Publius Terentius Afer, or Terence, wrote six comedies in Latin over the period 170–160 BCE, which were praised subsequently for their purity of language, and became a standard part of the Latin educational curriculum. The period in which they were written, when Rome was establishing itself as the Mediterranean superpower, was one of rapid political expansion. This period was also one when Roman literary culture was still experimenting with form and language, and in particular was in awe of the all-pervasive Hellenistic literature of the period. In the later Roman Empire, however, Terence’s plays gradually became more and more obscure to students, particularly in terms of their archaic linguistic forms and the occasional contemporary references. This study looks at their reception in the early Middle Ages, above all in the Carolingian period (c. 800–900 CE), when the plays still formed part of the essential curriculum in Christian monasteries, and long-forgotten scholars struggled to elucidate them for contemporary audiences using their vague cultural memories of the Roman past.

Our surviving manuscripts only represent a fraction of those copied and studied in the monastery scriptoria. These were sometimes originally deluxe books, but over time scholars added their own commentary notes (scholia), between the lines or in the margins, and these comments built up a complex web of text, often quite difficult to read. The primary aim of scholia is to elucidate obscure meanings or references to a contemporary audience, and in this sense they are always susceptible to change and revision. Nevertheless, interpretations usually also have a source, and works from the end of antiquity (a period of highly accurate literary scholarship) were sometimes excerpted for these notes. The late-antique grammarian Aelius Donatus wrote a comprehensive commentary on Terence’s plays some time around 350 CE, and large fragments of this were
preserved in a few manuscripts as marginal notes. Donatus’ notes are often highly illuminating, and contain much information which otherwise would be lost, but because they come from notes assembled from marginal comments, they contain frequent and confusing repetitions, while the notes for one whole play are completely lost.

Under the period of intense intellectual activity sponsored by Charlemagne (reigned 768–814 CE) and his immediate descendants, classical manuscripts began to be imported into Northern France from Italy and were copied in monastery scriptoria for study. Terence was a key author in this revival, and his works now needed to be glossed for students, who could see the Roman past all about them as ruins, but who were severed from the ancient traditions by centuries of barbarian invasions and social anarchy. As it happens, Donatus’ work appears not to have been widely known, and so other families of glosses began to be written to fill the vacuum. Two or three separate traditions seem to have been compiled at this stage, and this paper will look at the most pervasive of them, the so-called Commentum Brunianum.\(^1\) The Commentum Brunianum is named after Paul Bruns, who in 1811 published an edition of these comments based on a single eleventh-century manuscript from Halle in Germany; the manuscript was by no means the earliest or most complete of this family of glosses, but the mass of material from this tradition is so complex and requires study of so many manuscripts, that no one has yet produced an edition to supersede Bruns.\(^2\)

Rainer Jakobi, in a recent study of this commentary, dated it to the first half of the ninth-century CE, and argued that the work was an attempt to provide an

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\(^2\) Paulus Bruns, ed., P. Terentii Afri comoediae sex, 2 vols. (Halle, 1811). A discussion of the manuscript tradition and edition of the prefatory material to this commentary can be found in Yves-François Riou, ‘Essai sur la tradition manuscrite du Commentum Brunianum des comédies de Térence’, Revue d’histoire des textes 3 (1973), 79–113. For general discussion of the version of these scholia found in the twelfth-century CE English manuscript Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. F. 2. 13 (known in critical discussions by the siglum O), see now the digital edition of this manuscript in Bernard J. Muir and Andrew J. Turner eds., Terence’s Comedies (Oxford: Bodleian Digital Texts 2, 2011). All citations of the Commentum Brunianum in this essay are taken from this edition.
introduction to Terence’s text for Latin learners, but was severely handicapped by its anonymous compiler’s lack of access to relevant exegetical materials. The compiler did have access to some standard early mediaeval reference works, such as the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville, to various grammatical studies, and also to a series of commentary notes on Horace, which may have served as his model. However, the compiler did not have accurate information on the text of Terence itself. Rather than look any further than his immediate sources, he appears to have invented explanations of particular points, using as a rough model either the Horace commentary or else standard exegetical works on the Bible. In the scathing opinion of E.K. Rand, an early twentieth-century scholar who underestimated the range of sources used by the commentator:

> [f]rom this work [Horace’s *Ars poetica*], from Priscian and Orosius, from the text of Terence itself, and, I am confident, from absolutely no other source save his own perverse imagination, the author constructed an account of Terence and his comedies the like of which had never appeared before.

