

Twins and Metatheatre in Plautus' *Amphitryon*: A Rejection of New Comedy

As a trope from Greek New Comedy, doppelgangers permeated early Roman comedy, especially the works of Plautus and in none more so than his *Amphitryon*. While this play maintains characteristics of New Comedy, such as twins and the representation of common life, it draws, as Barchiesi observed years ago, upon qualities of Old Comedy and Greek tragedy such as mythological themes and a meta-theatrical quality (Barchiesi, 1970). This paper will discuss the ending of Plautus' *Amphitryon*, which contains the report of the birth of Heracles and his twin, as a conscious move by Plautus to emphasize the meta-theatrical quality of the play by mixing dream and reality, if not to reject, at least to redefine, the conventions of Greek New Comedy. The notion of doubling in *Amphitryon*, seen through sound effects, repetition, and double entendre ultimately is subverted by Plautus' presentation of non-identical "twin" half-brothers, allowing the poet to subvert the poem's central theme of doubling to emphasize *Amphitryon*'s meta-theatrical quality of life's strange coincidences—which in Plautus more than his predecessors now becomes a central feature of New Comedy.

Much scholarship has been written on the significance of doubles in *Amphitryon*. There are doubled characters. Jupiter plays a divine Amphitruo, Mercury a divine slave Sosia, and the play concludes with the birth of the twins Heracles and Iphicles. Christenson (2000) calls the organization of *Amphitryon* a "flexible network of (mostly) binary parallels and oppositions". The theme of doubling in language has been analyzed by critics mostly as it appears in the introduction and early scenes (Hough 1970, Christenson 2000, Fontaine 2010, Polt 2013). Treatments of the theme of doubles, however, have not considered its significance in the ending of the play. By presenting non-identical step twins, Plautus consciously reverses the theme which he has until now so carefully and extensively constructed. The only literal pair of twins in the

play are completely different, one being a demi-god and one being a mere mortal. The final scene of the play features Bromia, then Jupiter, recounting the birth of the twins and focusing on the divine twin. Plautus makes a very obvious move from the ever-present doubles to a lopsided and non-identical pair. In rejecting this theme by which his play as well as New Comedy were marked, Plautus both rejects a convention of New Comedy and emphasizes his presence as playwright by showing how he is able to build and tear down a trope.

In emphasizing his own presence, Plautus furthers the metatheatric aspects of the play. The play's theatric awareness begins in the prologue, in which Mercury, as the real life actor, makes obvious his role as an actor and audience participation. In addition, as a character, he makes obvious his and Jupiter's roles as actors – impersonators of Amphitruo and Sosia – within the play. Here there are demonstrated two levels of metatheater: that is the awareness of role playing in conjunction with a play-within-a-play (Slater 1985). The monologues of the play further emphasizes this. Both Slater (1985) and Segal (2001) comment on the dream-like nature of the human character's world, focusing on the confrontation between Mercury and Sosia and the scene's oneiric elements. Scholarship on metatheatre hitherto has not examined its significance in the ending of the play. Ending the dream-like play-within-a-play, Plautus emphasizes the meta-quality which he constructed. He furthers the metatheatric dream aspect by extracting the human characters from the nightmarish play which the gods have imposed upon them and returning them to (disputably) normal life. Simultaneously Plautus pulls the reader from the world of the play and deposits them into established myth and tradition, showing awareness of theatricality by signaling the end of *Amphitryon* with the beginning of myth. By revealing that the birth of the twins is the mythological birth of Heracles, Plautus jumps out of the everyday-world of New Comedy and into myth, inserting a touch of the ancient mythology of

Middle and Old Comedy. My reading suggests that *Amphitryon* can be seen as a rejection of New Comedy both through the rejection of the doubles theme and the final, metatheatric re-entrance of myth.

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