

The top half of the book cover features a vibrant red background with a series of flowing, wavy lines that create a sense of movement and depth. The lines are darker at the edges and lighter in the center, giving it a three-dimensional appearance.

Plautus

Four Comedies

The Braggart Soldier; The Brothers Menaechmus;
The Haunted House; The Pot of Gold

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The bottom half of the book cover continues the red wavy pattern seen in the top half, creating a cohesive and visually striking design.

FOUR COMEDIES

TITUS MACCIUS PLAUTUS (254–184 BC) was Rome's most successful playwright and perhaps the most influential comic author of all time. Like Shakespeare and Molière, he began his career as an actor in popular farces, which undoubtedly sharpened his unique sense of what made audiences laugh. Plautus' achievement is particularly remarkable since he is the earliest Roman author extant. His rise to fame coincided almost precisely with Rome's rise to world dominance. Plautus transformed the sedate, sentimental drama of Hellenistic Greece into boisterous musical farce, tailored to please the rough-hewn Romans of his day. In his comedies the strict, puritanical Roman social order is temporarily turned topsy-turvy—and the lowly slave reigns supreme.

Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* is an adaptation of *The Brothers Menaechmus* (in this volume). Molière rendered *The Pot of Gold* (also in this volume) when creating *The Miser*. Moreover, the huge success of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (a combination of several comedies) proves that Plautus is still very much alive on Broadway and in Hollywood.

ERICH SEGAL, formerly Professor of Classics at Yale, was a Fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford and author of the pioneering study *Roman Laughter: The Comedy of Plautus*. He edited *The Oxford Readings in Greek Tragedy*, *The Oxford Readings in Aristophanes*, and *The Oxford Readings in Menander, Plautus, and Terence*. His other books include *The Death of Comedy* (2001).

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PLAUTUS

Four Comedies

The Braggart Soldier

The Brothers Menaechmus

The Haunted House

The Pot of Gold



Translated with an Introduction and Notes by

ERICH SEGAL

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For my daughters,
Francesca and Miranda

RIDETE QUIDQUID EST DOMI CACHINNORUM

PREFACE TO THE OXFORD EDITION

ONE magical summer evening in 1962, I saw an Italian translation of Plautus' *Casina* convulse a huge audience at the Stadio di Domiziano in Rome. Until that time, like so many academics, I had regarded Plautus as merely a name in literary history: a good man long ago, the best comic author in *ancient* Rome. That night I learned otherwise. Good old Plautus is still flourishing wherever great professional clowns do his comedy justice.

My first attempt at Plautine translation was *The Braggart Soldier*, which, to my amazement and delight, actually made people laugh when it was played at the Harvard Loeb Drama Center in 1963. Encouraged by requests from teachers and directors, I subsequently rendered two other comedies that I regarded to be among the playwright's best: *The Brothers Menaechmus* and *The Haunted House*.

When the first trio of plays was ready for publication, my then Yale colleagues Thomas Cole and Kenneth Cavander read and corrected the manuscript, while Hugh Lloyd-Jones of Oxford reassured me on what he termed 'justifiable conjectures'.

The occasion of the Oxford reprint enabled me to make further revisions and to add the fourth play, *The Pot of Gold*. I am grateful to T. J. Luce of Princeton, Walter Moskalaw of Ball State University, and Carroll Moulton for their many suggestions. I have also benefited from seeing these plays produced, most recently by Richard Beacham at the University of Warwick.

These productions reassured me that Plautus is still alive and well and—I dare to hope—also living in the pages of this book.

E. S.

Wolfson College, Oxford

1995

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INTRODUCTION

Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor Plautus too light.

WHEN Polonius trumpeted to Hamlet the arrival of ‘the best players in the world’, he paid them the ultimate compliment. For the heritage of modern tragedy goes back to Seneca (not Sophocles), and the fountainhead of modern comedy to Plautus (not Aristophanes). Each playwright was, in his way, a kind of enduring Roman bridge over which the classics crossed the Renaissance to our own day.

But let us return to the originals—in their original setting. Imagine it is the Harvest Festival in Rome, c.200 BC. The rustic Roman citizenry mills about, bored by the ceremonies through which it has been obliged to sit (or stand), ‘drunk and disorderly’ (‘potus et exlex’).¹ On a crude stage thrown together for the occasion, an actor appears. He shouts desperately for silence, hoping to turn the unruly mob into something resembling an audience. Then he speaks magic words:

‘I bring you Plautus!’²

Suddenly, sweet silence. From the thousandth row, you can hear a pun drop.

The very name of Plautus means belly laughs, charm, wit, song—in a word, entertainment. Plautus knew what the public wanted and how they liked it. He gave them not only enough, but too much, which is the quintessence of all that evokes laughter.

The Comic Background

In 254 BC, the generally accepted date for Plautus’ birth, Rome was still a relatively insignificant nation. But she was in the midst of the first of her three wars with Carthage, the powerful

¹ Cf. Horace, *Ars Poetica* 223 ff.: ‘Only the attraction of novelty could keep the attention of the audience after the rites had been performed and they were inebriated and lawless.’

² *The Brothers Menaechmus* 3.