Granted that, from the perspective of nineteenth- to twenty-first-century classical scholarship, the *Commentum Brunssianum* does contain wildly inaccurate statements, how then did it come to be so popular and have such a long shelf-life? Before turning to its specific errors, I would like first to discuss its contents in general. To begin, the commentary notes can be divided into those dealing with the plays themselves, and those dealing with prefatory materials. The plays of Terence, which are strongly indebted to the Greek New Comedy (although by no means direct translations of these plays), deal with the domestic life of upper classes in a fictional Athenian world. Their plots are repetitive. They often incorporate stock elements such as a complex deceit managed by a slave, a mistaken identity and last-minute revelation, or the reconciliation of young lovers. The pool of character types and names is also very limited and capable of being easily confused; thus the name Chremes is found in four plays, in three for an old man, but in *Eunuchus* for an adolescent. Many of the notes in the *Commentum Brunssianum* are in fact simple plot summaries at the start of new scenes, perhaps aimed at refreshing the reader’s memory of where the action stands. These *scholia* are referred across to a particular part of the main text.

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5 It was still being incorporated in fifteenth-century manuscripts of Terence, such as Vatican, BAV, Barb. Lat. 82, copied in Northern Italy some time around 1440.
by *lemmata*, or short citations of a few words of the text at the outset of a note. Thus the scholion for *Andria* 2.2 reads as follows:

*Gods! What good news I bring!* Davus, hearing from the father that he wanted to give Philumena to Pamphilus in marriage, said to himself, ‘I shall go and tell this to Pamphilus so that he is not suddenly deceived by his father.’ And so he was saying these things to himself while he was going along and looking for Pamphilus. But Pamphilus had already been told this by someone else.

Far more interesting for the purpose of this discussion are the commentary notes on the prefatory materials. Terence himself wrote prologues to each of the plays, which discuss the Greek sources he used, the critical reception they received from his literary enemies, and on one occasion, the circumstances of the (disastrous) première production—typically, Roman comedies were premièred at public games, and were paid for by the aristocratic sponsors of these events. Terence’s prologues differ markedly from the prologues by Greek playwrights of New Comedy, and usually from those of Plautus, which generally function to provide background to the action of the play itself. In Terence’s prologues a figure such as the goddess Chance steps forward, and briefly sets out the complex background to the action for the benefit of the audience.

In addition to these prologues, each play of Terence is preceded by a *didascalia*, or production notice; these were probably not written by Terence, but contain such accurate information that it is generally agreed they were compiled soon after the plays were premièred. These *didascaliae* record the year of the first production (using the Roman system of dating by consuls), the public games at which it was produced, the aediles for that year, the producers, the slave who played the music, and the author of the Greek original. The *didascalia* for *Eunuchus* thus reads as follows:

Here begins the Eunuch of Terence, acted at the Ludi Megalenses in the curule aedileship of L. Postumius Albinus and L. Cornelius Merula. The producers were L. Ambivius Turpio and L. Atilius of Praeneste. Music composed by Flaccus, slave of Claudius, for two right-hand pipes. Greek original by Menander. The author’s second play, in the consulship of M. Valerius and C. Fannius.

As noted, the *Commentum Brunsianum* appears to have been influenced by

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a series of commentary notes on the poems of Horace, and in general follows
the principle of explaining all proper names encountered in the text. Its other
sources, as far as we can identify them, appear to be a miscellaneous collec-
tion of grammatical works.8 As these sources comment on such things as rare
linguistic forms, many of these explanations were bound to be wrong, particu-
larly those in the prefatory materials where names abound.9 For instance, in
the commentary on the didascalia to the Eunuchus, cited above, the scholiast
attempted to explain the Ludi Megalenses, or Megalensian games, at which
the Eunuchus was premièred. These games were held in Rome each year from
4–10 April, and were established in 204 BCE in honour of Cybele; they received
their name from the Greek word megalê, ‘great’, since Cybele was known in
Latin as Magna Mater or the ‘Great Mother’. The author of the Commentum
Brunsianum clearly did not know this, but he did know of a city in Southern
Greece called Megale where there was a famous temple of Zeus. Perhaps
thrown also by the statement in the didascalia that the play is based on a Greek
original by Menander, he explained:

[f]or when games were being held in Megale, a city of Greece, in honour of
Olympian Jupiter, and those men were the curule aediles among the Romans,
the Greek play of Menander was recited at Megale.

