

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Plautus (254 B.C.-184 B.C.)

Differences among genres. We have looked at examples of epic and historical imagination in Roman literature, and found that in certain cases the two imaginations overlap, as between Virgil and Livy, both of whom are driven to sanctify the origins of the Roman State. When it comes to Roman drama, however, we tap another vein of literary expression, that of popular amusement.

Origins of Roman drama. Early Roman drama acquired its impulse from the influence of the Greek dramatist Menander (341 B.C.-290 B.C.), who was the perfect expression of the urbane creations of the Hellenistic period; if it is true that the Greeks, in being conquered by the Romans in the second century B.C., at the same time conquered the Romans—through superior creativity—then the earliest expression of that reverse conquest might be the comedies of Plautus, which take off from the Greek. It should be added, though, that there is fragmentary evidence that Roman comedy existed long before Plautus—perhaps several centuries earlier—though all we have left is references to plays; also that the ludic/often raw/often phallic quality of the comedy of Plautus belongs to a long tradition of Roman popular culture, of jongleurs in the streets, nude public dancing, flute concerts in public.

Roman drama as popular entertainment. Be that as it may, we inherit in Plautus a fully developed comic tradition which played an important role in the public entertainment of the Romans. This role unfolded regularly at the *ludi*, religious festivals honoring Jupiter, and held annually in September, starting in 366 B.C. At those *ludi*, where chariot races, boxing, and dancing were performed, plays of Plautus were regular centerpieces. Of that centrality it should be noted that these plays were performed *without a theater* until 55 B.C., so that the face to face quality of actors and spectators contributed directness. Plautus himself, born in the countryside (Umbria), and raised to a modest background, got his earliest job as a stage carpenter, which was not only the bridge to his exposure to Greek dramatic works, but his baptism of fire in the nitty gritty of stage presentation.

Plautus' opus. Of Plautus' fifty two plays there remain twenty, all comedies, and all more or less cut from the same cloth; the same stock of characters; the same plot developments; the same license—a lot of joking about the gods, which aroused criticism in many quarters, and squared off against the 'religious devotional' purpose of the *ludi*; the same referential background of cultural anxiety—the 2nd Punic War (218-201 B.C.) sustained a high anxiety level in Rome. The stockpile of familiar character types—remarkably similar to those bursting forth in Italian *commedia del'arte*, already in the Renaissance heralding developments in seventeenth European theater—shares with the sharp dialogue the joyful energy of these plays.

Stock characters in Plautus. A mild example of the repartee in these plays can be found in the brief excerpt below, from Plautus' *Captivi*. (That mini excerpt will remind us already of the texture of those Shakespeare comedies, like *Measure for Measure*, which dazzle us still with their wordplay.) The stock characters who enact the formulae of these plays are numerous: the *adulescens*, a love struck young man; the *senex*, an old man, perhaps the father of the *adulescens*, often a competitor with his son for the love of a younger woman; the *leno*, or whoremaster, often in charge of a young lovely who is the interest of the *adulescens*; the *miles gloriosus*, or braggardly soldier, who totally lacks self-awareness; the *parasitus*, who sponges off the leading characters; and so on into minor characters like the whoremistress or the virgin, who is typically without personality, except beauty, and is the love object of the major male population. With this kind of cast—whose behavior, costuming, language are pretty consistent from one play to the next—Plautus constructs witty variations on themes of misunderstanding, happy endings for love, and cranky obstructionism—which will arouse the emotions we expect today from a good old sitcom. It will only add to the effect if we complete the description: each play has virtually the same setting, as well as characters; that setting is an urban street with an exit out onto a thoroughfare through which

characters enter and depart; the trigger to action is usually an act of eavesdropping by which a generative rumor starts things going.

SCENE II. Enter, from his house, HEGIO and a SLAVE.

HEG. Now, give attention you, if you please. Those two captives whom I purchased yesterday of the Quaestors out of the spoil, put upon them chains of light weight; take off those greater ones with which they are bound. Permit them to walk, if they wish, out of doors, or if indoors, but so that they are watched with the greatest care. A captive at liberty is like a bird that's wild; if opportunity is once given for escaping, 'tis enough; after that, you can never catch him.

SLAVE. Doubtless we all are free men more willingly than we live the life of slaves.

HEG. You, indeed, don't seem to think so.

SLAVE. If I have nothing to give, should you like me to give myself to flight?

HEG. If you do so give yourself, I shall at once have something to be giving to you.

SLAVE. I'll make myself just like the wild bird you were telling of...

History and the epic are hereby left behind as private acts, consummating private visions, while the dramatic imagination, in Rome as elsewhere, is eminently public, and in comedy especially absolutely requires giving public pleasure.

Readings

Plautus: The Comedies, Volume I, ed. Slavitt (Baltimore, 1995).

Sharrock, Alison, *Reading Roman Comedy: Poetics and Playfulness in Plautus and Terence* (Cambridge, 2009.)

Discussion questions

Why do Plautus' plays thrive on stock characters? Would it have something to do with his historical moment? In what ways do stock characters serve as useful vehicles of comic art?

Does Plautine comedy feature slapstick and burlesque elements? What kind of audience do you imagine for Plautus's plays?

What kind of use did Shakespeare make, of Plautus' plays? Does the comedy of errors theme seem to you to be of lasting value as a theatrical recourse?

The comedies of Plautus are closely related to popular humor and daily entertainments. What larger points—views of life and mankind—do you see Plautus developing through his drama?