Let's Get Down to Business: The *Meretrix* as Businesswoman in Plautus

The world of Plautus is one bustling with business from the *senes* and *adulescentes* who participate in trade to the cooks who are hired in the Forum and the pimps hunting for new clients. Prostitution, though, stands out as the prime example of business in Plautus' plays, as the *meretrix* negotiates with her male clients onstage. However, the male characters in Roman Comedy are only too quick to deny that their interactions with these *meretrices* are business transactions worthy of fair compensation. As a result, in the plays of Plautus and specifically the *Asinaria*, *Truculentus*, and *Bacchides*, we see *meretrices* claim sex work as a profession and an identity for themselves as businesswomen. In turn, their male clients attack them, using metaphors involving occupations usually held by men to invalidate their work and label these women's behavior as the result of personality flaws, instead of sound business sense. Time and again, we see *meretrices* unblur these lines to claim the monetary compensation that is owed to them and become the master, or rather the mistress, of these metaphors.

It needs to be clarified that this paper focuses on *meretrices* who are freedwomen, not slaves, and that the use of the term of the sex work and sex worker is not meant to erase the reality and prevalence of the sex trade and human trafficking in Rome at this time and in these plays themselves (Richlin 2017). In the plays, these female characters try to claim a *quaestus* for themselves, despite the added stigma that came with being a wage worker (Bond 2016), to gain the small amount of protection that came with clearer monetary expectations of an undoubtedly transactional relationship. *Quaestus* can be defined as "gainful occupation" or "profit" and appears thirty-one times in Plautus across eleven plays (OLD *s.v. quaestus*). The frequency of its usage, the majority of which apply to sex work, and the many metaphors comparing it to other occupations show an effort to portray prostitution as a profession. This characterization of

the *meretrix* is important because, unlike other Roman poetry and even Greek Old Comedy, the *meretrix* is not presented just as a greedy woman but as a businesswoman too (James 2003). The *meretrix's* supposed love of money comes from her role as a businesswoman and her desire to be fairly compensated for her labor. By accusing her of being faithless and money-hungry, her male clients misinterpret and mischaracterize their relationship, not recognizing her as a worker preoccupied with payment for the emotional and physical labor she has performed. A *meretrix* is not a woman engaging in a personal relationship, but someone conducting business.

This paper focuses on the ways that *meretrices* try to establish their work as a *quaestus* to gain the financial benefits of wage work, despite the efforts of their male clients to characterize their relationship as a personal one to avoid payment. By casting the professional requirements of sex work as personal failings and business relationships between male clients and female service providers as entirely personal love affairs, men ensured that they continued to benefit from their relationship at the expense of the female sex worker's financial security. This strategy is seen most clearly through the use of metaphors comparing prostitution to other occupations held by men primarily in Plautus' *Asinaria*, *Truculentus*, and *Bacchides*. These occupational metaphors are divided into the two subgroups of maritime professions, such as harbor tax collectors and fishermen, and agricultural ones, such as farmers and shepherds. In both cases, however, these metaphors are a tool of their male clients to enjoy their services but avoid paying for them. When women are compared to stigmatized maritime professions (Leigh 2010), their male clients can take advantage of the overlap in misogynistic and classist stereotypes to portray the obligations of their careers as personal flaws, most often greed and faithlessness, and deprive them of payment. In dealing with more idealized agricultural professions, money is often

compared to working animals and becomes a symbol of Roman identity that these women must be kept away from. In both cases, however, the *meretrices* are often able to take control of the metaphor and reveal that their actions are motivated by the demands of their profession and need for survival. They force the men to acknowledge them as businesswomen in their own right.

Works Cited:

Bond, Sarah E. 2016. *Trade and Taboo: Disreputable Professions in the Roman Mediterranean*. University of Michigan Press.

James, Sharon L. 2003. *Learned Girls and Male Persuasion: Gender and Reading in Roman Love Elegy*. Berkley: University of California Press.

Leigh, Matthew. 2010. *Comedy and the Rise of Rome*. Oxford University Press.

Richlin, Amy. 2017. *Slave Theater in the Roman Republic: Plautus and Popular Comedy*. Cambridge University Press.