Phoenician colony in Africa. The prize was the Mediterranean world, and it did not take the Romans long to win it. By the time Plautus was in his teens, conquered Sicily had become the first Roman province. With Sicily's wealth and strategic position came an extra benefit: culture. From at least the sixth century BC, it had been a highly civilized island where all the arts had flourished, especially drama. In Sicily, for the very first time, the Romans saw theatres.

The First Punic War ended in 241 BC. In 240 BC, the first play was produced in Rome at the Harvest Festival (*ludi Romani*). It was a Latin adaptation of a Greek tragedy, done by a captured slave named Livius Andronicus.³ The following year, Livius rendered both a comedy and a tragedy, and thus a tradition began: each year at this time the holidaying Romans would see stage plays rendered from Greek originals. Writing in this tradition, Plautus made his *début* at some unknown occasion after 215 BC. Since Livius Andronicus survives merely in fragments, Titus Maccius Plautus owns the distinction of being the earliest extant Latin author. We still have twenty of his comedies more or less complete (he may have composed as many as 130, and 'doctored' others).

What were the Greek models rendered by the Roman dramatists? As might be expected, their sources for tragedy were mainly Sophocles and Euripides. And yet the models for Latin comedy were not Aristophanic.

As we look back at Classical Greek literature, we can perceive two distinct types of comedy. First, there were the wild, loosely structured, bawdy, lyrical-satirical choral extravaganzas, whose most famous—but by no means only—practitioner was Aristophanes (c.448–380 BC). The *Birds*, in which a dispirited and dysfunctional old debtor rises (literally) to be crowned as the new Zeus in a city in the sky, is a paradigm of this type of play, referred to as Old Comedy. For various and complex reasons, however, the genre did not survive the fall of Athens in the Peloponnesian War (404 BC). The so-called New Comedy that even then was starting to evolve was radically different:

³ The early history of the Roman theatre is sketched by Livy, 7. 2. For a convenient collection of this and other sources in translation, see Eric Csapo and William J. Slater (eds.), *The Context of Ancient Drama* (Ann Arbor, 1995), 207 ff.

typical (in plot and characterization), atypical, polite, and apolitical. It had neither chorus, nor songs, nor 'jokes' as such. In fact, 'Aristotle-on-Comedy' states that Old Comedy over-emphasized laughter, and New Comedy disregarded it.⁴

New Comedy presented stock characters in stock situations. Its locale was the city, its people the bourgeoisie, its plots romantic: boy meets/wants/has previously raped girl. The whole milieu was at once realistic (no Birds or Clouds on stage), and yet removed from reality. Reading these plays, we have no notion that during the time of their composition the Hellenistic world was torn constantly by war and strife. The tears shed are only those of the lover, sighing like a furnace. The story may begin with an outrage—to a maiden, long ago, in the dark—but all always ends well; Jack marries Jill. The final chord is always one of apology and conciliation. What a tame contrast with the Aristophanic finales, which usually conclude by celebrating the triumph of unrepentant outrage!

The only author of this genre who has left us anything but fragments is the legendary Menander (c.342–293 BC). He was made a legend by scores of ancient critics (none his contemporary) who celebrated him as the nonpareil of civilized comedy. To the Roman scholar Quintilian, for example, Menander was perfection itself, in speech, in character analysis, and in his portrait of life.⁵ Plutarch regards him as the only reason for a civilized man to go to the theatre and enthusiastically lauds the playwright and his 'salt'.⁶

In the early part of the twentieth century the much-esteemed author existed only in fragments and quotable quotes. Yet since the late 1950s his *Dyskolos* (*The Grouch*) has been discovered entire, and *Samia* (*The Girl from Samos*) nearly so.⁷ These papyrus finds confirmed the general impression that Menandrian comedy

⁴ *Tractatus Coislinianus*, a document considered by some to epitomize Aristotle's (lost) views on comedy. See now Richard Janko, *Aristotle on Comedy: Towards a Reconstruction of Poetics II* (Berkeley, 1984).

⁵ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 10. 1. 69.

⁶ Plutarch, *Moralia* 854b–c. For good general overviews of Menandrian comedy, see the works by Goldberg, Moulton, Webster, and Zagagi listed in the Select Bibliography.

⁷ See now the Penguin translation by Norma Miller, *Menander: Plays and Fragments* (London, 1987).

presented a series of polished, sedate character-studies of the Hellenistic leisured class. Perhaps some of his colleagues, such as Philemon or Diphilus,⁸ were funnier, but it is unlikely that their plays remotely resembled the broad musical farce of the later fifth century BC. Suffice it to note here that when the Romans looked for Greek comedies to adapt, Aristophanes was completely out of the picture.

