

## Speaking Out: The Speech of Matronae in Plautus and Terence

In two successive scenes in *Casina*, Cleostrata interacts with two different male characters. First, she meets her neighbor Alcesimus. She is polite, reserved, and coy. Second, she encounters her husband and behaves quite the opposite—direct and firm. Cleostrata consciously adopts a different form of address for each circumstance. She relies upon her clever adaptation of speech to get the better of each man, thwart their scheming, and protect Casina. Cleostrata is an exemplary model of the manner in which wives and mothers in Plautus and Terence rely on their speech to navigate the various situations and challenges they encounter. While the bumbling male characters stir up havoc in the households with their impulsive actions, the women must adopt an appropriate register to ameliorate their circumstances. Women—physically inferior and subordinate to the authority of their husbands—have no other recourse.

Bain and Adams have produced studies that demonstrate the presence of gendered speech in New Comedy by means of analyzing the types of curses and addresses used by male and female characters. They demonstrate that certain phrases (exclamations: *pol*, *edepol*, *mecastor*, *ecastor*; polite modifiers: *obsecro*, *amabo*) are used more frequently by women. Studies such as these, though helpful, have contributed to a polarized classification of comedy's *uxor dotata*: “good wife” or “bad wife.” Essentially, a distinction is drawn between the subservient, deferential *morigera* and the commanding shrew who tells her husband what to do. Krauss (2004) refutes these reductive assessments of Plautine matronae. She argues that more often than not the matronae are controlling characters and complex comedic agents. Dutsch (2008) also challenges these studies and investigates the manner in which Plautus and Terence use linguistic stereotypes to characterize people of both genders. Following Dutsch and Krauss, I contend that female characters do not merely speak differently but manipulate their speech and

register as an instrument of power. The speech of the matronae—when assessed in context—reveals that the “good” and “bad” wife categories are irrelevant. Matronae, as women, hold a subordinate position in the household. Deferential, flattering language and commanding, stern speech are two methods of resistance and negotiation for women to maintain honor and respect in their own homes, particularly when protecting their children (James 2015).

First, I examine Plautine matronae—Cleostrata in *Casina*, the wives in *Stichus*, and Artemona in *Asinaria*—and the various registers they select in different circumstances. Cleostrata must prevent her husband from making off with the girl Casina and manipulates her interactions with the men to accomplish this. The wives in *Stichus*—husbands absent—are subject to the *patria potestas* of their father and thus rely upon deference and flattery to sway him to allow them to remain married. Artemona, on the other hand, relies on stern, direct speech with her husband. Since Demaenetus is already canoodling with Philaneum, their son’s lover, Artemona has no time for negation. In order to defend her son and protect herself from shame, she must pull her husband back to the house. Furthermore, each matrona comments on her self-conscious use of speech and thereby demonstrates the pointed adoption of register fit to context as means of resistance.

Finally, I conclude with Terence’s *Hecyra*, a play that shows the gross extent to which women are vulnerable to the whims of men. Though Pamphilus’ impulsivity causes the calamity, Laches and Phidippus consistently accuse their wives of instigating the trouble with quarrelsome speech. Far from combative, Sostrata and Myrrina attempt multiple rhetorical maneuvers to calm their spouses and protect their children. Whereas in Plautus the matronae are successful and sway the men, in Terence, Sostrata and Myrrina cannot ameliorate the situation. Rather, it is a twist of cruel fate that resolves Pamphila’s pregnancy—she was raped by her

husband. Thus while Plautus demonstrates the power of women's speech—highlighted by their triumph over dim-witted husbands—Terence underlines women's vulnerability and the limited authority of female speech.

### Bibliography

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