

## Son and Daughters, Love and Marriage: On the Plots and Priorities of Roman Comedy

Roman Comedy is often described as aiming for marriage. Such is the masterplot of Greek New Comedy, and more than a few Roman plays end up with at least an arranged union. Thus, the standard plot description for a Roman comedy begins with “boy loves girl” and ends with “boy gets girl.” In between, there is usually something about a clever slave or parasite. Thus Feeney (2010: 284) says of *Pseudolus* that its “fundamental plot resembles virtually every other Plautine plot—boy has met girl but cannot have her, but finally does get her thanks to cunning slave.” This description, which rightly recognizes the crucial role of the clever slave in Plautus’ theater, summarizes a long-standing view found in other sources too numerous to list.

But this summary is fundamentally incorrect. It fits only six of Plautus’ plays: *Asinaria*, *Bacchides*, *Miles*, *Mostellaria*, *Poenulus*, *Pseudolus*, and none of Terence’s, where the clever slave plays a reduced, often ineffective role. Fourteen Plautine plays have no such plot: *Amphitruo*, *Aulularia*, *Captivi*, *Casina*, *Cistellaria*, *Curculio*, *Epidicus*, *Menaechmi*, *Mercator*, *Persa*, *Rudens*, *Stichus*, *Trinummus*, and *Truculentus*. (Most of these do not even have a clever slave.) Even substitution of clever parasite for clever slave adds only two more plays, *Curculio* and *Persa*. As for the marriage-masterplot, Plautus’ plays often do not end in marriage: *Asinaria*, *Bacchides*, *Mercator*, *Miles*, *Mostellaria*, *Persa*, and *Pseudolus* cannot end in marriage—the beloved is a *meretrix*, not a lost daughter; in *Persa* the lover is a slave himself. The titular *Epidicus* actually takes the beloved away from his young master by recognizing her as the boy’s half-sister. *Casina* treats the eventual wedding as an afterthought; *Captivi* is utterly unrelated to romance; *Stichus* and *Amphitruo* cement pre-existing marriages; *Menaechmi* actually breaks up a marriage. In *Truculentus*, marriage is forced upon the Diniarchus, who hopes to continue seeing his *meretrix* Phronesium after marrying the girl he raped. Terence’s plays end in marriage, but

the lover-boy gets little help from slaves. The “boy-loves-girl; boy-gets-girl” plot, particularly when marriage is the end-goal, turns out to be rarer than has been believed. Finally, the “boy-loves-girl” is primary to the stage action far less often than is generally thought—often, it is a side plot or occupies little stage time, as in *Aulularia*, *Casina*, *Cistellaria*, *Epidicus*, *Mostellaria*, *Poenulus*, *Trinummus*, *Truculentus*, *Adelphoe*, *Eunuchus*. When that list is put together with *Amphitryo*, *Captivi*, *Menaechmi*, and *Stichus*, we have to say, that the boy in love is less interesting to Roman Comedy than has been thought.

It is time to re-evaluate the generally accepted masterplot of Roman Comedy, particularly of Plautus’ theater. This paper proposes to begin the process by suggesting that, generically, daughters are much more important to Roman Comedy than to Greek New Comedy. I argue particularly that daughters, especially the ones at risk, are far more important to Roman Comedy than are boys in love. Seventeen of the twenty-six plays feature at least one daughter whose marriage or marriageability is an issue: *Aulularia*, *Casina*, *Cistellaria*, *Curculio*, *Epidicus*, *Menaechmi*, ***Poenulus*** (two daughters), ***Rudens***, *Stichus*, *Trinummus*, *Truculentus*; *Adelphoe*, ***Andria***, ***Eunuchus***, ***HT***, *Hecyra*, ***Phormio***. The ten plays listed in bold contain a citizen girl who was lost and eventually restored to her family.

Furthermore, Roman Comedy shows intense concern for the fates and safety of citizen girls, especially those who lack the protection of families and therefore risk absolute ruin. That concern is articulated on every social level, from slaves to free persons to members of elite families. When this pattern is put together with the frequency of rape of citizen girls in Roman Comedy (nine plays), we can say that Roman Comedy adapts Greek New Comic plots to show a peculiar and generic consciousness of an absolute fact from antiquity—namely that the citizen girl is terribly vulnerable and can be ruined in a matter of minutes.

The tragedy of the raped citizen female is part of Roman foundational history, as recorded not only in the tales of Rhea Silvia and the Sabine women, but also in the stories of Lucretia and Verginia, whose targeting by tyrants caused popular uprising and revolution. These tales are extremely unusual as national foundational stories. The rape and ruin of a wife cannot fit into comedy, as it cannot be resolved by marriage, but as with the Sabine women, rape can be resolved by marriage. I propose that anxiety about the unmarried girl represents specifically Roman perspectives and concerns, and that Roman Comedy's serious social/emotional priorities, which have to do with protecting daughters, are at least as important to the genre as its lightweight, comic masterplot about a boy in love.

#### Bibliography

Feeney, Denis. 2010. "Crediting Pseudolus: Trust, Belief, and the Credit Crunch in Plautus' *Pseudolus*." *CP* 105: 281-300.