

## Equivalent but not Equal: The Characterization of Sisters Bacchis in *Bacchides*

The sisters named Bacchis in *Bacchides* are notorious as typical *meretrix*-characters in the plays of Plautus, who named the title of the play after them. Prominent examples for the *mala meretrix* stereotype, their guiles come second only to Phronesium of *Truculentus*. This paper examines the characterization of “*mala*” *meretrices* in Plautine comedy and its relation to the *mala/bona* dichotomy existent in the scholarship by discussing the two sisters as *meretrices*.

The dichotomy of good and bad persists in the scholarship on the topic of prostitutes in Plautine Comedy. The *mala meretrix* is greedy and manipulative, someone who lures young men and old into financial and moral ruin. The *bona meretrix*, in contrast, possesses virtues and loyalty. She is sincerely in love with the young man of the play. In reality the *meretrix*-characters are not such extremes as the dichotomy presents. Many characters do not belong in this limiting classification and show more complexity in their actions.

The very problem presents itself in *Bacchides* where two love plots take place for two sisters. Dunkin describes the sisters as “more polished than Phronesium, but every bit as sensuous and greedy” along with Erotium of *Menaechmi* and Philaenium of *Asinaria* (Dunkin 1946, 89). The two sisters are consistently mentioned together and classified under the *mala meretrix* category in discussions on Plautine prostitute characters. Earlier works from Ducksworth (1971, 258), and Barsby (1986, 97-8) who classifies them as “independent”

*meretrices* as opposed to “dependent” ones, to more recent ones such as Auhagen (2009, 151-61), do not question this classification. In particular, Tatum’s reconstruction of the missing prologue of *Bacchides* brings out the greedy nature of the sisters Bacchis by having them focus their conversations mostly about money (Tatum 1983, 21-4). His piece is especially expressive of how the scholarship perceives the two characters. What is often overlooked, however, is the different situations of the two sisters. The relationships of Athenian Bacchis with her lover and her surroundings are unlike those of her sister. The Athenian Bacchis is a typical *mala meretrix* who is mercenary and sees the young man as prey; on the other hand, the Samian sister Bacchis loves her young man and requires the help of his slave to be with him, while still playing her part in the seduction of the old men at the end of the play. One fits the definition of a *mala meretrix*, the other cannot be defined so easily. Integrating the approaches in recent works by James (2006) and Marshall (2013), this paper examines the characters of the two sisters as *meretrices* in terms of their agency and autonomy. As two separate love plots, each pertaining to one sister, transpires, one sees a difference in their situations. This difference is expressed most clearly in regards to their relationships with space, men, clever slaves, as well as with each other.

#### Bibliography

Auhagen, U. 2009. *Die Hetäre in der griechischen und römischen Komödie*. München: Verlag C. H. Beck München.

- Barsby, J., trans. 1986. *Plautus Bacchides*. Warminster: Aris & Phillips Ltd.
- Duckworth, G. 1971. *The Nature of Roman Comedy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dunkin, P. 1946. *Post-Aristophanic Comedy: Studies in the Social Outlook of Middle and New Comedy at both Athens and Rome*. Urbana: The University of Illinois Press.
- James, S. 2006. "A Courtesan's Choreography: Female Liberty and Male Anxiety at the Roman Dinner Party." In *Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World*, edited by C. Faraone and L. McClure, 224-51. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Marshall, C. W. 2013. "Sex slaves in New Comedy." In *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Greek Comic Drama*, edited by B. Akrigg, 173-96. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Plautus. 2011. *Plautus I: Amphytryon, Comedy of Asses, Pot of Gold, Two Bacchides, Captives*, edited and translated by W. De Melo. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Tatum, B., trans. 1983. *Plautus: The Darker Comedies: Bacchides, Casina, and Truculentus*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.