

The Trouble With Throuples in Plautus's *Stichus*

The ancient popularity of *Stichus* "has baffled many scholars, because the *Stichus* contains very little action... The plot, if it can be so called, consists of loosely connected scenes" (De Melo 2013, 3). Even the title names a "tricky slave" character who first appears more than halfway through the play, performs no tricks, and does nothing to resolve the problem presented at the start. Because the play does not follow through on the promise of its focus on the free citizens of the first scene, "as a piece of literature, [*Stichus*] is very third-rate and fails to impress the modern reader" (Cook 1966, 13); "the big problem for us is the poverty of the *Stichus* compared with the (by definition) sublimity of its Menandrian original" (Wilcock 1976, 24). Even as scholars stop comparing Plautus to unseen Greek originals, the difficulties with *Stichus* remain.

The final scene, in which three slaves throw a party of dancing, drinking, and professing their affection for each other, has caused particular difficulty, leading to various attempts at explanation. The revelry could be revelry for war-tired Romans who want to imagine parties (De Melo 2013, 9); or Plautus swapped in slaves for free citizens in a Greek party scene, to suit Roman ideas about dignity (De Melo 2013, 7-8); or it is actually political commentary, contrasting Greek excess of slave characters with the contemporary suffering of virtuous Roman citizens (Owens 2000, 401).

The play was not written for readers, but performed for an audience; and its audience liked it well enough, as the three performances in its first run (Livy 31.50.3), and preservation through antiquity, demonstrate. We can examine the scene of a raucous slave party on its own terms--the finale of a popular Roman comedy--instead of as an aberration in need of excuses.

Plautine comedy lies in the distortion of accepted reality (Petron 1977, 26) and distortion of Greek models is part of this Plautine approach, rather than being an authorial failure. The last scene's focus on slaves and their raucous, romantic party suits the absurdity of Roman hierarchy, mocking it in a manner appropriate to the festival context where the comedy was first (and second and third) performed, while also mocking the slaves so that the subversion of Roman customs never reads as dangerous to the audience. The "unnecessary" third slave is not introduced to fill out the scene, but as a friend, rival, and mirror of the titular Stichus; the drinking party is a celebration of slaves who accept the hierarchy they are embedded in, not a substitute for a genteel party of citizens; the slave woman with two lovers acknowledges a social reality among marginalized people of Rome; the party is not (just) a joke about slaves having personally meaningful relationships despite their legal vulnerability to the loss of any social bonds at their masters' whims. Even the ambiguity surrounding the characters--the doubled slave men, the surprisingly undoubled slave woman who is *amica* and *meretrix* and *scorta* by turn, the flute player who is musical accompaniment to the whole play but also participant in the drinking--is part of the joke, and part of the point. These metatheatrics allow jokes about serious institutions while keeping them securely in the realm of theater jokes, a bit of festival fun. Only the slaves, who sing about their own legal and social and personal status while dancing drunkenly for each other, can embody the absurdity of their place in both theater and life.

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