

Every study of what gets lost in translation is at the same time a reckoning of what gets preserved, and Fraenkel's detailed analysis of Plautus in his capacity as translator is no exception. Although the accent in Fraenkel's description of Plautus' distinctive poetic activity is on what the Roman poet adds to his Greek models (e.g., jokes based on personification of inanimate objects, or mythological comparisons), equally striking in his overall approach is his recognition of what Plautus retains from those models, especially the necessary elements of a well-formed plot. The image we are left with is of remarkably 'compact' Greek texts – densely constructed and thoroughly unified by the subservience of style to thought – in which, nevertheless, Plautus is able to find space to make an entirely different kind of theater. This model of Plautus' translation practice grounds itself in the details of expression and, by doing so, produces not only a description of the specific situation of Greek and Latin New Comedy, but begins to lay the groundwork for an understanding of translation itself.

Fraenkel's notion of translation intersects with modern translation theory in two ways: by downplaying the notion of equivalence as the goal of translation in favor of a more complex understanding of the translation itself as a literary text and by allowing for the conditions of reception (in this case, a staged performance) to influence the form that the translation takes. Together these two principles can explain some fundamental features of Fraenkel's procedure, especially his focus on Plautine forms of expression (rather than the Greek or Roman origin of specific references) and the split he describes between the plot structure of the play and its verbal texture. Further, the combination of these two principles accounts for the fact that in Fraenkel's description Plautine translation emerges as an odd amalgam of free and conservative.

After establishing this analysis of Fraenkel as a translation theorist, this paper will pursue two implications this approach has had for more recent scholarship. First, Fraenkel cut the Gordian knot of Plautine translation studies – a field which, we should remember, mostly studies translations for which we have no originals – by integrating the study of translation with the study of Plautine literary activity more broadly; in doing so he both built a foundation for a more complex study of Plautus' relation to the Greek originals and gave a new impetus to the study of Plautine stylistics, a branch of study which does not depend on our access to the Greek originals. Second, his observation that Plautus tends to treat each moment of the play as semi-autonomous not only accounts for his attention to the gap between the verbal texture of the plays and their plot structures, but also pre-figures some of the performance-oriented studies of Plautus which have flourished in the last few decades.