The scholiast makes an absurd error when trying to explain the statement
‘[m]usic composed by Flaccus, slave of Claudius, for two right-hand pipes’ in
the didascalia to the Eunuchus. The Latin text reads here modulauit Flaccus
Claudi tibiis duabus; Flaccus Claudi means literally ‘Flaccus of Claudius’, the
conventional early Latin way of expressing slave ownership, and the form
Claudi is a syncopated form of the genitive, common enough before the time
of Augustus, but used far more seldom in the late Classical period. Confronted
with these unusual forms, the scholiast assumed incorrectly that the form claudi
had something to do with the Latin word claudus, or ‘lame’, and noted:

[c]laudum is a type of double-flute made from pipes of unequal length, and
it is called claudum because it has one pipe shorter than the other just like
a lame man.

The scholiast was certainly unaware of other intricacies of Roman society,
including nomenclature; thus in the scholia to the didascalia of the Hecyra

8 The work of the fifth-century CE Christian historian Orosius was used by the
compiler in his life of Terence, which precedes most copies of the Commentum
Brunsianum, for an apocryphal story about Terence’s manumission by Scipio
Africanus, but does not appear to be used elsewhere in the work.

9 A more detailed discussion of these can be found in section 6.3 of the critical
introduction to Muir and Turner, Terence’s Comedies (n. 2 above).
he confuses a curule aedile named Sextus Iulius Caesar with the much more famous and distantly related dictator Gaius Iulius Caesar (born sixty-five years after the first performance of this play). Other errors can be readily explained by ignorance of Greek, which was an essential component of the intellectual background of Terence’s world, but which was very poorly known in Western Europe at this stage.10 The title Hecyra means simply ‘Mother-in-Law’, but the scholiast notes here: ‘Hecyra is named after a place not far from Athens’, perhaps confusing this with the Athenian deme Ikaria, or else the island of the same name in the Eastern Aegean. In the prologue to the Adelphoe, Terence had given his Greek source for one scene in this play, stating Synapothescontes Diphili comoediast, or ‘Synapothescontes is a comedy of Diphilos’, Diphilos being a Greek comic playwright of the fourth century BCE. Totally unfamiliar with Greek participles like Synapothescontes (which means ‘those who die together’), the author of the Commentum Brunsianum split this word in two, and created the name ‘Contes Difilus’, stating ‘Comptes Difilus, the Greek comic poet, composed a play which he called Synapotnes’.

A few errors seem to give insight into the author’s personal attitudes, and indeed contemporary values. In the play Eunuchus one of the chief characters is Thais, a prostitute, although the now archaic English term ‘courtesan’ would better describe her social position. In classical Greek society there would be an expectation that such a woman would not simply be a submissive sexual partner, but would be a trained musician and could engage her male customers as an equal in witty and educated conversation. In one scene of this play (4.6) Thais is approached by the drunken young man Chremes, and she encourages him to stand up manfully against the soldier Thraso, who is approaching her house with a gang of retainers in an attempt to snatch back a girl whom Chremes loves. The scholiast, however, reverses the situation, making Thais drunk, and intending to challenge the soldier herself:

[the prostitute] began speaking recklessly (as you might expect when drunk) with the young man Chremes, and prepared herself to stand up manfully to Thraso.

The attribution of these actions to Thais may point simply to a hasty reading of the text, but it may also show an incomprehension that a woman such as Thais could take a decisive role in the action, and an association of drunkenness with her other vices.

Despite clear contradictions with the Latin text, the *Commentum Brunsianum* came to dominate mediaeval criticism of Terence;¹¹ at best, notes were added to it giving alternative explanations from other sources.¹² To an extent, once a text like this began to dominate the critical discourse it gained its own auctoritas (‘authority’) which made it difficult (if not impossible) to dislodge. Mediaeval copyists were trained to replicate exactly what was in front of them, and seldom exercised any critical judgement. We should look, therefore, at the period in which the work was first composed, in order to see how the work was associated with the prestigious manuscripts of the period, which then resulted in it being copied so widely.

