

Plautus' *Lectisterniator* and Roman *Dies Natales*

In Plautus' *Pseudolus* 162 the well-known pimp Ballio orders one of his slaves to be the *lectisterniator* during preparations for a dinner party. This noun of agency is based upon the term *lectisternium*, the Roman ritual in which couches were spread out and a feast served to images of the gods. Greek and Latin sources imply that there was both an official version of this ritual, in which the Roman senate decreed a feast for the twelve Olympians, and a private version, in which ordinary Romans implemented the rite in smaller celebrations. At any rate, the reference in Plautus, the only occurrence of *lectisterniator* in Latin, is intriguing. Commentators on *Ps.* and Plautine scholars find in Plautus' word-choice no relevance to the formal rite. E. Fränkel, in his classic *Plautinisches im Plautus* (1922), does not even note the use of *lectisterniator*. E. Sturtevant (1932) suggests that Plautus inserted this remark simply because the production of *Pseudolus* in 191 B.C. occurred shortly after the celebration of an official *lectisternium*. J. Hanson (1959), reading Plautus through the scope of Roman religion, also finds no significance in Plautus' comment. In his monograph on the *lectisternium*, moreover, O. Wackermann (1888) dismisses this reference on the grounds that the verb *lectisterniare* is unattested in extant Latin. Contrary to the conclusions of these influential scholars, I argue that Plautus' *lectisterniator* is significant and contains an allusion to the Roman ritual of the *lectisternium*. In particular, I offer an explanation of the intent behind Plautus' *lectisterniator*, namely that the Romans established a connection between the *lectisternium* and birthday celebrations and that the context in *Ps.* is a birthday party.

There are three elements to my approach. First, I establish the general format of the official *lectisternium*. In particular, I demonstrate that the rite was pervasive in Roman society when Plautus' *Ps.* was first staged. This point suggests that Ballio's reference to a *lectisterniator* would have evoked the well-established ritual in the minds of a Roman audience. Second, I develop the connection between the official *lectisternium* and Roman birthday celebrations. For instance, I interpret a problematic reference to a *lectisternium* in *CIL* 5.5272, which claims that a freedman performed an annual *lectisternium* for his deceased wife on the anniversary of her birthday. Third, I tie this connection between Roman birthday celebrations and the *lectisternium* back to *Ps.* 162. The context for this single occurrence of *lectisterniator* in Plautus is, in fact, a birthday celebration.

My argument that the Romans associated the official *lectisternium* with birthday celebrations may hold significance for a broader understanding of Roman *religio*. This ritual began as a sacred feast for the official Roman pantheon, but over time, individual Romans seem to have shifted the boundaries of the rite and created an association with other religious practices. This paper also comments on Plautus' comedy and treatment of Roman cultural material. While the playwright may be making a joke about the *lectisternium*, the connection between *lectisternia* and birthdays seems to offer the best explanation of *Ps.* 162. The fact that this connection is articulated in so popular a venue as the production of a Plautus play, moreover, demonstrates the flexibility in Roman religious practices – i.e., adapting the *lectisternium* – as well as Plautus' role as a voice for contemporary Roman culture.

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