

Does a Lover Get a Line of Credit? Comic Economics in Plautus' *Asinaria*

In turning from nearly any other genre of ancient literature to Plautine comedy, one cannot help but be struck by the sheer number of references to payments, swindles, and various quid-pro-quos. Perhaps nowhere else in Plautus are such references more pronounced than in *Asinaria*'s focus on a youth scrambling for the funds to maintain access to his *amica*. Prominent at the outset of this play is a lively argument about contrasting modes of economic exchange: *amator* asserts that prior payments to *lena* for access to her daughter have been gifts (*dona*), while she identifies them, never as gifts, but only as discrete payments for services rendered. Hilarity ensues, I argue, from this comic misunderstanding, over which the audience can laugh at the naiveté of an impecunious youngster and the rapacity of a wily *lena*.

In the play's longest continuous dialogue (126-248), an insolvent young lover melts down before a *lena*: for him, all the money and favors he has lavished heretofore surely ought to extend him some credit, i.e., more time with his beloved (e.g. 136-7; 163-4; 196). The *lena*, however, promises to treat him—now an *exclusus amator*—no differently than she would any other client new or old (172; 190-5). I suggest that what animates this scene is a confusion of gift-giving with commodity exchange: the former, often idealized, envisages the creation or maintenance of a relationship built upon diachronic but interrelated transactions (Bourdieu 1977; Qviller 1981), while the latter, necessary for life but often denigrated, assumes one-off purchases with no further entailment (Parry and Bloch, 1989). In other words, gifts create a relationship between people, while commodity exchange creates a relationship between things (Gregory 1982). Thus, the *amator* sputters in disbelief that his *amica*'s household can do a volte-face in

their treatment of him, as if there is no connection between their former and present selves (140, 205-6).

Plautus dramatizes a collision between these two modes of exchange and, for good measure, exaggerates the proponents' positions: The young lover idealistically, naively, and repeatedly casts his "gifts" in terms of intimate, relationship-building ties between himself and his *amica*'s family, while the madam blithely refuses to countenance any such understanding, insisting instead solely upon commercial realities (172)—indeed going so far as to affirm that the newer customers are all the "juicier," like fresh fish, having more to offer than the tried and true [178-9]). For an audience aware of both modes of transaction (Konstan 1996), such a confrontation is rich fodder for laughter at the expense of the young lover and his hopeless attempts to cast prior payments as gifts. As is *de rigueur* in the genre of comedy, the audience enjoys the perspective of superior knowledge vis-à-vis the characters on stage.

Such an approach to *Asinaria* contrasts with much of recent scholarship on this play, which is less focused on what makes the play funny (*pace* the irrepressibly idiosyncratic treatment of Henderson 2006) and more caught up with problems of assignation of roles (Porter 2016) or aspects of Plautus' originality (Lowe 1992). The prologue, however, declares the play to be primarily a funny one (*ridicula res est*), hence the warrant for delving into the comic sensibilities of the drama wherever they might lead. Like Abbott and Costello's famous "Who's on First?" routine, two characters seemingly speak to one another about the same topic, but understand their terms in mutually exclusive ways.

I will conclude, on a less comic note to be sure, by connecting the economic motifs of this play more closely with the Roman context of the 2nd century BCE during which a

significantly greater monetization of the economy (Harl 1996; Coffee 2017), may well have made such misunderstandings all the more topical for Plautus' original audience.

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