

## Playing the Player: Thinking about the *Meretrices* of Plautus' *Truculentus*

The desires of men – young and old, married or single – animate the plots of Plautus' comedies, nor should this be terribly surprising given the patriarchal culture of Rome, awash in the machismo of Rome's military expansionism in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century bce, but recent scholarship (Richlin 2017) has sought to broaden our understanding of the Plautine audience as a fairly diverse one of wealthy and poor, men and women, free and enslaved. Plautus himself recognized that his audience, more diverse than the primarily male, citizen audience that Athenian comedies were directed at, would need comedies that approached male desire in different terms than his originals provided. *Truculentus*, the story of a *meretrix* adeptly playing off the desires of three lovers for the benefit of her household, provides Plautus' most robust critique of the ways that freemen understand their desire and their relationship to the objects of said desire. By exploring the deployment of three key terms (*meretrix*, *scortum*, and *amica*), this paper seeks to develop more nuanced understandings of ways that audiences might respond to male desire in Plautine plays.

*Truculentus* has largely gone uncommented on by modern scholars, but those who have do so largely from the perspective of male desire. Dessen (1977) speaks of the “the mercenary courtesan and her emasculating effect on her lovers” (145) while Grimal (1970) put his focus on the antifeminism of the play. For scholars like these, the morally dubious methods of the *meretrix* and her maid are all the more problematic as they target the young men while similarly morally dubious actions on the part of the men go largely uncriticized (one has raped a free girl and another has stolen from his father). As Witzke (2015) reminds us, we need to think carefully about how we translate various terms for those in the sex trade in order to avoid wrongly

attributing to Plautus' text certain attitudes towards the characters themselves. In *Truculentus*, Plautus confronts his audience with a double standard regarding men's attitudes towards sex workers.

The opening of the play itself features a pair of monologues, each character believing they have the stage to themselves. The young lover Diniarchus appears to complain about his sense of being ill-treated by the *meretrix* Phronesium. He complains about the amount of money he has squandered for her attention, comparing these women to fisherman waiting with baited hooks to ensnare their prey (35-49). All of this is the typical language of male interests as they complain about the greediness of sex workers. This play, though, gives voice to an alternative perspective as Phronesium's *ancilla* arrives on stage. In response to the claims of the greediness of sex workers, she paints a picture of groups of men invading a brothel. One keeps the *meretrix* busy with kisses while the rest rob the place, treating the whole episode as if it is "an epic battle to plunder booty from robbers." (106) The young men are no innocent victims in the commercial enterprise of prostitution, but rather potential aggressors. Astaphium reconfigures the relationship as an antagonistic one in which both sides are trying to maximize gain and minimize losses.

By focusing not simply on the words that various characters use for sex workers in *Truculentus*, but also on the aims of the speaker in deploying particular terms, modern scholars can think about the audience response in richer and more nuanced ways. Just because a character believes that they are right does not make them so in the audience's mind. Diniarchus, who starts the play as a typical leading lover, ends the play a disgraced rapist. In light of this information, the audience has to reconsider his claims on Phronesium's attention and her interest in delaying

his satisfaction. By extension, they also have space to reconsider how they might understand why Phronesium treats her clients as she does.

### Bibliography

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