Enter Plautus

Although Plautus' plays are based on Greek originals, they have a character uniquely their own. The Roman playwright has refashioned the subdued dialogue of New Comedy into something rich and strange. What Elaine Fantham has aptly described as 'the kaleidoscopic brilliance of Plautine language'⁹ is characterized by striking coinages, both verbal and imagistic.¹⁰ Some are colourful metaphors like *lapides loqueris* (*The Pot of Gold* 151), 'you're babbling boulders'. Others are more surrealistic. For example, in *Captivi* 951, the slave, who typically exists in a violent atmosphere of menace and dire threats of punishment, is punningly referred to as *statua verberea*, 'a whipped-up statue'.¹¹

Scholars have long debated the precise nature—and worth—of Plautus' changes to his Greek originals. It is fairly safe to state that he transformed what was simple metrical dialogue in the Greek to polymetrical songs (*cantica*) in the Latin; he added gags where there were none in the original; he poured on a plenitude of puns (there are virtually none in extant Menander). If he did not always change the plots, he would at least emphasize those aspects and figures that amused him most. His *Casina* illustrates this. Perhaps the strongest irony is the dramaturgical in-joke of the title itself. We know from internal evidence that this is one of the plays which has been renamed by Plautus. Thus he has deliberately called it after a person who does not appear, the

⁸ See *The Haunted House* 1149 ff., and p. xxxi below.

⁹ See *Comparative Studies in Republican Latin Imagery* (Toronto, 1972), 96.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Eduard Fraenkel, *Plautinisches im Plautus* (Berlin, 1922), revised by the author and translated into Italian by Franco Munari as *Elementi Plautini in Plauto* (Florence, 1960).

ultimate thumb in the nose to Greek New Comedy. The prologue explains the Roman playwright's intent. The lovely 'title character', the maiden Casina, will not arrive on stage during the play. Nor will the young man who is in love with her. The reason? *Plautus noluit*, 'Plautus didn't want to' (line 65). This is not merely an exercise of artistic volition, in order to bring the misadventures of a libidinous old codger to the fore. It is a deliberate subversion of the cardinal feature of Greek New Comedy. Youthful romance? *Plautus noluit*.

The second-century writer Aulus Gellius has preserved brief passages from *Plocium* (*The Necklace*) by Plautus' younger contemporary Caecilius, as well as the corresponding lines of the Menandrian original on which they were based.¹² Not only has the Roman playwright transformed the almost prosaic iambs of the Greek model into a Plautine 'song', he has changed the content as well, having larded the piece with what Gellius disapprovingly calls 'nescio quae mimica' ('some farcical rubbish'). This invaluable exercise in comparative literature was for centuries the touchstone for judging a Latin comic text in the light of its Greek model.¹³

Then came an unexpected windfall: in 1968, Eric Handley published a newly discovered papyrus containing a passage from Menander's *Dis Exapaton* (*The Double Deceiver*), the source of Plautus' *Bacchides*. After many centuries, we could once again make a very specific, detailed comparison between a Roman dramatist and his Greek original.¹⁴

In one sense, Handley's essay substantiated many of Eduard Fraenkel's brilliant conjectures about Plautine style.¹⁵ But Handley concludes that with the new papyrus we can see 'on a very small scale but *by direct observation* how [Plautus] likes his colours strong, his staging more obvious, his comedy more comic'.¹⁶ Subsequent interpreters have unanimously agreed on Plautus' preference for

¹² Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 2. 23.

¹³ See John Wright, *Dancing in Chains: The Stylistic Unity of the Comoedia Palliata* (Rome, 1974), still a valuable study of Roman comic style—he demonstrates that what we now accept as 'Plautine' was actually typical of the playwright's contemporaries as well.

¹⁴ Handley's landmark contribution appeared as *Menander and Plautus: A Study in Comparison* (London, 1968).

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 9 and n. 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 18.

the broader strokes of farce over such Greek New Comedy elements as realism, irony, pathos, and subtle characterization.

In addition, we can now understand the sly overtones of the Plautine slave Chrysalus' quip at line 649 of *Bacchides*: 'I have no time for ordinary servants like Parmeno and Syrus.' Handley's papyrus demonstrated that the slave in the Menandrian original was in fact called Syrus! Plautus changed both the appellation and the characterization of the bondsman for his own purposes.

The passage from *Bacchides* is typical of the playwright's metatheatrical practice—perhaps the ultimate dimension of his overall neglect of realism and divergence from the New Comedy originals. Niall Slater's provocative study of the 'phenomenon of theatrical self-consciousness'¹⁷ in our poet is an eye-opening demonstration that a good deal of Plautus is about the process of writing Plautine comedy. His works abound in references to 'the play as play and the performers as players and playwrights'.¹⁸ Indeed, perhaps the cleverest of clever slaves, Pseudolus, in the play which bears his name, compares his scheme to swindle his master to the creative act of dramaturgy:

Just like a playwright when he's starting to compose,
Seeking what is nowhere in the world—yet finds it,
Transforming baseless lies into a semblance of the truth,
Thus, I shall now become a playwright . . .

(*Pseudolus* 401–4)

Both text and context glance at once forward and back. Even as they recall a famous fragment by the Greek playwright Antiphanes in which he describes the comic poet as having to 'invent things from thin air' (Fr. 191), they also prefigure the metatheatrical vision of Shakespeare of 'these our actors' in 'the great globe itself'.

Plautus is also the first professional dramatist in the modern sense. Neither Aristophanes nor Menander had to write for a living. For Plautus, however, the notions of his next play and his next meal were inextricably intertwined. Like Shakespeare and Molière (both of whom wrote in what may be described as 'the Plautine tradition'), the theatre was his career, his life, and his livelihood.

¹⁷ Niall Slater, *Plautus in Performance* (Princeton, 1985), 9.

