

# EPIDICUS BY PLAUTUS

An Annotated Latin Text,  
with a Prose Translation

CATHERINE TRACY





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Cover image: Marble figure of a comic actor. Roman, 1st–2nd century. Photo by Joanbanjo, Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Actor\\_borratxo,\\_exposici%C3%B3\\_la\\_Bellesa\\_del\\_Cos,\\_MARQ.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Actor_borratxo,_exposici%C3%B3_la_Bellesa_del_Cos,_MARQ.JPG).

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# Introduction

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"I love the play *Epidicus* as much as I love myself," claims the wily slave Chrysalus in another of Plautus's plays (*Bacchides* 214), implying, we'd like to think, that the playwright was particularly proud of it.<sup>1</sup> *Epidicus* is a play that translates well and manages to be very funny despite the millennia that have passed since its original production. What makes it so appealing is the star character: the slave Epidicus. While Romans accepted the inhumanity of slavery as a fact of life (there was no ancient abolitionist movement), the plays of Plautus, and *Epidicus* in particular, show us that Roman spectators loved to see a slave outwit a stupid master, at least in the ritualized context of the *fabula palliata* (comedy set in the Greek world).<sup>2</sup>

The *fabulae palliatae* used stock characters that the spectators would recognize and expect to act in characteristic ways. Apuleius (second century CE) gives us a list of some of these stock characters:

the lying pimp, the ardent lover, the wily slave, the teasing girlfriend, the wife that gets in the way, the permissive mother, the stern uncle, the helpful pal, the belligerent soldier, [...] gluttonous parasites, stingy fathers, and sassy sex workers. (Apuleius, *Florida* 16)

In other ancient lists of comic stock characters, the "father" is defined as "harsh" or "angry" or by his tendency to be tricked by his slave, the "soldier" is "boastful", and additional characters are listed as the "running slave" (usually a different character from the "wily slave"), the "dishonest procuress", the "virtuous wife", and the "shameless flatterer".<sup>3</sup>

Stock characters might behave according to recognizable patterns and within a limited set of plot lines, but such constraints did not hinder Plautus from creating memorable and innovative comic romps.

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- 1 The line from *Bacchides* cannot be taken uncritically as Plautus's enthusiastic endorsement of *Epidicus*, however, as it was at least partly a joke (see Gunderson 2015: 228).
  - 2 The adjective *palliata* comes from the Latin word *pallium*, referring to a cloak commonly associated with Greek male attire in which most of the actors in a *fabula palliata* were dressed. By contrast, comedy with a Roman setting, of which unfortunately only fragments survive, was called *fabula togata* (plural: *fabulae togatae*), in which at least some of the actors wore togas.
  - 3 Plautus, *Captivi* 57–58; Terence, *Eumuchus* 35–40 and *Heauton Timorumenos* 37–39; Horace *Epistulae* 2.1.170–173; Ovid, *Amores* 1.15.17–18.

Reading the play today is entertaining, but it also gives us some insight into the world of mid-republican Rome (Plautus lived from about 254 BCE till 184 BCE). *Epidicus*, like all Roman comedy of the *palliata* genre, was inspired by the Greek New Comedies circulated from Athens a hundred years before. The characters have Greek names, and the action is usually supposed to take place in Athens, which does, it is true, pose a minor problem when we want to use Plautus to illustrate the world of Rome. The plays, however, were not direct translations of Greek originals. As Siobhán McElduff explains when discussing Plautus's art: "translating drama is not simply a matter of linguistic replacement (itself a complicated endeavor), but of adapting a play so that it appeals to a new audience, often one with a different set of demands and expectations" (McElduff 2013: 62). Plautus's Roman audiences enjoyed other forms of comic drama, including Atellan farces (short improvised comic skits originating in Atella, an Oscan town in Italy) and mime performances (short, low-brow comic dramas), and the exuberance of these theatrical forms doubtless influenced the spirit of the *fabulae palliatae*. It is important to understand that the *fabulae palliatae*, though strongly influenced by Greek literature, were composed for Latin-speaking Italy. The versions of the *palliata* genre that we have were adapted specifically for Roman audiences, with topical references to the city of Rome, and jokes about contemporary Roman fashions (see lines 222–235 of *Epidicus*, for example) and historical events. The Greek costumes allowed the playwrights to make jokes about Roman life that would not have been permitted by the sponsoring magistrates if the characters had been dressed in togas (Kocur 2018: 207).

*Epidicus*, probably one of Plautus's later plays, is a great example of Plautus adapting a basic Greek romantic plot line into an irreverent situation comedy that depicts characters (mis)behaving within a fantasy "Athens" that mixed stereotypes of Greek culture with day-to-day Roman life. Where we have evidence of the Greek source for any of Plautus's plays we see that Plautus's approach was fundamentally different to that of his Greek models, with the triumph of the underdog predominating over the Greek focus on traditional family values (Anderson 1993: 29; see also Stürner 2020).

