

RE-EXAMINING THE PORTRAYAL OF SLAVES AND FREEDMEN IN SELECTED PLAYS OF PLAUTUS AND TERENCE

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Abstract

*This study re-examines the portrayal of slaves and freedmen in Roman comedy, focusing on Terence's *Adelphoe* and Plautus' *Pseudolus* and *Menaechmi*. Roman comedy, no doubt, reinforces and distorts societal structures through humour and exaggeration. By contextualising these portrayals within the broader socio-political realities of Rome, this study underscores the dual function of Roman comedy as both entertainment and indirect social commentary. Employing a qualitative research method, this study presents an analytical examination of Roman literature and plays to reveal the different roles of slaves and freedmen as portrayed in Roman comedy. While not introducing wholly new interpretations, this re-examination sheds light on aspects that have been under-explored, encouraging further discussion on how ancient literature selectively constructs and critiques social identity. This research contributes to the body of knowledge in Classical Studies by re-assessing familiar tropes within a framework that emphasises their performative and ideological significance.*

Keywords: *Roman comedy, Plautus, Terence, Portrayal, Slaves, Freedmen*

Introduction

Roman comedy, a form of theatrical performance, emerged as a significant cultural and social institution during the Roman Republic

and early Imperial period. Adapted primarily from Greek New Comedy, Roman comedy maintained its distinctive identity. The Greek New Comedy, which flourished around the late fourth and early third centuries BCE, provided a shift in ancient Greek theatre from the highly political and often fantastical Old Comedy to a subtler, more personal, and domestic style of comedy. This genre centred on everyday life rather than mythological or political themes and found its roots in the social and political shifts of post-Classical Greece. As Athens lost its autonomy to Macedonian control under Philip II and Alexander the Great, Greek society underwent significant changes that diminished the influence of traditional institutions like the Athenian democracy (Brown, 2021).

A defining characteristic of New Comedy is its focus on the lives of ordinary people rather than gods or public figures. New Comedy reflected and perhaps subtly critiqued the social hierarchy and gender norms of the time. Many plays featured young, upper-class male protagonists who, despite societal constraints, pursued love and happiness, often circumventing the rigid authority figures who symbolised traditional values. Women, though often confined to stereotypical roles in the plays, had a more pronounced presence in New Comedy than in earlier dramatic works, likely reflecting the increased visibility of women in certain Hellenistic social spheres, particularly in the royal courts and urban elite circles. Despite this increased presence, New Comedy generally upheld conservative values, with plots resolving in favour of social harmony and traditional family structures, thus subtly reinforcing the status quo even as it portrayed individuals challenging their immediate constraints. These plays rely heavily on characters such as the cunning slave, the miserly father, the brash soldier, and the love-struck youth. This use of archetypes and everyday situations gave New Comedy a more universal appeal and lessened its reliance on specific cultural or political references, contrasting sharply with the topical and often coarse humour of Old Comedy (Brown, 2021).

As it has been stated earlier, Roman comedy flourished in the third and second centuries BCE. It developed as both an adaptation and a transformation of Greek New Comedy, which had been introduced to Rome through cultural interactions with the Greek-speaking world, especially in the wake of Rome's conquests in the Hellenistic East. The Romans, having encountered Greek plays by Menander and his predecessors, adapted these works to reflect Roman

societal structures, cultural norms, and tastes. Roman comedy became a defining element of Roman theatre, showcasing the linguistic skill and narrative inventiveness of playwrights like Plautus and Terence, who reshaped Greek stories to suit Roman audiences. This genre, often referred to as *palliata* (after the Greek-style *pallium*, or cloak, worn by actors), dealt largely with domestic and social issues, with a focus on character types and scenarios that could entertain a diverse audience in Rome (Brown, 2021).

The Roman plays of Plautus and Terence entertained diverse audiences in public theatres, festivals, and other communal gatherings, using humour, satire, and clever wordplay to explore everyday life and relationships (Moore, 2012). They served not only as a form of leisure but also as a medium for reflecting societal values and tensions. At its core, Roman comedy relied on vibrant characters, intricate plots, and the effective use of stock characters, including cunning slaves, boastful soldiers, and scheming lovers. These recurring archetypes helped audiences connect with familiar themes while offering commentary on human behaviour. Roman comedy, therefore, became a powerful vehicle for addressing universal and localised concerns, albeit through a comedic lens (Christenson, 2014). The humour ranged from slapstick to sophisticated wit, ensuring its appeal to all social strata.