¹⁸ Ibid. 14.

The Theatre and its Audience

What little we know of his biography does not help to explain how Titus Maccius Plautus rose from humble origins in Sarsina, northern Italy,¹⁹ to become what a later Roman writer praised as ‘the glory of the Latin tongue’.²⁰ And where did Plautus get the impulse for the melodies and broad slapstick which he added to his primly sober models? The most obvious answer is from his own genius. But there had always been at Rome a native type of subliterate comedy, known as the *fabulae Atellanae*, or Atellan farces, named after the Campanian village where the genre probably originated.²¹ This crude entertainment presented little skits with stock low-life characters like Bucco, the babbling fool; Pappus, the foolish old codger; Dossenus, the hunchback buffoon; and Maccus, another type of simple fool. The spirit of these lusty, popular entertainments pervades Plautine comedy.

The playwright at one time may well have been an actor in one of the troupes performing these farces. Certainly his *nomen*, Maccius, bears a suspicious resemblance to one of the Atellan types, and his *cognomen* (Plautus) has been translated by some scholars as ‘flatfoot’, which may also suggest a previous career in baggy tunics. His ancient biography states enigmatically that Plautus made a fortune in some kind of show business: ‘in operis artificum scaenicorum’.²² It is a happy idea to imagine our author in a band of strolling players. The notion would certainly help to explain his unique instinct for pleasing the crowd.

There is little information and less evidence about theatre productions in the age of Plautus. To begin with, although there were three recorded attempts in the second century BC to build a permanent structure in Rome, the project was not realized until 55 BC, when the stone theatre of Pompey was finally constructed. The best that can be inferred is that the essential element of dramatic performance was what Plautus referred to as either a *scaena* or a *proscaenium*, a rather long, thin, wooden stage, assembled for the festival and then dismantled. From later

¹⁹ See *The Haunted House* 770, and my note, p. 236.

²⁰ Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 19. 8. 6: ‘Plautus, linguae Latinae decus’.

²¹ See the discussion of W. Beare in *The Roman Stage*³ (London, 1964), 137–48.

²² Plautus’ biography is preserved by Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 3. 3. 14.

theatrical designs we can assume there was some kind of simple backdrop and actors' quarters—which might have provided 'doorways' for the plot.

It is not known for certain whether the actors were masked, but since both New Comedy and the Atellan tradition included this convention, it is logical to assume that they were.²³ Some have speculated that the feminine roles were played by males (as in the Elizabethan theatre), although we know women did act in the coarse mimes. This may in part account for the limited variety of female roles in the comedies. There is no extant visual record, as there is for the Greek theatre, so we must rely upon the conjectures of scholars for many questions of scenic practice and stagecraft. Nor do we have any contemporary descriptions of the customs or histrionic style of the players. There seems, at any rate, to have been no three-actor rule as there was in Greek drama; therefore no doubling of roles by the actors was necessary.

Apparently, senators were privileged to have a special seating area, but we cannot tell if the others were all obliged to stand. What is certain is the heterogeneous character of the audience.²⁴ Although the entire Plautine *œuvre* mentions the word 'Roman' only once (*Poenulus* 1314)—a disputed passage at that—it is a single term which describes all the spectators, regardless of status or gender. Yet every disparate member of Plautus' audience was aware of the Roman value-system. They may not have been pious in their daily life, but they knew what *pietas* was: respect for parents, leaders, and divinities.

Plautus was, after all, an almost exact contemporary of Cato the Censor, who was an energetic campaigner for early Roman 'puritanical' mores. Roman society was governed by a series of restrictive, moralistic ordinances. Historian Crane Brinton describes the atmosphere:

²³ See Beare, *The Roman Stage*³, 184 ff. and 303 ff. Slater, *Plautus in Performance*, 24, offers some imaginative 'evidence', interpreting the 'two voices' in a speech of the slave Epidicus (lines 81–101) as an address between the actor and his mask.

²⁴ Cf. A. S. Gratwick, *Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, ii, 81, citing the prologues to Plautus' *Poenulus* and Terence's *Hecyra*.

We here encounter clearly for the first time another persistent theme in the moral history of the West, and one that confronts the sociological historian with some difficult problems: sumptuary, prohibitory, 'blue law' legislation accompanied by official or semi-official educational propaganda toward a return to 'primitive' values.²⁵

Throughout Plautine comedy these Roman values are alluded to only to be violated or overthrown—a deliberate comic subversion of Roman *gravitas*.

Plautine Comedy: Setting, Style, and Characters

Despite its Italian-Atellan touches, Plautus' comedy often explicitly alleges—indeed protests (too much, of course)—that it is Greek: see the absurd pronouncement by the prologue to *The Brothers Menaechmus*, lines 7 ff. Such places as Athens, Epidamnus, and Aetolia are only ostensible locales for the plays; in fact, as A. S. Gratwick has pointed out, the setting for Plautine comedy is a universalized *civitas graecoromana*, a cosmopolitan 'Plautinopolis' contemporaneous with the known civilized world.²⁶

That said, however, the Roman playwright makes a good deal of comic hay out of his characters' ethnic protestations. When these figures are revelling, for example, they claim to be 'Greeking it up',²⁷ a notion which has special reverberations for his audience. The citizens of the early Roman republic were fundamentally a puritanical folk, prim, proper, abstemious, and reserved, who despised the Greeks for their dissolute ways. There is, then, an extra comic dividend when the Roman comedy hell-raisers are Hellenic. A famous example of Plautus' 'Greek irony' is the moment when the slave Stichus, in the process of arranging a little dinner-party, breaks the dramatic illusion to assure the spectators: 'We're allowed to do this sort of thing at Athens' (*Stichus* 448). But Plautus' Athens was no further from Rome

²⁵ Crane Brinton, *A History of Western Morals* (New York, 1959), III.