The Greek original for *Epidicus*, if there was one, has not survived. Some scholars believe that it was based on a Greek play that made much more of the young master's love affair, and ended with his marriage to his half-sister, which would have been legal in Athens had she been a citizen, though such a marriage would not have been legal in Rome.<sup>4</sup> However it may have played out in the

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4 There are two lost Greek comedies, known only by title, called *Homopatritoi* (Ὁμοπάτριοι), one by Antiphanes and the other by Menander, which may have been the model for *Epidicus* (Katsouris 1977: 321). True, Goldberg 1978 argued that we lack evidence to assume that *Epidicus* was based on a Greek script, and he found some evidence to suggest that — exceptionally — it was an original plot by Plautus. But more recent scholarship has tended to be less interested

Greek play that inspired Plautus, *Epidicus* gives us no charming love scenes, and in fact makes the young man surprisingly unappealing, so that we enjoy, rather than sympathize with, his final discomfiture when he learns that the woman he'd hoped to make into his slave- or freed-girlfriend is now out of his reach. Plautus always puts comic effect ahead of sentimentality, and in *Epidicus*, the romantic plight of the young man Stratippocles serves only to place the wily slave Epidicus in a series of situations where he must use his wits to get out of impossible situations.

What can we learn about Rome from the play *Epidicus* then? While the play gives us a ludicrously sanitized view of what it was like to be a slave, it nevertheless conveys to us the ubiquity of slavery in Rome, and it can be a useful jumping-off point for an informed reader to consider how Plautus's ancient audiences thought about slavery. The cheerful ingenuity of Epidicus can't completely hide the brutal reality of slavery: we know that the impossible situations he finds himself in are due to his abusive masters. Stratippocles, the freeborn son of the household, has the power to cause Epidicus real harm (a severe beating at the very least), so when he demands that Epidicus solve his problems for him, Epidicus has little choice but to obey. Solving the son's problems, however, means cheating his legal master Periphanes (Stratippocles's father), and if he gets found out Epidicus will suffer worse harm from him. Slave owners often kept torturers whose job was to punish slaves who angered their masters (see line 147 of this play), and we know from joking references in Plautus's comedies that slaves lived under constant threat of corporal punishment and torture.

Rome's overseas expansion during the 3rd century BCE had begun the process of turning Roman Italy from a society that owned slaves into, by the mid 2nd century BCE, what is called a "slave society", in which slavery becomes a significant element of the society's economy, and in which enslaved people have come to form a large proportion (at least 20%) of the population (Hunt 2018: 20). Men who fought in Roman wars risked enslavement if they were defeated, and if their army was victorious they helped to bring about the enslavement of the defeated soldiers as well as of the women, children, and other civilians of the captured towns and states.

Slaves in republican Rome had no right to fair treatment by their owners and no recourse when their owners abused them. There were no legal restrictions on a slave owner's right to destroy his or her slave (Dowling 2006: 12). While a small number of slaves were treated comparatively well because of their invaluable skill-sets and/or the decency of their particular owner, most lived under the very real threat of cruel punishments, such as "spikes, red-hot irons,

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in this hypothetical source for the play, though Arnott 2001 shows how closely some elements of the play correspond to various examples of Greek New Comedy.



crosses, leg shackles, ropes, chains, prisons, restraints, leg traps, neck irons" (so listed by a slave character in another play by Plautus: *Asinaria* 548–52).

Slaves had no right to bodily autonomy, and indeed the physical and sexual abuse of slaves (male and female) was a deliberate means of subjugating them. Slaves were not only separated from their families upon enslavement but were considered no longer to have parents or ancestors (see line 340 of this play, and note 53 on page 150); they lost the right to their own names, and even if they were eventually freed, their legal name became that of their former owner. Those born into slavery likewise were deemed not to have parents in a legal sense; they might be identified as the offspring of a particular slave woman, but she had no parental rights over her children and could be sold away from them, or they could be sold away from her. When a male slave owner fathered a child by one of his female slaves, the child was automatically a slave and had no filial claim on her or his father.

In the opening scene of this play, Epidicus jokes to his fellow slave Thesprio about thieving slaves getting a hand cut off as a punishment (11–11a). Epidicus's young master (Stratippocles) threatens to have Epidicus severely beaten by the slaves his father keeps for the purpose (147) and then sent to the mill to push the treadmill if Epidicus doesn't find a way to settle Stratippocles's debt, a seemingly impossible situation for a slave, though not for the clever Epidicus (lines 121 and 145). At lines 610–626 Epidicus, who thinks that he's about to be found out and punished for his lies, expresses his fear of crucifixion, and a strong desire to run away.

The agonizing and slow form of execution known as crucifixion was reserved, in the Roman world, mainly for slaves and convicted criminals. Crucifixion involved suspending the victim on a post with or without a cross-piece, with flogging and/or disemboweling and/or impaling potentially forming part of the execution (Harley 2019: 305). Such a form of execution, even if rarely carried out, is so horrifying that we must wonder how it could be such a common subject for jokes in Roman comedy.

It is true that crucifixion never occurs within the plays, on or off stage, nor do the plays mention crucifixion as something that had been done prior to the action of the play. But crucifixion did exist as one of the methods that a real-life slave-owner had for terrorizing his or her slaves. A little over one hundred years after Plautus's time, Cicero mentions a slave owner having her slave crucified (Cicero *Pro Cluentio* 187). Cicero calls such an act "dangerous and inhuman wickedness" (*infestum scelus et immane*), but Cicero's outrage was due to the fact that the poor slave was thus prevented from bearing witness against his murderous owner, rather than due to any sympathy for the slave (the slave's testimony, had he not been crucified, would have been extracted under torture, as Roman law required). An inscription from Puteoli (a town about 200 km

south of Rome) reflects the right of slave owners to have their slaves crucified, listing four sesterces as the pay for each of the labourers who were needed to carry the cross-piece (*patibulum*), for each of the floggers (*uerberatores*), and for the executioner (*carnifex*) (AE 1971, no. 88, II.8–10).

