

Breaking Formula as Social Criticism in Plautus's *Casina*

The interpretation of Plautus's comedy as serious social criticism has been elided under flattening models which reduce even the most compelling Plautine content to standard comedic conventions (Segal 1968). Even scholars such as Forehand (1973), who grants Plautus some authorial intentionality, have urged against interpreting this intentionality as amounting to ordered social commentary.

In this paper I argue that a cogent criticism of contemporary systems of power is not only present but deliberately foregrounded in Plautus's *Casina*. The playwright communicates this criticism through systematic, conspicuous deviations from comedic convention which resonate to critical effect with the sociological situation of Plautus's Rome. Most notably Lysidamus, the play's central figure, belongs to a stock type, the *senex amator* (old man in love), yet is characterized in an extremely unusual way. Conventionally, comedies stop short of exploiting the transgressive potential of the *senex amator* by distancing the character's lecherous adultery from his role as *paterfamilias*. Yet in the figure of Lysidamus, Plautus deviates from this typical depiction to portray the *senex amator* specifically and unavoidably as a corrupted *paterfamilias*, and to critically focalize the systems of power which enable the destabilizing consequences of his corruption.

In Section 1, I identify the unusual measures that Plautus takes to emphasize Lysidamus's failure as a father and husband. Conventionally, a *senex amator* might pursue a slave-girl only out of genuine ignorance that she is his son's girlfriend (*Mer.* 991-996), or might aid his son's affair in exchange for enjoying a night with the girl (*As.* 731-736). Yet Lysidamus acts in direct contradiction to his role as a father: he lusts after a little slave-girl from his own household, who

has been raised as if she were his own daughter, and he knowingly contends against his own son in pursuit of her (*Cas.* 45-49). In an outright abuse of the *paterfamilias*'s *potestas* over his children, Lysidamus forces his son abroad to clear the way for his own lecherous pursuit (*Cas.* 62).

Moreover, the *senex amator*'s adultery is conventionally justified as a reaction to his nagging wife's insufferable *industria* ("assiduousness") (e.g. *Menaechmi* 110-118, 791). Yet Lysidamus's wife Cleostrata is, strikingly, not a nag. Her *industria* is instead described as the care with which she has raised the slave-girl Casina like her own daughter (*Cas.* 44-46). Therefore Lysidamus's complaints against Cleostrata's *industria* are not a typical sympathetic reference to spousal nagging: they are instead a lecher's resentment of the woman's maternal effort to protect her child from his rapacious pursuit (*Cas.* 276-278).

In Section 2, I argue that Plautus draws critical attention to the contemporary system of power which enables Lysidamus to act on his corrupt desire, and disenfranchises Cleostrata of any recourse against him. *Cas.* 194-211 conspicuously emphasizes that Cleostrata and Lysidamus are in a *cum manu* marriage; that is, she has been brought under his legal power as *paterfamilias*, and has surrendered to him ownership of any property that she had owned prior to, or would acquire during, their marriage. Therefore Cleostrata is powerless to prevent Lysidamus from doing as he pleases with the little slave-girl who is, legally, his property. It is for this reason that Cleostrata, uniquely among the Plautine wives, struggles against her husband with virtuosic trickery: the comedic weapon of slaves and prostitutes, of people to whom no systemic power is afforded.

In Section 3, I examine the destabilization which the *senex amator*'s systemically enabled corruption wreaks upon every sphere of the *paterfamilias*'s social role: for the sake of his

lecherous pursuit, Lysidamus creates conflict in his household (*Cas.* 327-330), abuses his religious authority (*Cas.* 363 ff), neglects his extended relatives while shirking his participation in the legal institution (*Cas.* 563-575), and distorts the obligations of friendship (*Cas.* 515-519). This destabilization consistently results in scenes of violently inflected discord. I briefly identify contemporary sociological instabilities which may have prompted Plautus's presentation of this criticism.

By explicating Plautus's illustration of the systemic facilitation and social consequences of an atypically corrupt *senex amator*, this paper demonstrates the method of conspicuous, socially resonant deviation from convention through which the *Casina* communicates an ordered criticism against systems of power. This study is part of a broader project identifying Plautus's increasingly critical engagement with systems of power over the course of his career. It offers a rare glimpse into how non-elite, marginalized members of society experienced the imbalances of power which so pervaded Roman life.

Works Cited

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