²⁶ Gratwick, *Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, ii. 112–13.

²⁷ The verb *pergraecari* is used in *The Haunted House* 22, 64, 960—and in other Plautine comedies. Sometimes Plautus expresses it by *congraecare* (*Bacchides* 743), a similar verb which we may translate as 'Greek around'. Both these terms influenced the Elizabethan stereotype of a 'Merry Greeke'—one who acted frivolously and hedonistically.

than Beaumarchais's Seville was from Paris. Unlike Beaumarchais, or Montesquieu in the *Lettres persanes*, where Persian means Parisian, Plautus intends no satire. His only target is the funny-bone.²⁸

The twin sources of Plautine style parallel the two strains which blended centuries later to become the special comedy of Molière. The critic Boileau rather snobbishly taxed his contemporary for combining the high and low comic styles, complaining that in *Les Fourberies de Scapin* Molière 'joined Terence and Tabarin', that is, he forced (Italian) *commedia dell'arte* to stand side by side with (Latin) classics. Without the depreciatory tone, we may paraphrase Boileau to suggest that Plautus 'joined Athens and Atella'. As in the case of Molière's combination, it was an inspired match.

I have already alluded to Plautus' songs. His was the first truly 'musical' comedy since the lyrics of Aristophanes had been replaced by the mundane iambs of New Comedy. But he was not the only Roman writer to add melody to a simpler text.²⁹ The operatic impulse seems to have been part of the Italian character from the very beginning. As he developed in the theatre, Plautus tended to add more and more songs to his plays. This is, in fact, one method employed by scholars to date his comedies. *The Braggart Soldier*, included in this volume, has no lyrics, and its simple metrical scheme suggests a date of composition early in his career.³⁰ *The Brothers Menaechmus* and *The Haunted House* each have five songs and the incomplete *Pot of Gold* has three; they were doubtless written later on, when Plautus had perfected his own style.

Nor, since Aristophanes, had an audience heard such vivacious

²⁸ See further Erich Segal, *Roman Laughter: The Comedy of Plautus*² (Oxford, 1987), 33-41.

²⁹ Fraenkel asserted that, among others, Ennius (239-169 BC), in adapting Roman tragedy from Greek models, changed Greek dialogue into Latin lyric, and vice versa: see *Elementi Plautini in Plauto*, 325 ff. The historian Livy, in discussing primitive Roman drama (7. 2), mentions a *satura* ('variety show') with assorted rhythmical music.

³⁰ In *The Braggart*, one brief interlude of anapaests ('Aristophanic' or 'Gilbertian' metre), lines 1011-93, interrupts the very simple iambs and trochees. The chief arguments tracing Plautus' development through his increasing use of lyrics are by W. B. Sedgwick: cf. 'The Dating of Plautus' Plays', *Classical Quarterly*, 24 (1930), 102 ff.

verbal abandon. What a language Plautus' characters speak! Unlike the simple, forthright (good old Roman) style championed by his conservative contemporary Cato, the dialogue is purple, but not blue; it is racy, but not dirty.³¹ Plautus is repetitive, mock-elegant, mock-heroic, mock-everything. He invents all sorts of delicious new words. As one of his slave characters—surely speaking for his creator—expresses it: 'Nil moror vetera et volgata verba' ('To hell with dated, dissipated diction!') (*Epidicus* 350). Note the alliteration, by the way—a very Roman touch.

Plautus' verbal extravagance ranges from the super-superlative, for example:

Occisissumus sum omnium qui vivent!

I'm the very dead-dead-deadest man alive!

(*Casina* 694)

or Menaechmus' complaint that he is *exclusissimus*, the most 'kicked-out' man in the world (line 698), to the mini-diminutive, such as his famous description of a lover's embrace:

Papillarum horridularum oppressiunculae.

Touchie-clutchie, itty-bitty-pretty-titty.

(*Pseudolus* 68)

Plautus did not 'invent' any new comic figures, but he memorably developed certain types with enormous zest and skill. The most vivid are those characters who are in some way the enemies of *la dolce vita*: greedy pimps (Plautus has an entire gallery, the most infamous being Ballio in *Pseudolus*); bitchy wives (Plautus has a veritable henhouse: Menaechmus' wife has plenty of company). Then there are the silly old codgers, credulous dupes like Theopropides in *The Haunted House*, or senile Romeos like Lysidamus in *Casina*. Clearly, the farcical figures are emphasized. Menander sketched; Plautus painted with broad strokes.