When, at line 78, the slave Thesprio tells Epidicus to “go get crucified”, and at 513 Periphanes expresses the same wish to the hired freedwoman lyre-player, we are not meant to take the threats at face value (especially in the latter case, since the lyre-player was not a slave). No doubt these jokes found favour with the slave-owning members of the audience who probably viewed the punishment of slaves simply as a solution to the difficulties of managing their own slaves. It has been suggested, furthermore, that the joking references to crucifixion in the *fabulae palliatae* “confirm[ed] the Roman audience in its sense of superiority and power”, but that the “cunning slave” is never actually crucified because his bad behaviour has all been for the benefit of the young man’s love affair that the audience naturally wants to see succeed (Parker 1989: 240; 246). Another possibility is that the slave avoids the threatened punishment because his role in the comedy is to celebrate “pure anarchic fun” and to represent, for the audience, “an alternative humanity, parodic of the free citizen and released from the obligations that the demands of dignity impose on the free” (Fitzgerald 2019: 188–199). The high stakes (painful and disfiguring punishment) emphasize the slave’s heroism, too.

These approaches interpret the references to slave punishment through the lens of the free spectators, but how did the slaves and former slaves in Plautus’s audience respond to these jokes when crucifixion was a terrifying reality for some unfortunate slaves? Modern readers should not be deluded into thinking that the light-hearted references to such cruelty in Plautus’s plays meant that no one in the ancient audiences found the idea of these punishments upsetting. Were their feelings unimportant to Plautus, or did they have a more complicated response? Applause, even from enslaved spectators, was still applause, making it unlikely that Plautus didn’t care about entertaining the slaves in the audience. Jokes about abuse may have helped the slaves in the audience endure it in their own lives. It is also probable that individual slaves were able to persuade themselves that only bad slaves got punished, and that good slaves like themselves could safely laugh at the bad ones on stage (while perhaps secretly admiring the bad behaviour). Everyone could, at least, recognize how this ideology was supposed to work.

It is also likely that the torture references loomed less large for the slaves in the audience than the fact that, on stage, the wily slave magnificently dominates his master. Richlin has argued that the triumph of the wily slave on the *palliata* stage may have given voice to those who had been enslaved, and created a safe, though temporary, way for slaves and former slaves to

experience the undermining of slave owners (Richlin 2020: 354–355; Richlin 2017: 26 and throughout). The slaves in Plautus’s audience could thus be expected to enjoy Epidicus’s triumph over his master Periphanes as a delightful though unrealistic alternative to their own less successful relationships with their masters.

Epidicus’s behaviour would not, of course, have been plausible for real Roman slaves. Furthermore, since the plays produced in Rome were sponsored by magistrates from a slave-owning elite, we know the plays could not have been fundamentally subversive of slavery as an institution, however much the slaves in the audience may have enjoyed them. It is intriguing to speculate about how the slave owners in Plautus’s audience reacted to the wily slave outwitting his master. Did it serve to justify their brutal control of their own slaves, or did they laugh at the helpless dupes on stage who couldn’t dominate their slaves as well as they fancied they themselves did? Fitzgerald’s suggestion, mentioned above, that they identified with the stage slave’s ability to live without worrying about the dignity required of free citizens is certainly possible.

*Epidicus* references the brutality and inhumanity of slavery within a madcap and cheerful comic setting that ultimately rejoices in one (male) slave’s fundamental (and fictional) power over his hapless owner, which creates a cognitive dissonance with which modern readers should attempt to engage. The plays of Plautus were, above all, fantasies. We are told that another form of comic drama in Rome (the comic *fabulae togatae*, or comedies in Roman dress) rarely included wily slaves that were cleverer than their masters (Donatus, *On the Eunuch* 57), which makes it clear that slaves outwitting their masters was a pleasure enjoyed by Roman audiences only in specific and ritualized settings.

The fantastical schemes of a clever male slave on stage, and his relationship to the lived experiences of enslaved men in the real world, give us one way to look at mid-Republican Rome. Another is to look at how Plautus depicted women, both slave and free/freed.

*Epidicus* shows us how vulnerable women were to mistreatment in the world of the ancient Mediterranean: the old man Periphanes had impregnated and then abandoned Philippa; years later their daughter Telestis was captured and sold as a slave; and we ought to sympathize with Acropolistis and the other sex workers who have to make their living by pleasing wealthy men, though the Roman audience generally saw them simply as desirable and rapacious (see lines 213–235 of this play).

In the plays of Plautus, women who have become sex workers greedily deplete the fortunes of the hapless men who want to buy access to their bodies, and then become clownish alcoholics when they’re too old to attract customers anymore. Only women who have not yet started sex work are ever discovered to be freeborn daughters of citizens and thus worthy of marriage. Marriage in



Rome, especially among the wealthy, was about linking two families and was arranged by, or had at least to be approved by, the male head of the household (*pater familias*). The bride's chastity was an important aspect of her value as a wife, hence the unmarriageability of practicing sex workers. The misfortunes that the female characters suffer through no fault of their own may inspire a modern reader's sympathy, but in the plays self-pity is simply what women do (Dutsch 2008: 49, citing Donatus *Ad Ad.* 291.4).

