

The Improvisatory Spectrum in Plautus

Plautus inherited a tradition that was a heady mixture of the scripted theater of Athens and the improvised traditions of Italy. Plautine scholarship has long focused on Plautus' use of Greek scripted originals, but there has been a trend recently to engage seriously with the improvised traditions that provided the basis for the audience's expectations (e.g., Vogt-Spira 1995, 1998, and 2001; Marshall 2006). Overlooked in this ongoing discussion is the potential of Plautus' evolving relationship with the two modes, scripted and improvised, over the course of his career. By examining the plotting in *Miles* and *Pseudolus*, we find two *servi callidi* pursuing very different paths to success.

In Plautus' early work, there is greater emphasis on scripting, distinguishing the *palliatae* from the local, improvised traditions. *Miles* consists of two deceptions, one aimed at the soldier and the other at his slave. The development of each places heavy emphasis on the rehearsal of the ensemble cast needed to bring the plot to fruition. In the first, the slave Palaestrio recruits the young man's beloved to pretend that she is her own twin. He directs his accomplice, the old neighbor, to rush inside to tell her the scheme (246-248), and when she enacts the scheme, he famously remarks that his dream is being narrated (385). The emphasis throughout this deception is on the scheme that Palaestrio concocts beforehand, and the scheme works smoothly to its conclusion.

The second deception involves the old neighbor recruiting a prostitute to play the part of his wife who has fallen madly in love with the soldier. Palaestrio carefully scripts the look that the prostitute needs to appear a proper *matrona* (791-793); he lays out the plan; he reminds the young lover to call his beloved by the fake name they gave her twin; and he concludes with an emphasis on playing the assigned roles carefully (811: *actutum partis defendas tuas*). When the

neighbor returns with the prostitute, the audience sees him rehearsing the plot in detail. Again, the emphasis in this early work is on scripted plots. The clever slave scripts his deception, recruits actors to play the parts he has crafted, and watches the scheme unfold according to that script.

Pseudolus, performed in 191 BCE, provides an interesting contrast. Roughly a decade into his career (see Buck (1940) and de Lorenzi (1952) on dating), Plautus needed to keep his comedies fresh, and he challenges his audience who may believe they have the scripts of the *palliatae* figured out – i.e., *servus callidus* bamboozles blocking figure X with a well-crafted plot to reunite lovers. *Pseudolus* is a fundamentally bad plotter in the scripted tradition, but he is a very good plotter in the improvised tradition, as Bungard (2014) has observed. Each attempt to write a script is met with an opponent who refuses to play the script written for them. Even the plot that ultimately proves successful requires *Pseudolus*' actor to improvise when confronted with the fact that he does not know the name of the soldier he is supposedly the messenger of (986-991). In a theatrical world in which the scripted tradition may seem to have gained greater power over the improvisatory, Plautus reminds his audience of the power of the local, Italian tradition.

The genius of the *palliatae* stems precisely from the confluence of the scripted and improvised traditions, especially in thinking about life off the stage. As Gunderson (2015) notes, there is the possibility that we are all just making it up as we go, but we simultaneously, as Batstone (2005) suggests, constantly make claims on others, wanting them to play by our script. Plautus' use of scripted and improvised techniques on the stage enables him to get at this essential truth about life off the stage.

Works Cited

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