

## How Rich was Terence?

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The *Eunuchus*, Terence's greatest popular and financial success, was produced at the *ludi Megalenses* of 161 B.C., a year before his brief theatrical career came to its sudden end. Two quite extraordinary features mark this unprecedented success: the performance was repeated twice on the same day, a previously unheard of procedure, and it drew the largest payment ever paid for a comedy till that day, so large in fact that to commemorate it the sum was inscribed on the roll's *titulus*<sup>1</sup>: *Eunuchus equidem bis die acta est meruitque pretium, quantum nulla antea cuiusquam comoedia, id est octo milia nummorum. propterea summa quoque titulo ascribitur.* (Suet. *Vita Terenti* 3).

It was apparently this success which prompted the aediles curules, L. Valerius Merula and L. Postumius Albinus, to present at the *ludi Romani* (the other *ludi* for which they were responsible) of the same year another Terentian comedy, the *Phormio*.<sup>2</sup> When Scipio Aemilianus and Q. Fabius Maximus, the

- 1 Not the 'title page of the manuscript', as W. Beare, *The Roman Stage*<sup>3</sup> (London 1968) 165, describes it, but a label of papyrus, which projected from the roll, and on which the title of the book was inscribed.
- 2 Both aediles came from prominent patrician families. The Postumii had 9 consuls between the years 232–133 B.C., whereas the Cornelii had 23, cf. H.H. Scullard, *Roman Politics 220–150 B.C.* (Oxford 1951) 11; L. Cornelius Merula (271) is the only one of the aediles responsible for the staging of Terence's comedies in the years 168–160 B.C. whose political career has no documented continuation (perhaps he died young). All the other aediles succeeded to attain the consulship. It has not been previously noticed that the aedil L. Postumius Albinus (*RE* 42) could have been influenced in his choice of plays by his close relative, the philhellene historian and writer Postumius Albinus (con. 151 B.C.).

organizers of Aemilius Paullus' grandiose funeral games, included two Terentian comedies, the *Adelphoe* and the *Hecyra*, in the program of the *ludi funebres* which took place in the following year (160 B.C.), and on which they lavished no less than thirty talents (Polyb. 31, 28, 3–6), it seems clear that they chose the best and the most popular playwright available at that time, and probably also the most expensive.

How much money did the *Eunuchus* actually fetch? Or, to phrase the question differently, what was the value in Terence's times of *octo milia nummorum*? Donatus in his comment, which clearly rests on Suetonius' words and no more than expands them, instead of *nummi* uses the word *sesterces*: *pretium... octo milibus sestertium numerarent poetae* (*Eun. praef.* 6). Modern commentators follow Donatus as a matter of course.<sup>3</sup>

In Donatus' times, the *sestertius* was the standard reckoning unit, and, therefore, it is quite understandable that he unwittingly substituted it for the word *nummi*, which has the general meaning of 'coin', 'piece', 'money'. However, the same was true for Suetonius' times. Therefore, the fact that in Suetonius' text appear not the *sesterces* of his own day but the archaic *nummi* strongly indicates that Suetonius actually copied the words *octo milia nummorum* from a *titulus* attached to a scroll which he saw in a library. This manuscript of the *Eunuchus*, which Suetonius saw, if not the original ancient actors' script, was at least an early copy which preserved the original term *nummi* of 161 B.C.

In 161 B.C. *nummus* meant "not 'coin' simply, but the standard silver coin — the *denarius*."<sup>4</sup> This silver *denarius* (X piece), whose date of introduction is not yet absolutely determined, was until its retariffing in the Gracchan period equivalent to 10 *asses*, and in Terence's times reckoned as the equivalent of the Athenian drachma (cf. Ter. *Ht.* 601–606). Its fractions, the *quinarius* and

- 3 G.E. Duckworth, *The Nature of Roman Comedy* (Princeton 1952) 66; A. Rostagni, *Suetonius De Poetis* (Torino 1944) 34.
- 4 H. Mattingly, *Roman Coins* (London 1967) 17. Mattingly dates the introduction of the *denarius* to 187 B.C., R. Thomsen, *Early Roman Coinage* (Copenhagen 1957–1961) to 213–211 B.C.; H. Zehnacker, "Les 'nummi novi' de la 'Casina'," in *Mélanges offerts à Jacques Heurgon* (Rome 1976), considers Mattingly's chronology dated and accepts that of Thomsen; and cf., most recently, M. Crawford, *Coinage and Money under the Roman Republic* (London 1985) 62: "The year 211 stands out as the beginning of a period in which the production of the new *denarius* coinage was eminently possible."

the *sestertius*, had a very limited circulation and soon ceased to be issued (probably by 209 B.C.).<sup>5</sup> The unit of reckoning, which appears also in the official text, continued to be the *as*.<sup>6</sup> Only after the retariffing of the *denarius* to 16 *asses* in the Gracchan period, the *sestertius* became the prevalent unit of reckoning. Thus, it may be concluded that the word *nummi* written on the *Eunuchus' titulus* must mean the standard silver coins of Terence's days, i.e. the *denarii*, and that the price fetched by the *Eunuchus* was 8,000 *denarii* (=32,000 *sesterces*),<sup>7</sup> probably paid in *asses*. For the sake of comparison: according to Polybius (6.39.12), an *equus* received a *denarius* a day, a centurion 2 *denarii* every three days, and a legionary a *denarius* every three days. From this pay a sum of money to cover food and equipment was deducted.<sup>8</sup>

Was it really, at that time, such an extraordinarily huge amount of money? Luckily we are in possession of an excellent measuring rod for the assessing of its buying power. It has not been previously noticed that the *Eunuchus* was presented on the same *ludi Megalenses* in regard of which the consul C. Fannius Strabo, immediately upon entering office,<sup>9</sup> sponsored a resolution of the senate aimed at limiting the sums of money which the *principes civitatis* could spend on dinner parties, a resolution later followed by the famous *lex Fannia sumptuaria*.<sup>10</sup> The leading and rich citizens used to entertain each other

5 Cf. Crawford (n. 4 above) 72.

6 H. Zehnacker, "La numismatique de la république romaine," *ANRW* I, 1 (1972) 286–287. Zehnacker sees in the final victory of the *sestertius* as the unit of reckoning a victory of the progressive forces (i.e. hellenized financiers) over the conservative. But cf. now Crawford (note 4, above) 147–148: "The shift to reckoning in sestertii was no doubt undertaken immediately after the retariffing of the *denarius*, perhaps to disguise the fact that the *as*, the previous unit of reckoning, had in effect been devalued from a tenth to a sixteenth of a *denarius*."

