CHAPTER 8

Ornatu prologi: Terence’s Prologues on the Stage/on the Page

Gianni Guastella*

Foreword

Orator ad vos venio ornatu prologi:
sinite exorator sim eodem ut iure uti senem
liceat quo iure sum usus adulescencior,
novas qui exactas feci ut inveterascerent,
ne cum poeta scriptura evanesceret. (Ter. Hec. 9–13)

I come to you as an advocate in the guise of a prologue. Allow me to succeed in my advocacy; let me enjoy as an old man the same privilege as I did in my younger days, when I ensured that new plays which had been driven off the stage became established and that the scripts did not vanish from sight along with the playwrights (trans. J. Barsby).

In the opening lines of the second prologue to Hecyra, Ambivius Turpio described himself as an orator “dressed up as a prologue,” asking for the audience’s attention before introducing a comedy which had met no success in the past. Understanding the exact nature of Turpio’s ornatus prologi would be interesting, but we will never know what costume was actually worn by the actor delivering those lines on a Roman stage. In ancient sources there is no mention of the subject. Only much later, in the ninth century, a few miniatures first display the image of the Prologus as a character.¹ These pictures had a limited but influential circulation, appearing first in a few major illustrated manuscripts of the Carolingian period, then re-emerging in the first printed

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¹ In this discussion, the italicised Latin form Prologus will be used to denote this specific character when he appears in Terence’s plays, while ‘prologue’ refers to other uses, including the actual text.
editions of Terentian comedies. On the strength of the evidence we can derive from the manuscript tradition, I would like to present an outline of the character to whom Terence entrusted his defence in front of the Roman audience. I would also like to briefly describe the development of the function attributed to the prologue during the early stages of the ‘revival’ of modern theatre.

Functions of the Prologue

At the opening of a ceremony or of a performance, there always comes a point when the audience is invited to adopt an attitude suitable to the kind of interaction about to be initiated. Managing this transitional moment can be problematic. The main issue is attracting the attention of the audience. How is this task to be carried out? There are several alternatives: a master of ceremonies, an announcement and a request for silence, the dimming of the lights, and so on.

In a play, prologues are located in the liminal stage of the performance, when the beginning of the show must be ‘unravelled’. At this precise point, in fact, one or several actors directly interact with the audience, either by giving information about the play or by introducing particular issues the author wishes to submit to his audience’s judgement. One of the most effective descriptions of the functions gathered in this liminal stage of the performance can be found in the famous prologue written by Ruggero Leoncavallo for his opera Pagliacci (1892).

PROLOGO

Tonio, in costume da Taddeo come nella commedia, passando attraverso al telone
Si può? ... (poi salutando) Signore! Signori! ... Scusatemi se solo mi presento.—Io sono il Prologo.
Poiché in iscena ancor le antiche maschere mette l’autore, in parte ei vuol riprendere le vecchie usanze, e a voi di nuovo inviami.
Ma non per dirvi come pria: “Le lagrime che noi versiam son false! Degli spasimi

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2 For a full survey of all known illustrated manuscripts of Terence, see the contribution of Radden Keefe in this volume.
3 I quote from Leoncavallo 1893 7–8.