

**Module #2 - Section A**

**Lecture Notes 2**

**PLAUTUS AND HIS COMEDIES: *THE BROTHERS MENAECHMUS***

**PLAUTUS (255/4-184 BC)**

Comic playwright

- Plautus' plays are **the earliest Latin literary works to have survived complete**.
- Plautus **was not from Rome**. He is said to have come from a small town in the region of Umbria in Central Italy.
- **The precise form of his name is uncertain**. The ancient Romans usually cited him as 'Plautus'; sometimes they used the full name **TITUS MACCIUS (or MACCUS) PLAUTUS**. **This seems to be a stage name which may suggest that Plautus may have been an actor himself.**
  - Plautus is probably the **Romanized form of an Umbrian name, Plotus**, the original meaning of which is uncertain, probably "flat-footed", and possibly associated with comic actors.
  - The name **Maccius** seems to have been derived from **Maccus**, which is the name of a **typical character of Italian popular farce, the clown**. This name has probably something to do with Plautus' personality or activity.
  - **Titus** was also slang for 'penis.'
- The **date of his death is 184 BC**; we do not know for sure when he was born, probably around 254 BC.
- He might have been a freed slave, who probably started an early career in the theater as an **actor**.
- He had **great success** during his times as playwright.
- An ancient writer, **Varro**, made a **list of 21 plays** that were generally agreed to be by Plautus. **These 21 plays are the ones that came down to us and we can still read today.**

Plautus wrote only *palliatus* which are, as we said above, comedies written in Latin but set in Greece, and **adapted from Greek models, that is previous Greek comedies**.

**What are Greek models of Plautus' comedies?**

Nearly all of Plautus' comedies are either known or assumed to be **adaptations of plays of the so-called "Greek New Comedy"**.

• **What is "Greek New Comedy"?**

**It is as a type of comedy that developed** in Greece between about **330 BC and 250 BC**, about 100 years before Plautus' birth.

- The main characteristic of plays of the "Greek New Comedy" was the representation of **ordinary life and ordinary people**.
- They had **few obvious plots** (young lovers finally together, lost children returned to their families, trickery, misunderstandings, discovery...)

- They also featured **stock characters**.
- They were very popular: we know that about 1,400 plays were written by 64 authors. Only portions of these comedies survive today, together with a large number of titles (but not the actual plays) and some random quotations from them.

The most famous playwright of the ‘New Comedy’ was **MENANDER** – who is considered the “father” of “Greek New Comedy”.

**Plautus (and Terence) used the works of these playwrights of the Greek New Comedy and of Menander especially, as models for their comedies.**

- One problem arising from this is that we are not always sure of **what of Plautus is ORIGINAL and what is borrowed from Greek models**
- We do not have enough evidence from the Greek models (most of them are lost) to see what – if any – of Plautus’ lines were directly translated into LATIN from Greek. Thus, **we cannot clearly establish the type of relationship that Plautine comedy had with its models** (i.e., how much/what is copied from the Greek original play and how much/what is originally created by Plautus)
- But in general, we get the **impression that Plautus DID NOT simply copy the Greeks** – he loosely **adapted** – but also **changed** the Greek models in many ways **in order to suit his Roman audience** – and **introduced new elements** that were not there before, especially music and sections which were sang within the plays.

**Two major features of Plautus’ plays (and of plays of the Greek New Comedy)**

**1) PREDICTABILITY OF THE PLOT**

- He adopts the typical plots of ancient comedies – taken from the Greek original plays and well-known to the audience.
- **2 basic types of plots** can be identified:
  - The most preferred type is conventionally termed “**SLAVE COMEDY**”. In earlier plays, the slave character in the play may simply be acting under the orders of another character (e.g., the young man in love) – but in later plays he becomes a much more active and creative character – **the slave actually directs action and thus the plot**. In the end- we see a clear division of the plot into three phases: **1) slave plans a ‘trick’ 2) he acts 3) and in the end he wins.**
  - Another type of plot (which might be combined with the slave comedy) is the “**COMEDY OF RECOGNITION.**” The idea here is rather simple. It usually involves **the identity of one of the characters, which is either hidden, lied about, or somehow mistaken by other characters. This in turn causes errors and confusion within the play (see ‘The Brothers Menaechmus’)**. This type of plot always features the **happy ending of the final recognition** (i.e., the identity of the character is revealed), which solves all the difficulties.