The female stock characters in Plautus are divided between middle-aged (who are usually depicted as no longer desirable) and young (and thus desirable). These groups are further subdivided into the categories of freeborn citizens, free or freed non-citizens, and slaves. *Epidicus* includes examples of most of these types. Interestingly, the middle-aged freeborn woman (Philippa) is depicted as still desirable, since the old man Periphanes hopes to marry her. Philippa, in the *Epidicus*, follows the self-pitying-woman script (mentioned above), as evidenced by her opening speech and Periphanes's response:

**Philippa:** [*weeping and wringing her hands*] If a person suffers so much that she even pities herself, then she's really pitiable. I should know: so many things are coming at me at once, breaking my heart. Trouble on top of trouble keeps me in a state of worry: poverty and fear are terrorizing me, and there's no safe place where I can pin my hopes. [*sobbing*] My daughter has been captured by the enemy, and I don't know where she may be now.

**Periphanes:** [*Catching sight of Philippa*] Who is that foreign woman, coming along looking so fearful, who's moaning and pitying herself? (526–534)

It is perhaps Philippa's relative passivity and powerlessness that makes her worthy of marriage, since other middle-aged women in the plays of Plautus who exercise or attempt to exercise power over men are not depicted as desirable (see Plautus's *Casina*, for example). Passivity is a characteristic of most of the marriageable women in Plautus; in *Epidicus* the marriageable Telestis is even more passive than her mother Philippa. Passivity is not sufficient on its own to make them marriageable, however; to be worthy of marriage in Plautus a woman must be a citizen, and either a virgin (as we are to assume with Telestis), or to have had sex only with the man who eventually marries her (as we are to assume with Philippa).

The play shows us the Roman reality that freeborn young women like Telestis needed family support to protect them from capture and sexual exploitation. If her father Periphanes had not interested himself in her welfare she would have been forced into sexual slavery (by Periphanes's son Stratippocles, despite his boast at line 110 that he had not so far used force on her). Sexual abuse of slaves was both common and also an established part of the enslavement process of women and girls after the sacking of a town. As Kathy Gaca has shown, women and girls captured in war were routinely brutalized as part of the domination

of the defeated people, a process known as andrapodization (from the Greek *andrapodisis* or *andrapodismos*) (Gaca 2011: 80).

This vulnerability works as an uncomplicated plot device in the plays of Plautus. Freeborn and virginal women are rescued from the sex trade just in time, while those who had already entered the sex trade before the play's action are cheerfully accepting of their permanently unmarriageable status. Acropolistis, in *Epidicus*, is viewed as primarily a sex worker, and indeed Epidicus assumes that she will be available to compensate Stratippocles by becoming his concubine after his disappointment in finding out that Telestis is his half sister (line 653). Acropolistis's lyre-playing skills do not hint at an alternate career to sex work, since professional women in the Roman world were generally assumed to be sex workers as well. Women and men who performed on the stage were deemed *infames*, which meant that they had lost *fama*, or reputation, and they held reduced civic rights. The bodies of free/freed professional women were assumed to be for sale, and if the women were slaves their bodies belonged to their masters.

Life for a sex worker in mid-republican Rome would have been precarious, but though Plautus's audience might be prompted to feel sorry for the recently enslaved Telestis and be glad when she regains her free-born status, the same cannot be said of women like Acropolistis who have already entered the sex trade. Acropolistis is depicted as relatively self-reliant, and capable of looking after herself. When Periphanes realizes she is not his daughter and is furious with her for tricking him, she responds with humorous logic, claiming that she can't be blamed for obediently doing what was asked of her (by Epidicus), and for calling Periphanes "father" in response to him calling her "daughter" (lines 584–592).

Her obedience somewhat undermines Periphanes's right to be angry with her, since it is a womanly virtue in the world of Plautus to obey. The passive obedience of Telestis is what nearly condemns her to a life of sex slavery, but it is also what makes her worthy of being rescued. Philippa's prior relationship with the young Periphanes is also marked by her passivity and compliance (see note 5 on page 12 on the question of whether or not Periphanes had in fact raped her). In Roman comedy it is not a woman's choices that fit her to a life of respectable marriage on the one hand, or infamous sex work on the other; instead it is what is allowed to happen to her that changes her status and her future prospects. It is therefore her protectors, or lack thereof, who define her status.

How might Plautus have thought about the real women in his audiences, and how would they have interpreted his plays? We know that enslaved, freed, and free women watched the plays. The prologue of Plautus's *Poenulus* includes a direct address to the audience, and refers to various different groups including "nannies / nursemaids" (*nutrices* 28) and "married women" (*matronae* 32). The

*nutrices* would have been slaves or else free/freed lower-class women, while the *matronae* would have been freeborn, and probably citizens, coming from all classes.

How much did Plautus and his actors care about keeping these women entertained? Marshall has argued that “Plautus sought to take the diverse individuals in the audience and treat them as a corporate whole, perhaps at the expense of a scapegoat or two”, and lists as these potential scapegoats a “reluctant spectator”, a “Greek slave or tourist”, or “the *praeco*” — that is, the crier or announcer whose job was to announce the play and make the audience pay attention (Marshall 2006: 77). It is evident that the female members of the audience ought to be added to Marshall’s list of scapegoats, especially given that the “nannies” and “married women” mentioned above from the prologue of the *Poenulus* are told, respectively, to stay at home with the children they are in charge of, and to be sure to laugh quietly so as not to annoy their husbands. Regardless of the women’s class, it seems, Roman men were always ready to laugh at jokes that told women to shut up.

