

**Reflections of Roman Women in the comedies of Plautus and Terence**

by

Britney DiTocco

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Sponsor: Dr. Lisa Keller

Second Reader: Dr. Rachel Hallote

## Introduction

On a chilly September morning, I began my trek across campus towards the Durst Humanities building for my first presentation as a teaching assistant for Western Civilization. I was to provide the students with an overview of the Roman comedy, a topic I had been researching for a few months in preparation of writing my senior project. I was showing the Western Civilization class the movie *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, a 1966 film adaptation of the play by the same name. Directed by Richard Lester, this movie is a compilation of plots and characters from Titus Maccius Plautus (~254 B.C.-184 B.C.), the famous Roman playwright; it incorporates aspects of his plays *Mostelleria*, *Miles Gloriosus*, and *Pseudolus* into a mix of farce and slapstick comedy, along with hilarious musical numbers. The students watched the main character, a slave named Pseudolus, sweat profusely when presented with a number of courtesans available for sale. They chuckled when the servant, Hysterium, reveals himself to be dressed as the love interest, Phillia, and the song “Lovely” reprised with an in-drag character.

*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* proves that a joke from over two thousand years ago can still be funny enough to get a laugh out of college students, even at 8:30 am. This is one of the reasons I chose to write about the twenty-six extant plays of Plautus and Terence, two famous playwrights living in the Roman Republic during a period of warfare and territorial expansionism. This paper combines my interest in ancient Rome and the history of women by analyzing the ways in which Roman women are portrayed in the Roman comedic corpus, and the ways in which female characters reflect historical representations of real Roman women. I discuss the way female stock characters are portrayed, and identify multiple themes related to Roman women’s issues that persist throughout many of the comedies. When these themes are compared against Roman primary sources,

many similarities become apparent. I argue that the female characters created by Plautus and Terence, and the issues they face, exist in the comedies because they reflect the world in which these playwrights lived.

Modern Western culture is rooted in Classical civilization, and Roman values remain an important part of our culture today. The Romans laid the foundations for American and European justice systems. We still marvel at the engineering feats accomplished by Romans, who built viaducts, aqueducts, stadia, baths, sewers, and so much more. Many of our essential thought processes can be traced to the Romans. Historian Mary Beard writes:

“...many of our most fundamental assumptions about power, citizenship, responsibility, political violence, empire, luxury, beauty, and even humor, have been formed, and tested, in dialogue with the Romans and their writing.”<sup>1</sup>

The Roman influence on our way of thinking is even more apparent when we all enjoy a laugh at the antics of Pseudolus in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.

This senior project focuses on the nature and accuracy of female stereotypes in these plays. Female characters share many similarities across the comedic corpus. These plays examine the relationships between Roman women and the men in their lives, and the virtues expected of them. Chapters Three and Four examine these stereotypes and themes in greater detail.

I also examine parallels between Roman history and Roman comedy. Many similarities exist between the way that women in the plays and in historical sources, such as letters, epitaphs, and the works of ancient Roman historians. Fictional and real Roman women are praised and criticized for similar reasons. Chapter Four compares themes within the plays to primary sources from the Roman people.

I first encountered Roman literature in an independent study I took on with Dr. Lisa Keller. Week by week, I read the works of prominent writers, such as Horace, Livy, and Catullus. However,

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Beard, “Why Ancient Rome Matters to the Modern World,” *The Guardian*, October 2, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/02/mary-beard-why-ancient-rome-matters>.

the work that surprised me the most was Plautus's comedy, *Aulularia*, or *The Pot of Gold*. It was still so funny. I was amazed at how well a comedy written over two thousand years ago translated into modern day humor. It reminded me a lot of my father's favorite television sit-com, *The Odd Couple* (1970-1975). The arguments between Oscar and Felix are entirely reminiscent of the banter between two angry slaves of Plautus. The reason for this familiarity is that modern day situational comedies find their roots in the ancient Roman comedies of Plautus and Terence. Stereotyped roles such as the lecherous old man, the domineering wife, and the pathetically in love teenage boy have been handed down to us directly from the ancient Romans. When I learned this, I knew that I wanted to dive deeper into ancient comedy.

The study of Roman women in the comedies of Plautus and Terence is interdisciplinary, and requires research into multiple fields such as history, gender studies, and literature. Chapter Two provides a general introduction to the social and political history of Rome in the third and second centuries B.C. and examines the origins of Roman society. It also provides a brief biography of the two famous Roman playwrights, Plautus and Terence, and an introduction to the nature of Roman comedy.

Then, in Chapters Three and Four, I discuss Roman women. Chapter Three focuses on the way that women are portrayed in the plays. I provide the reader with my own analysis of female stereotypes within the plays of Plautus and Terence, and support my ideas using the works of other scholars. I then identify a number of overarching women's themes which persist throughout the comedic corpus. Chapter Four compares these stereotypes to the way real Roman women were characterized by their society. Using primary sources and the works of historians, I provide a historical analysis of each of the themes presented in Chapter Three, and argue that these themes exist because Plautus and Terence were influenced by the world around them.

The ancient comedies constitute most of my primary sources. I also relied on documents taken from the sourcebook, Women's Life in Ancient Greece and Rome, edited by Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant. This sourcebook allowed me to read works by famous Roman authors, such as

Cicero, Dionysus of Halicarnassus, and Pliny the Elder, along with epitaphs, letters, and law codes.

Livy's History of Rome provided critical information about ancient Roman values and morals. I was able to obtain many secondary sources by prominent historians including Sarah B. Pomeroy, Eve D'Ambra, and Sharon L. James.

Almost a year later, I ended my research as I began: marveling at the similarity of human nature two thousand years ago with today. Whether I am reading the poetry of Catullus, the letters of Cicero, or the prologues of Plautus and Terence, I am amazed at how familiar these figures feel. It is comforting to know that people have always felt the same happiness, heartbreak, and frustration that we ourselves have felt. Even though these people lived over two thousand years ago, every time we sit back and enjoy a sit-com, laughter connects us to the Ancient Romans, who may not be so different from us after all.

## Chapter Two: Background

If you have ever enjoyed a television sit-com and laughed at the expense of a lecherous old man, an overdramatic youth in love, or pitied the henpecked husband, you have shared a laugh with the people of the Roman Republic. Over two millennia later, the comic spirit of Plautus and Terence, two famous Roman playwrights, lives on. Although Plautus and Terence are not well known in the twenty first century, they were famous playwrights during their lifetimes, in the third and second centuries B.C. Their comedies became an integral part of Roman culture and were still being performed hundreds of years later after the Republic fell and Rome became an empire. “In the second century (A.D.) people still went to see Plautus and Terence played, but rather out of deference to tradition than for pleasure.”<sup>2</sup> The works of Plautus and Terence were so significant that they later became models for famous playwrights such as Molière, William Shakespeare, and Ben Jonson.

Plautus and Terence lived in the Rome, and their work was undoubtedly influenced by the world around them. Ancient Rome was one of the most powerful civilizations to have existed. Its triumphs in architecture and construction, along with the nation’s emphasis on dedication to the state over personal interests, have left its impact on modern Western civilization. During its shift from kingdom to Republic to vast Empire, Rome remained a highly complex civilization, and the city of Rome itself was a place where refinement and extravagance met crumbling buildings, brothels, and crime.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jerome Carcopino, *Daily Life In Ancient Rome: With a New Introduction and Bibliographic Essay by Mary Beard*, 2nd ed., ed Henry T. Rowell, trans. E.O. Lorimer (1940, repr., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 229.

<sup>3</sup> Carcopino, xi.

Rome's greatness is foreshadowed in the epic nature of its founding myths. Rome began as a kingdom in 753 B.C. Titus Livius, commonly known as Livy, a historian in the 1st century B.C., recounted the early history in his work, The History of Rome. According to Livy, the story of Rome began with twin brothers Romulus and Remus. Said to be offspring of a raped vestal virgin, they were sentenced to be exposed (abandoned and left to die) as infants. Their mother claimed Mars, the Roman god of War, was their father. A servant took pity on the boys, put them in a basket, and floated them down the Tiber River. The infants were rescued and suckled by a "she wolf" before they were found and raised by the king's herdsman.<sup>4</sup> When the two became young men, "Romulus and Remus... were suddenly seized by an urge to found a new settlement on the spot where they had been left to drown as infants and had been subsequently brought up."<sup>5</sup> The two brothers ruled the city together at first, but eventually Romulus killed Remus, and became the sole ruler of Rome.

Although Livy's writings were produced seven hundred years after these events, he was not trying to prove whether this information is factual. "Events before Rome was born or thought of have come to us tales with more of the charm of poetry than the sound of historical record, and such traditions I propose neither to affirm nor refute."<sup>6</sup> Instead he "is to shape his account of the figures and events he describes so that their value as *exempla* (moral anecdotes) can be perceived and evaluated by his reader."<sup>7</sup> Some of Romulus' actions throughout this story are morally questionable by modern standards. Romulus killed his brother to secure the throne for himself. Romulus also planned the abduction and rape of the young women of a neighboring kingdom when the city of Rome was without women to bear children. However, Romulus' actions are justified by Livy as necessary to sustain the nation. "Livy's characterization of Romulus demonstrates the lesson that the needs of the state should

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<sup>4</sup> Livy, *The Early History of Rome: Books I-V of The History of Rome from its Foundation*, trans. Aubrey De Séincort (1960; repr., Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1973), 37-38.

<sup>5</sup> Livy, 39.

<sup>6</sup> Livy, 33.

<sup>7</sup> Rex Stem, "The Exemplary Lessons of Livy's Romulus," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-)137, no. 2 (2007), [www.jstor.org/stable/4543321](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4543321), 436.

be understood as predominant, and hence when the survival of the state is at risk, the preservation of the state inherently justifies the means necessary to do so.”<sup>8</sup> Rome was ruled by seven kings following Romulus, and Rome’s rigid social class system was established. The aristocracy owned the most fertile land and held the government power; lower class citizens, agricultural laborers, had virtually no power in government.<sup>9</sup>

Around 509 B.C., the Roman Republic was founded, and the seventh king was replaced by two elected officials called consuls. These consuls were advised by an assembly, called the Senate. Senate decisions also had to be confirmed by a third body, the Popular Assemblies.<sup>10</sup> But the class system of Rome remained largely unchanged: “The aristocracy only divided amongst themselves the functions of the king as supreme commander, judge and priest.”<sup>11</sup> The upper class became known as “patricians,” and the lower class as “plebeians.” Class status passed down through families and was not simply based on wealth. Roman society was also made up of a number of “non-citizens,” such as slaves and foreigners.

The family was the “foundation of Archaic Roman society.”<sup>12</sup> In The Social History of Rome, Historian Géza Alföldy writes, “The family was a discrete economic, social, and religious entity.”<sup>13</sup> The father, or *paterfamilias*, was the head of the family in Ancient Rome. The father had the right of “unlimited power over his wife, children, slaves, and property.”<sup>14</sup> Politically, the family was significant because they constituted clans, and “...in political struggles and especially in warfare... clans would participate in close alliance.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Stem, 439

<sup>9</sup> Géza Alföldy, *The Social History of Rome*, trans David Braund and Frank Pullock (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1985), 3.

<sup>10</sup> David M. Gwynn, *The Roman Republic: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 23.

<sup>11</sup> Alföldy, 4.

<sup>12</sup> John Andrew Couch, “Women in Early Republican Law,” *Harvard Law Review* 8, no. 1 (April, 1894): 41, [www.doi.org/10.2307/1322384](http://www.doi.org/10.2307/1322384), 39.