2) Another major feature of Plautus' plays is **the use of a limited set of character types (STOCK CHARACTERS)** – that are repeated from play to play

For example:

the clever slave  
the old man  
the young lover  
the pimp  
the prostitute

We see how by featuring these characters – repeated and always with similar functions – Plautus further seeks **predictability**

- so that the audience recognizes them immediately and knows what to expect from them (see also the use of masks to create the same effect)

### **THE MENAECMI OR THE BROTHERS MENAECHMUS**

It is one of the most successful comedies of Plautus and represents the prototype of all comedies of errors (it inspired also Shakespeare).

- DATE: unknown
- GREEK MODEL: unknown – it is a *palliata*, a comedy set in Greece and based on a Greek original comedy, but we do not know of what Greek play it was an adaptation.
- **Plot** (you should be able to remember the plot of the play after reading it)
- **Main characters:**
  - **Menaechmus**, the twin who was kidnapped, now is married and lives in Epidamnus
  - **Sosicles** (Menaechmus 2), his twin brother, who came from Sicily to Epidamnus to look for his brother and has the same name, even if in your translation he is always indicated as Sosicles (the name he had before it was changed into Menaechmus) to distinguish him from his twin brother
  - **Peniculus** called also “**the Sponge**”, because he explains to the audience: “whenever I eat I wipe the table clear”; literally in Latin Peniculus means “little brush”, the one used to sweep/clean the table after eating. He is “**the parasite**”, one who habitually takes advantage of the generosity of others, usually a person of a lower social class, who is not a real friend, but is always around to get something out of his rich friend and take advantage of every situation
  - **Erotium**, Menaechmus's mistress, a high-class prostitute. Once again the name is extremely well chosen, in order to suit the character: in fact Erotium comes from ‘Eros’, which is both the Greek god of love and the Greek word for “love”.

- **Messenio**, the slave of Menaechmus 2 or Sosicles. He is not the most typical of Plautus' slaves. He does not control the plot as slaves in other Plautine comedies do; he is more the **kind of the loyal slave**. . . Towards the end of the comedy, however, he is the one that first realizes that his master has finally found his brother and leads the two to their mutual recognition
  - **The wife** of Menaechmus, left unnamed, is the typical wife of Plautine comedies, the nagging wife
- **Where in the text can we find the background information necessary to understand the events that unfold on stage?**

### **The PROLOGUE**

**A prologue introduces the beginning of the comedy and is recited by an unnamed character** (who may personify the playwright himself).

‘...you know our comic writers have a way of claiming that what happens in the play takes place in Athens, that it may appear to have a truly Grecian atmosphere...’ (p. 103) > reference to **Greek models and Greek setting of Roman comedies**

In the prologue Plautus talks to his Roman audience, **he sets the scene, transporting his spectators to Sicily and provides relevant information on background events necessary to follow the story.**

The speaker tells the story of the twins who lived in the city Syracuse in Sicily and how Menaechmus ended up in Epidamnus.

After that he announces to the audience that in order to continue the story he must go to **Epidamnus** (a Greek city on the Adriatic sea, north of what is now Albania) and he moves, he physically takes a few steps on the stage.

Then he **interrupts the narration and jokes with the audience** and asks if anybody in the audience has any business which he would like done while the speaker is in Epidamnus (here he creates the illusion that the stage is Epidamnus).

He returns to the background details after the interruption and says: “**All this is Epidamnus** (and clearly indicates the stage) **as long as this play lasts** ...In another play it will be another place...” The **illusion about the setting in Epidamnus** is in this way **deconstructed**.

**By exposing the fact that the setting is created on the stage (that it is fake, unreal) he establishes a DISTANCE BETWEEN THE AUDIENCE AND THE DRAMATIC SITUATION.** In this way, the Roman audience in the theater sits back and **looks at the events on stage without losing their self-awareness as Romans**. By looking at the Greeks being fooled and tricked on stage, the Roman audience feels a **sense of superiority**. Moreover, by informing his audience of the background events, by letting them know more than what the characters on stage seem to know, Plautus enhances this feeling of superiority of the spectators.