But, without a doubt, his most brilliant—and favourite—character is the clever slave. This type did not originate with

³¹ Cato the Censor (234–149 BC), stern guardian of Roman morals, coined this phrase as a formula for Roman speaking style: *Rem tene, verba sequentur* ('Just stick to the subject, the words will follow'). Plautus, on the other hand, sticks to the words—as many as possible.

Plautus (Xanthias in Aristophanes' *Frogs* is a much earlier example of a witty bondsman). But never before did the scheming servant take centre stage.³²

As Gratwick observes, 'The slave is . . . at once a member of the audience and of the cast, the director of the action, and the intermediary between us and the more exotic characters. There is, as it were, no actor behind the mask of the slave.'³³ Pseudolus and Epidicus in the comedies that bear their names, Palaestrio in *The Braggart Soldier*, and Tranio in *The Haunted House* are all comic catalysts, the stars of their shows. If Greek New Comedy is essentially about love,³⁴ Plautine comedy is essentially about trickery, the *malitia* or 'shrewdness' that is celebrated in the brief epilogue to *Epidicus* (lines 732–3):³⁵

Hic is homo est qui libertatem *malitia* invenit sua.
 plaudite et valete. Lumbos porgite atque exsurgite.

Here's a lad who won his freedom, making good by being bad.
 Now applaud, arise and stretch. Go home—we've nothing more to add.

The fact that the Roman slave who grovelled at the lowest rung of everyday society reigns supreme in Plautus epitomizes the topsy-turvy, Saturnalian quality of his comedy—just the right atmosphere for a Roman holiday.

A thousand handbooks and a million footnotes testify to the influence of Plautus throughout the ages. Masters of comedy have unceasingly filched from the storehouse of Plautine fun. In 1962, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* had audiences rolling in the aisles in the same way Plautus had in ancient Rome—and with the very same jokes.

Yet, strangely enough, though Plautus' verve and gaiety brightened the stages of countless nations, it could not keep the

³² See the chapter on this subject in Fraenkel, *Elementi Plautini*, 223 ff. and Segal, *Roman Laughter*², *passim*.

³³ Gratwick, *Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, ii, 107.

³⁴ See the interesting discussion on the love theme as treated by other New Comedy authors in William S. Anderson, *Barbarian Play: Plautus' Roman Comedy* (Toronto, 1993), 62 ff.

³⁵ *Malitia* is not unlike the Greek *poneria*, 'resourceful craftiness', which Cedric Whitman considered the distinguishing quality of the Aristophanic protagonist. Cf. his *Aristophanes and the Comic Hero* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), 30 ff.

Roman theatre alive after his death. The epigram which marks Plautus' passing well describes the state of Roman comedy after 184 BC:

Postquam est mortem aptus Plautus, comoedia luget.

Scaena est deserta, dein risus ludus jocusque

Et numeri innumeri simul omnes conlacrimarunt.

When the playwright Plautus died,

Comedy broke down and cried.

Then the stage was empty, then all Laughter, Games and Fun

And all his boundless bouncy rhythms—wept as one.

(Baehrens, *Fragmenta Poetarum Romanorum*, p. 296)

The Braggart Soldier

Miles Gloriosus does not begin with a prologue. It opens instead with one of the touchstones of comic literature: the hero discussing himself (who else?) with a professional flatterer. This is a classic confrontation between *alazon* and *eiron*, the quintessential comic opposites originally described by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.³⁶ The *alazon* is the overstater, the bluffer, the great balloon of hot air. *Alazoneia*, braggadocio, has been aptly described as the comic counterpart of *hubris*, tragic pride. In contrast, the *eiron* is, as the word suggests, the *ironic* man, the understater, the needle of 'I know nothing' which takes the air out of the *alazon*'s 'I know everything'. In all of ancient literature, the greatest *eiron* is Plato's Socrates; the greatest *alazon* is Plautus' Pyrgopolynices.

In a scene of but seventy-nine lines, the Braggart Soldier's outrageous character is exposed to an audience who will wait anxiously through more than half the play to see him reappear. Pyrgopolynices ('terrific tower-taker') boasts of such mammoth achievements as having crushed exactly 7,000 men in a single day (line 45), and punching an elephant to smithereens (line 28). There may be a pun on the soldier's (Greek) name in line 1055:

³⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 4. 7. The effect is reinforced in the delayed prologue speech at line 86, where we learn that the title of the play's Greek original was none other than *Alazon*.

'noble king-killer, *sacker of cities*'. He is vain about his attractiveness to women. When his slave suggests that one of his female admirers may be compared in beauty to himself, the soldier can only remark: 'Oh, how gorgeous!' (line 968).

The *miles gloriosus* is by no means a Plautine invention, but the boastful officer is one of his favourite characters and appears in seven of the twenty extant plays—although never so prominently as in this comedy. Certainly General Lamachus in Aristophanes' *Acharnians* is a blusterer of much the same ilk. However, the type must have had a very special appeal for the Roman spectators, many of whom were themselves soldiers. This audience had seen its commanders become world conquerors in real life.