<sup>13</sup> Alföldy, 5

<sup>14</sup> Alföldy, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Alföldy, 5.



Religion was another important aspect of Roman life. The Romans were polytheistic and worshipped deities copied from the Greek Pantheon. “Roman religion was notoriously strict,” and the Roman’s fear of the gods bordered on superstition.<sup>16</sup> The family also functioned as a religious unit, and worshipped household gods. “Of this exclusive religion of the family, the father was the high priest.”<sup>17</sup>

“The early years of the Republic were marked by an attempt on the part of the patrician families to achieve a monopoly of secular and sacred office.”<sup>18</sup> Economic hardships strengthened plebeian resentment towards patricians. The plebeians were essential as manpower in the Roman military, which gave them leverage and resulted in the “struggle of the orders.” Slowly, plebeians began to chip away at patrician privileges.<sup>19</sup> A major plebeian victory occurred in 450 B.C. with the creation of the Twelve Table, a code of Roman law, significant because it was the first time the laws were written down. The Twelve Tables were not based upon status as plebeian or patrician but were based instead on one’s property.<sup>20</sup> This was done so that patricians with more influence could not interpret the laws to benefit only themselves. The Twelve Tables were displayed in the Forum, so that any inhabitant of the city of Rome could read these laws and understand their rights.<sup>21</sup> During these centuries, Rome expanded its territory by conquering neighboring Latin cities. Throughout the Italian peninsula, they granted rights just shy of citizenship to all men living in these territories. Instead of demanding tribute, they asked these new colonies for manpower.<sup>22</sup>

Roman interest in Greek culture heightened after Alexander the Great began his conquest of the known world in 334 B.C. His conquests included Greece, Asia Minor, Egypt, and Persia.<sup>23</sup>, Alexander

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<sup>16</sup> Erich Segal, *Roman Laughter: The Comedy of Plautus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 30.

<sup>17</sup> Couch, 40.

<sup>18</sup> John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, and Oswyn Murray, eds, *The Oxford History of the Classical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 329.

<sup>19</sup> Boardman, Griffin, and Murray, eds, *The Oxford History*, 329.

<sup>20</sup> Alföldy, 17.

<sup>21</sup> Allan Chester Johnson, Paul Robinson Coleman Norton, Frank Card Bourne, trans., “The Twelve Tables,” in *Ancient Roman Statutes*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1961), 9.

<sup>22</sup> Boardman, Griffin, and Murray, eds, *The Oxford History*, 330.

<sup>23</sup> Colette Hemingway and Seán Hemingway, “Art of the Hellenistic Age and the Hellenistic Tradition,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, April 2007, [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/haht/hd\\_haht.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/haht/hd_haht.htm).

spread Greek culture, including art, architecture, and literature, throughout the territories that he conquered. But the Romans continued to expand their territories, and eventually conquered Greek city-states, increasing the importance of Greek culture. Centuries later, Horace, one of the most famous poets in the first century B.C., looked back on the conquest of Greece and wrote, “Captive Greece took captive her fierce conqueror, and introduced her arts into rude Latium (*Epistles, II, I*).

The Romans incorporated Greek religious cults, Greek styles of architecture, and “Greek influence over the material culture of the republic became even more apparent.”<sup>24</sup> The practical Romans also copied Greek styles of art and literature, knowing it to be superior to primitive Roman art. Greece experienced a Golden Age during the fourth and fifth century B.C., while the Romans were still in the early years of the Republic and working to resolve the Struggle of Orders. “In the case of Rome, a village barbaric by Greek standards finds itself suddenly thrust into the highest place of opulence and power. The suddenly enlarged villagers could... not be expected to traverse the laborious steps upward from primitive art when Greek masterpieces were there to shame their crudities.”<sup>25</sup> Perhaps the most significant conflict during the third and second centuries B.C. were the three Punic Wars, fought against Carthage, a Mediterranean power centered in North Africa. The first Punic war was fought from 264 to 241 B.C. over the territory of Sicily.<sup>26</sup> The Second Punic War was marked by an invasion of Rome by Carthaginian General, Hannibal from 218 to 202 B.C. The Romans were successful in defeating Hannibal’s army, and put many policies in place to ensure Carthage would never be a power again, such as limiting their navy. The Third Punic War (149-146 B.C.) was fought when the Romans invaded the already weakened Carthage and destroyed the city. “Carthage was finally destroyed, and Rome was transformed into a true Mediterranean power.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Boardman, Griffin, and Murray, eds, *The Oxford History*, 334

<sup>25</sup> Moses Hadas, *A History of Latin Literature* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1952), 11.

<sup>26</sup> Sara Ann McGill, 2017, “The Punic Wars.” *Punic Wars*, August 2017, 1.

<http://ezproxy.purchase.edu:2059/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=17957836&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>27</sup> Gwynn, 46.

Territorial expansion and warfare, especially during the Punic Wars, had a large impact on Roman society: “The wealth of the Mediterranean was pouring into Italy, partly in the form of booty, partly in the form of payments exacted from defeated enemies.”<sup>28</sup> Much of this wealth remained in the hands of the Roman elite, although some was distributed to lower orders. Some of this money was used to erect extravagant buildings, both public and private,<sup>29</sup> However, despite all of the wealth rushing into the nation, “the atmosphere in Rome of this era is constantly described by scholars as ‘spartan’ or ‘puritanical,’ and it was, without question, conservative to the extreme.”<sup>30</sup> Legislation such as the Oppian Law, passed in 215 B.C., severely restricted ostentatious wealth and consumption; it was felt that it would reinforce key Roman values, such as frugality and the valuing of the state over oneself. This was just one of multiple “sumptuary laws” (laws to limit consumption) passed during this time in Rome.<sup>31</sup> In 184, the year of Plautus’ death, Cato the Elder became censor, and used his position within government to fight against Hellenism, extravagance, and increased rights for women,<sup>32</sup> earning Cato the nickname, “Cato the Censor.” In regards to these sumptuary laws, classicist Erich Segal writes, “Whether or not they were strictly adhered to is less important than the fact that the rules were promulgated... we must be aware of what... contemporary Romans were not supposed to do.”<sup>33</sup>

So comedy, increasingly popular, provided a cathartic relief from the somber Roman conservatism of the time. Productions often accompanied both public games and Roman festivals.<sup>34</sup> Public games were state funded, and admission was free.<sup>35</sup> On festival days, all businesses were closed

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<sup>28</sup> Boardman, Griffin, and Murray, eds, *The Oxford History*, 409.

<sup>29</sup> Boardman, Griffin, and Murray, eds, *The Oxford History*, 409.

<sup>30</sup> Segal, 10.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Crawford, *The Roman Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 79-80.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Grant, *History of Rome* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1978), 151.

<sup>33</sup> Segal, 11.

<sup>34</sup> George E. Duckworth, *The Nature of Roman Comedy: A Study in Popular Entertainment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952), 74-77.

<sup>35</sup> Duckworth, 74.

and “all ordinary activities came to an absolute standstill.”<sup>36</sup> The Romans all headed to the theatre, instead of the Forum. In the third century B.C., when Roman comedy was extremely popular, there were at minimum four annual festivals which had multiple days set aside for dramatic performances.<sup>37</sup>

The Roman comedies that have survived until the modern day were adapted from Greek plays, which fall into two categories: “Old” and “New” Comedy. Old Comedy developed in the fifth century B.C. in Athens and focused mainly on politics and philosophy. Old Comedy, was dependent upon the existence of freedom of speech, as it often mocked the government.<sup>38</sup> New Comedy came into existence when Greece fell into political turmoil following the death of Alexander the Great in the late fourth and early third centuries B.C.<sup>39</sup> These plays were domestic dramas, which mocked aspects of family life and society with little in the way of Politics..<sup>40</sup>

Both playwrights featured highly stylized plots. One typical plot is that of the youth who falls in love with a prostitute and asks his slave to come up with the money to buy the girl from her captor. Another common plot line involves a pair of look-a-likes, who get into trouble resulting from being mistaken for their twin. They feature stock characters, such as the *Adulescens* (the youthful lover), the *Seruus*, (the cunning slave), and the *Meretrix* (Prostitute).<sup>41</sup>

Titus Maccius Plautus “was the most *successful* comic poet in the Ancient world.<sup>42</sup>” Plautus is the first known professional playwright and was able to make a living off his plays alone. Unlike other playwrights, such as Terence and Aristophanes (a Greek playwright of Old Comedy) he does not appear to have had any setbacks in his career, and contrary to Terence, he did not have any trouble holding the attention of the theatergoers.<sup>43</sup> He was born around 254 B.C. in Umbria, and his native

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<sup>36</sup> Segal, 53.

<sup>37</sup> Duckworth, 76-77.

<sup>38</sup> Duckworth, 20-23.

<sup>39</sup> David Konstan, *Roman Comedy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 22.

<sup>40</sup> Konstan, 22.

<sup>41</sup> Duckworth, 237-249.

<sup>42</sup> Segal, 1.

<sup>43</sup> Segal, 1.

language was likely Umbrian.<sup>44</sup> Plautus moved to Rome at a young age where he mastered the Latin language and worked in a theatre. Accounts of his life suggest that he did physical labor for the theater, but his name suggests that he may have been an actor, as “Maccus” was the name of one of the stock characters in a style of theatre called the “Atellan Farce.”<sup>45</sup> Later, he worked in a flour mill and wrote plays to entertain himself in his spare time. When these plays became popular with the Roman public, he was able to dedicate the rest of his career to writing.<sup>46</sup> He is believed to have lived a long life, and Cicero, an orator from the first century B.C., places his death to be in the year 184 B.C. (Cicero, *Brutus*, Line 60).

In his book, A History of Latin Literature, historian Moses Hadas writes, “Plautus’ aim is to produce the greatest possible volume of immediate laughter.”<sup>47</sup> In Plautus’ plays, “consistency of characterization and plot development are cheerfully sacrificed for the sake of an immediate effect.”<sup>48</sup> The comic style of Plautus is to always put humor first. Not even the gods were safe from being mocked by the playwright. Plautus was not the first to mock religion in Comedy. Aristophanes, the most famous Greek playwright of Old Comedy, was known to point out the “oddities of religion.”<sup>49</sup> One of his plays “The Frogs,” shows the Greek God Dionysus as he is mocked by frogs in the underworld.<sup>50</sup> It is important to note that the blasphemous remarks spoken by Plautine characters were written at a time when religious human sacrifice was still being practiced throughout Rome.<sup>51</sup> Although Plautus generally borrowed his plots from Greek comedies, his style is distinctly Roman in his portrayal of character and moral tone, and his works are far from exact translations.<sup>52</sup> Plautine

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<sup>44</sup> Hadas, 35.

<sup>45</sup> Hadas, 35.

<sup>46</sup> Hadas, 35.

<sup>47</sup> Hadas, 36.

<sup>48</sup> Boardman, Griffin, and Murray, eds, *The Oxford History*, 442.

<sup>49</sup> Boardman, Griffin, and Murray, eds, *The Oxford History*, 177.

<sup>50</sup> Boardman, Griffin, and Murray, eds, *The Oxford History*, 179.

<sup>51</sup> Segal, 30.