Plautus’s depiction of female characters on the stage is not by any means wholly misogynistic, but most of the women in Plautus are not given as full a range of human emotions as the male characters are (bearing in mind that the male characters are by no means fully fleshed out as characters themselves). This must partly have been due to the fact that the Roman comedies were meant to be set in the Greek world (usually Athens), where, as the fifth-century Athenian general Perikles had reportedly said, women achieved glory by not being talked about by men, no matter whether that talk was about their virtues or their flaws (Thucydides 2.45). Women in Rome were far freer in their movements than their Athenian counterparts, but they were not the target audience for the plays of Plautus. The female characters in Plautus were played by male actors in masks, unlike mime dramas where female actors could play starring roles, and this would have further diminished the likelihood of the actors and the playwright viewing women as their target audience.

The limited behaviours and outcomes for the female characters in Plautus must have fit within the Roman audience’s ideas about women’s roles, even if the reality for Roman women would have been significantly more varied. We can’t know if the Roman women watching Plautus’s plays viewed the stage women as relating in any way to their own real lives, but it is likely that the plays’ emphasis on the fates deserved by each of the stage women had the effect of teaching them their place in Roman society.

Reading *Epidicus* also allows us to see some of the more casual aspects of life on the lower end of the Roman social scale. Students of Roman history are usually familiar with the praetorship as a step on the *cursus honorum*, that is, as one of the coveted political offices for which ambitious men of the senatorial class

campaigns energetically, and they have probably learned about the retinue of lictors who accompanied the higher magistrates and symbolized their authority by carrying the *fasces* (bundles of rods with or without axe heads attached). We see in Plautus that, to the ordinary Roman public, the praetor was primarily seen as the judge who dealt with bankruptcies, fraud cases, and the like. At the beginning of the *Epidicus*, the title character uses formal legal language for comic effect (line 24), in response to which the other slave, Thesprio, makes a joke about Epidicus playing praetor and deserving a beating with his own lictors' *fasces*. This probably inspired shocked and delighted laughter amongst the lower-class members of Plautus's audience, who had reason to fear the praetor's power. If a real praetor was present in the audience (a likely possibility), his reaction to the joke would have enhanced its comic effect.

Students will also know about Rome's nearly constant warfare; in the plays of Plautus we get to see how frequently warfare and its consequences appear as background to the plots. Greek warfare, especially after Alexander the Great, tended to involve soldiers hiring themselves out as mercenaries, while Roman soldiers of Plautus's time were drafted to serve the republic. The plays juggle with both of these military practices, and soldiers in the audience would have been able to mock the Greek mercenaries while appreciating the military metaphors. In *Epidicus* the slaves deplore and joke about the cowardliness of Stratippocles's conduct in battle (lines 29–38 tell us that he threw away his weapons and ran away), and military metaphors are casually used at lines 343 and 381 to illustrate the strategic efforts of Epidicus and Stratippocles to outsmart Periphanes and win the *praeda* ("war prize", that is, the enslaved woman Stratippocles is in love with). When the unnamed soldier in the play (who is characteristically boastful and belligerent as his stock character requires him to be) meets Periphanes (whom we find out was himself a boastful soldier in his youth) we get to laugh at their self-aggrandizement and sense of entitlement in much the same way that Plautus's ancient audience must have done (lines 442–455). More importantly we see that successful soldiers, at least in the fantasies of the Roman audiences, were able to enrich themselves from their campaigns, and that the economic power of wealthy soldiers was at odds with the way the Roman audiences felt power ought to be distributed. Wealthy soldiers in Plautus usually end up being very properly outwitted by the less wealthy characters. Burton 2020 discusses the multifaceted ways in which the plays of Plautus were intended to appeal to spectators who had personal experience in Rome's wars.

At least two characters in the play show us sanitized examples of some of the direct victims of warfare: Telestis, whose capture would have condemned her to a life of sex slavery had she not been rescued, and Thesprio, whose name (meaning "man from Thesprotis"), tells us that he was probably also a war captive, since captured slaves were usually given new names, with the new

slave name often being a reference to their place of origin (Strabo 7. 3.12). Lines 210–211 of the play mention the boys and young women that Stratippocles and his fellow soldiers have brought back as slaves from the war in Thebes: enslaving the conquered was a consequence of war that was uncontroversial to the Roman audiences.

The religious references in the play illustrate the pervasiveness of religion in everyday life in the ancient Mediterranean. It is, however, far from clear how Roman these references are, rather than (fictionalized) Greek. Since the play is set in Athens, or rather “Athens”, we have to accept the likelihood that some of the religious references were meant to be a comic version of what the average Roman could believe was normal in the Greek world (on this see Jocelyn 2001). Characters swear by the demigods Hercules and Pollux (both naturalized Greek imports — Herakles and Polydeukes — to Roman religion) and make repeated references to personal religious rituals. When Apocides jokes about Periphanes’s ritual offerings to his dead wife’s tomb (lines 173–177), does this suggest that the Roman audiences laughed at the insincerity of those carrying out personal religious rituals in Rome, or did they only find it funny because they thought they were laughing at Greek religious insincerity? The unnamed freelance lyre-player (who appears in act 4, scene 1, and who has a short speaking role in lines 496–516) has, she tells us, been hired to play her lyre for a religious ritual Periphanes was to have performed, and this points to the regular domestic rituals conducted by the male head of a Roman household (*pater familias*), though we do not know if hiring a lyre-player for the ritual would have seemed normal to the Roman audience, or if it was meant to be a comic example of an alien Greek ritual (Jocelyn 2001: 280). The Greek setting, of course, would have made jokes about religious rituals safer, since it could be plausibly denied that they were attacks on Roman ritual.