As the title character struts off pompously to the forum, the tricky slave Palaestrio enters to deliver a long expository prologue. He has a complicated story to convey. In 'good old Athens', the Braggart Soldier abducted his master's girlfriend.³⁷ Loyal retainer that he was, Palaestrio set out in pursuit (quite an independent slave!) But, as fate would have it, he was captured by pirates and given to none other than the Braggart himself, who had by this time rented a mansion in Ephesus for himself and the kidnapped girl. By chance, the soldier's house is *right next door* to that of an old family friend of Palaestrio's Athenian master. Greek New Comedy dealt constantly with the workings of chance. In this prologue, Plautus mocks the convention.

The metatheatrical in-joking, however, soon takes a back seat as the characterization of Palaestrio develops. In this early play, he is the prototype of such tricky Plautine servants as Pseudolus and Tranio (in *The Haunted House*). The imagery the playwright lavishes on him must soon convince the audience that, if Pyrgopolynices is the titular hero, Palaestrio is the real protagonist (cf. lines 140–1). The plot revolves around his two 'mighty machinations'. He is repeatedly an 'architect' (lines 901, 902,

³⁷ 'Girlfriend' is both anachronistic and inaccurate. 'Mistress' is rather Victorian and does not suit a lively young woman like Philocomasium. *But she is not your sister either*. Though not a pay-as-you-go courtesan like Acroteleutium, she can be 'owned', and is therefore some sort of slave. We have problems of vocabulary here, not of sociology. I trust the reader will make the necessary adjustments of sensibility. It is not impossible that in (one of) Plautus' Greek originals Philocomasium was discovered to be free-born and could therefore marry Pleusicles.

915 ff., 1129), as well as a planner of strategy, an opponent of the enemy, an assailant from the ramparts, a company commander (lines 196 ff., 219–25, 266–7, 334, 813–15), and (climactically at line 1160), an *imperator*—in short, the real conquering hero of the piece. It is important to note that the spectator's pleasure in the portrayal of soldier and slave—*militia* hand in hand with *malitia*—is reciprocal. Both are profoundly playful impersonations, deriving their humour as much from the reversal of audience expectations as from their mutual, virtually symmetrical relationship.³⁸

As if to embellish this structural feature, Palaestrio's 'campaigns' involve a substantial component of disguise, even by the standards of Plautine comedy.³⁹ When one of the soldier's slaves happens to spy the young lovers, Palaestrio must convince this thick-witted servant that he did not see Philocomasium, but her sister, who *just happened* (chance, again) to arrive in Ephesus the night before. To validate this claim, Palaestrio trains the girl to impersonate her own twin.

All this masquerading scares off the silly slave who had spied on the young couple, but does nothing towards getting Philocomasium ('lover of revelry', the pleasure principle personified) away from the soldier. And so Palaestrio needs a second stratagem.⁴⁰ With the help of an aged neighbour, he dresses up a courtesan to pretend that she is the old man's wife, desperately in love with the military marvel, and willing to go to any length—and expense—to win his amatory attentions. Pyrgopolynices will then hurriedly get rid of his current mistress. The scheme has a second purpose as well: to deflate the soldier's gargantuan ego and show the 'hero' to be a grovelling coward when confronted with the penalty for adultery—castration.

³⁸ John Arthur Hanson, 'The Glorious Military', 66, in T. A. Dorey and Donald R. Dudley (eds.), *Roman Drama* (New York, 1965), 66 points out that all but one of the Plautine comedies with a *miles gloriosus* also feature a *servus gloriosus*.

³⁹ There are, in fact, three masquerades in *The Braggart Soldier*: first Philocomasium as her own twin sister, then the courtesan as the amorous wife, then Pleusicles, the young lover, as a ship's captain. Needless to mention, Palaestrio wrote all three scripts.

⁴⁰ Much has been written about the fact that Plautus has combined two plots in this play, perhaps derived from two different Greek originals. This process is known as *contaminatio*, a term which has a pejorative connotation.

Palaestrio knows his military master, and brilliantly couches his proposition in terms that appeal to the soldier's greatest source of pride: not his valour, not even his beauty, but his wealth (1063 ff.). The slave feeds the soldier with ambiguous promises of 'profit' from this new affair, which he describes as *condicio nova et luculenta* (line 952), a phrase which could be understood either as a new love or business affair. He further stokes the fire of the soldier's *alazoneia* by presenting him with a ring which he calls *arrabonem amoris*, the 'first deposit on a love account' (line 957). The financial imagery had special, ironic resonance for the Roman audience, evoking the world of the forum and *negotium* (business).⁴¹

On every field of battle, the clever slave emerges victorious over the allegedly undefeated and unbeatable warrior. The farewell scene, when the girl, her many trunks of baggage, and Palaestrio himself are about to be given away by the departing soldier, is a masterpiece of irony. For those who suspect that Euripides in his late plays was really the godfather of New Comedy, there are some piquant similarities between this ironic leave-taking and the finale of the Greek playwright's *Helen* (Compare, for example, *Helen* 1419–20 with *The Braggart* 1321–5.) This may not prove any direct Euripidean influence, for Plautus himself has a predilection, as we have seen, for trickery by masquerade.