<sup>52</sup> Titus Maccius Plautus, *The Pot of Gold and Other Plays*, ed. Betty Radice, trans. E.F. Watling (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1965), 1.

characters are always “over the top.” One of his most popular characters is the “scheming slave,”<sup>53</sup> who often engages in trickery to help his young master. These plays contain elements of farce, such as horseplay and buffoonery. Plautus often explains the plot of the play to the audience in his prologues, creating “comic irony,” so that the audience can laugh at the lack of knowledge possessed by the characters.<sup>54</sup> As “the first known professional playwright,” Plautus needed his to be popular with the Roman people because he “depended on the theatre for his livelihood.”<sup>55</sup>

Terence, on the other hand, sought to create a more intellectual comedy. Around 184 B.C., Publius Terentius Afer was born a slave in Carthage, and was brought up in the house of Roman senator Terentius Lacinus.<sup>56</sup> His master recognized his brilliance, and educated and freed him. As a writer, Terence became part of the Scipionic Circle, which was a community of educated young poets, philosophers, and statesmen.<sup>57</sup> Unlike Plautus, who enjoyed a relatively long life, Terence is said to have died young, possibly as early as 24 years old.<sup>58</sup>

The plays of Terence were intended for an educated audience. Terence does not give away the plot of his plays in the prologues, but rather depends on suspense.<sup>59</sup> Terence also regularly utilized a double plot, which involved two sets of lovers.<sup>60</sup> The success of these more intricate plays depended on the engagement of the audience, something which could not be expected of the more rowdy and less sophisticated lower class. Terence’s plays were far less farcical than that of Plautus, and his characters act more moderately. For example, while one of Plautus’ characters might wish their parents dead, a character from Terence’s *Adelphoe* instead states, “I wish- as long as he stayed healthy, he would tire out and lie in bed for three whole days.”<sup>61</sup> Terence’s plays portrayed good, decent people. In his play,

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<sup>53</sup> Boardman, Griffin, and Murray, eds, *The Oxford History*, 442.

<sup>54</sup> Edith Hamilton, *The Roman Way* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1932), 50.

<sup>55</sup> Segal, 1.

<sup>56</sup> Terence, *The Comedies*, trans. Peter Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), ix.

<sup>57</sup> Hamilton, 47.

<sup>58</sup> Brown, trans. x.

<sup>59</sup> Hamilton, 50.

<sup>60</sup> Hadas, 45.

<sup>61</sup> Segal, 19.

*Hecyra* (The Mother-In-Law), he even characterizes the prostitute, Bacchus, as virtuous. She resolves the main conflict of the play by relaying important information to an ex-lover.

Terence wrote his plays during a time in which the Romans believed themselves to be at the peak of their influence and power. In the 160s, “the importation of Macedonian booty led to ‘a great display of wealth, both in public and private,’ and that... this was a time when many Romans abandoned themselves to the sort of luxurious lifestyle that they traditionally associated with the Greek world.”<sup>62</sup> Some were unhappy and pushed for reform like Cato the Elder.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps this extravagance is what pushed Terence to create more virtuous characters who reflected the morality of those who still lived more virtuous lives. However, this did not make him popular with the Roman people. Terence “has never been out of favor except during his lifetime.”<sup>64</sup> Terence did not have to please the Roman public, because his plays were subsidized by the Scipionic circle. Instead, he had to please his patrons, who were elite, highly educated men.<sup>65</sup>

Comedy provides important insights into Roman people of the third and second century B.C. In her classic book, The Roman Way, Edith Hamilton pointed out “The comedy of each age holds a mirror to the people of that age.”<sup>66</sup> In order for someone to understand humor, he or she must be familiar with what is being mocked. Comedy must “present the audience, as tragedy need not, with a picture of life lived as they know it.”<sup>67</sup> In his exploration of comedy, literary scholar Cyrus Hoy wrote, “Man is possessed of an ideal of human conduct, but circumstances together with his own inherent failings conspire to make the belief that the ideal can be fulfilled a finally illusory one.”<sup>68</sup> Humans, by

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<sup>62</sup> Brown, xii.

<sup>63</sup> Brown, xii.

<sup>64</sup> Segal, vii.

<sup>65</sup> Segal, 1.

<sup>66</sup> Hamilton, 15.

<sup>67</sup> Hamilton, 15.

<sup>68</sup> Cyrus Hoy, *The Hyacinth Room: An Investigation into the Nature of Comedy, Tragedy, and Tragicomedy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), 11.

nature, hold on to the idea of an ideal way to act, but seldom attain perfection. Laughter often results in observing the failure of a character to accept or recognize this.<sup>69</sup>

Despite presenting life in a familiar setting, the leading characters in comedy seldom act in the way Roman society would expect them to. Sons curse their elders, slaves steal from their masters, and men curse the gods. These characters are forgiven for their poor behavior because the plays are set in Greece: “And yet, the *palliata* (Roman plays in Greek dress) was Roman Comedy. Its basic premise ‘it all takes place in Athens, folks,’ licensed behavior that was ordinarily forbidden.<sup>70</sup>” Therefore, the ancient Romans vicariously lived out their desire to misbehave by watching such acts performed on the stage.

Comedy serves a similar function in modern days. In his study on the role of standup comedy, Lawrence E. Mintz explains that although people laugh in knowing they are superior to foolish characters, “we may identify with his expression or behavior, secretly recognize it as reflecting natural tendencies in the human activity if not socially approved ones...”<sup>71</sup> Regardless of exaggeration of character, comedy reflects not only a civilization’s values and expectations, but also reflects the people’s inner desires, and is invaluable in studying the history of a society.

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<sup>69</sup> Hoy, 11-15.

<sup>70</sup> Segal, 40.

<sup>71</sup> Lawrence E Mintz, "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation," *American Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (1985): 71-80. [www.jstor.org/stable/2712763](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712763), 78.



### Chapter Three: Feminine Portrayal in the Comedies

Reading ancient Roman Comedies is an excellent way to better understand the lives of Roman women. Historian Sharon L. James writes that New Comedies “present exaggerated versions of everyday issues and conflicts, much as TV sitcoms and soap operas do, and are thus excellent sources for information about social life in the ancient city.”<sup>72</sup>

The twenty-six plays of Plautus and Terence<sup>73</sup> examine the relationships between women and their fathers, women and their husbands, and women within society. Roman comedy also paints a picture of the ideal Roman woman while also exaggerating undesirable qualities for comedic effect. These plays also present the historical role of rape in Roman society and the playwrights’ sympathy for the victims.

These comedies present a broad characterization of the stock characters for citizen women (*virgo* and *matrona*). Young, unmarried maidens of free birth fall into the stereotyped role of *virgo*.

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<sup>72</sup> Sharon L. James, “Ancient Comedy, Women’s Lives: Finding Social History and Seeing the Present in Classical Comedy,” Humanities Futures, Duke University, August 16, 2016, <https://humanitiesfutures.org/papers/ancient-comedy-womens-lives-finding-social-history-seeing-present-classical-comedy/>.

<sup>73</sup> For my evaluations of these plays, I have utilized the following publications: “Amphitryon,” “The Comedy of Asses,” “The Two Bacchides,” “Casina,” “The Casket,” “Curculio,” “Epidicus,” “The Merchant,” “The Haunted House,” “The Girl from Persia,” “The Carthaginian,” “Pseudolus,” “The Rope,” in George E. Duckworth, ed, *The Complete Roman Drama Volume I* (New York: Random House, 1942). “Stichus,” “The Three Penny Day,” “Truculentus,” “The Woman of Andros,” “The Eunuch,” “Phormio,” “The Brothers,” in in George E. Duckworth, ed, *The Complete Roman Drama Volume II* (New York: Random House, 1942). Plautus, “The Pot of Gold,” “The Brothers Menaechmus,” “The Swaggering Soldier,” in *Plautus: The Pot of Gold and Other Plays*, trans. E.F. Watling (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1965). Terence, “The Mother in Law,” “The Self Tormentor,” in *Terence: The Comedies*, trans. Peter Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

They are characterized as beautiful, virtuous, and chaste, and their main function is to act as the love interest of the young man, or *adulescens*. These *virgos* can be divided into two categories: those who are known to be of good birth, and those whose identity is unknown until the end of the play. If the girl is known to be of good birth from the start of the play, she usually never appears on stage, such as Philumena in Terence's *Hecyra* (The Mother in Law), Phaedria in Plautus' *Aulularia* (The Pot of Gold), and the two unnamed daughters in Plautus' *Trinummus* (The Three Penny Day). According to Roman historian George Duckworth, "When the heroines of Roman comedy are girls of respectable parentage, they remain off-stage..."<sup>74</sup> However, the absence of these maidens adds to the idea of submission, and therefore their desirability. The "transaction" of marriage can take place without her presence, giving off the impression that she is more passive. "Since she is totally under the dominion of her father or guardian until she is handed over to her husband," says another Roman historian, "she is seen in a positive light, as a paragon of socially approved female virtues... her various assets, then, are her birth, her natural beauty, her chastity, her dowry - and her silence."<sup>75</sup>

Plautus does include one interesting example of a *virgo* from the lower orders of society; the unnamed daughter of Saturio in the *Persa* (The Girl from Persia). Her father, Saturio, is a "parasite," or a gluttonous man from the lower orders of society. However, he and his daughter are free citizens, and her true identity is known throughout the duration of the play.

Saturio's daughter is the only young maiden of free birth in Roman comedy to play a large role in the dramatic trickery. In the play, her father forces her to pretend to be a kidnapped foreigner, and pretends to have her sold to a pimp. Saturio then plans to come forward as her father, since free girls could not be bought by pimps. Saturio's daughter plays her role convincingly, although she retains her truthfulness and innocence throughout the duration of the play by her clever choice of wording when

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<sup>74</sup> George E. Duckworth, *The Nature of Roman Comedy: A Study in Popular Entertainment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952), 253.

<sup>75</sup> Ann R. Raia, "Women's Roles in Plautine Comedy," VRoma, Accessed on February 12, 2020, <http://www.vroma.org/~araia/plautinewomen.html>.

answering questions.<sup>76</sup> She combines virtue and blamelessness with intelligence and resourcefulness. It is likely that her larger role in the dramatic action as compared with the upper class maidens reflects the fact that girls from poorer families worked to help support the family.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, it would not be uncommon to see a girl like Saturio's daughter participating in society.

Unlike the girls who are known to be of good birth, girls of unsure parentage participate in the dramatic action. At the start of the play, these girls are believed to be either courtesans, prostitutes, or foreigners. At the conclusion, these maidens are discovered to be citizens, which often leads to their betrothal. For example, in Plautus' *Cistellaria* (The Casket), a young girl named Selenium is believed to be a prostitute and is in love with a young man named Alcesimarchus. The characters are later able to identify her as the daughter of a citizen named Demipho using some trinkets she had kept since birth. Once she is known to be a citizen, her newly found father allows her to marry her lover, Alcesimarchus.<sup>78</sup>

Mistaken identity is common throughout the comedies of Plautus and Terence, and does not only apply to female characters. For example, in Plautus' *Amphitryon*, the main action occurs when the Roman god, Jove, and his son Mercury, disguise themselves to be Amphitryon and his slave, Sosia. In Plautus' *Menaechmi* (The Brothers Menaechmi), confusion (and laughter) results from the mistaken identity of two twin brothers. One historian, Moses Hadas, suggests that this trend is the result of a period of instability and warfare in the Hellenistic Age (when the Greek models were written); a time when "separations of families, loss and even recovery of identity, and surely seductions must actually have been common."<sup>79</sup> Similarly, Duckworth suggests that the appearance of separations and mistaken identity in the comedies "merely means that New Comedy in this respect mirrored the life of the period

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<sup>76</sup> Plautus, "The Girl from Persia" in *The Complete Roman Drama*, ed. George E. Duckworth (New York: Random House, 1942), 679-722.

<sup>77</sup> Eve D'Ambra, *Roman Women* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 46.

<sup>78</sup> Plautus, "The Casket," in *The Complete Roman Drama*, ed. George E. Duckworth (New York: Random House, 1942), 325-350.

