her as "Highest Lady", the German audience caught the allusion to Hermann Göring's wife. The Luftwaffe commander had married his second wife, the screen star Emma Sonnemann, several months previously. Emmy Göring, as she came to be called, served as Hitler's hostess at many state functions, which led to her claim to be the "First Lady of the Third Reich". Also sharing this title, along with her role at many social functions, was Goebbels' own wife Magda (Sigmund 2000: 87). Needless to say, this created much animosity between herself and Hitler's mistress, Eva Braun, whom Magda Goebbels snubbed and openly despised. (Eva Braun, Hitler's mistress, because of the clandestine nature of their relationship, was "not called on for official receptions", and was not allowed out of her room when high-ranking visitors came to visit Hitler at Berghof [Sigmund 2000: 172].)

Goebbels himself may have been one of the targets of Schünzel's satire. The sexual adventures of the propaganda minister, despite his

marriage to Magda, were common knowledge, earning him the nickname "the goat of Babelsberg", making Goebbels "an almost tragicomic figure" (Kreimeier 1999: 245). It is possible (and even more remarkable and hilarious for its success) that Schünzel intended to satirize his immediate supervisor, Goebbels, and the minister's scandalous womanizing. The director's comedic and thoroughly irreverent treatment of Jupiter in the film is thus all the more amusing. And Magda, too, may have been recognizable as the jealous and domineering wife, Juno.

In a scene near the end of the film, Juno descends to earth to look for her wayward husband. She arrives at Alcmena's house, introduces herself, and announces her purpose. Alcmena denies that she has seen Jupiter and speaks glowingly of her own dear husband, Amphitryon. Juno quickly realizes that Alcmena is sweet and innocent, and the two women soon bond over matters of fashion. "Too bad we didn't get to know each other earlier," Juno tells Alcmena. She is also concerned about women's helplessness when faced with Jupiter's shape-shifting abilities: "Tell me, are you sure he hasn't been with you? Has some kind of animal been bothering you lately?"

As the two women chat, the real Amphitryon returns home, and Jupiter is discovered, recovering from a cold, in Amphitryon's bed. Jupiter reveals his duplicity, the mortal and immortal couples are reconciled (nothing untoward took place, after all), and the gods ascend to heaven on their divine umbrella. End of film.

Aftermath

What was the reception to the film? There had been some quarrels over its content from the start, and there had been reservations about the level of satire ("persiflage") in the script. Censorship continued throughout the film's production, with some cuts even occurring immediately before the film's release. Nevertheless, the film was a popular success, and Ufa continued to show it and present it as one of their model films through 1944. An entry in Goebbel's diaries indicates that he found the film silly or kitschy and that he was disappointed in his hopes that it could be an entry in the major international film festival, the Biennale (Hermann 2005: 13 Juli 1935).

The popular success of the film did not assure Schünzel's position. Goebbels, the propaganda minister, decreed in December of 1935 that Schünzel could be active in one more German film. In 1937 Schünzel's film *Land der Liebe* (*Land of Love*), a biting satire of Nazism in the innocuous guise of a fluffy operetta, made any future work in Germany

impossible for him. Goebbels turned completely against Schünzel. Goebbels' anger and thoughts of his impending wrath appear over several days in his diary entries (Fröhlich 2000: 29. April 1937; 30. April 1937; and 4. Mai 1937). Schünzel left the country even before *Land der Liebe* opened, after heavy censoring, and Goebbels directed the press to be silent about his emigration. Schünzel went to Hollywood, where he directed a few minor films and, like other expatriate German actors, sometimes had to play Nazis. Notably, in Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946), Schünzel plays the scientist Dr. Anderson, head of a group of surviving Nazis in Argentina, still conspiring against the Allies. Schünzel returned to Germany in 1949 to continue his work in Munich, where he passed away in 1954.

In its original form in the 2nd century BC, Plautus' *Amphitruo* was innocent of political satire. However, its unique *tragicomic* genre and mythological setting, distancing its content from contemporary viewers, made the play and its adaptations particularly suited for circumstances in which figured speech was not only necessary but also entertaining. Schünzel's adaptation of this play as cinematic musical comedy in Nazi Germany, though censored, yet succeeds in its criticism of the powerful. However, such artful subtlety may be lost on a casual observer.

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