

Comedy Personified in Plautus' *Truculentus*

Plautus' use of metatheater in the *Truculentus* helps him create three as-yet-unrecognized personifications of Roman comedy in the form of a sex worker and two female slaves. Central to this identification are two traits shared by these three characters (an unnamed *ancilla*, the sex worker Phronesium, and her *ancilla* Astaphium). The first shared trait is an unusual perspicacity: each of the three women sees through some pretense, either the stage convention that hiding characters must remain unnoticed or the dramatic pretense of the performance itself. The second shared trait is an outspoken defense of the powerless.

For example, the nameless handmaid of Callicles is the only character in Roman comedy ever to notice an eavesdropper who wishes to remain hidden (Moore 1998 156). The *ancilla* points out a hiding Diniarchus to her master at 817 and 822. The *meretrix* Phronesium and *ancilla* Astaphium, for their part, also see through the pretense of performance in ways that most of the play's male characters do not, as they address the audience directly at 463-75 and 105, respectively. This perspicacity is accompanied by a propensity to speak truth to power, as five of the unnamed *ancilla*'s sum total of 10.5 lines of speech reference the unfair treatment of the powerless by the powerful (810-13, 836-7). Likewise, Phronesium and Astaphium justify a sex worker's pursuit of profit as a defense against poverty at 901-8 and at 220 and 237-40, respectively (a theme that recurs at *Asin.* 531 and *Cist.* 41-5).

Although the outspoken and perspicacious trio of *ancilla*, Astaphium, and Phronesium has no parallel in the Plautine corpus, the slave status or meretricious behavior associated with each woman is also attributed to actors in other Plautine prologues and epilogues (cf. *Asin.* 946-7, *Cas.* 79-86, *Cist.* 782-5). And the very traits shared by the three women also render each of them a metaphor for a Roman comic actor: a low-status individual who ruptures the pretense of a

performance (e.g., via metatheatrical remarks) and may even acknowledge the difficulties of marginalized individuals in society (cf. Richlin 2014, Richlin 2015 47). But low-status characters across all genres of ancient comedy tend to engage in metatheatrical behavior more than their high-status counterparts (Moodie 2007), which prompts us to move beyond the simple identification of these three female characters as representations of Roman actors.

In fact, Konstan (1983 164) notes Phronesium's parallels with the Aristophanic hero/heroine. Although Konstan emphasizes the Aristophanic hero's (and thus Phronesium's) ability to reshape the world according to his own wishes, the parallel between Phronesium and the heroes and heroines of Aristophanes extends beyond such an ability. Just as Aristophanes creates characters who are personifications of his genre—e.g., Trygaeus in *Peace*, whose name means both 'Harvester' and 'Mr. Comedy'—one can view Phronesium, or any of the *Truculentus*' clear-sighted, truth-speaking, low-status women as comedy personified.

Such an identification is interesting for several reasons. First, while clever male slaves like Pseudolus have often been presented as a stand-in for Plautus (Slater 1985 118-46)—scholars have not yet recognized that Plautus also created characters who personified his own genre. Second, since Greek poets often represented their poetry as their wives or as *hetairai* (Sommerstein 2005 162), reading Phronesium the *meretrix* as a personification of comedy may also be seen as a nod to the Greek poetic relationship. Finally, Chris Bungard has argued that Plautus' preference for the *Pseudolus* and *Truculentus* (reported by Cicero in *De Senectute* 14) stems from the fact that both comedies played with the Roman Comic tradition, tricking an audience already familiar with the genre's characters and tropes just as Pseudolus and Phronesium trick their own opponents. Thus, Bungard continues, Plautine comedy might not be as interested in uniting lovers as it is in tricking people—including the audience—who think they

know how the world works. How suitable then, to read the delightfully deceitful Phronesium as a personification of Plautus' own deceptive comic genre.

Works Cited

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