<sup>79</sup> Moses Haddas, *A History of Latin Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 34.

and and developed what sometimes happened in real life into themes that became conventional and stereotyped.”<sup>80</sup> To what extent mistaken identity of women is reflected historically will be examined in Chapter Four.

Although women with mistaken identities are able to speak freely and participate in the action, they share the same helplessness as the sheltered citizen girls. This vulnerability surfaces when they express their concerns about abandonment by their lovers. For example, Glycerium in Terence’s *Andria* (The Woman of Andros) worries that Pamphilus will marry another woman while she is giving birth to his illegitimate son.<sup>81</sup> Palaestra (*virgo*) and Ampelisca (courtesan) are completely at the mercy of the men in Plautus’ *Rudens* (The Rope). They fear remaining under the control of their pimp, Labrax, and are saved by the combined efforts of Palaestra’s lover Plesiddipus, her father Daemons, and his slave Tralchio.<sup>82</sup> In the *Rudens*, this helplessness is coupled with suicidal exclamations believed to be inherent for women. According to a Roman historian, “the notion that suicidal thoughts are a woman’s natural response to private distress is especially prominent in the *Rudens*... When Palaestra declares that she wants to die... Ampelisca tells the audience that she has also decided to die,<sup>83</sup> She exclaims, “For my part, I’d rather die than submit to the procurer’s anger. But my heart fails me when I think of death... I am only a woman. Ah, bitter, bitter day!”<sup>84</sup> Not being able to follow through on desires for honorable suicide amplifies the idea of powerless connected to gender.

Despite these challenges, girls of unsure parentage exhibit what the ancient Romans considered “ideal” female qualities: chastity, natural beauty, fidelity and modesty. These women seem to combine the virtues of young maidens with the increased freedom of speech and participation given by Plautus

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<sup>80</sup> Duckworth, 159.

<sup>81</sup> Terence, “The Woman of Andros,” in *The Complete Roman Drama Volume II*, ed. George E. Duckworth (New York: Random House, 1942), 143-196.

<sup>82</sup> Plautus, “The Rope,” in *The Complete Roman Drama*, ed. George E. Duckworth (New York: Random House, 1942), 829-904.

<sup>83</sup> Dorota Dutsch, “Genre, Gender, and Suicide Threats in Roman Comedy,” *Classical World* 105, no. 2 (2012): 187-198. doi:10.1353/clw.2012.0013.

Plautus, “The Rope,” in *The Complete Roman Drama*, 871.

and Terence to courtesans. Aldelphasium in *Poenulus* (The Carthaginian) is one character who combines a straightforward nature with virtue and poise. She is not afraid to speak her mind to her lover, Agorasticles, and treats him coolly when it takes him longer than expected to purchase her. However, she proclaims her good manner by saying “I’d much rather be adorned with a good disposition than with gold. Gold comes from luck, a good disposition from one’s nature.”<sup>85</sup> She too, is discovered to be of free birth at the end of the play.

The wives and mothers of Roman comedy fall under the category of *matrona*. The characterization of the *matrona* varies from play to play, and often these women contribute more to the dramatic action compared to the *virgo*. Some wives are depicted in a negative light: they nag their husbands, treat them harshly, and ask them too many questions. For example, in Plautus’ *Menaechmi* (The Brothers Menaechmus), Menachmus describes his wife as a “mean, stupid, obstinate, and impossible female.”<sup>86</sup> Damaenetus in Plautus’ *Asinaria* (The Comedy of Asses) states that he would rather “drink bilge-water” than kiss his wife, Artemonia.<sup>87</sup> Lysidamus in Plautus’ *Casina* also shows resentment for his argumentative wife, Cleustrata, and exclaims that she “tortures him by being alive.”<sup>88</sup> However, the wives that are depicted as shrewish, hot tempered, or suspicious are often married to unfaithful or cruel husbands.<sup>89</sup> In the plays such as the *Menaechmi*, *Asinaria*, and *Phormio*, it is the lecherous and unfaithful husbands who introduce their wives as domineering or confrontational.<sup>90</sup> Menaechmus is having an affair with a courtesan named Erotium, and steals

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<sup>85</sup> Plautus, “The Carthaginian,” in *The Complete Roman Drama*, ed. George E. Duckworth (New York: Random House, 1942), 735.

<sup>86</sup> Plautus, “The Brothers Menaechmus,” in *Plautus: The Pot of Gold and Other Plays*, trans. E.F. Watling (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1965), 106.

<sup>87</sup> Plautus, “The Comedy of Asses,” in *The Complete Roman Drama*, ed. George E. Duckworth (New York: Random House, 1942), 107.

<sup>88</sup> Plautus, “Casina,” in *The Complete Roman Drama*, ed. George E. Duckworth (New York: Random House, 1942), 285.

<sup>89</sup> Duckworth, 255.

<sup>90</sup> Elaine Fantham, “Women in Control,” in *Women in Roman Republican Drama* eds. Dorota Dutsch, Sharon L. James, and David Konstan (University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 2015), 91.

expensive garments from his wife to gift his lover.<sup>91</sup> Damaenetus attempts to sleep with the prostitute his son has purchased.<sup>92</sup> Cleustrata discovers that Lysidamus is trying to marry her maid, Casina, to one of his slaves so that he may sleep with her.<sup>93</sup> These adulterous husbands reflect the Ancient Roman double standard which prohibited extramarital affairs for women, but looked the other way for men.<sup>94</sup> It is also interesting to note that these wives emerge triumphant by the end of the plays, and make their husbands pay for their cruel treatment. Cleustrata embarrasses her husband by dressing up one of her male slaves as Casina, and Artemonia drags her husband home and away from the table with his son and Philaenium, his lover. When Demaentus asks Artemonia if he can just stay until they've eaten dinner, Artemonia replies "You shall have a dinner such as you deserve when you get home."<sup>95</sup>

Often these wives are resented because they are *uxor dotata*, or dowered wives, and have more money than their husbands.<sup>96</sup> In Plautus' *Aulularia* (The Pot of Gold), Megadorus explains why marriage should be without a dowry: "It would make for harmony in the community and there would be much less friction in the home. The wives would learn obedience... On those terms, they'll perhaps improve their morals, and bring good characters with them instead of the dowries..."<sup>97</sup>

Dowered wives argue with their husbands without fear of punishment, and therefore must have some power within the relationship. For example, in Plautus' *Casina*, the lecherous Lysidamus acts sweetly towards his wife, Cleustrata, in an attempt to cover up his debauchery. His attempts are met with disgust from his wife, who exclaims: "Oh, you worthless, hoary-headed gnat... Do you walk through the streets reeking with perfume at your time of life, you silly old fool?"<sup>98</sup> According to historian Sharon James, "The *uxor dotata*- always the mother of a son- has a husband guilty of

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<sup>91</sup> Plautus, "The Brothers Menaechmus," in *Plautus: The Pot of Gold and Other Plays*, 110.

<sup>92</sup> Plautus, "The Comedy of Asses," in *The Complete Roman Drama*, 63-110.

<sup>93</sup> Plautus, "Casina," in *The Complete Roman Drama*, 279-319.

<sup>94</sup> Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, "130. Punishment for adultery. Rome, 2nd cent. B.C." in *Women's Life in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2016), 122.

<sup>95</sup> Plautus, "The Comedy of Asses" in *The Complete Roman Drama Volume I*, 109.

<sup>96</sup> Duckworth, 255-257.

<sup>97</sup> Plautus, "The Pot of Gold" in *Plautus: The Pot of Gold and Other Plays*, 29-30.

<sup>98</sup> Plautus, "Casina," in *The Complete Roman Drama Volume I*, 285-286.

attempted or actual hanky-panky... These women use little deference: they challenge and prod their husbands, protecting their own interests and punishing the improprieties of the wayward *senes*.”<sup>99</sup> However, the negative descriptions of these women may have been included for the sake of comedic effect. Fantham suggests that the portrayal of wives as overbearing and ill-tempered was the way in which playwrights transformed women into comedic characters.<sup>100</sup> Regardless, these strong willed and wealthy wives are reminiscent of the wives who gained more power and control over their lives through a type of marriage referred to as *sine manu*, to be discussed in Chapter Four.

Some wives, however, are depicted in a positive light, or with sympathy from the playwrights. These women function within the plays less as wives, and more as mothers, daughters, sisters, or friends,<sup>101</sup> and are dedicated to their families, selfless, and obedient. For example, Sostrata in Terence’s *Hecyra* (The Mother in Law) is wrongly blamed for the absence of Pamphillus’ wife. Despite knowing her innocence, Sostrata offers to leave so that Pamphillus and Philumena can reunite.<sup>102</sup> Her concern for her son’s marriage and wellbeing allows her function to be primarily that of a mother, evoking sympathy and admiration from the audience. Plautus presents two devoted and loving wives in his *Stichus*. The two women, Panegyris and Pamphilla, spend the first third of the play convincing their father to allow them to remain married to their absent husbands.<sup>103</sup> Again, the play revolves more around their relationships with their father versus their relationship to their husbands. Eunomia in Plautus’ *Aulularia* (The Pot of Gold) is also portrayed in a positive light. She constantly ridicules her own gender, making statements such as “No woman can be the *best* woman you know.

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<sup>99</sup> Sharon L. James, “Mater, Oratio, Filia,” in *Women in Roman Republican Drama* eds. Dorota Dutsch, Sharon L. James, and David Konstan (University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 2015), 109.

<sup>100</sup> Fantham, 91.

<sup>101</sup> Raia, “Women’s Roles in Plautine Comedy.”

<sup>102</sup> Terence, “The Mother in Law” in *Terence: The Comedies*, trans. Peter Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 82.

<sup>103</sup> Plautus, “Stichus,” in *The Complete Roman Drama Volume II*, ed. George E. Duckworth (New York: Random House, 1942), 5-43.

Each one is worse than another in some way.”<sup>104</sup> However, Eunomia commands the respect of her brother, Megadorus, and convinces him to get married, despite his reservations about marriage in general.<sup>105</sup> It is also interesting to note that she holds enough power within their relationship to advise him, without being portrayed as a domineering character. Again, Eunomia is seen by the audience as Megadorus’ sister, not as a wife.

The exception to this rule is Alcumene from Plautus’ *Amphitryon*. She is gifted with all of the wonderful qualities of the *virgo* and the positively portrayed matrons, and still functions within the play mainly as a wife. Alcumene is characterized as respected, innocent, and chaste, despite her having been raped by the Roman god, Jove, disguised as her husband. She is so trusted by her husband that he rushes home from war to bring her news<sup>106</sup> and is thought highly of by all of the citizens of Thebes.<sup>107</sup> When her husband accuses her of adultery, she stands strong against these allegations.<sup>108</sup> At the end of the play, Jove clears her of any fault by telling her husband that it was he who raped her: “She has done nothing to deserve your blame, she was compelled by me.”<sup>109</sup>

Plautus and Terence also shed light on the importance of chastity, relationships between fathers and daughters, marriage dynamics, ancient opinions of rape, and ancient ideas about what the perfect woman looked like. The ways in which these themes are presented show many parallels to historical information regarding women, to be discussed in Chapter Four.

The chastity of young women is of utmost importance in the comedies. Citizen women have to be loyal to only one man. As one scholar explains, “Roman woman’s primary virtue was *pudicita* (not so much chastity, as sexual fidelity enhanced by fertility). This was the female equivalent to *fides*, a

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<sup>104</sup> Plautus, “The Pot of Gold” in *Plautus: The Pot of Gold and Other Plays*, trans. E.F. Watling (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1965), 16.

