Visualizing Comedy: Network Mapping Plautus

Plautus' plays provide a rare glimpse into the broad range of possible social contact in ancient Rome. On the Plautine stage, sex-laborers converse with high-status, citizen men, poor hanger-ons petition their rich patrons, enslaved men negotiate their status with their free enslavers, and citizen wives confront their unfaithful husbands, among many other interactions. Through these depictions—cutting across class, status, and gender—Plautus offers crucial evidence for social dynamics in ancient Rome.

This paper presents a new way to analyze these interactions through a series of social network maps using the network analysis software, Gephi. These maps visually represent the intricate social dynamics of Plautus' plays, tracking key metrics such as the total lines spoken, total lines on stage, and total lines exchanged in conversation. Characters are depicted as nodes, whose size corresponds to the number of lines they speak. Nodes can be color-coded to indicate a character's gender, class, or stock-type, depending on the focus of the network map analysis. Edges, or lines between characters, represent shared conversation, with the thickness of the edges reflecting the number of lines spoken in conversation. The resulting web-like structure of interconnected nodes provides a high-level overview of the social interactions within a given play.

These textual visualizations open up new opportunities for analyzing Plautine plays. In this paper, I will demonstrate how social network maps can be used in conjunction with a close reading of the Latin text to enhance our understanding of Roman social dynamics as depicted by Plautus. The plays *Bacchides* and *Asinaria* are used as case studies to demonstrate this method. For instance, in *Asinaria*, a network analysis of the *meretrix*, Philaenium, together with a close

reading of the language of *pudicitia*, reveals how Plautus blurs the line between the *meretrix* and *virgo intacta* stock-types. By muddling the distinction between sex-workers and free-citizen women, Plautus trivializes the institution of elite Roman marriage (James 2020) and highlights the precarious status of women in ancient Rome, who's social standing and marriage eligibility is often dictated by male perceptions of their *pudicitia*.

While in *Bacchides*, network maps highlight how the two enslaved characters, Chrysalus and Lydus, and the low-status free character, an unnamed hanger-on, share no time on stage with one another, and instead only interact with upper-class, citizen men. This reflects a broader pattern of lower-class social disconnect that appears throughout the Plautine corpus, underscoring the isolating and perilous nature of enslavement in ancient Rome as depicted by Plautus. When considered alongside the language of violence embedded throughout these interactions (Scott 1990), this pattern illustrates how Plautus portrays the marginalization and accompanying vulnerability of enslaved individuals throughout his plays.

Furthermore, this paper demonstrates the potential of network maps for making broader claims about the Plautine social structure across his corpus as it pertains to gender, class, and stock type. Major findings include: statistical evidence for Plautus' saturnalian interests and focus on the lower-class (Richlin 2017); an augmented focus on cross-class rather than intra-class interactions; and the empowerment and centrality of the *matrona* stock type despite the character's generally limited time on stage.

This preliminary work lays the foundation for a larger project aimed at developing a comprehensive database of interactive network maps for all of Greek New Comedy and Roman Comedy. Such a resource would allow scholars and students of ancient theater to explore social

relationships, intersections of gender, class, and status, and patterns of composition within and across Plautine plays and other ancient authors.

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