

The Curious Case of Bacchis: Rhetoric and the *Meretrix* in Terence's *Hecyra*

The *meretrix* Bacchis, the former mistress of the respectable *adulescens* Pamphilus in Terence's *Hecyra*, is quite an unusual character, both as regards her own role in the play and as regards her relationship to the tropes of Roman comedy. Though she is a frequent topic of discussion for the other characters, she does not actually appear onstage until near the end of the play, when Laches, the father of her former client, asks her to confirm to the women of the central family that she no longer has a relationship with Pamphilus. Bacchis agrees, and then after fulfilling his request, essentially produces the entire resolution of the plot over the course of a single speech: the women have recognized a ring Bacchis wears, which Pamphilus gave her after taking it from a woman he raped, who turns out to be his current wife. Bacchis relates the recognition scene, as well as the events of the night of the rape, to the audience, and provides her own commentary on the benefit she is providing to Pamphilus and his family.

This paper analyzes Bacchis' speech in *Hecyra* 816-840, and puts forward an image of Bacchis as not only self-assured woman who endeavors to show herself as equal to those who would look down on her, but also as a potentially destabilizing force for the conclusion of *Hecyra*'s narrative. In the speech, Bacchis speaks in a way unusual for women and especially for sex workers (see Adams 1984). She proves herself a competent orator, typically the role of an elite citizen man, sometimes even borrowing rhetorical gestures we might expect to find in court speeches. She uses active and intense verbs to show her power and knowledge both in the current situation and on the night of the rape, in contrast to her depiction of Pamphilus as confused and even animalistic. Bacchis also frequently uses the language of political and social relations between citizen males to describe her own relationship with Pamphilus, showing that she is

aware of how discourse between elites operates and is willing to place herself in it. Bacchis, despite her lowered official status, depicts herself as having the control and knowledge that the characters of higher official status lack. Bacchis also intentionally separates herself from her own class in terms of morality, as she asserts that other *meretrices* would not act to their own financial disadvantage, as she herself is doing by reuniting the central family.

Consideration of Bacchis and her rhetorical strategies, and by extension the potential difficulties she represents, allows us another angle on two areas of contention in the world of Roman Comedy. First, Bacchis' characterization of herself in opposition to other sex workers has often been brought up in connection to the supposed trope of the *bona meretrix*, if such a trope really exists (see Fantham 2011, Gilula 1980). I argue, however, in light of the rest of the play, that we are not meant to see Bacchis' statements as an encompassing or final view on sex work, and that the variety of sex workers' opinions on their work is in fact displayed in *Hecyra*. Terence is perhaps acknowledging that the real lives of sex workers are far more complex than tropes (see Edwards 1998, Fantham 1975), and that they should not all be painted with the same brush. Second, the final few scenes of *Hecyra* open up doubts as to whether the reunion of families in Roman comedy is meant to be taken at face value: Bacchis' final speech and presence onstage at the play's conclusion cast doubt over the strength of the repaired familial bonds depicted, perhaps indicating a certain degree of unease around marriage as a solution to rape (see Lape 2001).

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