Plautinisches im Ovid:
The *Metamorphoses*, the *Amphitruo,* and a Rejection of Roman Comedy

Scholars have thus far not produced an analysis of the intertextual links between Plautus' description of Hercules' birth at *Amphitruo* 1061-71 and Ovid's rendering of Alcmene's birth pangs at *Metamorphoses* 9.281-322. My paper argues that a number of Ovidian allusions to the Plautine corpus embrace the grotesqueness of the comic world, but ultimately criticize its harmlessness as incompatible with the *Weltbild* of the epic poem. The series culminates in the birth scene, which is as clear in its allusions to the *Amphitruo* as it is in its ultimate rejection of Plautus' mythography.

Ovid evokes scenes, characters, and motifs from Plautus' plays as early as in the second line of the *Metamorphoses.* His observation that the gods transformed (*mutastis*, *Met.* 1.2) his choice of genre from elegy to epic alludes in both language and content to the *prologus* of the *Amphitruo,* where Mercury actively transforms the play into a "tragicomedy" (*commutauero/ eandem hanc, si uoltis, faciam ex tragoedia / comoedia ut sit omnibus isdem uorsibus ... faciam ut commixta sit; sit tragicomoedia, nam me perpetuo facere ut sit comoedia / reges quo ueniant et di, non par arbitror*, *Amph.* 53-55; 59-61). Ovid's demand that the gods make his poem *perpetuum* (*Met.* 1.4) then stands in deliberate contrast to Mercury's reluctance to allow the Plautine play to be a comedy *perpetuo.* This *recusatio* already hints at the overall attitude of the *Metamorphoses* toward Plautine plays, as does the Ovidian Mercury's appearance toward the end of book 1: he is no longer a comic prankster but the cold-blooded slayer of Argus. The readers of the *Metamorphoses* may often be reminded of the Plautine *Amphitruo* and its Mercury, as the two works abound in physical transformations, trickster gods, and illicit sex. Yet the world of epic is never as innocent as a harmless comedy, and Ovid subtly maintains the tension between the two genres. His gods brag like *milites gloriosi* or are tricked like various other stock-types, yet unlike in Greco-Roman Comedy, the result is, inevitably, pain and suffering.

Ovid returns to Plautus' rendering of the mythology surrounding Hercules' birth in book 9, where he presents his own, grimmer interpretation. He directly appropriates a burlesque element from the *Amphitruo* in Alcmene's speech at *Met.* 9.287-89, where she describes the enormousness of her pregnant belly. Christenson (2000, 37-39) treats Alcmene's pregnancy as a particularly memorable point of visual humor in the Plautine play, and Ovid's intention of alluding to this "prominent" feature of the *Amphitruo* becomes more obvious if we consider that the epic poem's other pregnancies do not include such descriptions. In addition, in both Ovid and Plautus the event of Hercules' birth is reported in retrospect speeches, includes a servant, and the gods feature in central roles, while particular importance is attached to the length of the birthing process. Ovid systematically touches on every one of these items as they were suggested by Plautus, but ultimately rejects their levity. In the *Metamorphoses*, the birth is not quick and painless but takes seven days; Jupiter does not assist but Juno obstructs; and the *Amphitruo*'s happy servant is turned into a weasel in Ovid. The role of Lucina is also noteworthy, as it is a stock feature of "comic" birth scenes to invoke the help of this goddess. Plautus' Alcmene calls for but does not require her support. Dismissing this cheerful outcome, Ovid has his Lucina increase the mother's pain, instead of shortening it. Reality, or such would be the implication of the *Metamorphoses*, is a lot harsher than Plautus would have it, and Ovid is out to set the record straight.

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