

Let Them Talk: The Politics of Plautine Gossip

In Plautus, people talk. And not just through their masks to the audience. Behind the backs of the very characters inhabiting his comedies, Plautus constructs an unseen world of gossip. The actions on stage become potential fodder for the imaginary busybodies inhabiting the imaginary city invoked as the setting. All of this can become quite unnerving for a Plautine character. So the clever Virgo of *Persa* fears rumor's repercussions once word should get out that she has pretended to be sold: *nam ad paupertatem si admigrant infamiae* (Act III.i.347). Likewise, the young spendthrift of *Trinummus* reacts angrily to an offer that he thinks will leave him in a bad light: *ne mi hanc famam differant* (Act III.ii.689). In both of these examples, marriage is at issue and the question of a dowry looms large. In the case of *Persa*, the spread of gossip might prevent the young woman from finding a suitable match, while in *Trinummus*, an unsuitable match will result in gossip.

The comedic frivolity of their concerns belies genuine reason for anxiety, an anxiety most clearly articulated in Vergil's baroque description of Fama in *Aeneid* 4. People talk, and that talk can have real consequences. Through the funhouse mirror of these Plautine plots one can glimpse a society in which informal talk supplements legal procedures to maintain a strict societal hierarchy. Gossip exists, according to a recent overview published by the American Psychological Association, to build and maintain social networks (*Rumor Psychology*, N. DiFonzo and P. Bordia, 2007). These contemporary social scientists distinguish the offhand personal judgments rendered in "gossip" from "rumor", which is reserved for cases of unverified information about a significant situation in a context of ambiguity and potential risk. Yet in a society like that of Rome in which one's place in the social network is always of paramount importance and is always at risk, the idleness of "gossip" carries the ramifications of "rumor." All politics is indeed personal when one lives in a *polis*.

Plautus does offer possible relief. Early in *Trinummus*, the wiser and older Callices has responded to news of gossip-mongering with the dismissive: *quin dicant, non est; merito ut ne dicant, id est* (Act I.ii.105). Or in the words of Saturio, the father of the Virgo: *dicat quod quisque volt* (Act III.i.373). Let them talk.