<sup>105</sup> Plautus, “The Pot of Gold” in *Plautus: The Pot of Gold and Other Plays*, 17.

<sup>106</sup> Plautus, “Amphitryon,” in *The Complete Roman Drama*, ed. George E. Duckworth (New York: Random House, 1942), 15.

<sup>107</sup> Plautus, “Amphitryon,” in *The Complete Roman Drama*, 34.

<sup>108</sup> Plautus, “Amphitryon,” in *The Complete Roman Drama*, 43.

<sup>109</sup> Plautus, “Amphitryon,” in *The Complete Roman Drama*, 43.



man's loyalty to his friends and his country."<sup>110</sup> In the comedies, the "prostitutes" and "courtesans" who are discovered to be of free birth are always loyal to one man. On her deathbed, Glycerium's supposed sister, Mysis, tells Pampilus "she has always loved you, and you only, with all her heart..."<sup>111</sup> Glycerium gives birth to a son by Pamphilus offstage during this play, so she is certainly not virginal. However, Terence clearly tells the audience of Glycerium's fidelity to Pamphilus.

Plautus' *Rudens* (The Rope) contains another example of a loyal courtesan discovered to be a free woman. Palaestra and Ampelisca begin the play in the possession of a pimp named Labrax, and after a shipwreck, they hide from him at the Altar of Venus. Despite being a courtesan, Palaestra describes herself as pious and innocent,<sup>112</sup> and describes the horror she feels at enduring life as a prostitute: "I should lay violent hands upon myself, rather than submit to that."<sup>113</sup> Palaestra would rather die than have her chastity violated, especially since she knows that she was born a free woman. At the end of the play, her lover, Plesiddipus, is allowed to marry her after she finds her father. In Plautus' *Curculio*, Phaedromus proclaims his lover Planesium's chastity by stating "she's just as chaste as if she were my sister- unless there's something unchaste in a few kisses."<sup>114</sup> The young maidens of these plays are certainly reflective of a society with a negative view of female sexuality,<sup>115</sup> and reinforce the social pressure for women to be sexually loyal to one man.

Girls who are known to be of good birth are always under the control of their fathers, another characteristic of Roman legal structure. The fathers' power over his daughters is reflected first by the daughter's general absence from these plays. Often, girls of good birth were sheltered in ancient Rome, and were kept under constant supervision until they could be married.<sup>116</sup> Therefore, it is likely that girls

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<sup>110</sup> Elaine Fantham et al., *Women in the Classical World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 225.

<sup>111</sup> Terence, "The Woman of Andros," in *The Complete Roman Drama Volume II*, 152.

<sup>112</sup> Plautus, "The Rope" in *The Complete Roman Drama*, 854.

<sup>113</sup> Plautus, "The Rope" in *The Complete Roman Drama*, 870.

<sup>114</sup> Plautus, "Curculio," in *The Complete Roman Drama*, ed. George E. Duckworth (New York: Random House, 1942), 357.

<sup>115</sup> D'Ambra, 12.

<sup>116</sup> D'Ambra, 10.

such as Phaedria in *Aulularia*, the two unnamed girls in *Trinummus*, and Philumena in the *Andria* do not appear because they were under the control of their fathers, and their appearance would not have been considered proper.<sup>117</sup>

The fathers of Roman comedy also exercise their power by arranging marriages for their daughters, always without consultation. In Terence's *Andria* (The Woman of Andros), Simo says "Chermes came to me of his own accord and offered to give his only daughter to my son to wed, with a handsome dowry."<sup>118</sup> Chermes' daughter, Philumena, does not appear on stage, but is said to be in love with a different young man, named Charinus. Despite this, Chermes betrothed her to Simo's son, Pamphilus. It is difficult to imagine that she would have been in favor of such a marriage when she was in love with Charinus. Euclio, the father in Plautus' *Aulularia* (The Pot of Gold) betrothed his daughter without her consideration, to a bachelor named Megadorus.<sup>119</sup> However, these plays also reflect the reality that daughters sometimes had a say in the matter.<sup>120</sup> When the identity of a young maiden is discovered, her father typically marries her to the *adulescens* she is in love with. In Plautus' *Rudens* (The Rope), Daemones marries his newly found daughter Palaestra to the young man who attempted to buy her from her procurer.<sup>121</sup> In Terence's *Andria* (The Woman of Andros), Chermes marries Glycerium to her lover, Pamphilus, after discovering that she is his long lost daughter, despite having previously betrothed his other daughter to the same man.<sup>122</sup>

Paternal power does not end with marriage in these plays, as very often the father remains involved in the lives of his daughters post-marriage. In Plautus' *Menaechmi* (The Brothers

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<sup>117</sup> Duckworth, 253.

<sup>118</sup> Terence, "The Woman of Andros," in *The Complete Roman Drama*, ed. George E. Duckworth (New York: Random House, 1942), 146.

<sup>119</sup> Plautus, "The Pot of Gold" in *Plautus: The Pot of Gold and Other Plays*, trans. E.F. Watling (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1965), 19-22.

<sup>120</sup> Gillian Clark, "Roman Women," *Greece & Rome* 28, no. 2 (1981): 193-212. Accessed April 12, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/642866](http://www.jstor.org/stable/642866), 202.

<sup>121</sup> Plautus, "The Rope" in *The Complete Roman Drama*, ed. George E. Duckworth (New York: Random House, 1942), 893.

<sup>122</sup> Terence, "The Woman of Andros," in *The Complete Roman Drama*, 143-192.

Menaechmus), after her dress has been stolen from her by her husband, the wife of Menaechmus exclaims “I shall send for my father and tell him about your wicked doings.”<sup>123</sup> She then asks her father to take her away from the marriage, which implies that he has the power to do so. Another example takes place in scenes I and II of act one in Plautus’ *Stichus*, which focuses on two daughters of a man named Antipho. The husbands of the two girls who Antipho picked for them had been overseas for three years. Since their husbands have not been in contact with them, Antipho visits his daughters with the intention of remarrying them. He wishes to remarry them because he knows that the daughter’s absent husbands have not been providing for them, and he worries about their safety and stability. Although the sisters acknowledge that Antipho has the power to separate them from their current husbands,<sup>124</sup> they persuade him to allow them to remain married to them.<sup>125</sup>

Patriarchal power in Roman society is reflected in the comedies especially in the arranged marriages. These fathers argue they have their daughters’ best interests at heart. For example, Antipho expresses genuine concern for the wellbeing of his daughters, whose husbands have been absent for three years. It is made clear that he is worried about his daughters when he asks them, “Am I to allow you girls to stay married to beggars, as long as I live?”<sup>126</sup> Chermes in Terence’s *Andria* (The Woman of Andros) also demonstrates that he has his daughter’s best interests in mind when he breaks off Philumena’s engagement to Pamphilus after hearing that he has had an illegitimate child with Glycerium. Chermes tells Pamphilus’ father: “Why, you have driven me into giving my daughter to a young fellow who is in love with someone else and loathes the idea of marriage, to undergo domestic unhappiness... They say that Glycerium is an Athenian citizen; a boy has been born; let us go.”<sup>127</sup> In Plautus’ *Poenulus* (The Carthaginian), Hanno searches for his daughters, and asks the gods and

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<sup>123</sup> Plautus, “The Brothers Menaechmus,” in *Plautus: The Pot of Gold and Other Plays*, 130.

<sup>124</sup> Plautus, “Stichus,” in *The Complete Roman Drama Volume II*, ed. George E. Duckworth (New York: Random House, 1942), 5.

<sup>125</sup> Plautus, “Stichus,” in *The Complete Roman Drama Volume II*, 10.

<sup>126</sup> Plautus, “Stichus,” in *The Complete Roman Drama Volume II*, 10.

<sup>127</sup> Terence, “The Woman of Andros,” in *The Complete Roman Drama Volume II*, 180.

goddesses to allow him to find them.<sup>128</sup> Daemons from Plautus' *Rudens* (The Rope) laments the loss of his stolen daughter. "O my daughter, when I look upon this young girl, how I am reminded of what your loss makes me suffer!"<sup>129</sup> These plays are filled with fathers who love and care about their daughters, and who show great concern for their wellbeing. Such figures may reflect ancient anxieties about the safety of women.

Roman comedies also present an interesting take on the Roman marriage dynamic. While wives in Roman history had little legal power and autonomy over their husbands, wives in these comedies are shown to have some influence or "power" over their husbands. For example, in Terence's *Heauton Timorumenos* (The Self-Tormentor), Chermes' wife, Sostrata, is able to persuade him to punish their son, Clitipho, less harshly.<sup>130</sup> Sostrata also deliberately disobeyed her husband when he told her to expose a baby girl. Instead of exposing the baby herself, she gave the baby to an old Corinthian woman to expose. This suggests that she must have some power in the relationship as to not be afraid of the repercussions. Chermes even forgives her for not exposing the baby: "Yes of course, I'll forgive you for what you did. But I teach you a lot of bad habits, Sostrata, by being so obliging."<sup>131</sup> However, the wives that yield the most power are the wives with large dowries. Artemonia in the *Asinaria*, is feared by her husband, Demaenatus, and resented by him for her wealth. Demaenetus describes his wife to his slave, Libanus, as a "fearful trial."<sup>132</sup> She clearly demonstrates her power over him at the end of the play when she discovers him sitting down for dinner with his son and the courtesan he fancies, Philaneum. She drags him away from the dinner table, back home without supper.<sup>133</sup>

Another example is "The Wife" in Plautus' *Menachemi*. Although she cannot stop her husband from cheating on her, aside from calling on her father to talk to him, she manages to kick him out of

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<sup>128</sup> Plautus, "The Carthaginian," in *The Complete Roman Drama*, 763.

<sup>129</sup> Plautus, "The Rope," in *The Complete Roman Drama*, 873.

<sup>130</sup> Terence, "The Self-Tormentor," in *Terence: The Comedies*, trans. Peter Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 146.

<sup>131</sup> Terence, "The Self-Tormentor," in *Terence: The Comedies*, 126-127.

<sup>132</sup> Plautus, "The Comedy of Asses," in *The Complete Roman Drama*, 63-66.

<sup>133</sup> Plautus, "The Comedy of Asses," in *The Complete Roman Drama*, 104-110.

the house and angrily tells him that he will have to pay interest on the property he “borrowed” from her.<sup>134</sup> Although these wives are hated by their husbands, and are characterized as argumentative and shrewish, they seem to be presented with sympathy by the playwrights. Dowered wives usually get their way, and it is made clear to the audience that they have been severely wronged by their husbands.

The plays’ views on rape can veer from the realities of law. . Rape is depicted as dishonorable for the woman, but these women are portrayed with sympathy by the playwrights. Most of the characters in the plays recognize rape as a terrible crime. The rape is handled in these plays by marrying the victim to her rapist in every instance, a reflection of historical reality. Terence is particularly sympathetic to the plight of Roman women: he presents “in *Hecyra* and *Eunuchus*, a skeptical view of rape as the mythical foundation for Roman marriage (in the legend of the Sabine women) and for marriage in New Comedy. .... Terence marks the vulnerability of the female citizen body, which is placed in constant risk by men.”<sup>135</sup>, Terence’s *Hecyra* and *Eunuchus* chose not to gloss over rape.<sup>136</sup> As one scholar points out, “in the *Hecyra* in particular Terence shows us the social and emotional consequences for women of a rape---pregnancy.”<sup>137</sup> In Terence’s *Hecyra* (The Mother in Law), Philumena was raped just before her marriage to Pamphilus. The gravity of the situation is illuminated through the trouble both Philumena and her mother, Myrrina go through trying to conceal this pregnancy from all of the men in their lives. When Pamphilus is told by Myrrina about the rape and the baby Philumena has borne, he refuses to take her back. “But as for taking her back, I don’t think that’s honorable, and I won’t do it.”<sup>138</sup> However, he agrees to keep this rape a secret, because it was “disgraceful.”<sup>139</sup> These passages demonstrate that the women’s’ attempts to hide the pregnancy

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<sup>134</sup> Plautus, “The Brothers Menaechmus, in *Plautus: The Pot of Gold and Other Plays*, 124.

