Helping through Harming: Divine Intervention in the Prologues of *Aulularia* and *Rudens*

This paper examines the prologues of Plautus' *Aulularia* and *Rudens.* The two plays contain elements that are not frequently found in other Plautine plays—namely that they are both given by divine beings (a Lar in *Aulularia* and the god-star Arcturus in *Rudens*). Other plays do have divinely spoken prologues (*Amphitruo, Casina, Cistellaria,* and *Trinummus*), but these prologues largely serve descriptive purposes (Marshall 2006). The divine beings give a summary of how the play got to its starting point before getting to the action, a fundamental aspect of comic prologues (McCarthy 2016). The Lar and Arcturus, while serving a similar function, take on greater roles in their prologues. Both characters discuss their direct involvement in the plot rather than their mere presence overhanging the play. In *Aulularia*, the Lar tells us that he has revealed a pot of gold to Euclio in order to provide a dowry for his daughter (26-27). In *Rudens*, Arcturus describes how he started a storm so the *leno* would be ruined and the girls in his possession be saved (68-69).

These prologues exemplify divine intervention that is absent from much of Plautus' other work (with *Amphitruo* standing as an exception). In the divine intervention of these two plays, Plautus creates prologues given by active divine agents that are different from the other prologues in his corpus. First, it shows Plautus' ingenuity in constructing and unfolding his plots. He deploys a similar conceit to vastly different results. The Lar tells the audience what the resolution of the play will be: the rapist Lyconides will marry Phaedria because of the Lar's machinations (31-32). Arcturus, in contrast, only describes his role in kicking off the plot, but gives no indication of how the rest of the play will unfold (68-82). Both gods, however, in their efforts to help the citizen daughter, put the daughter in extreme danger. The Lar first brings about

an engagement between Phaedria and the older Megadorus (31), creating a situation where the rape and her pregnancy will be discovered by her father and new husband. Arcturus, in sending a storm, puts the lost citizen daughter Palaestra in a position where she almost drowns and then must seek shelter on a foreign shore (74-76). The danger, however, leads to the successful resolution of the plot and the intervention of the respective gods is crucial to securing safety for each daughter in the aftermath.

The intervention of these gods also allows Plautus to experiment with traditional elements of the comic plot. The Lar and Arcturus both function in lieu of the *servus callidus*—enslaved trickster—of other Plautine plots. They both create overly complex situations through which the *adulescens* can be united with his beloved. In *Aulularia,* the Lar ensures that Lyconides will do his best to rectify his violent act. In *Rudens*, Arcturus brings about Plesidippus' defeat of the pimp Labrax so he can marry Palaestra. In revealing the deceptions in the prologue, Plautus conflates the divine character with that of the trickster. Additionally, the unique nature of these prologues creates tragicomic resonances throughout the two plays. The intervention of a divine being, while not unknown to New Comedy or Roman Comedy (Hunter 1987), is more at home in tragedy. Elements of paratragedy have been explored in *Rudens,* especially in the *cantica* (Stockert 2016). In the *Aulularia*, the role of the Lar and its revelation of hidden family truths add a tragic tone to the opening of the play, even if the play's comedy has come under less scrutiny than that of *Rudens* (Lefèvre 2006).

The prologues of *Aulularia* and *Rudens* represent unique plot devices in Plautus's plays. The divine beings do not merely lay out the plot of the play but participate in the plot themselves. He uses them to fulfill functions that other characters and devices—such as the

servus callidus—perform and to innovate on the stock plot and characters that are inherent to Roman Comedy.

Works Cited

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