

Comic Twins in Plautus, Shakespeare, and the Marx Brothers:
Surrealism and Breaking the Conventions of Social Discourse

Plautus clearly took delight in having two characters look alike. Indeed, we can distinguish between two “twins” scenarios. The first situation is characterized by *mistaken identity*. When a twin arrives unannounced in a new town, local characters mistake this brother for the one they know (*Menaechmi*; cf. Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors*). The second situation is that of *usurpation*, a competition in which one actor tries to take over another’s identity. When Mercury takes on Sosia’s appearance and manner in *Amphitryo*, Sosia in some sense surrenders his role as Mercury plays the *servus callidus* (263-69, e.g.) and Sosia becomes “un-Sosia-ed” (*exossatum*—318-20; see Fontaine (2010) 120). Sosia later laments: “I need to find another name” (423; cf. 302-5, 439).

This talk seeks to explore contrasting perspectives, comic theory, and a twentieth-century parallel to the usurpation scenario. First, I contrast the characters’ and the audience’s perspectives on mistaken identity and usurpation. Characters within the plays often find themselves in what they feel is an irrational or dreamlike situation and attribute the strange events to madness, dreaming, drunkenness, “cozenage,” or witchcraft. If the townspeople are not out of their minds or conniving, it would seem that the world itself has been altered in a “surreal” way. The audience, of course, enjoys a position of epistemological superiority relative to characters in the drama; in the *usurpation scenario*, however, not only does the audience know why mistakes are made, but certain characters in the play actively enlist the audience in their scheme. As Christenson (2000)

146-47 puts it, Mercury's prologue draws "the audience deeper into the gods' conspiratorial net" (see also Moore (1998) 115).

My second goal is to employ two neglected approaches that may illuminate our understanding of comedy: surrealism and (anti-)politeness theory. Emphasizing the world beyond rationality, *surrealism* embraces dream and myth, surprise and non sequitur, and the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated objects. The second approach derives from *politeness theory* which posits a "model speaker," who is rational, wishes to "maintain face" in conversation, and expects others to operate in the same manner (see Brown and Levinson 1978). Yet in comedy, characters employ irony and lies, utter insults and obscenities, and discuss taboo subjects. The recurring scenario of comic twins therefore may be illuminated by following a two-fold approach. For example, the apparently irrational world the out-of-town Menaechmus finds himself in (the surreal situation) appears to free him from the normal conventions of social discourse; this leads him to insult and attack his brother's wife (an instance of "anti-politeness"—*Men.* 701-52). That is, he has entered the world of comedy where reason and courtesy have been banished.

Third, I will show three short excerpts from the Marx Brothers movie *Duck Soup* (1933). Often one of the best ways to appreciate ancient comedy (or contemplate its staging) is to find a modern analogue. The famous "mirror" episode from *Duck Soup* presents Harpo—a usurper in disguise—as a "reflection" of Groucho, who must test to see if this is really "him" (with interesting parallels and contrasts to the Sosia-Mercury scene in *Amphitryon*). The Marx Brothers also delight in odd juxtapositions and employ non sequitur in much of their conversation. For example, Groucho asks: "What is it that has

four pairs of pants, lives in Philadelphia, and it never rains but it pours?” Taylor (2008) notes that the surrealist Salvador Dali found Harpo Marx to be “one of the great American surrealists.” In Plautus, Shakespeare, and early twentieth-century cinema, we encounter similar comic impulses that incorporate the surreal scenario and “anti-politeness” humor.

Bibliography

- H. E. Barnes, “The Case of *Sosia Versus Sosia*,” *CJ* 53 (1957) 19-24.
- P. Brown and S. Levinson. *Politeness. Some Universals in Language Usage* (Cambridge 1987).
- D. Christenson (ed.). *Plautus. Amphitruo* (Cambridge 2000).
- M. Fontaine. *Funny Words in Plautine Comedy* (Oxford 2010).
- B. Freedman, “Errors in Comedy: A Psychoanalytic Theory of Farce,” in *Shakespearean Comedy*, ed. M. Charney (New York 1980) 233-43.
- E. W. Leach, “*Meam Quom Formam Noscito*: Language and Characterization in the *Menaechmi*,” *Arethusa* 2 (1969) 30-45.
- C. W. Marshall, “*Quis Hic Loquitur?* Plautine Delivery and the ‘Double Aside,’” *Syllecta Classica* 10 (1999) 105-29.
- _____. *The Stagecraft and Performance of Roman Comedy* (Cambridge 2006).
- R. Miola. *Shakespeare and Classical Comedy* (Oxford 1994).
- T. J. Moore. *The Theatre of Plautus: Playing to the Audience* (Austin, TX 1998).
- E. Segal, “The *Menaechmi*: Roman Comedy of Errors,” *Yale Classical Studies* 21 (1969) 77-93.

N. Slater. *Plautus in Performance: The Theatre of the Mind* (Princeton 1985).

M. R. Taylor, "Giraffes on Horseback Salad," in *Dali and Film*, ed. by M. Gale (2008)

140-53.