The repeated ritual imagery throughout the play, where the slave Epidicus is likened to a “sacrificial victim, sacrificer, embalmer, *auspex*, Agamemnon, and son of Vulcan” has been discussed by T. H. M. Gellar-Goad, who argues that the *Epidicus* “uses ritual imagery and religious associations to reflect power relationships between characters” (Gellar-Goad 2012: 149). The play thus shows us the ubiquity of religion in Roman life and the ways in which religious imagery could be used in popular performances as shorthand for social themes.

Finally, the play conjures up exaggerated versions of the ways that Romans might get into debt, and depicts the rascally nature of moneylenders. We see that husbands resented their wealthy wives (lines 173–180), and that the famous paternal power (*patria potestas*) — which we know from legal sources gave, at least in theory, near absolute power to a man over his sons — was something that Roman audiences liked to see flouted, at least on stage, if not in real-life Rome. It is likely that the now lost *fabulae togatae* (comedies set in Rome) forbore

to depict this sort of undermining of Roman paternal power; the *togatae* seem to have had a less frivolous approach to family life (Manuwald 2010: 5). The *fabulae palliatae*, however, show us that Plautus's Roman audience enjoyed seeing the perennially outwitted father on stage in fantasy-"Athens".

## The Plot of *Epidicus*

The complicated tricks the slave Epidicus uses to outwit his master are what makes the play so funny, but sorting out the various young women around whom the plot hinges requires some concentration.

The first woman is Acropolistis, who is a slave trained as a courtesan and as a lyre-player (*fidicina*). We are told in the opening dialogue of the play that Stratippocles, the son of Periphanes, fell madly in love (actually, "lust" is the more appropriate word) with Acropolistis before he left to fight with the army in the nearby state of Thebes (remember that the play is supposedly set in the Greek state of Athens, and its characters are supposed to be Greeks). He left instructions for Epidicus, a slave of his household, to somehow get hold of enough money to buy her for him. Like most young men in Roman comedy, Stratippocles is financially dependent on his father who could not approve of wasting large sums of money buying courtesans, so Stratippocles's repeated insistence that Epidicus buy Acropolistis might seem an impossible task.

Nothing, however, is impossible for such a wily slave as Epidicus, the star of the show. Epidicus convinces Stratippocles's father Periphanes that Acropolistis is the latter's illegitimate daughter. Years before, Periphanes had raped or had a fling with<sup>5</sup> a woman called Philippa whom he had not married (presumably

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5 An unfortunate result of Greek and Roman predatory attitudes around sex and possessive attitudes around women means that the question of whether or not Philippa had consented to the sexual encounter with Periphanes was not considered important enough to be made clear in the Latin text. In a virgin-bride culture, any sex with a young woman of marriageable status was considered a sexual crime because it ruined her value as a family asset unless she then married the man. Wolfgang de Melo's 2011 translation of *Epidicus* uses the term "rape" (to translate *compressae* in line 5 of the *Argumentum*) and later has Periphanes say that he "forc[ed Philippa] to lie with [him]" (to translate *comprimere* at line 540b). Henry Thomas Riley, in his 1852 translation of *Epidicus*, used the rather quaint Victorian terms "seduction" and "intrigue". While the verb *perpulis* (or possibly *pepulis*, according to one of the manuscript traditions) at line 541a of the play seems to suggest force was used, it is not unambiguous in meaning. The play simply emphasizes Periphanes's selfishness in having thus compromised Philippa's marriage prospects. Rape as a plot point in a culture that valued a woman's *pudicitia* (sexual modesty and chastity) allowed the play to "increase the dramatic impact of citizen girls" without the raped woman losing her claim to *pudicitia* (Witzke 2020: 337). Philippa's potential willingness to marry Periphanes years after their sexual encounter would have seemed, to the Roman audience, like a satisfactory conclusion for her regardless of whether or not he had used force. On rape as a plot point in New Comedy see Rosivach 1998 (chapter 2); see also Omitowoju 2009 on the relative unimportance of the woman's consent in Athenian attitudes around extra-marital sex (chapter 2; see also Part 2 of her book for discussion of illicit sex in New Comedy).



he was already married to Stratippocles's mother at the time), and Philippa had borne him a daughter named Telestis. The widowed Periphanes has been planning on marrying Philippa and is now delighted to rescue his long-lost daughter (as he thinks) and to welcome her into his home. Periphanes therefore has provided the money to buy the pretend Telestis (who is really his son's girlfriend Acropolistis).

So far so good: Epidicus has got the young master what he wants, and presumably hopes that Periphanes will never discover the trick. How Stratippocles would have been able to carry on an affair with a woman living in his household as his half-sister is not addressed, but the silliness of such an arrangement is part of the fun.

As we learn in the opening dialogue of the play, however, Epidicus's efforts to get Stratippocles access to Acropolistis turn out to have been wasted, since the shallow Stratippocles has already transferred his interest to a different woman. This second woman is a recent war captive, and Stratippocles has borrowed money at an extortionate rate of interest in order to buy her and bring her back from Thebes. She's from a "good family" as we're told, and Stratippocles boasts to his friend Chaeribulus that he has so far not forced himself on her<sup>6</sup> (which Sharon James calls "perhaps the play's most implausible feature", given the expected behaviour of young men in Roman comedy, see James 2020: 114). His self-restraint is important for the plot, because we eventually find out that she is the real Telestis, and thus Stratippocles's half-sister. Stratippocles, who seems to have few redeeming qualities, now tells Epidicus that he'll send him to work at the mill (exhausting, miserable work used to punish disobedient slaves) unless Epidicus quickly finds a way to pay back the money Stratippocles had borrowed to buy Telestis.