The Braggart Soldier has a long heritage on the comic stage. Even Terence's Thraso—in *The Eunuch*, his most successful play—owes quite a debt to Plautus. (Significantly, Terence is at pains to deny a contemporary charge of plagiarism at *The Eunuch* 23 ff.) We see the same characterization in the various captains of the *commedia dell'arte*, in Corneille's *L'Illusion comique*, in Nicholas Udall's *Ralph Roister Doister*, in Captain Bobadill of Ben Jonson's *Every Man in his Humour*, and, of course, in Falstaff, who is the greatest *alazon* of all time and perhaps also the best *eirōn* as well.⁴² If nothing else, the Braggart Soldier has commanded a legion of imitators.

⁴¹ See the introduction to *The Brothers Menaechmus* (p. xxviii) and the fuller analysis in Segal, *Roman Laughter*², 53 ff.

⁴² Cf. Falstaff's famous (and true) self-characterization: 'I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men' (2 *Henry IV*, 1. ii. 10).

The Brothers Menaechmus

This is Plautus' only comedy of errors. His Hellenistic predecessors wrote so many that 'Miss Ignorance', a personification who speaks one of Menander's prologues (*Agnoia* in *She Who was Shorn*) has been called the presiding deity of New Comedy. Plautus usually preferred wit to ignorance, shrewd deceptions to naïve blunders. People in a comedy of errors are mere puppets; Plautus admired puppeteers, creative plotters like Palaestrio and Tranio. Since no one in *The Brothers Menaechmus* is clever, the laughter it arouses provides strong argument for that popular theory of the comic which sees the cue for guffaws as a feeling of audience superiority. Indeed, who would not feel superior to these fools who wander the streets of Epidamnus, where the presiding deity must surely be Miss Ignorance's dull-witted twin, 'Misunderstanding'?

Yet this is a fine, if untypical, Plautine comedy. It has enjoyed unceasing popularity over the ages, and not only in famous adaptations like Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* and Rodgers and Hart's *Boys from Syracuse*. It has always been the most-performed play of Plautus. Clearly, it has a very special appeal—in both its Plautine assets of song and snappy patter, and its atmosphere of holiday abandon, of carnival release from everyday rules. Moreover, it presents more simply than any comedy before or since the greatest of all wish-fulfilments: the surrogate self, the *alter ego* with no super-ego, the man who can get his pleasure free in every sense, because he is 'Jack in town and Ernest in the country'. Indeed, Plautus' twin-brother comedy might be aptly subtitled 'The Importance of Being Menaechmus'.⁴³

The two houses on stage represent the conflicting forces in the comedy. They are not unlike the statues of Artemis and Aphrodite which frame the setting of Euripides' *Hippolytus*. In both dramas the action takes place in a magnetic field between poles of restraint and release. It is no coincidence that the house of Menaechmus I

⁴³ Plautus, *Menaechmi*, ed. Gratwick (Cambridge, 1993), 138. Gratwick points out that Plautus has very likely invented the name of the twins as a kind of comic commemoration of Menaechmus, the mathematician of Syracuse (mid-fourth century BC), 'famous for a solution of the problem of the duplication of the cube to the unmathematical, a sort of "twinning"'.

stands at the exit nearer the forum. For the local twin is bound by the business of everyday life, restrained by legal, financial, and social ties, especially by a wife who is constantly 'at work'. Across the stage, and nearer the harbour whence visitors come, dwells a lady of pleasure aptly named Erotium ('Passionella', if you will). Throughout the play, Plautus associates the word *industria* ('work') with Menaechmus' wife (e.g. line 123); to emphasize the contrast, he constantly refers to Erotium as *voluptas* ('pleasure').⁴⁴ It should be noted that Menaechmus' lawfully wedded spouse has no name at all; she is merely called 'wife'. Shakespeare, in his adaptation, reverses this, making the courtesan the lady with no name, and calling the twin's wife Adriana.

Plautus, of course, intends no allegory; he never intends anything but entertainment. And yet, without any conscious attempt on the part of the playwright, we see in the two on-stage houses in *The Brothers Menaechmus* a contrast between the atmosphere of everyday and that of holiday, or, as Freud would express it, the Reality Principle versus the Pleasure Principle. Needless to say, Pleasure emerges triumphant, for that is the essential theme of all comedy. But it is especially interesting to see why Menaechmus I needs a twin in order 'to win'.

The local, married brother is the hero of the play. Plautus gives him the larger and more lyrical role (Shakespeare, on the other hand, emphasizes the visiting twin). We first meet Menaechmus I in the midst of a domestic battle, describing himself as a hardened soldier in the war called marriage (lines 127, 129). He craves rest and recreation from this campaign; this is, in fact, what the play is about. He takes several steps in the direction of rest and recreation, that is, towards the other side of the stage, where passion lives incarnate. He orders a banquet, the bill of fare for which emphasizes various delicacies which were *forbidden to the Romans* (lines 209 ff.).⁴⁵ Plautus even concocts comic names for these illegal dishes, to emphasize how much Menaechmus is savouring the prospect of his breaking-of-the-rules banquet. And, of course, dessert will be Erotium, also rather unlawful. The

⁴⁴ *Eros*, of course, means passion, and *-ium* is an affectionate diminutive suffix; thus Erotium means 'Passion-ella'. Plautus loves to give his heroines such sensual names, e.g. Philocomasium in *The Braggart Soldier*, and Philematium in *The Haunted House*.

⁴⁵ Cf. Pliny, *Natural History* 8. 78 *passim*.