<sup>135</sup> Sharon L. James, “Gender and Sexuality in Terence,” in *A companion to Terence*, eds A. Augoustakis and A. Traill (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2013), <http://doi.org/10.1002/9781118301975.ch9>, 187.

<sup>136</sup> James, “Gender and Sexuality in Terence,” 187.

<sup>137</sup> Tara Mulder, "Female Trouble in Terence's *Hecyra*: Rape-Pregnancy Plots and the Absence of Abortion in Roman Comedy," *Helios* 46, no. 1 (2019): 35-56. doi:10.1353/hel.2019.0003, 35.

<sup>138</sup> Terence, “The Mother in Law” in *Terence: The Comedies*, trans. Peter Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 75.

<sup>139</sup> Terence, “The Mother in Law” in *Terence: The Comedies*, 75.

and expose the infant were justified given the alternatives. Although Philumena is a victim it still brings shame and disgrace upon her until Pamphillus is found to be the rapist at the conclusion of the play, and is therefore able to resume his marriage with Philumena.

In Terence's *Eunuchus*, Chaerea rapes a young girl named Pamphilla. Although Pamphila is thought to be a courtesan, Thais, another courtesan, knows that Pamphila was actually born a citizen. Upon hearing of the rape, Thais expresses deep concern for the fate of the girl, and scolds Chaerea by stating "I don't know what I am to do about this girl; you have so upset all my plans, that now I can't hand her over to her friends..."<sup>140</sup> The problem is solved by the rapist, Chaerea, agreeing to marry Pamphila. However, "the entrance of the criminal *adulescens* into the framework of legitimate citizen marriage does not mean the end of forced sexual encounters for his young bride... From this point on though, all sexual violence will be justified as the prerogative of the *paterfamilias*,"<sup>141</sup> (a father's power over his household). Even Periphanes in Plautus' *Epidicus* wishes to reunite his family that resulted from his rape of Philippa, after having not seen her for years.<sup>142</sup> While Periphanes makes light of the situation when they meet again, Philippa asks him, "are you the man who, for your own pleasure, sowed grievous suffering in me?"<sup>143</sup>

These plays also present a model of what the ideal Roman woman looked and acted like. These qualities can be reduced to chastity, modesty, and selflessness. Parmino praises Philumena in Terence's *Hecyra* (The Mother in Law) for her submissiveness: "The girl behaved as a well brought up girl should, modestly and decently, putting up with her husband's unkindness and mistreatment, and keeping quiet about his insulting behavior."<sup>144</sup> In Plautus' *Stichus*, Antipho asks his daughters, "With

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<sup>140</sup> Terence, "The Eunuch," in *The Complete Roman Drama*, ed. George E. Duckworth (New York: Random House, 1942), 293.

<sup>141</sup> Mulder, 50.

<sup>142</sup> Plautus, "Epidicus," in *The Complete Roman Drama Volume I* ed. George E. Duckworth (New York: Random House, 1942), 396-431.

<sup>143</sup> Plautus, "Epidicus," in *The Complete Roman Drama Volume I*, 421.

<sup>144</sup> Terence, "The Mother in Law," in *Terence: The Comedies*, 66.

what characteristics should women be endowed with to be the ultimate in womanliness?”<sup>145</sup> The girls mention traits such as showing restraint, avoiding gossip, and maintaining dignity in difficult times.<sup>146</sup> In his *Heauton Timorumenos* (The Self-Tormentor), Terence demonstrates his ideas about feminine ideals through his juxtaposition of the characters Antiphilla (*virgo*) and Bacchus, a prostitute. While Antiphilla focuses on her wool work, is modest, and is faithful to Clinia, Bacchus is described as “Extravagant, overbearing, and shameless.”<sup>147</sup>

Alcumene in the *Amphitryon* is an example of the perfect wife in Roman comedy. In one scene, she recounts all of the qualities she possesses which make her a worthy wife: “A dowry sir, is not what people deem; but love and modesty, and all desires controlled in fitting bounds, the fear of Heaven, respect of parents, good will to my friends, conforming in my likings to your own, bounteous in kindly service for your good, These things I had, and these my dowry were.”<sup>148</sup> Alcumene reinforces the Roman ideal of a modest woman who respects her parents, and puts her husband before herself.<sup>149</sup>

Another representation of the model wife is Sostrata in Terence’s *Hecyra*. Pamphilus’ wife Philumena has left his family’s home and returned to her parent’s house in an attempt to hide a pregnancy which resulted from rape. However, Pamphilus’ mother, Sostrata, is wrongly accused of being the reason why Philumena has left. Despite her being entirely innocent, Sostrata remains selfless and honorable., even offering to leave the house with her husband so that she is not “an obstacle” in the relationship between Pamphilus and Philumena.<sup>150</sup> However later in the play, her innocence is proven.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Plautus, “Stichus,” in *The Complete Roman Drama Volume II*, 8.

<sup>146</sup> Plautus, “Stichus,” in *The Complete Roman Drama Volume II*, 9.

<sup>147</sup> Terence, “The Self-Tormentor,” in *Terence: The Comedies*, 109.

<sup>148</sup> Plautus, “Amphitryon,” in *The Complete Roman Drama*, 43.

<sup>149</sup> Plautus, “Amphitryon,” in *The Complete Roman Drama*, 34.

<sup>150</sup> Terence, “The Mother in Law” in *Terence: The Comedies*, 82.

<sup>151</sup> Terence, “The Mother in Law” in *Terence: The Comedies*, 70.

Although women are not always the central characters of the drama, these fictional women give historians a great deal of insight into what the lives of Roman women were really like, in an absence of a lot of primary sources. A one historian wrote:

“Roman writers employ New Comedy particularly for women: Cicero invokes stock Roman comic types in his legal speeches; the historian Livy draws on Roman Comedy in his account of the religious-political scandal of the Bacchanalia (itself mentioned in Plautus), a crisis said to have involved inappropriate behavior by women; the Roman elegists routinely mention characters and plots from New Comedy as models for the love affairs they depict.”<sup>152</sup>

Therefore, it is not surprising that the common themes found across the twenty-six comedies are also reflected in other historical sources.

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<sup>152</sup> James, “Ancient Comedy, Women’s Lives: Finding Social History and Seeing the Present in Classical Comedy.”



## Chapter 4: The History Reflected in Plautus and Terence

Comedy is an invaluable source in the study of any society, because in order for an audience to find something amusing, they must understand or relate to the joke. Women were a part of the audience who watched Roman comedy.<sup>153</sup> The comedies of Plautus and Terence reflect the society in which the playwrights lived and worked, and provide additional insight into the lives of Roman women.

Plautus and Terence highlight the qualities expected of the ideal Roman woman, and emphasize the seemingly unattractive traits of women, for comedic purposes. These playwrights are also, however, sympathetic towards the plight of women as seen through issues such as rape and unfaithful husbands. As one historian writes:

Latin plays were written for audiences whose gender perspectives and expectations were shaped by life in Rome and its environs, audiences that included female citizens and slaves. There is indeed little doubt that the specific gender relations of Rome to some extent, at least, shaped the Latin scripts.<sup>154</sup>

In Roman epitaphs, letters, and inscriptions, women are characterized with the same obedience, innocence, and helplessness that the *virgo* of Roman comedy presents. An inscription from a grave stele from the first century B.C. for a Roman mother named Murdia reflects on her demeanor as a young maiden: “determined to maintain the marriages given to her by her parents to worthy men,

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<sup>153</sup> <sup>153</sup> Dorota Dutsch, Sharon L. James, and David Konstan, eds, *Women in Roman Republican Drama* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), 4-5.

<sup>154</sup> Dutsch, James, and Konstan, 4-5.

with obedience and propriety, and as a bride to become more beloved because of her merits...”<sup>155</sup>

Pliny the Younger, mourns the death of a young girl named Minicia Marcella in one of his letters, and writes that she “was as wise as an old woman and as sedate as a matron without losing her girlish sweet and virginal modesty. How she would throw her arms around her father’s neck! How she loved her nurses and pedagogues and teachers for the services they provided her... She suffered her last illness with such sobriety, patience, and constancy.”<sup>156</sup>

Just like the absent *virgos*, real young women were praised for their modesty and obedience. Take for example, Palaestra from *Rudens* (The Rope). Palaestra describes herself as “pious” and “innocent,” and remains at the mercy of men throughout the play. She courageously states that she would “lay violent hands upon herself,” before she has her honor ruined by living the life of a courtesan.<sup>157</sup> Another example can be found in Terence’s *Heauton Timorumenos* (The Self-Tormentor) when the virtuous maiden, Antiphila, is found “hard at work weaving a web, modestly dressed,” proving that she had been faithful to her lover, Clinia.<sup>158</sup> These declarations of innocence and modesty within the comedies clearly reflect the Roman desire to raise chaste and virtuous young women.

All Roman fathers possessed *patria potestas*, a power which granted him “the right of life and death over the entire household.”<sup>159</sup> Fathers decided whether a child was to be raised or exposed.<sup>160</sup> Fathers continued to hold this right of life and death over their children throughout their lifetime, however fathers rarely killed their sons or daughters after choosing to rear them.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, “52. Murdia. Rome, 1st cent. B.C.” in *Women’s Lives in Greece and Rome* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2016), 28.

<sup>156</sup> “The Death of Minicia Marcella. Rome, AD 105/106.” in Lefkowitz and Fant, 244.

<sup>157</sup> Plautus, “Rudens,” in *The Complete Roman Drama Volume II*, 870.

<sup>158</sup> Terence, “The Self-Tormentor,” in *Terence: The Comedies*.

<sup>159</sup> Elaine Fantham et al., *Women in the Classical World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 227.

<sup>160</sup> Clark, 194.

<sup>161</sup> D’Ambra, 49.

Gillian Clark writes that “A girl’s chances of being reared were less than her brother’s.”<sup>162</sup> Female babies were more likely to be exposed than their male counterparts.<sup>163</sup> Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a Greek historian who wrote during the reign of the first Roman Emperor, Augustus (27B.C-14 C.E.) recounts the laws supposedly created by Romulus at the founding of Rome: “...he obliged the inhabitants to bring up all their male children, and the first born of the females...”<sup>164</sup> A letter from a husband to wife from Roman Egypt written in 1 B.C. reads “If- good luck to you!- you bear offspring, if it is male, let it live; if it is female, expose it.”<sup>165</sup> Despite these guidelines, some families did raise multiple daughters.<sup>166</sup> The exposure of female babies harkens to another theme in Roman comedy: the power of fathers over their daughters (to be discussed in further detail later in the chapter).

The absence of known *virgos* in the dramatic action of Roman Comedy is also reflective of the sheltered lives lived by daughters, although this depends on the social class of the family. Eve D’Ambra explains that “Girls from leading families were kept close to home under constant supervision until they were handed over to husbands.”<sup>167</sup> Unlike wealthier maidens, girls from lower class families sometimes worked to help support the family.<sup>168</sup> Therefore, it would not be uncommon to see girls from the lower classes participating in the Roman society and economy. Plautus provides readers with an example of a lower-class maiden; the unnamed daughter of Saturio in the *Persa* (The Girl from Persia). As discussed in Chapter Three, Saturio’s daughter participates in the dramatic action more than any other daughter known to be of free birth, and is representative of the young girls tasked with helping their families.

