

## Heroes and Fools: Uses of Mythical References by Low-Status Characters in Plautus

Plautine characters frequently make mythical references and compare themselves, others, or their situations to mythical figures and events. Even when limiting mythical references to named references and excluding simple evocations of deities' names and oaths, Plautus's corpus includes numerous examples, proportionately more references than extant Menander or Terence (Hines). This paper studies mythical references made by low-status characters in Plautus, which have not yet been systematically addressed in scholarship. I argue that these characters use myth to challenge social hierarchy by either elevating themselves as heroes or bringing down their social superiors. Plautus consistently characterizes low-status characters as mythically knowledgeable and high-status characters as mythically ignorant. This pattern undermines Roman social hierarchy by portraying it as arbitrary. The use of myth to elevate low-status characters and critique social hierarchy is in line with Plautus's tendency to focus on enslaved persons and other low-status individuals.

Previous scholarship on mythical references has largely followed Eduard Fraenkel in debating whether the references are Plautine inventions or are original to Greek plays (Hines, Law, Prescott, Questa, Zagagi). Emilia Barbiero and K. F. B. Fletcher have recently demonstrated the relevance of mythical references for characterization in *Bacchides* and *Menaechmi*. Since Fraenkel, scholars have also consistently noted the importance of low-status characters, especially enslaved characters, in Plautus's drama (e.g., Richlin). Fletcher has even connected mythical references and social status in *Menaechmi*, arguing that "most of the time a character uses myth it is as part of a strategy for taking over a scene and of asserting authority over another character, often of a lower social status" (47). This analysis is true for *Menaechmi*,

where high-status characters use the most mythical references. It does not account, however, for the ways in which Plautine low-status characters use mythical references to challenge rather than reinforce social hierarchy. I address these previously unexplored mythical references made by low-status characters and the characterization they entail.

This paper first defines two major categories of mythical references made by low-status characters: references that either cast them as heroes or ridicule higher-status persons. I analyze two heroizing examples: Chrysalus's Trojan War monody in *Bacchides* (925–978) and Milphidippa and Palaestrio's references to Troy in *Miles Gloriosus* (1025–1026). Chrysalus's monody is a torrent of references comparing himself to heroes and even claiming to surpass them (*Atridae duo fratres cluent fecisse facinus maxumum / ... / non pedibus termento fuit praeut égo erum expugnabo* 925, 929). Milphidippa does not boast, but rather uses myth as a shared language to communicate with Palaestrio about the trick they are playing on the ignorant *miles*: *quo pacto hoc Ilium appelli / uelis, id fero ad te consilium* (1025–1026). These heroizing references allow low-status characters to claim their importance and knowledge within the play, which the events of the plays validate.

I then turn to two ridiculing references in *Miles* and *Menaechmi*. The enslaved Milphidippa continues to trick the *miles* and compares him with Achilles to flatter him into action: *age, mi Achilles, fiat quod te oro, serua illam pulchram pulchre, / exprome benignum ex te ingeniúm, urbicaepe, occisor regum* (1054–1055). He misses the irony, but Milphidippa and Palaestrio cannot control their laughter: they break into an aside which conveys to the audience how humorous the soldier's ignorance is (1073–1074). Similarly, when Menaechmus compares himself to Ganymede and Adonis (143–146), he intends his reference to be self-complimentary. The parasite Peniculus, however, reinterprets the reference with an unintended ridiculing

interpretation (193–195). These references display low-status characters’ ability to use mythical knowledge to ridicule unwitting high-status characters.

I conclude that Plautine mythical references present an uncomfortable disconnect between social power and knowledge. Those who have social power are both ignorant and unaware of their ignorance, while those who lack social power use their knowledge to exploit this ignorance. The divorce between knowledge and social power in Plautine mythical references reveals social hierarchy as uncomfortably arbitrary.

#### Works Cited

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