

What is Roman about Plautus' *Trinummus*?

Over the past century, Plautus' *Trinummus* has not been a fan favorite. Erich Segal (1974: 252) asserts that "The *Trinummus* is unique in the Plautine canon. For though Plautus wrote both good plays and bad, this is his only boring one." Even the renowned Wilamowitz claimed that reading *Trinummus* as a youth nearly put him off of classics altogether (qtd in Lefèvre 1993: 178). This negative assessment of the play comes primarily from judging it against the hypothetical perfection of its Greek model, Philemon's *Thensauros*, which is no longer extant. When we look for what would have been compelling to a Roman audience in the wake of the Second Punic War, a different image emerges. Charmides is forced abroad to the east, leaving his household in the care of his inexperienced son Lesbonicus and his neighbor Callicles. In Charmides' absence, Lesbonicus runs the family coffers dry, sells the house for a bargain cash price, and is forced to choose between marrying off his sister without a dowry or giving away the family farm, which is the only property keeping Charmides' household from joining the ranks of the urban poor. Far from presenting his audience with scenes that are "savagely altered" to such an extent that they destroy Philemon's "complex plot in which deep ethical commitments were inextricably bound up with love themes" (Anderson 1979: 338, 344), Plautus instead shows his audience an image of the typical plebeian household attempting to advance in Roman society while the father is conscripted as a citizen soldier and the family property back home is at the mercy of inexperienced young men and greedy neighbors. Although the play is nominally set in Athens, the fact that it is performed at Rome for a Roman audience allows us to make these connections between fictional Greek characters and Roman realities (see Cicero *Rosc. Am.* 46-7).

The threat of shattered household wealth is placed in the foreground at the outset of the play by Luxuria, the divine prologue speaker, who ushers her daughter Inopia into Charmides' house, a powerful visual symbol of the anxieties that undergird the play (1-3). In the debate about the dowry, Lesbonicus and Lysiteles' father Philto acknowledge differences in wealth (*ordo rerum*) and social status (*factio*) between the two families, which in Roman terms would align Lesbonicus' family with the plebeian nobility, who were powerful yet more vulnerable to the loss of wealth and status than their patrician counterparts (451-452, 486-487, 642-647). To Lesbonicus' enslaved servant Stasimus (615-619) and neighbor Megaronides (136-137, 139), it appears that Callicles has taken advantage of Charmides' absence and cheated the house away from Lesbonicus. The threat is made all the more dire by what seems like the inevitable loss of the family farm. Even Charmides, upon his arrival home, laments "I made it home alive! But now, here, I meet my end, pathetic, all on account of those for whose sake I was forced abroad, at my age. The sickness of it steals my breath away." (1089-1091). But, since this is a comedy, things aren't as they seem. As it turns out there was a treasure hidden in the walls of Charmides' house all along, Callicles bought the house to preserve the treasure for his friend, while Lysiteles, the suitor of Lesbonicus' sister, doesn't actually want the farm as a dowry. In the end, Charmides returns home to find his possessions protected by faithful friends and a socially advantageous marriage arranged for his daughter—comic wish fulfillment at its best!

In Plautus' Rome, however, the families of those conscripted into the citizen army were not so fortunate. Rather than finding a postwar boom after the expulsion of Hannibal from Italy, everyday Romans instead had to deal with socially imbalanced veteran colonies, the take-over of *ager publicus* by the wealthy, the rise of latifundia throughout Italy, an influx of foreign slave labor, and the continuous strain on middle-class citizen soldiers caused by Rome's military

expansion in Greece and Asia Minor, all factors that, over time, contributed to the upheavals of the Gracchi and the ultimate dissolution of the Republic. The social anxieties that undergird the history and literature of the late Republic are also present in the oldest extant corpus of a Roman author, granted we are willing to look for them rather than point out all the ways Plautus falls short of his Greek models.

Bibliography

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