

Insanity in Plautine language and Roman popular opinion  
Alison Lanski (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)

There is surprisingly little lexical diversity in the Plautine language of insanity. One study considers ten terms of mental error found in Plautus but confesses that only one, *insanus*, consistently refers to insanity (Paschall 1935). Periphrasis is also rare – e.g. *atra bilis* occurs only twice in the corpus. With so many plotlines involving mistaken identity, the accusation of insanity is common; thus the lack of options for expressing such invective is surprising. A case study of the plays *Menaechmi* and *Amphitruo* reveals that characters tend either to be explicit in their accusations of madness or to provide alternate explanations for aberrant behavior that have nothing to do with sanity. Throughout both plays, characters make a noticeable effort to account for apparent craziness by means of physical explanations: particularly drunkenness, sleeping, or deliberate deception, e.g. *Amph.* 551-632. This lexical poverty suggests that a true accusation of insanity was a serious one and that mental competence was regarded on an absolute scale.

Roman laws give credence to this view – from the Twelve Tables to the Digest of Justinian an insane citizen was consistently deprived of rights and placed under the power of a *custos* (Nardi 1983). In the medical view, however, insanity could be caused by things like black bile, possession by a spirit, or magic (Rosen 1968). This diversity of cause does not seem to translate into a diversity of language or a nuanced public opinion of insanity. Even though a legal defense of temporary insanity was permissible (Gardner 1993), at any given moment a citizen was still considered entirely sane or insane.

The single apparent exception to these constraints is the term *delirare*. The agricultural basis of the word (Vellius VII 73) provides a metaphorical flavor to accusations of insanity (Gratwick 1993; Christenson 2000). But despite the vividness of *delirare*, it has a connotation of absolute, not partial, insanity. Furthermore, the term is used only ten times in the entire Plautine corpus (as opposed to sixty-two instances of *insanus/insania/insanire*, and sixty more of *sanus*). Its uniqueness as a colorful and figurative alternative to *insanus* in Plautus further suggests that the Romans, in general, were not interested in fine distinctions of sanity in their language or their culture.