The significance of Roman comedy extended beyond its entertainment value. It played a crucial role in fostering a shared cultural identity among Roman citizens. By addressing social norms, gender roles, and familial structures, the plays reinforced common values and challenged audiences to think critically about their society. Moreover, Roman comedy provided a space for discussing power dynamics, particularly through its depictions of slaves, freedmen, and masters, which mirrored the complex realities of Roman life (Dutsch, 2008). In addition, Roman comedy contributed to the development of Western theatrical traditions, influencing later dramatic forms in medieval and Renaissance Europe. Its legacy endures in modern comedy, where elements like stock characters, mistaken identities, and social satire remain integral.

In ancient Roman society, slaves and freedmen held pivotal yet complex roles which formed the backbone of its economy and social order. Slaves, often acquired through conquest or trade, performed a wide range of tasks, from labour-intensive agricultural

work to specialised domestic services. They were regarded as property, with their status determined by their masters' authority. However, their skills, loyalty, and utility could significantly impact their treatment and prospects within Roman households and businesses (Bradley, 2011). Freedmen, on the other hand, represented a unique intermediary class. Upon manumission, slaves became freedmen or freedwomen, gaining partial rights and freedoms within Roman society. While they remained indebted to their former masters, they often continued to serve them as clients. Freedmen could own property, engage in commerce, and even amass considerable wealth. Their upward mobility, however, was typically constrained by lingering social stigma, reflecting the rigid class distinctions of Roman society (Mouritsen, 2011).

In Roman comedy, slaves and freedmen are depicted with a mixture of humour and realism, reflecting their societal roles and relationships. Slaves, often portrayed as clever and resourceful, played key roles in driving the narrative forward, sometimes outsmarting their masters. Freedmen, though less prominently featured, were shown as aspirational figures striving to navigate the social hierarchy. These portrayals provide valuable insights into Roman attitudes toward servitude, freedom, and class mobility (McCarthy, 2020). By re-examining the roles of slaves and freedmen in Roman comedy, particularly in the plays of Plautus and Terence, this study seeks to illuminate the intricate social dynamics and power relations of ancient Rome. The comedic representation of these groups highlights both the constraints they faced and their capacity for agency within a highly stratified society. Through this lens, Roman comedy serves as a cultural artefact that bridges entertainment and socio-political commentary. By examining the social structures embedded in Roman comedic works, one gains a deeper understanding of the values, tensions, and contradictions of ancient Roman society (Richlin, 2017).

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical framework appropriate for this study is “slave as a metaphor”. The theory explores how the concept of slavery is used to symbolise a wide range of constraints beyond literal bondage, including psychological, social, or cultural limitations. The theory is popularised by Hegel in his book, *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This metaphorical use appears in ancient philosophy and religious texts,

and later in literature to represent everything from enslavement to passion or habit, to political subjugation (Hegel, 2018).

The theory also suggests that the relationship between master and slave in plays was used to represent other hierarchical relationships and experiences. For example, the relationship between the slave and the master could be used as a metaphor for the relationship between the writer and the audience, or between literature and life itself. This framework also allows for an analysis of the power dynamics at play in Roman society and how these dynamics were reflected and manipulated in theatrical works (Hegel, 2018).

A Brief Biography of Plautus and Terence

Titus Maccius Plautus (circa 254–184 BCE) was a prominent Roman playwright renowned for his comedic works, which significantly influenced later European literature and drama. Born in Sarsina, Italy, he began his career as an actor before transitioning to writing, producing a prolific body of work during his lifetime. Although over fifty plays are attributed to him, only twenty-one manuscripts survive, with the majority dating from the fourth or fifth century CE. His comedies often adapted Greek originals, showcasing a variety of themes such as mistaken identity, clever servants, and comedic misunderstandings. Among his most celebrated plays are *The Twin Menaechmi*, which inspired Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*, and *Miles Gloriosus*, featuring the archetype of the boastful soldier. Plautus' humour often reflects societal dynamics, presenting a world where lower-class characters outsmart the elite, promoting a sense of equity through laughter. His influence is evident in the works of later playwrights like Molière and in modern adaptations, underscoring his lasting legacy in the realm of comedic literature.

