

More than Laughter in Plautus's *Amphitryon*

Plautus's *Amphitryon* is an anomaly among extant Roman comedies, because it is the one surviving example of a play in which gods appear alongside mortal characters. In *Amphitryon* the term *tragicomoedia* (tragicomedy) appears for the first time in Latin literature to describe this blending of comedy and tragedy, and it is the god Mercury who coins the term in the play's prologue. However, while modern scholarship lacks other examples of tragicomedy, both literary references and south Italian vase painting provide evidence for a much older tradition that blended comedy and tragedy, a tradition that can be traced back in literature to the mimes of Epicharmus of Syracuse in the fifth century, the hilarotragedia of Rhinthon in fourth-century Syracuse, and the so-called phlyakes vases of southern Italy. So Plautus's *Amphitryon*, written and performed perhaps around 200 B.C., was not a novelty. Indeed, the play's topic, focusing as it does on the conception of Heracles through Jupiter's sexual adventure with Alcmena, was perhaps one of the most well-known myths about one of the most well-known heroes in the Greco-Roman world.

Since the cast of *Amphitryon* includes two gods, a hero and his wife (who is mentioned in Homer), the play presents a group of beings different from the slaves, pimps, and foolish young lovers of Plautus's other plays. With divine and heroic characters, *Amphitryon* delivers comedy in a different register. On the one hand it is funny to hear the god Mercury talk and behave like a comic slave; and, as Christenson has argued, the audience would have found it humorous to watch a male actor in drag play the part of pregnant Alcmena. On the other hand, the play also stirs up real philosophical questions about self-identity, trust, and the nature of spousal love. So while it is possible to laugh at characters, situations, and lines in *Amphitryon*, there is also enough in the play to make one think, if not cry.

However, the most recent editor of the play, David Christenson has claimed that “Plautus did not want his audience to reflect on any possible ‘tragic’ implications of Alcmena’s situation.” This claim seems too restrictive. Christenson’s insistence on a purely farcical reading of the play and especially Alcmena’s situation does not recognize the double nature inherent in tragicomedy. Alcmena’s first song at lines 633 – 53, which draws attention to a number of important Roman concepts including especially *virtus*, offers a good point of departure in any discussion of tragic or philosophical meaning in the play. So without dismissing Christenson’s argument entirely, my contention is that one should consider the serious concepts in *Amphitryon* for a full appreciation of the play. The reception of the Amphitryon myth in later drama especially in works by Kleist (1807) and Giraudoux (1929) demonstrates that the material transcends the farcical.

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