The quick-thinking Epidicus comes up with another scheme; one which, as Barbiero notes, is essentially a repetition or reverse of his first trick (see chapter 5 of her forthcoming book). Epidicus tells Periphanes (Stratippocles's father) that Stratippocles has borrowed a lot of money with the plan of buying a lyre-playing courtesan (supposedly Acropolistis) so that he can set her free. Periphanes is horrified, and jumps at Epidicus's plan, which is that Periphanes should buy the woman before his son can and then sell her to a wealthy soldier so that she'll be out of Stratippocles's reach. Periphanes gives Epidicus the money to make the purchase, but Epidicus uses the money to pay off Stratippocles's debt instead. Meanwhile Epidicus hires a freedwoman (that is, a former slave) who is also a lyre-player and brings her home to play the part of Acropolistis.

Epidicus may have temporarily achieved his aim (of getting Stratippocles what he wants), but he knows that there is no way to prevent the truth from

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6 Here the Latin is quite clear that rape is meant: Stratippocles says that he hasn't used violence nor violated her chastity (*at pudicitiae eius numquam nec uim nec uitium attuli*, line 110).

coming out once the hired lyre-player is discovered not to be Acropolistis. Indeed, when Periphanes tries to sell the false Acropolistis to a wealthy soldier who had been planning on buying the real Acropolistis, he finds out that Epidicus has tricked him. He doesn't yet realize that he was also tricked into thinking the real Acropolistis was his daughter Telestis, but that trick too is soon discovered: Philippa, Telestis's mother whom Periphanes had abandoned years ago, arrives looking for her daughter whom she knows has been made a captive. Periphanes happily tells her that he has Telestis safe in his house, but when Philippa sees Acropolistis and of course knows she is not her daughter Telestis, the truth comes out. Periphanes has now been tricked into giving up two large sums of money to buy slave women who were not who he thought they were, and he intends to punish Epidicus harshly.

Epidicus, knowing this, talks wildly of running away, but then he comes face to face with the real Telestis, whom he has so far in the play only heard about as an unnamed war captive (line 43). He recognizes her as his master's long-lost daughter and knows that Periphanes will forgive everything in his joy at being reunited with her. Stratippocles isn't pleased to find out that his newly acquired courtesan is his own half-sister, but Epidicus tells him to make do with Acropolistis. Epidicus then guilt-trips Periphanes into promising him many rewards, and the play ends with the triumphant celebration of how the clever slave won his freedom thanks to his own bad behaviour.

### Loose Ends

Over a century of scholarship has reflected worries about the apparent loose ends and small holes in the plot of *Epidicus*. Some people have been bothered by the fact that we are not given the expected happy conclusion to the young master's love affair, for example. Stratippocles is left looking foolish, as the object of his desire turns out to be his half-sister and therefore out of bounds, and he does not respond with any obvious enthusiasm to Epidicus's suggestion at line 653 that he make do with Acropolistis after all. Another apparent loose end is the fact that the marriage of Periphanes and Philippa is not announced with the fanfare we might expect (though probably Periphanes asking to take Philippa's hand at line 559 implies a marriage — see Maurice 2006: 42; James 2020: 114). Periphanes's plan (line 190) to get his son Stratippocles married off and thus to clear the way for Periphanes to marry Philippa is dropped without any explanation. Epidicus's original plan (lines 364–370) to trick the pimp into playing a role in the fake purchase of the hired lyre-player is not mentioned again (we don't know if Epidicus ended up carrying out this part of his plan or not). We don't know if the Euboean soldier of line 153 is the same as the Rhodian soldier of line 300, and if they are, why Epidicus refers to them by different

demonyms. Epidicus's plan to coach the hired lyre-player to convincingly play the role of Acropolistis seems not to have been carried out, since the hired lyre-player's response to getting found out suggests instead that she was lied to by Epidicus rather than coached to play a role. There is no explanation as to how Epidicus thought he could sell Acropolistis to the rich soldier of line 153 when he has already convinced Periphanes that she is his daughter Telestis. We never find out what is to happen to Acropolistis: will she become Stratippocles's concubine, or will Periphanes punish her for her part in Epidicus's tricks by sending her out of town as suggested in line 279?

Some of the loose ends might be due to abridgments of the play made by later producers, to the loss of an original prologue and/or epilogue that tidied up the loose ends, or to Plautus retaining only parts of a now lost Greek original plot. Ultimately these loose ends shouldn't matter, however. There is certainly no need, as Niall Slater put it, to interpret the *Epidicus* as "a ham-fisted re-writing of the ending of a lost Greek original" (Slater 2001: 191). Plautus's comic genius was to use the Greek plot lines as a jumping off point for the exuberant interactions between the trickster and his dupes, so we ought not to expect such a carefully constructed plot as we might find in Greek comedy. Plautus, Malcolm Willcock rightly wrote, "is more concerned with vivid comic scenes than with the antecedents of the plot, or for that matter the future of the characters (Willcock 1995: 28).

The play should be evaluated on its own terms, as a Roman comedy. The supposed problems may simply be due to a mistaken assumption by modern critics that the plays of Plautus are fundamentally love stories. The Greek New Comedies on which Roman comedy was based were, as Sharon James notes, "a marriage-minded genre", but in the plays of Plautus a concluding marriage for the young man (*adulescens*) and the freeborn young woman (*uirgo*) is not the primary goal (James 2020: 109). James argues that Plautus in fact had a "constitutional lack of interest in setting up citizen marriages, families, and social harmony", and his plays were not focused on marriage as the happy ending, even when the plot ended with a marriage (James 2020: 119).