The *Commentum Brunsianum* appears to have been composed before 850⁵, when it was cited by the scholar Sedulius Scottus, although the first surviving manuscripts date from a century or so later.¹³ Significantly, it was also somehow associated closely with a small group of lavishly designed and illustrated manuscripts of the plays of Terence which preserved images of performing characters at the start of each scene. These manuscripts were copied between 820⁵ and 900⁵ either for members of the Carolingian court or else in monasteries which were the direct beneficiaries of royal patronage, such as Reims. The two most important manuscripts belonging to this group are denoted C and P; C (Vatican City, BAV lat. 3868), the earliest and most sumptuous, appears to have been written for someone in the court of Louis the Pious in Lotharingia (the border area of France and Germany), while P (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 7899) was written some time between 850⁵ and 880⁵ in Reims.¹⁴

There are some clear links between the illustrated editions and the *Commentum Brunsianum*. Jakobi notes how, in the general discussion of Terence’s plays which precedes the *Andria*, the scholiast refers to the way in which the

¹¹ Riou, ‘Les commentaires médiévaux’ (n. 1 above), 36, noted its presence in four manuscripts of the tenth-century⁵, two from the beginning of the eleventh-century⁵, and in seventy other manuscripts of Terence.

¹² Thus in O, in addition to the statement that Hecyra is the name of a location not far from Athens, the scribe (or the scribe of his exemplar) added the correct explanation: ‘It may also be named after the word ‘mother-in-law’, for hecyra in Greek is ‘mother-in-law’ in Latin’.

¹³ Jakobi, ‘Das Commentum’ (n. 3 above), 37.

¹⁴ For the date and provenance of C, see Bernhard Bischoff, *Mittelältliche Studien* 3 vols. (Stuttgart; A. Hiersemann, 1966–81), 3:181. For both manuscripts, see also section 8 of the critical introduction to Muir and Turner, *Terence’s Comedies* (n. 2 above), as well as David H. Wright, *The Lost Late Antique Illustrated Terence* (Vatican City, 2006).
'Terentian portraits [i.e. portraits of the characters in manuscripts of Terence] are drawn with swollen and inflated cheeks', a clear allusion to the comic masks these characters always wore. Furthermore, in the opening scholion to Andria 1.1 in the Commentum Brunsianum, the author describes the picture, stating: 'because Simo was pretending he wished to celebrate a wedding, his slaves and servants gathered together food and drink for him, whatever they each could: some of them fish, some of them birds, some of them wine, some of them milk, and all other such things.

This remark is particularly telling, since in the text of Terence there is no reference at all to what the slaves are carrying into the house for the wedding feast, or indeed how many of them there are; all Simo says to them is: ‘[y]ou [men] take those things inside’, and we hear nothing about the slaves again. But in the illustrated manuscripts the slaves are clearly shown carrying these items inside: birds, fish, and vessels of liquid. As a final point, in the earliest versions of this commentary there are no notes for either Andria 5.1 or 5.2, and both of these scenes are also missing in the illustrated manuscripts.

In her keynote address for the conference Text, Illustration, Revival: Ancient drama from late antiquity to 1550, at the University of Melbourne in July 2011, Dorota Dutsch of the University of California, Santa Barbara, analysed the function of the images in P, and argued that these should not be regarded as primary evidence for ancient theatrical performances, although many of the details point directly to a late-antique model; rather, they should be seen as an attempt by the artist to recreate the performance in the mind of the reader, thereby shaping the reception of the text. In particular, she argued that the reproduction of these anachronistic images can be read as an attempt by Carolingian elites to invoke the glory days of ancient Rome, and so help legitimise their own establishment of empire.

Viewed in this light, the attempts of the scholiast of the Commentum Brunsianum to make up for the absence of proper commentary traditions for Terence with

15 Jakobi, ‘Das Commentum’ (n. 3 above), 41–2 (‘Für uns ist wichtig, daß unser Exeget einen illustrierten Terenztext vor Augen hatte’); see also his remarks on 37, that the earliest manuscripts derive without exception from France, with a tendency Lotharingia (i.e. the area identified by Bischoff as the source of C).

16 Notes to these scenes are absent in the manuscripts Paris, BNF lat. 16235 (K) and Escorial, Real Biblioteca, S.III.23–I (Es).

17 Dorota M. Dutsch, ‘Staging the Andria: The Parisian Terence as Palimpsest Theater’, paper presented at Text, Illustration, Revival: Ancient drama from late antiquity to 1550, the University of Melbourne, 14 July 2011.
interpretations of the text based on little else than grammatical treatises and inspired guesswork, provide further evidence for the value that Carolingians placed on interpreting and revitalising the glory days of the Roman past. The *Commentum Brunsianum* actualised the memory of Rome in the minds of readers who still were surrounded by its ruins, and, if the contents seem dubious or even absurd to us nowadays, the quick proliferation of manuscripts containing them, and the way they soon became indistinguishable in the minds of readers from authoritative ancient texts, shows how they fulfilled a real need to know about the past, and to express it in terms easily understood by the present.

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