Terence (Publius Terentius Afer, c.195–159 BCE) was born in Libya in Africa circa 195 or 185 BCE. He came to Rome as a slave to a senator who taught him how to write Latin, the skill that earned him his freedom. Terence joined the Scipionic Circle in Rome, where patrons of Scipio (of all disciplines) shared a love of Greek culture and literary tradition and related their philosophies to Roman contexts. Here he began adapting late Attic Greek comedies to conversational Latin works. Between 166 and 160 BCE, Terence produced his six surviving comedies.

Terence's play *Eunuchus* (*The Eunuch*) revolves around familial relations and features a foreign, comedic slave named Parmeno. The play features characters who reflect a broad range of citizens and others of the Roman Empire and beyond, including an Ethiopian slave purchased as a gift for a foreign courtesan by one of her suitors. These characters challenge or poke fun at stereotypes familiar to a typical Roman. Using comedy as a guise, Terence critiques Roman treatment of foreigners and subtly challenges Imperial policy.

Terence used his position as a native African in Rome (and later Greece, where he died in 159 BCE) to present, in a simple yet elegant style, balanced yet popular and palatable renditions of plays that featured people like him. The fact that *Eunuchus* was 'performed twice a day for weeks on end' in the Roman playhouse affirms the popularity of his works, which in turn increased the influence of his works.

The comedies that these two wrote are called *fabulae palliatae*, that is, plays in Greek dress, and were adaptations from the Greek New Comedies produced some centuries ago. It was only natural, when Rome turned to comedy, that she should be inclined to take over the already rich and fully developed comic tradition of her neighbours, the Greeks. So, to understand Roman Comedy, it is necessary to understand something of the nature of Greek Comedy, whose plots and forms it borrowed.

Origins of Slavery in Rome

Slavery in Rome originated from a confluence of war, trade, and social stratification. The Roman Republic and later the Empire relied heavily on the enslavement of war captives from conquered territories. The influx of enslaved populations surged during expansionist campaigns, particularly in the Punic and Gallic Wars (Lenski, 2023). Additionally, slave markets in Delos and other hubs facilitated the purchase and sale of slaves from various cultural and geographic backgrounds (Bradley, 1994).

Domestic slavery also emerged from debt bondage and the abandonment of infants. These sources, though less significant than war, contributed to the diversity of the enslaved population. The cultural acceptance of slavery in Roman society, bolstered by philosophical justifications from figures like Aristotle, entrenched it as a normative institution. Slavery also served as a mechanism for

demonstrating wealth and power among the Roman elite, who often employed enslaved individuals in grand architectural projects and lavish households (Roth, 2016).

Economically, slaves were indispensable to the Roman economy, functioning as labourers, artisans, and administrators. In agriculture, slaves worked in *latifundia*, or large estates, producing essential crops such as grain, wine, and olive oil (Blavo, 2014). This agricultural output was vital for sustaining the Roman population and feeding its armies. Urban slavery, on the other hand, included skilled labour in workshops and construction, as well as administrative roles within the imperial bureaucracy (Perry, 2013).

Slaves also contributed to the Roman economy through their roles as entertainers, educators, and managers of financial enterprises. Wealthy Romans often relied on slaves to operate businesses, collect rents, and even manage estates. This multifaceted economic role underscored the dependence of Roman society on enslaved labour, despite its precarious nature (Mouritsen, 2011). The possibility of manumission acted as an incentive for productivity, aligning the interests of slaves with those of their masters and fostering a complex relationship between exploitation and potential social mobility (Harper, 2011).