Plautus worked to produce a **DIRECT APPROACH TO THE AUDIENCE, involving them, chatting with them, like the main speaker does in the prologue.**

This approach is now a common element of modern theater and TV productions; however, it should be emphasized that Plautus' practice was unusual at the time. Neither his predecessors nor successors in Latin theatrical works allowed their characters to step out of the dramatic context, and chat with the audience.

There are other instances in which Plautus plays with his audience through **DRAMATIC IRONY** (= a **stylistic device** for creating situations in which the audience knows more about the plot than the characters on stage). A typical 'device' used to obtain this effect is the **ASIDE**: a character on stage 'turns' and says something aside, which the other characters are not supposed to hear, but the audience does hear. Often he reveals his inner thoughts or plans – which will help the audience follow along and provide the audience with more information than the characters on stage have.

- For example, p. 133, Sosicles tells asides: "If they are going to declare me insane, the best thing I can do is to pretend to be insane..." – letting the audience know the audience knows that he is not truly insane....and on p. 135, after pretending to be crazy, Sosicles leaves and addresses the audience directly: "do not tell the old man, if he comes back, which way I have gone. Goodbye..."

## **OBSERVATIONS**

### ➤ **Why is this comedy funny?**

We laugh at the ignorance of the characters, who are nothing but puppets...

Ignorance

Naïve misunderstanding...

Usually Plautus prefers to use wit, cunning deception, and machination to develop the plot rather than chance and fate as he does in this play.

### ➤ Plautus was the **most successful comic poet in the ancient world.**

Plautus was **the first professional playwright**; he depended upon the theater for his livelihood.

Plautus **had to make sure the audience enjoyed his plays.**

## **PLAUTUS' ORIGINALITY**

**Some original characteristics Plautus' comedies that were likely added by Plautus and not in the Greek models are:**

1. **Humor** based on straight jokes and puns
2. Wordplay - **verbal creativity**
3. **Involvement of the audience**/addressing the audience: this characteristic is referred to as '**metatheater**' (literally 'beyond the theater'). Plautus takes the play off the stage and into the audience, and at the same time the audience is drawn into the play – importance of pleasing the audience, providing predictability >they know what to expect, they feel in control
4. **Impression of improvised performance**: Plautus creates in the audience the impression that there is no script and that they are watching the story as it is unfolding
5. **Parts that are sang with music (*cantica*)** (we can only guess which sections were sang based on the meter of the lines, since there is no written music associated with the plays).

### ➤ **Although the comedy is based on a Greek model, ELEMENTS that are typically ROMAN (and therefore likely added by Plautus) can be identified:**

1. **References to the custom of PATRONAGE (typically Roman social custom):**
  - **the relationship between Peniculus and Menaechmus** reminds us of the relationship between a patron and a client,

- on p. 123 clear reference to patrons' custom of providing legal help to clients: in a long monologue Menaechmus attacks and criticizes the custom of patronage, he tells us that he has spent all morning in the forum providing legal help for one of his clients – what a waste of time! - and because of that he missed the lunch with Erotium
2. **Reference to the FORUM and to the political and social activities that were taking place there:**
    - **first, Peniculus' tirade against public meetings** (p. 119) (public meetings are 'a device for wasting the time of people that have no time to waste...'). In his monologue, he defines participating to an assembly a crime and then he suggests that idle men should be the ones to spend their time in political debate, since they do not have anything better to do. **His position reverses the Roman social norm: it is honorable and expected of a Roman citizen to serve in politics and fulfil his civic duties; civic duty comes first, then private pleasure.** For Peniculus this is not how it should be – being a good citizen and participate in a public meeting is just a waste of time that keeps him away from a good meal and pleasant entertainment.
    - **Menaechmus's monologue a few pages later** (p. 123) – mentioned also above: Menaechmus attacks and criticizes the custom of patronage: **'[gods] curse me too for ever going to the forum this morning!'** p. 123  
Going to the forum to fulfil one's obligations toward the city and its citizens by performing various duties as juror, attorney, or any type of public official was a Roman custom... it was expected...it was a good Roman's duty...**Menaechmus' attack is something very 'UN-ROMAN'**
  3. **References to MANUMISSION (i.e., possibility for a slave to be freed by his master): Messenio's monologue about being a good slave** (p. 138) and his hope of manumission, which he receives in the end, after saving the man he thinks is his master.

Even though the plays are set in Greece, the world of Greece seems to be far away. It is Rome, Roman customs and Roman manners that interest Plautus.