

“I went in a lover and came out a brother?” Near-Miss Incest in Plautus’ Comedies

Although near-miss incest and quasi-incestuous woman-sharing occur in eight of Plautus’ plays, few scholars treat these themes (Archibald, Franko, Keyes, Slater). Plautus is rarely recognized as engaging serious issues because of his bawdy humor, rapid-fire dialogue, and slapstick but he does explore—with humor—social hypocrisies, slave torture (McCarthy, Parker, Stewart), and other discomfiting subjects, including potential social breakdown via near-miss incest.

Consummated incest in antiquity was considered the purview of barbarians or tyrants (McCabe, 25), and was a common charge against political enemies (e.g. Cimon, Alcibiades, Clodius Pulcher). In Greek tragedy, incest causes lasting catastrophe (Archibald, 56). Greece favored endogamy, and homopatric siblings could marry (Cohen, 225-27; Dziatzko; Harrison; Keyes; Stärk), but Romans practiced exogamy (Shaw & Saller), prohibiting half-sibling marriage (Slater, 198). Roman revulsion against incestuous relationships allows Plautus to exploit the threat of incest as a means of increasing dramatic tension and exploring the degeneration of the societies he depicts.

Menander provides a prototype. In *Perikeiromene*, Moschion lusts after a hetaera he does not know is his sister, and in *Georgos*, an old man seeks to marry a girl who is probably his daughter. In both plays, the recognition of the girl’s paternity prevents incest and allows her to marry the young man with whom she has already had sexual relations. In Plautus’ *Curculio* a soldier pursues a *meretrix* who is actually his sister; in *Epidicus* a girl is purchased as a concubine by her half-brother; in *Poenulus* a foreign father (Blume) searches for his daughters—*meretrices*—by hiring prostitutes and having sex with them (Franko) while enquiring if they are his daughters; and in *Rudens* where an old man lusts after a girl who will turn out to be his

daughter. All instances of near-miss incest are unwitting, and the would-be lovers relinquish sexual claims when the girls' identities are revealed.

Plautus also features several instances of quasi-incestuous woman-sharing between father and son. The homosocial triangle of father-son erotic competition for a single woman has incestuous connotations: "the continuum of male homosocial desire" was bound up with "male friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry, and hetero- and homosexuality" (Sedgwick, 1). *Asinaria*, *Bacchides*, *Casina*, and *Mercator* feature conscious father-son sexual rivalry. Plautus' characterization of the old men as ridiculous indicates the inappropriate nature of their desire (Bianco).

What is the meaning of near-incest in Plautus' comedies? Slater (202) asserts, "the daring in even hinting such a thing energizes the comedy of the play...for a Roman audience, the prospect [of incest] is indeed morally outrageous, and therefore fraught with comic possibility." But near-miss incest is more than a vehicle for comedy: recognition plots showcase fragmentation and reintegration of the family, and the fragmented family itself is a symptom of greater social dysfunction. The taboo of potential incest raises dramatic tension and marks a flawed family in need of healing. Plautus pays lip service to social reintegration with his pat happy endings, but he mocks the superficiality of dramatic resolution by depicting lecherous fathers, slave torture, unhappy marriages, foolish sons, and near-miss incest. Though subtler in critique and more overt in humor, Plautus deserves to be ranked alongside Terence in challenging the generic conventions of Menandrian New Comedy.

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