The institution of slavery in Rome was an integral part of its socio-economic and cultural fabric. Enslaved individuals were considered property, devoid of legal personhood, and often subjected to harsh treatment. However, their roles extended beyond labour to functions within Roman households, religious rites, and economic ventures (Herrmann-Otto, 2013). Roman slavery was highly stratified, encompassing urban and rural slaves, educated and unskilled labourers, and those born into slavery alongside captives of war. This diversity shaped the experiences of the enslaved, influencing their opportunities for manumission and integration into Roman society (Joshel, 2010).

The legal framework surrounding slavery was codified in Roman law, granting owners absolute control over their slaves. However, avenues for manumission, or the formal release of a slave, provided a unique aspect of Roman slavery. The process often elevated freed individuals to the status of *liberti*, granting limited rights but binding them to their former masters through patronage (Wiedemann, 1985). The interplay of power, economy, and societal

norms ensured the longevity and adaptability of slavery across centuries.

The Transformation from Slave to Freedman

The transition from slavery to freedom represented a profound social and legal transformation, marked by a mix of opportunity and limitation. As freed persons, former slaves occupied a liminal status in Roman society, neither fully free citizens (*ingenui*) nor entirely devoid of constraints. Their new identity as *liberti* granted them a legal personality, allowing them to participate in economic and social life, but it was accompanied by ongoing ties to their former masters, now patrons (Mouritsen, 2011).

Freed persons often experienced upward social mobility, leveraging the skills and networks developed during their enslavement. They became prominent figures in commerce, crafts, and even local governance, contributing significantly to the Roman economy. Their ability to earn and display wealth, often through public acts of generosity, sometimes allowed them to integrate into the broader Roman community. However, this integration was rarely complete, as societal prejudices and legal restrictions reinforced their subordinate status (Joshel, 2010).

Cultural representations, particularly in Roman comedy, often depicted freed persons in roles that underscored their dual identity. They were sometimes portrayed as cunning and resourceful, reflecting their survival skills, but also as objects of ridicule, emphasising their marginal position in Roman society. These portrayals reveal the tension between admiration for their achievements and disdain for their servile origins (Perry, 2013).

Furthermore, gender played a critical role in shaping the experiences of freed persons. Freedwomen, in particular, faced additional societal constraints, often tied to their roles as wives, mothers, or concubines. Despite these limitations, some freedwomen achieved considerable influence, especially through strategic marriages or economic success (Witcher, 2024). The multifaceted identity of freed persons highlights the complex interplay of legal, economic, and cultural factors in their transformation from slavery to freedom.

Roles of Freedmen in the Roman Economy and Public Sphere

Freedmen (*liberti*) were integral to the Roman economy and public sphere, leveraging their unique status and skills acquired during enslavement. After manumission, many freedmen utilised their expertise and connections to establish themselves as entrepreneurs, artisans, and merchants. Freedmen were particularly active in industries such as banking, shipping, and trade, often acting as intermediaries for their patrons or other elite Romans (Perry, 2013). Their economic contributions extended to urban development, where they financed and managed construction projects, including aqueducts, temples, and other public works (Mouritsen, 2011).

Beyond the economy, freedmen played significant roles in the public sphere, particularly in local governance. Although barred from high-ranking magistracies, freedmen could hold lower civic offices, such as *seviri Augustales*, a position often responsible for organising religious and public festivals in honour of the emperor. This role allowed them to gain prestige within their communities, bridging the gap between their servile past and their aspirations for societal acceptance (Joshel, 2010). Through acts of public benefaction, such as funding games, monuments, or infrastructure, freedmen further integrated into Roman society while cementing their legacy.

Cultural portrayals of freedmen in Roman comedy reflect their economic and public roles. Playwrights often depicted freedmen as shrewd and resourceful, characters who capitalised on their social mobility to achieve prominence. These portrayals, though exaggerated for entertainment, underscore the freedmen's ability to navigate the complexities of Roman society and adapt to their newfound status (Wiedemann, 1985). However, such portrayals also reveal societal ambivalence, with freedmen simultaneously admired for their industriousness and ridiculed for their servile origins.

This section of the study examines the various depictions of slaves and freed persons in Roman comedy.