If, instead of focusing on the happy conclusion of the freeborn man's love affairs in *Epidicus*, we realize that the play is about the trickster Epidicus's impressive ability to outwit his masters, then the plot's loose ends become unimportant. "The very weakness of Epidicus's plans" emphasizes his brilliance in nevertheless achieving his ends (Maurice 2006: 43). Especially when seen in performance, the *Epidicus*'s complicated plot and madcap approach to the various tricks of the title character are unlikely to cause any real confusion, or prevent readers or spectators from thoroughly enjoying the play.

## The Roman Theatre

What would a performance of a Plautus play have been like for late-third- / early-second-century BCE Romans? For moral and political reasons, the Roman senate refused to allow the building of any permanent theatres in the city of Rome until the middle of the first century BCE. As a consequence, every time plays were produced for one of the religious festivals a temporary wooden stage was built, and possibly seating as well. References in Plautus's plays make it fairly clear that in his day most of his audiences were usually or always seated — this was half a century before the senate attempted to ban the spectators from sitting (Sear 2006: 55).<sup>7</sup> For the original performances of Plautus's plays either a stage and seating was built for each dramatic festival, or a stage was built in front of pre-existing seating, such as the steps of the temple for the deity in whose honour the festival was being held. The seating area would not have been very large: an estimate for the seating area at the Temple of Magna Mater where Plautus's *Pseudolus* was staged in 191 BCE suggests that the audience might have been between 1300–1600 (Goldberg 1998: 14). The comparatively intimate space for Roman plays (as opposed to the much larger spaces of Greek theatres) would have allowed the actors, such as the speaker of the prologue, the hungry hanger-on (*parasitus*, or “parasite”), or the wily slave, to create a rapport with the audience (Moore 1998: 33).

Unlike Greek theatrical productions, which used both the lower orchestra level and the raised stage, the plays of Plautus were staged on a single level, intended to represent a street with one or more houses (Vitruvius 5.6.2). The characters could go in and out of doors that led into the “houses”, or they could move on and off stage from the right and left. The set for *Epidicus* had the house of Periphanes on the spectators' left and the house of Chaeribulus on their right; the exit at stage left (to the spectators' right)) represented the direction of the forum, while the other exit (stage right) indicated the direction of the harbour (Duckworth-Wheeler 1940: 97).

The troop of actors was called a *grex*, a Latin word also used to mean a “flock” or “herd” of animals. Amy Richlin draws a picture of how a troop of actors might have looked in the middle of the third century BCE, touring central Italy mostly on foot (Richlin 2017: 3–4). She suggests a group of eleven men and boys, most of them not native Latin speakers. Five of them are slaves, in Richlin's scenario, owned by their fellow actors and trained from an early age to perform on stage; several of those who aren't slaves are former slaves

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7 There was a brief attempt in the middle of the second century BCE by the senate to require spectators to stand during dramatic performances. Sitting down was deemed an immoral luxury and was associated with Athenian democratic principles (Athenians sat at their political assemblies, which seemed, to the oligarchic Roman senatorial class, to explain their dangerously democratic approach to government — see Cicero *Pro Flacco* 16).

(freedmen). The social status of actors was low, and they lived precarious lives (Richlin pictures them as “hardly ever get[ting] enough to eat” - 3). In Plautus’s play the *Cistellaria*, the *grex* speaks the final lines in unison, promising that the actors who performed badly would be flogged, while those who had performed well would get a drink (*qui deliquit uapulabit, qui non deliquit bibet* — 785). In Plautus’s *Casina* the speaker of the prologue promises that the boy playing the part of the young girl Casina will be available for paid sex after the play (lines 84–86). Even if these were just jokes they suggest that the enslaved actors, at least, could face violence and exploitation in their jobs.

The status of the playwrights was also low, and their financial situation precarious despite the money they could make selling their plays for performances. An ancient tradition (Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 3.3.14) tells us that Plautus lost his savings and hired himself out to work at a mill, writing three of his plays during this period of grueling labour. Richlin argues that, though such backstories for ancient authors must be treated with skepticism, having to resort to physical labour to make ends meet is plausible for a playwright of Plautus’s independent status who had no patron to support him through periods of financial disaster (Richlin 2017: 5–6).

By Plautus’s time there may have been twenty-five to thirty days per year dedicated to theatrical performances in Rome (Marshall 2006: 19). Plays were put on as part of the many state-sponsored religious festivals, and, as far as we know, anyone could attend them free of charge. Slaves probably had to stand at the back, but men and women could sit together and, though no doubt rich theatre-goers tended to be able to get the best seats by sending slaves ahead to reserve spaces for them, segregated seating for the senatorial class was not yet official in Rome (Sear 2006: 2).<sup>8</sup>

Given that the class of the wealthiest Romans paid for the performances, and that it is only because members of the elite valued Plautus that any of his plays survive to this day, it is not unreasonable to assume that the plays were composed for the elite, rather than for the less privileged members of the audience (see especially McCarthy 2000 on this). Nevertheless, the enjoyment of the audience as a whole was important to the success of the performance, which means that the plays were performed with an awareness of how they might be received by rich and poor, slave owners and slaves, men and women.

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8 It may have been that case that, even before seats were officially reserved for senators in 194 BCE, no one would have dared to sit in front of the senators (Jocelyn 2001: 263 n.4).

