

Class and the *Aulularia*: Megadorus' Criticism of *Uxores Dotatae*

This paper examines the dramatic function of Megadorus' verbally extravagant, misogynistic monologue at lines 475-536 of Plautus' *Aulularia*, a monologue in which he complains about the expenses that are supposed to accompany *uxores dotatae*. Relations between the rich and the poor are a central thematic tension in this play, and Megadorus' monologue reinforces the assumption that any suspicion felt by the poor toward the rich is unfounded. Plautus' characteristic verbal humor in this passage serves to underline this point, effectively making it impossible to miss.

Verbal "exuberance" of the kind seen in this monologue is one of the features most associated with Plautus' language. Puns, nonce formations, and verbal sound effects fill his plays. Certain passages show these features at an exceptionally high rate, leading some to feel that they are, in a sense, more Plautine than the rest. Previous stages of scholarship have focused on the relation of these passages to their Greek models, alternately identifying them as post-Plautine redactions, instances of *contaminatio*, expansions of briefer passages, or as completely free inventions by Plautus. Megadorus' monologue is one such passage (Fraenkel 2007; Kuiper 1940; Questa 1972). This paper will not be concerned with its origins *per se*, but rather with the dramatic function that this especially Plautine language performs.

Megadorus' monologue has long been interpreted as a topical reference to the *Lex Oppia* (Lefèvre 2001). On this model its function is purely comedic, as the Romans presumably liked to hear such criticisms. This is true on many levels, but the attitudes expressed in this monologue are part of a broader network of associations within Roman comedy. The function of Megadorus' comments is best understood through the connection between their assumptions about gender and the implications that these have for socio-economic status. Megadorus is a

wealthy man who proposes to marry the daughter of Euclio, his poor neighbor. Throughout the play he casts himself as Euclio's benefactor, doing him a "favor" by asking for no dowry. This type of wealthy, would-be benefactor appears elsewhere in the Plautine corpus (Burton 2004), with particularly strong connections found in *Trinummus* (Maurice 2003) and *Miles Gloriosus*, where characters comparable to Megadorus speak stylistically and thematically similar monologues. Throughout these plays these characters explicitly claim that they are wealthy enough to help precisely because they have avoided contact with women. This misogynistic benefactor plays on Roman gender stereotypes, and is a stock character of sorts. Megadorus' monologue does not only aim to elicit laughter at the expense of *uxores dotatae*, but also marks him as someone capable of assisting the play's protagonist, building up expectations about the thematic and dramatic conflicts that are to follow. Plautus signals this to the audience by dwelling on the point in an extended and especially exuberant monologue, much as the role of an *adulescens amans* or *parasitus* might be expressed in a lengthy entrance monologue.

Due to the nature of the genre, Euclio cannot simply accept Megadorus' offer and end the play easily. The plot needs tension to make it go, and in the *Aulularia* this tension comes from stereotypes about rich and poor men and their relations with each other. From the beginning of the play the audience knows that Megadorus' marriage proposal is sincere, because we see him conceiving the idea with his sister. Euclio himself does not know this, however. He and Megadorus have two contentious encounters, with Euclio assuming that the rich only befriend the poor in order to cheat them. Megadorus, meanwhile, argues that poor men are always suspicious of the rich, but always end up regretting it. While Euclio is very much the star of this play and is miserly to an absurd extent, Megadorus' comments attribute Euclio's suspicions not just to this exceptional comic miser, but to poor people in general. His misogynistic monologue,

because of the set of associations mentioned above, reminds the audience that he is sincere and that Euclio's suspicions of the rich are unfounded. Megadorus' prediction ends up coming true almost immediately after his monologue, when Euclio tries to relocate his treasure only to have it stolen as a result.

Works Cited

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