Analysis of the “Clever Slave” Trope in Plautus’ *Pseudolus* and *Menaechmi*

In Roman comedy, particularly in the works of Plautus, the “clever slave” (*servus callidus*) emerges as a central figure, embodying wit, resourcefulness, and subversive intelligence. This archetype is prominently featured in plays like *Pseudolus* and *Menaechmi*, where

the slave's cunning not only drives the narrative but also challenges societal norms and hierarchies.

In *Pseudolus*, the titular character exemplifies the clever slave through his intricate schemes to secure his master's love interest, Phoenicium. Pseudolus' ingenuity is evident in lines where he declares his intent to outwit his adversaries, "I' faith, you surely know, if I set my plans a-going, after what fashion and how great is the bustle that I am in the habit of causing (*Pseudolus*, Act 1, Scene 3)".

This bold proclamation captures Pseudolus' confidence and cleverness as he manipulates situations and characters to achieve his goals, often outsmarting free citizens and authority figures. This portrayal aligns with scholarly observations that the clever slave often serves as the engine of the plot, using deception and strategic thinking to navigate and overturn obstacles (McCarthy, 2000). Pseudolus' actions not only entertain but also subtly critique the social order by highlighting the intellectual capabilities of those in servitude.

The clever slave trope serves multiple functions within Roman comedy. It provides a source of humour through the subversion of expectations and the inversion of social hierarchies. By portraying slaves as more intelligent and resourceful than their masters, these comedies invite audiences to question the legitimacy of social stratification based solely on birth and status. Moreover, the clever slave's success often hinges on their ability to deceive, as Pseudolus demonstrates when he boasts:

Why, with the procurer your neighbour; by means of stratagem and artful tricks, I'll cleverly bamboozle the procurer out of this music-girl, with whom your son is so desperately in love; and I surely will have both of these things effected this very day, before the evening. (*Pseudolus*, Act 1, Scene 3).

This reflects societal anxieties about the reliability of appearances and the potential for subversion within the household (Richlin, 2017). Furthermore, the clever slave's role can be seen as a form of social commentary on the limitations and hypocrisies of the free citizens they outwit. By enabling the desires of their young masters, often in opposition to the wishes of the paterfamilias, these slaves expose the tensions between individual desires and societal expectations. This

dynamic is evident in *Pseudolus*, where the slave's machinations ultimately lead to a resolution that satisfies the young master's romantic pursuits, challenging the authority of the father figure (Leigh, 2004).

The clever slave trope in Roman comedy, as exemplified by characters like Pseudolus and Messenio, serves as a vehicle for humour, social critique, and narrative progression. Through their wit and resourcefulness, these characters challenge societal norms, question hierarchical structures, and highlight the complexities of human relationships within the context of Roman society.

Mistaken Identity in Plautus' *Menaechmi*

Another element in Plautus' *Menaechmi* is the use of the element of mistaken identity. Here, the slave Messenio plays a pivotal role in the unfolding of the mistaken identity plot. His awareness and timely interventions contribute significantly to the resolution of the narrative. This is particularly evident when Messenio saves his master, Menaechmus, from being captured by Senex's slaves, boldly declaring, "No slave of mine has ever done what you just did for me. You've earned your freedom today (*Menaechmi*, lines 1027–1028)".

Messenio's loyalty, combined with his shrewdness, ensures the twins' reunion and a satisfactory resolution to the plot. This depiction resonates with the analysis that slaves in Plautine comedy often possess a keen understanding of human nature and societal structures, allowing them to manipulate events to their advantage (Sharrock, 2009).

Analysis of the Rebellious and Comedic Elements in Slave Characters

Slave characters in Roman comedy often embody a blend of rebelliousness and humour, serving as instruments of both entertainment and social commentary. Their defiance against authority and societal norms is frequently portrayed in a comedic light, allowing playwrights to explore themes of power, resistance, and human folly. The rebellious nature of these slaves is typically manifested through acts of deception, trickery, and the subversion of their masters' commands. This behaviour not only drives the comedic plot but also reflects a subtle critique of the rigid social hierarchy of Roman society. By outsmarting their superiors, these characters

expose the vulnerabilities and absurdities inherent in the structures of power (McCarthy, 2000). For example, in *Pseudolus*, the titular slave asserts his rebellious nature when he declares:

The latter is too common an expression. Now, that no one may affirm that it wasn't told him, I tell you all to the AUDIENCE, in the presence of the youths in this audience, and of all the people, to all my friends and all my acquaintances, I give notice, that for this day they must guard against me, and not trust me (*Pseudolus*, Act 1, Scene 3).