7 And not 2,000 *denarii*=8,000 *sesterces*, as T. Frank, *An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome* (Paterson, New Jersey 1959) I, 200 would have it.

8 Cf. Walbank *ad loc.*; for the pay of the Roman soldiers cf. also Crawford (note 4, above) 146ff.

9 In 161 B.C. the consuls still entered office on the Ides of March, less than three weeks before the *ludi Megalenses*. Therefore, there was no time to pass a law which would regulate these *ludi*. This must have been the reason for the using of a *senatus consultum* for this purpose. The *lex Fannia sumptuaria* was passed later in the same year. The dinner parties were given on April 4, the first day of the *ludi*.

10 Cf. Lucil. 1172M; Gell. 2, 24, 2–6; 20, 1, 23; Plin. *NH* 10, 39; Macr. *Sat.* 3, 13, 13; 16, 4 and 17, 3–5; Athen. 6, 108, 274c. Cf. G. Rotondi, *Leges publicae populi Romani* (Milano 1912) 287–288.

at the *ludi Megalenses* on a basis of rotation (*principes civitatis, qui ludis Megalensibus antiquo ritu 'mutitarent', id est mutua inter sese dominia agitar-ent*, Gell. 2, 24, 2), and of course they wished to outdo each other in splendor and luxury. The resolution limited the sum to be spent on each dinner to 120 *asses*, not counting vegetables, bread and wine (*centenos vicenosque aeris praeter olus et far et vinum*, *ibid.*). Hence, the total amount one could lavish on such a festive meal with several guests (most probably nine guests), was somewhat greater. From the *lex Fannia sumptuaria* subsequently passed it may be deduced that the *ludi Megalenses* were considered more important than the *ludi Romani*, *ludi plebeii* or the *Saturnalia*, for the amount one was allowed to spend on such festivals was limited to 100 *asses* a day all included. On ten other days of each month one was permitted to spend 30 *asses*, and 10 *asses* on all other days (Gell. 2, 24, 3). These are maximal sums aimed at curbing the spending of the richest. The not so affluent apparently could make do with much less.

If the entire sum inscribed on the *titulus* of the *Eunuchus* reached Terence's hands (such at least seems to be Donatus' view: *pretium...numerarent poetae, Eun. praef. 6*),<sup>11</sup> and if Terence, who was not one of the *principes civitatis* and therefore not obliged to offer grandiose dinners, merely wished to live well, according to the *lex Fannia* he could very well have done so spending 10 *asses* daily (the sum permitted to be spent on non-festive days). Thus, the sum received for the *Eunuchus* alone could provide for more than 20 years of good life. But, since a man does not live on bread alone, other expenses, such as clothing, housing, slave-labour etc., should also be taken into account. Cato said that he never wore clothes worth more than 100 *denarii*, and never paid more than 1500 *denarii* for a slave (Plut. *Cato* 4,4). Cato was frugal. There were of course luxury dresses (esp. women's dresses and ornaments), and delicate slaves of pleasure much more expensive (cf. Liv. 39, 44, 1–3); still the *Eunuchus* was not Terence's only source of income in the last two years of his life. It was followed by the *Phormio*, the *Adelphoe* and two performances of the *Hecyra*. He did not live to enjoy all of it. He left Rome, and apparently died in 159 B.C.. It should, therefore, come to us as no surprise that he left

11 The exact payment arrangements are not clear, but since the aediles bought productions and not manuscripts, perhaps Terence had to share the payment with his actor-producer, Ambivius Turpio, and his company (*grex*).

*hortuli* of 20 iugera on the via Appia near the temple of Mars, not far away from the sepulchral monument of the Scipiones, and a daughter who later married a Roman knight (Suet. *Vita Terenti* 6).<sup>12</sup>

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- 12 Rostagni (note 3, above) 41: 'L'aver sposato un *equus Romanus* mostra in quale condizione e considerazione essa fosse.' The temple of Mars was situated between the first and second milestone outside the *porta Capena* (Dessau 7213: *ad Martis intra milliarium I et II ab urbe euntibus parte laeva*), the sepulchral monument of the Scipiones was outside the *porta Capena* (Liv. 38, 56, 4) within the first mile (Val. Max. 8, 14, 1: *Ennius poeta... sepultusque in Scipionis monumento via Appia intra primum ab urbe lapidem*); cf. I. Shatzman, *Senatorial Wealth and Roman Politics* (Bruxelles 1975) 246: 'The Scipiones had an estate near Rome, outside the Porta Capena, where their famous sepulchral monument is found.' Suetonius himself already criticized Licinius Porcus' tendentious description of Terence's alleged poverty (*Vita Terenti* 6). The diminutive *hortuli* should not be understood as indicating the gardens' size, cf. Cic. *De off.* 3, 14, 58 and Rostagni *ad loc.*, but cf. P. Grimal, *Les jardins Romains*<sup>3</sup> (Fayard 1984) 58.