

Inversion and Instability: Gendered Humor in Plautus' *Mostellaria*

In Plautus' *Mostellaria*, one scene has managed to elude serious scholarly criticism and, at times, has been neglected by commentators and editors altogether. In the opening act of the play, the *adulescens* Philolaches completes a monologue in which he bemoans that his life has been turned upside-down by his love for the courtesan Philematium. Then, the courtesan herself, recently freed by Philolaches, and her *ancilla* Scapha come onto the stage, while Philolaches retreats to another portion of the stage and spies upon the women. From here, the scene is divided into two distinct parts that are clearly delineated by the meter. In the first portion, the two women discuss the nature of Philematium's love for Philolaches; however, in the second, Philematium is shown at her toilet, gussying herself up for her beloved while Scapha protests her actions. In these three episodes – the monologue, the discussion of love, and the toilet-scene – the roles of Philolaches, Philematium and Scapha amplify the main themes of inversion and instability that form the foundation of the play. This paper aims to analyze these roles in depth through a close reading and argues that Plautus achieves his dramatic goal of inversion and instability through a manipulation of gender stereotypes.

First, this paper will take up the character of Philolaches and will show that he is not simply a typical Plautine *adulescens*, but has effectively been effeminized by the lack of a paternal presence and his relationship to Philematium. Philolaches' effeminate nature will be discussed through two means. Primarily, Philolaches' actions are beyond those normally associated with *adulcentes* in Plautus, as he not only falls for a *meretrix*, but even buys her freedom and aims to marry her and make her his heir. In addition, he even refuses to face his father at the play's end and sends Calliopides, a typical *adulescens*, to speak on his behalf. Then, the analysis of Philolaches will turn to his immoderate and violent mood swings throughout the

scene that color him in a feminine light as one who is *immodus* and unable to maintain control of his impulses.

After looking at Philolaches' effemination, this examination will then turn to the female characters in the scene, Philematium and Scapha, and will show that they continue the theme of instability through their ambiguous and constantly changing roles. During the course of the scene, Philematium acts first as a *meretrix iuvenis*, then as a *puella pudica*, and then as the *matrona* of Philolaches. This paper will attempt to analyze these role changes through looking at *comporanda* in the Plautine corpus and will argue that these changes are consistent with stereotypes of women in New Comedy and were incorporated to constantly frustrate the expectations of the audience and to emphasize the ever-present theme of inversion in the play.

In the final portion of this paper, the analysis will broaden out to examine the socio-historical background of the play in an attempt to answer why Plautus chose these references for his jokes. It will argue that the effeminization of Philolaches could correspond to the struggle between *veteri mores* and *novi mores* in late second century BCE Rome that is seen throughout Plautine drama. Likewise, the changing depictions of Philematium and Scapha seem to correspond to the advent of Pythagorean doctrine in Rome and the debate over the *Lex Oppida*, both of which highlighted the volatile nature of women. Thus, Plautus' use of gender stereotypes can be seen to be relevant to his time period and could be used to create the inversion in the roles of Philematium, Philolaches and Scapha in the earlier portions of the *Mostellaria*.

Bibliography

- Dutsch, D. (2008). *Feminine Discourse in Roman Comedy*. Oxford.
- Fantham, E. (1975). "Sex, Status, and Survival in Hellenistic Athens: A Study of Women in New Comedy" in *Phoenix* 29.1, pp. 44-74.
- Friedrich, W.H. (1941). "Zur Altlateinischen Dichtung" in *Hermes* 76.2, pp. 113-135.
- Goldberg, S. (1983). "Terence, Cato and the Rhetorical Prologue" in *CP* 85, pp. 198-211.
- Hallett, J. (1984). *Fathers and Daughters in Roman Society: Women and the Elite Family*. Princeton.
- Johnston, P. (1980). "Poenulus I.2 and Roman Women" in *TAPA* 110, pp. 143-159.
- Merrill, F. (2010). *Plautus: Mostellaria*. Bristol.
- Moore, T. (1998). *The Theater of Plautus: Playing to the Audience*. UT Press.
- Packman, Z.M. (1999). "Feminine Role Designations in the Comedies of Plautus" in *AJP* 120, pp. 245-258.
- Rosivach, V. (1994). "Anus: Some Older Women in Latin Literature" in *CW* 88, pp. 107-117.
- Wyke, M. (1994). "Woman in the Mirror: The Rhetoric of Adornment in the Roman World" in *Women in Ancient Societies: An illusion of the night*, ed. L. Archer, S. Fischler, and M. Wyke, Routledge, pp. 134-151.