

Plautus and the Marriage Plot

When he took up the *palliata* in Rome, Plautus inherited a marriage-minded genre. The plot of New Comedy is typically described as “boy loves girl; boy can’t have girl; with help, boy gets girl” (e.g., Feeney 2010). In Menander, to “get” girl means to marry her (a pattern found, with pervasive undercutting, in five of Terence’s six plays), and the plays take trouble to show that the young man loves her and will make a good husband. Plautus’ theater differs starkly: within the plays, marriage is formally arranged only in *Aulularia*, *Curculio*, *Poenulus*, *Rudens*, *Trinummus*, and *Truculentus*. Elsewhere, a marriage might be rescued (*Stichus*, *Amphitruo*) within the action, but more often is unimaginable because the girl is a *meretrix* (*Asinaria*, *Bacchides*, *Mercator*, *Miles Gloriosus*, *Mostellaria*, *Pseudolus*). If a boy “gets” such a girl, he cannot marry her. Sometimes Plautus deliberately removes either the possibility or the announcement of a wedding. This paper expands upon Anderson 1993, for further review of Plautus’ avoidance of the generic marriage imperative.

In Menander, establishment of a citizen family supports the polis (Lape 2004). As an elite, Menander was invested in the citizen life of Athens, to which marriage and procreation were very important. Plautus, either Roman nor elite, was uninterested in young love or new families among the citizen classes. His true dramatic interest is the heroic clever slave. Indeed, quite a few plays dispense altogether with the wedding plot: love is irrelevant to *Captivi*; *Menaechni* actually breaks up a new union; *Stichus* saves two marriages from divorce, but does not focus on love; *Amphitruo* shows a young marriage producing a baby, but its Greek mythic plot is anomalous in the genre. As noted, plays with *meretrix* girlfriends cannot end in citizen marriage.

Surprisingly often, Plautus actively suppresses arrangements for marriage or even the possibility of marriage. *Casina* makes hay about slave marriage, but the *adulescens* is never on stage, and the *anagnorisis* is removed for the raucous final scene (Arnott 2003): the epilogue announces the wedding, after the drama has ended. *Cistellaria* makes implicitly clear that the young lovers will marry, but does not stage the banns. *Mercator* eliminates Pasicompsa's recognition as a citizen from Philemon's Greek original (Lefèvre, James 2010; contra, Dunsch). I will argue the same for *Bacchides*. Persa's love plot occurs among slaves, so citizen marriage is impossible. The titular clever slave of *Epidicus* actually takes the girl Telestis away from the boy by identifying her as his half-sister. The parents-by-rape of Telestis appear to be heading for a belated shotgun wedding, to legitimize her, but theirs is hardly a union of young love.

Even in Plautus' few plays that bother to arrange a marriage of young lovers (*Cistellaria*, *Curculio*, *Poenulus*, *Rudens*), the lovebirds do not dominate the action. *Trinummus* focuses obsessively on a dowry and marriage for its unnamed girl, but it focuses on the efforts of non-kin men to arrange them for her, with little attention to affection between the intended spouses. The plays that arrange a wedding enforced by rape hardly feature love: Lysiteles of *Aulularia* loves Phaedrium, but waits months to do right by her. How she might feel about marrying him remains unknown. Diniarchus of *Truculentus* raped his fiancée, then broke their engagement; he agrees to marry her, once her father finds out, so he can avoid prosecution. His hopes to keep seeing the *meretrix* Phronesium, and willingness to let her continue using his baby for deception, bode ill for his wife.

To these lists could be added many moments of cynicism, sometimes brutal, about marriage and family life. Outsider status gives Plautus a different perspective on Roman society: on his stage, citizens (chiefly the men) fail to recognize their own weaknesses, particularly their

vulnerability to inappropriate sexual desire, and take a utilitarian view not only of slaves but also of their children and wives. Most importantly, however, citizen marriage can never be as funny as the brilliant clever slave. Ultimately, Plautus is not interested in citizen life. No wonder he avoids Menander's marriage plot.

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