

Sexual Violence and Sex Industry in Comedies of Plautus

Despite being the subject of a great deal of scholarship in the fields of reception and literary criticism, in the past Plautus has often been relegated to that problematic sort of ancient comedy whose more unsavory elements scholars would rather not dwell upon. These include sexual assault, slavery, visible, brutal onstage beatings, and any number of situations which suggest or depict something horrific to modern cultural sensitivities, which are nonetheless the subject not simply of abject horror, but often of great humor, seemingly at the victims' expense.

In particular, across Plautus's work there is a large volume of content surrounding sexual violence and the sex industry of Ancient Rome. This is due in no small part to the fact that the world the playwright inhabited was filled with both: enslaved and free prostitutes alike filled the many legal brothels of the Republic, and enslaved people, prostituted or not, had no agency to resist their masters' advances. One wanting to better understand the place of Plautine comedy in the world of Roman theater, and the broader meaning of Plautus to audiences both ancient and modern, should study these scenes carefully within their contexts and with a critical eye to relevant modern scholarship as a number of scholars in the past couple of decades have attempted.

This paper opens by categorizing the sexual material into a few major types which can be found in numerous instances across the Plautine corpus. These include, broadly: violent sexual contact, including assaults perpetrated by force and those carried out through deception, and jokes surrounding the sex industry, such as those within the monologue of the nameless *Puer* of *Pseudolus* (Plautus, *Pseudolus* 767–789; Christenson, 2020, 263–267). As so much of Plautus's comedy is reliant upon tropes, especially the use of certain types of stock characters (Duckworth,

1952, 236-268), it is often helpful to compare scenes with similar qualities in different plays, as when the interpretation of one is unclear, studying a similar scene in a slightly different context can tell readers much about how to understand the scene in the former.

The remainder of the paper will then deal with a number of instances of violent humor from across the Plautine corpus and attempt to establish whether they reinforce, are ambivalent to, or attempt to subvert violent institutions of Roman society. Scholars disagree widely on the nature of these, in particular those involving slaves and their relationships with their masters and overseers (McCarthy, 2000; Stewart, 2012), and while this study can by no means address every point raised by the proponents of various theses, it will nonetheless attempt to provide methods for reasonably interpreting the types of material outlined above with reference to contemporary scholarship.

Bibliography

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