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<sup>162</sup> Clark, 194.

<sup>163</sup> Clark, 194-195.

<sup>164</sup> Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities, Volume I: Books 1-2*, trans. Earnest Cary, Loeb Classical Library 319 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937),

[https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Dionysius\\_of\\_Halicarnassus/2A\\*.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Dionysius_of_Halicarnassus/2A*.html).

<sup>165</sup> “295. Exposure of a Female Child. Oxyrhynchus, Egypt, 1 BC,” in Lefkowitz and Fant, 236.

<sup>166</sup> Clark, 195.

<sup>167</sup> D’Ambra, 10.

<sup>168</sup> D’Ambra, 46.

Not all young girls were completely sheltered in their childhood—many were educated. Some daughters attended primary school in the Roman forum. Historians cite the mention of a plebeian girl named Verginia who attended school in the forum as evidence that it was not entirely unusual for girls to attend school.<sup>169</sup> Wealthy girls could have private tutors. For example, the daughter of Pompey, a Roman consul living in the first century B.C., had a tutor for Greek.<sup>170</sup> Studies for women could include the liberal arts and the performing arts.<sup>171</sup> If girls did not have a tutor or attend school, they could attain a semblance of education from their parents, brothers, or husbands. For example, Pliny the Younger, living in the first century A.D. continued the education of his wife.<sup>172</sup>

However, the education of women was not aimed at their personal enlightenment, but sought to make these women into better partners for their husbands.<sup>173</sup> Women were “educated in elite families because they were expected to be informed companions of husbands in the higher echelons of political service... Women were literate, wrote poetry, and discussed philosophy as *matronae doctae*, learned women.”<sup>174</sup> Plutarch, in a letter to his newly married friend, advised him to educate his wife, but he suggests this because he believed that education kept wives out of trouble. “For if they do not receive the seed of a good education and do not develop this education in company with their husbands, they will, left to themselves, conceive a lot of ridiculous ideas and unworthy aims and emotions.”<sup>175</sup> Usually, education for Roman emphasized domestic skills.<sup>176</sup> The Roman comedies do not mention women’s education, and generally do not characterize the women based on their intellectual capabilities. However, these plays do not comment on the education of male characters either.

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<sup>169</sup> Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 170.

<sup>170</sup> Clark, 199.

<sup>171</sup> D’Ambra, 64.

<sup>172</sup> Clark, 199.

<sup>173</sup> D’Ambra, 62.

<sup>174</sup> D’Ambra, 136.

<sup>175</sup> “286. Advice on marriage. Boeotia, 2nd cent. AD,” in Lefkowitz and Fant, 231.

<sup>176</sup> D’Ambra, 59.

The characterization of the *matrona*, the virtuous wife, is also historically reflected. Roman matrons were praised for many of the same reasons as the positively portrayed women in Roman comedy. In the epitaph for Murdia, her son writes:

“Still, my dearest mother deserved greater praise than all others, since in modesty, propriety, chastity, obedience, wool working, industry, and loyalty she was on equal level with all other good women, nor did she take second place to any woman in virtue, work, and wisdom in times of danger.”<sup>177</sup>

Another inscription reads, “Here lies Amymone, wife of Marcus, best and most beautiful, worker in wool, pious, chaste, thrifty, a stayer at home (*domiseda*).”<sup>178</sup> Alcmena in Plautus’ *Amphitryon* is described as “innocence itself,” and proclaims:

A dowry... is not what people deem; But love and modesty, and all desires controlled in fitting bounds, the fear of Heaven, Respect of parents, good will to my friends, Conforming in my likings to your own, bounteous in kindly service for your good, These things I had, and these my dowry were.”<sup>179</sup>

On the other hand, exaggerated negative characteristics of wives in Roman comedy reflect negative stereotypes held by Romans. Women were criticized for their extravagance by conservatives such as Cato the Elder,<sup>180</sup> and women who were less subservient to their husbands or less meek were portrayed as nuisances. Juvenal, a Roman satirist living in the second century AD, complains about the annoyance of the “female who, as soon as she sits down to dinner, praises Vergil and excuses Dido’s suicide: matches and compares poets, weighing Vergil on one side of the scale and Homer in the other. Schoolmasters yield; professors are vanquished, everyone in the party is silenced.”<sup>181</sup>

Women were also criticized for shamelessness or adultery. While trying to tarnish the character of the infamous political plotter, Clodia, the Roman orator, Cicero exclaimed that she “is a hussy and lives brazenly, that is, she is a wealthy woman and lives extravagantly; that is she is a slave to her appetites and lives like a whore.”<sup>182</sup> Romans also shared similar complaints about rich wives. Martial,

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<sup>177</sup> “52. Murdia. Rome, 1st. Cent. BC,” in Lefkowitz and Fant, 28.

<sup>178</sup> “50. Amymone, housewife. Rome, 1st cent. BC,” in Lefkowitz and Fant, 27.

<sup>179</sup> Plautus, “Amphitryon” in *The Complete Roman Drama Volume I*, 43.

<sup>180</sup> “196. Women demonstrate and obtain repeal of the Oppian law. Rome, 195 B.C.” in Lefkowitz and Fant, 172.

<sup>181</sup> “83. Juvenal on women in general. Rome, 2nd cent. AD,” in Lefkowitz and Fant, 48.

<sup>182</sup> “85. Cicero on Clodia. Rome 56 BC,” in Lefkowitz and Fant, 51.

a Roman satirist from the first century A.D., writes “Are you asking why I don’t want to take a rich wife? I don’t want a husband for a wife. Let the matron, Priscus, stay beneath the husband.”<sup>183</sup>

Many characters in the comedies complain about the effect that wealthy wives have on their husbands. For example, in Plautus’ *Asinaria* (The Comedy of Asses), Damaenetus’s wealthy wife, Artemonia, has all of the power in the relationship. He exclaims that when he married her, he “sold my empire for that dowry!” When his son needs money to buy his lover, he tells his slave Libanus to swindle his wife for the money, because he has no money of his own.<sup>184</sup> In Rome, many wealthy matrons could, and did manage their own wealth and property. Women could inherit fortunes and make wills, although it required some legal technicalities.<sup>185</sup> Historian Sarah B. Pomeroy writes: “The Romans found a number of legal loopholes by which wealth could be transferred to women...” and by the late Republic, “some women were in actual fact independently controlling large amounts of property.”<sup>186</sup>

Roman comedies emphasize the importance of chastity in women. These comedies explicitly state that the young girls only stay with one man if they are of good birth. Roman girls typically entered their first marriage at puberty, around 14, though boys of the same age could continue their education.<sup>187</sup> Maidens were married very young to ensure an “undefiled body and mind” instead of ensuring that girls were ready for childbearing.<sup>188</sup> These girls typically married men who were about ten years older than them.<sup>189</sup> The Romans sought to marry these girls before sexual desire began for them.<sup>190</sup> According to one historian, “Maidens, young women physically developed and ready for marriage in their teens, required the most supervision because their budding sexuality left them

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<sup>183</sup> “82. The disadvantage of a rich wife. Rome, late 1st cent. AD,” in Lefkowitz and Fant, 46.

<sup>184</sup> Plautus, “The Comedy of Asses,” in *The Complete Roman Drama Volume I*, 66.

<sup>185</sup> Clark, 206.

<sup>186</sup> Pomeroy, 163.

<sup>187</sup> Clark, 200.

<sup>188</sup> Clark, 200.

<sup>189</sup> D’Ambra, 46.

<sup>190</sup> Clark, 201.

vulnerable to physical desires they might not be able to control. Female sexual desire was considered a dangerous, antisocial force by male authorities...<sup>191</sup> Teenage pregnancy presented these women with a greater risk of dying during childbirth.<sup>192</sup>

Roman fathers arranged both marriages and sometimes divorces for their daughters.<sup>193</sup> For the upper classes, marriage was arranged for the sake of making political connections and economic advancement.<sup>194</sup> Legally, a daughter could refuse a marriage only if she could prove that the man was morally unfit.<sup>195</sup> However, in practice some mothers and daughters had a say in the matter.<sup>196</sup> For example, Cicero, a Roman statesman, allowed his daughter Tullia, and his wife to pick Tullia's third husband, Dollabella.<sup>197</sup> This is reminiscent of the fathers in Roman comedy who married their newly found daughters to the man that they were in love with. For example, in Plautus' *Cistellaria* (The Casket), Selenium's father, Demipho, allows her to marry her lover, Alcesimarchus, after she is identified as his daughter.<sup>198</sup> In Plautus' *Rudens* (The Rope), Palaestra's father, Daemons, allows her to marry her lover, Plesiddipus.<sup>199</sup>

In Rome there were two types of marriages, *cum manu* and *sine manu*. In a marriage *cum manu*, or "with hand," the wife passed from her father's *potestas* to that of her husband. If she married *sine manu*, or "without hand," she remained in the control of her father.<sup>200</sup> Divorce in both types of marriage was relatively easy.<sup>201</sup> The father decided which form of marriage it would be, although *sine manu* was more common.<sup>202</sup> Marriage *sine manu* was often preferable for the families of both the

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<sup>191</sup> D'Ambra, 12.

<sup>192</sup> Clark, 196.

<sup>193</sup> Clark, 202.

<sup>194</sup> Pomeroy, 155.

<sup>195</sup> Pomeroy, 157.

<sup>196</sup> Clark, 202.

<sup>197</sup> Clark, 202.

<sup>198</sup> Plautus, "The Casket," in *The Complete Roman Drama*, ed. George E. Duckworth (New York: Random House, 1942), 325-350.

<sup>199</sup> Plautus, "The Rope" in *The Complete Roman Drama*, 893.

<sup>200</sup> Clark, 203.

<sup>201</sup> Clark, 204.

<sup>202</sup> Pomeroy, 152.

husband and the wife, because it kept the wealth of their families separate.<sup>203</sup> Therefore a woman's father retained more control over his daughter than her husband had. This can explain the cases in Roman comedy in which wives call upon their fathers for help when they are displeased with their husbands, and can explain the need of the daughters in Plautus' *Stichus* need to dissuade their father from separating them from their husbands. Historian Sarah B. Pomeroy suggests that there may be a connection between the increase of wealth in the second century B.C. (due to territorial expansion and war) and an increase of marriages *sine manu* which took place respectively. The rush of booty into Rome increased the wealth of the society, and Pomeroy suggests that families moved towards marriage *sine manu* to retain control over family money. This period of expansion also resulted in greater wealth for women. Simply put, as their brothers died in war, women inherited greater portions of family fortunes.<sup>204</sup>

Marriage *sine manu* allowed for women to have greater freedom, as it was likely that their fathers would die before their husbands. In this case, she was appointed a male guardian, but his authority over her was nominal. This left her to be *sui iuris*, or independent. "Matrons attained measures of legal and financial autonomy simply by outliving their fathers and husbands. Women could also be free of guardianship if they had borne three children.<sup>205</sup> Some of these women were rich and managed their own wealth.<sup>206</sup> Historian Gillian Clark describes the increased freedom for women as such:

"A widow *sui iuris*, managing her own affairs with only token reference to guardian and her agnates (or free from *tutela* altogether if she had borne enough children), and old enough to escape the obligation to remarry and have more children, was Rome's nearest approach to a legally independent woman."<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Pomeroy 155.

<sup>204</sup> Pomeroy, 155.

<sup>205</sup> D'Ambra, 72.

<sup>206</sup> Clark, 206.

<sup>207</sup> Clark, 206.



The increase in freedom for married women that occurred in the shift from marriage *cum manu* to *sine manu* can perhaps account for the larger role in the dramatic action given to the *matrona*, as compared with the role given to *virgos*. This greater role can also be attributed to the fact that marriage provided women with an entrance into public life. When a woman “crossed the threshold of marriage and became a mother and matron, she assumed dignity and a public voice...”<sup>208</sup> Both wealthy and poorer women had the freedom to lead interesting social lives. A wife often conversed with visitors in her atrium, went out shopping, attended the theatre and public games, and visited friends and family.<sup>209</sup> In a comparison of Greek and Roman customs, Cornelius Nepos, a Roman biographer from the first century B.C. wrote, “No Roman would hesitate to take his wife to a dinner party, or allow the mother of his family to occupy the first rooms in his house and to walk about in public.”<sup>210</sup> Women could, and did travel alone on many occasions.<sup>211</sup> For example, Cicero mentions the independent travels of his wife in his letters,<sup>212</sup> while Cornelia, one of the most famous Roman matrons, is said to have entertained many friends.<sup>213</sup>

In Roman comedies, we find wives who argue with their husbands, directly disobey them, and speak their opinions freely. Although women were always technically under the guardianship of men,<sup>214</sup> the reality is that a number of upper-class women had some degree of influence over their husbands, and occasionally even an indirect influence in politics. One example of this is Terentia, the wife of the Roman orator, Cicero. Upon the discovery of the Catilinarian Conspiracy (a plan to assassinate multiple elected officials, headed by Lucius Sirgius Cataline), Cicero, then the consul, had to decide what to do with the conspirators. It is said that Terentia “took the lead in inciting her husband

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<sup>208</sup> D’Ambra, 10.

<sup>209</sup> Clark, 201.

<sup>210</sup> “246. Greek and Roman customs compared. Rome, 1st cent. BC,” in Lefkowitz and Fant, 208.

<sup>211</sup> D’Ambra, 79.

<sup>212</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, “To Tiro (at Patrae) Brundisium, 26 November, 50 B.C.” in *Letters of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, trans. Evelin S. Shuckburgh (New York: P. F. Collier & son, 1909), <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/cicero-letters.asp>.

<sup>213</sup> “61. Cornelia’s noble nature. Misenum, 2nd cent. B.C.” in Lefkowitz and Fant, 31.

<sup>214</sup> “127. The Twelve Tables (excerpts). Rome, 450 BC (traditional date),” in Lefkowitz and Fant, 120.

against the Catilinarian conspirators.”<sup>215</sup> Terentia is also believed to have pushed her husband to testify against Publius Clodius for dressing up as a woman to attend the Bona Dea ceremony, a religious ceremony only to be attended by women. Plutarch, in his *Life of Cicero*, explains her motivation to be a disliking of the accused’s sister, Clodia, who she believed wanted to marry her husband. Plutarch describes Terentia as “in her own nature neither tender hearted, nor timorous, but a woman eager for distinction (who, as Cicero himself says, would rather thrust herself into his public affairs, than communicate her domestic matters to him).”<sup>216</sup>

Another politically influential woman is Fulvia, the wife of Marc Antony, who lived in the first century B.C. She was known to accompany all three of her husbands in political business, and is noted for her cruelty during the proscriptions. She faced harsh criticism for her involvement in politics, and is constantly characterized in a masculine manor. However, “the antagonism she aroused is a measure of the real political power that women like her wielded, whether through wealth or influence.”<sup>217</sup>

Cornelia, the wife of Gaius Gracchus, and a contemporary of Terence, is perhaps the most beloved Roman matron of the Republic. She was the daughter of Scipio Africanus, the famous war general who defeated Hannibal in the second Punic war, and the wife of the statesman, Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, who had served as consul in 177 and 163 B.C. Cornelia attested that her main priority was education of her sons. After her husband died, Cornelia was left to raise her twelve children on her own. She did so nobly, and the Romans related the eloquence of her two sons, the Gracchi brothers, to be the result of the care their mother took in raising them.<sup>218</sup> She exemplified the Roman ideal of the *univira*, and is even said to have refused the marriage proposal of King Ptolemy VIII of Egypt.<sup>219</sup> She was highly educated, especially for a woman. She was fluent in Greek and

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<sup>215</sup> Sharon L. James and Sheila Dillon eds., *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World* (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012), 354.

<sup>216</sup> Plutarch, *The Life of Cicero*, trans. John Dryden, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, The Internet Classics, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/cicero.html>.

<sup>217</sup> Pomeroy, 185-186.

<sup>218</sup> D’Ambra, 143-145.

<sup>219</sup> “62. Tiberius Gracchus chooses to die in place of Cornelia. Rome, 2nd cent. BC,” in Lefkowitz and Fant, 33.

studied rhetoric. She was so eloquent, that her letters, if they are genuine, may be some of the only words written by women to have survived from the Roman Republic. Yet, seemingly without criticism, “through her two sons, Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, Cornelia exercised a profound influence on Roman politics.”<sup>220</sup> Cornelia seems to have balanced being politically influential with ideal womanly qualities, and is therefore remembered very fondly.

In addition, women could also hold political influence by intervening as a large group. In the fourth century B.C., Rome was occupied by Gauls who demanded a ransom to leave the city. The wealthy women of Rome contributed greatly to this ransom.<sup>221</sup> In 215 B.C., the *Lex Oppia*, a sumptuary law, prevented women from wearing more than an ounce of gold. When the women found out that its repeal might fail, they took to the streets to demonstrate their disapproval.<sup>222</sup> The repeal of this law was important to women because wearing jewelry identified women of wealth.<sup>223</sup> Livy, writing later, expresses sympathy for these women, arguing that “finery could serve as a woman’s badge of honor.”<sup>224</sup>

The ugly aspects of society also aligned with the plays. In Rome, “all sexual assault, including rape, was treated as a crime, though the legal charge was sometimes obscured.”<sup>225</sup> Because rape threatened the production of legitimate Roman citizens, rape was considered a crime against the state instead of crime against the victim.<sup>226</sup> Although the plays of Plautus and Terence do not include persecution, they accurately depict the realities of rape for the women. The playwrights express deep sympathy for the misery that accompanies rape, and comment extensively on the social consequences.

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<sup>220</sup> Pomeroy, 150.

<sup>221</sup> Fantham et al., 222.

<sup>222</sup> D’Ambra, 32.

<sup>223</sup> D’Ambra, 32.

<sup>224</sup> D’Ambra, 12.

<sup>225</sup> Nguyen, 83.

<sup>226</sup> N. L. Nguyen, “Roman Rape: An Overview of Roman Rape Laws From the Republican Period to Justinian’s Reign,” *Michigan Journal of Gender & Law*, 13(1), 75-112, <http://ezproxy.purchase.edu:2048/login?url=https://ezproxy.purchase.edu:4131/docview/236649396?accountid=14171>, 88.

In Plautus' *Epidicus*, Philippa, a victim of rape, recounts the miserable life she leads. "This now is my experience, on whom so many woes converge and batter my breast at one time; sufferings of many a kind keep me in anguish; poverty and apprehension terrify the thoughts of my mind, nor have I anywhere a place of refuge wherein I can place my hopes."<sup>227</sup> The instability in Philippa's life is likely due to the fact that her rape and the resulting pregnancy destroyed her marriage prospects. In Terence's *Hecyra*, Philumena's mother, Myrrina, begs Pamphilus not to tell anyone about Philumena's rape, as they plan to expose the child. Pamphilus agrees to cover up the "disgraceful injury that the poor girl has suffered."<sup>228</sup> Myrrina went to great lengths to conceal the pregnancy from everyone to protect her daughter from suffering social consequences.

In Terence's *Eunuchus* (The Eunuch), Thais discusses the ways in which Pamphila will be affected by her rape. She tells the rapist, Chaerea, "I don't know what I am to do about this girl; you have so upset all my plans, that now I can't hand her over to her friends..."<sup>229</sup> Historically, rape had extensive social consequences for the victims. Most importantly, rape severely limited a girl's marriage prospects. "With the loss of their virginity, unmarried women had little hope for marriage, and married women suffered shame and despair."<sup>230</sup> In fact, under the *lex Aquilia*, an act established in 286 B.C. which enforced compensation for losses, fathers could prosecute rapists because they "spoiled marriage potential."<sup>231</sup> Marriage was seen as a rite of passage for women, and therefore women who could not be married were deprived of an important part of Roman life. Plautus and Terence, instead of glossing over the effects of rape, expand on the ramifications of rape, and present them in a realistic way which is sympathetic to the victims.

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<sup>227</sup> Plautus, "Epidicus," in *The Complete Roman Drama Volume I*, 419-420.

<sup>228</sup> Terence, "The Mother-in-Law," in *Terence: The Comedies*, 53-95.

<sup>229</sup> Terence, "The Eunuch," in *The Complete Roman Drama*, ed. George E. Duckworth (New York: Random House, 1942), 293.

<sup>230</sup> Nguyen, 84.

<sup>231</sup> Nguyen, 91-92.

In plays such as Terence's *Hecyra* (The Mother-In-Law) and the *Eunuchus* (The Eunuch), it is clear that rape is viewed as a social disgrace for the victim., Pamphilus refuses to take his wife back after she bears a child of rape, even though he is unknowingly the rapist himself. This discusses deep concern for the limitations which will be put on the life of Pamphila because of her rape in the *Eunuchus*. In Rome, "raped women were seen as embarrassments to their husbands and fathers," because the rapist has essentially undermined their main responsibility of keeping their wives and daughters sexual integrity.<sup>232</sup> The prime function of marriage in Rome was to create legitimate Roman citizens to serve the state. Therefore, when a woman's chastity was violated, it threatened her duty to bear legitimate children and brought about the "destruction of her chief commodity in the exchange which accompanied marriage."<sup>233</sup>

The idea of rape being shameful for the woman can also find its roots in one of the founding myths of the city of Rome. The story of Lucretia depicts suicide as a reasonable, and even noble solution to the problem of rape. When Rome was still a Kingdom, a group of princes discussed the virtue of their wives. One of these princes was Sextus Tarquinius, son of the king, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus. One of the men, Collatinus, decided that they should check on their wives to prove that his, Lucretia, was the most virtuous. While the other wives were found enjoying themselves at extravagant dinner parties, Lucretia was "still hard at work by lamplight upon her spinning."<sup>234</sup> Sextus Tarquinius lusted after Lucretia because of her "beauty" and "chastity." He returned a few days later and threatened that if she did not submit to him, he would kill her and one of her slaves to make it appear as if she was caught in adultery with a slave. Lucretia yielded to Sextus, but committed suicide after telling her husband and her father of her rape to maintain her honor.<sup>235</sup> Lucretia is depicted as heroic for inflicting this punishment on herself, even though she knew that she was innocent at heart.

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<sup>232</sup> Nguyen, 84.

<sup>233</sup> Nguyen, 84.

<sup>234</sup> Livy, 98.

<sup>235</sup> Livy, 98-99.

In the comedies of Plautus and Terence, the way women are portrayed reflects Ancient Roman ideas about the place of women within their culture. These plays paint a picture of the relative freedom given to women upon entering marriage, the prominent influence of wealthy women, and the quiet, sheltered lives of wealthy daughters. They praise women for their virtue, chastity, and modesty, while exaggerating some negative stereotypes for comedy. The comedies of Plautus and Terence give the reader a look into the functions of the Roman family. Historically, Roman women are portrayed in a similar way, and their position within Roman society within the plays is in many ways consistent with historical records. Therefore, the study of these Ancient comedies is invaluable in better understanding the personality of the Roman people.

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