This moment highlights Pseudolus' defiance as he openly exhibits his cunning and revelling nature while simultaneously delighting the audience with his audacity.

Humour in these portrayals often arises from the juxtaposition of the slaves' lowly status with their superior intellect and cunning. This inversion of roles creates comedic situations where the expected order is disrupted, leading to laughter and reflection. For instance, in *Menaechmi*, Messenio demonstrates his sharp wit and rebellion against traditional expectations of servitude when he quickly assesses a chaotic situation and takes charge, showing more awareness and practicality than his master. His actions ultimately help resolve the confusion, reinforcing the recurring theme in Roman comedy where slaves, despite their lower status, display intelligence and resourcefulness that surpass those of free citizens.

Moreover, the comedic elements associated with rebellious slaves often involve physical humour, wordplay, and situational irony. These devices not only entertain but also underscore the themes of resistance and autonomy. The slaves' ability to navigate and manipulate their circumstances, despite societal constraints, highlights their agency and resilience (Richlin, 2017). For example, in *Pseudolus*, the titular character's quick thinking is evident when he tricks Ballio to unknowingly fund his scheme by crafting an elaborate lie as Ballio reveals to Simo below:

The wicked rogue has assurance enough. He hasn't contrived his knavish scheme amiss. By my faith, that whipping-post of a fellow, Pseudolus, how cleverly he has managed his plans; just as much money as the Captain owed, he has given this man, and has dressed out the fellow that he

might take away the woman * * * * * To
HARPAX. But the real Harpax himself brought
that letter hither to me. (*Pseudolus*, Act 4, Scene
7).

In addition, the interactions between rebellious slaves and other characters often serve to critique social norms and expectations. Their defiance can be seen as a challenge to the status quo, prompting audiences to question the legitimacy and fairness of existing power dynamics. This aspect of Roman comedy reflects a complex understanding of social relations and the potential for subversion within established hierarchies (Sharrock, 2009). In *Adelphoe*, the slave Syrus exemplifies this dynamic through his quick thinking and manipulation of situations to his advantage. Rather than passively obeying his master, he actively works behind the scenes to influence events, often using humour and wit to mock authority and subtly undermine traditional hierarchies.

Through their wit, rebelliousness, and humour, slaves in Roman comedy disrupt societal norms and invite audiences to reconsider entrenched power structures. These characters not only entertain but also provide an insightful critique of the complexities and contradictions of Roman society.

The Roles of Freedmen in Roman Comedy

Freedmen played a significant role in Roman society, yet their presence in Roman comedy is far less pronounced compared to that of slaves and freeborn individuals. Unlike slaves, who are frequently central characters—often portrayed as clever and resourceful—or freeborn citizens, whose authority and status are typically reinforced, freedmen appear less frequently and with minimal narrative focus in the plays of Plautus and Terence. While they were essential to the economic and social framework of Rome, their roles in comedy remain relatively understated, often existing in the background rather than as central figures. This contrasts with their real-world influence, where they contributed to commerce, administration, and even political life (Bradley, 1994).

In *Adelphoe*, the play explores themes of education and moral upbringing, which are relevant to the integration of different social classes, including freedmen. However, while the play reflects broader

societal concerns about status and mobility, it does not explicitly feature freedmen as characters navigating these challenges. Instead, its focus remains on the contrasting parenting styles of Demea and Micio and their impact on freeborn sons (Richlin, 2017).

Similarly, Plautus in *Menaechmi* does not feature freedmen in a major role, but its central theme of mistaken identity and social confusion can be interpreted as reflective of the challenges freedmen faced in constructing new identities after manumission. As individuals who transitioned from slavery to citizenship, freedmen often had to navigate societal expectations and reestablish their place within Roman society. While this theme resonates with the freedman experience, the play does not explicitly engage with their struggles (McCarthy, 2000).

In *Pseudolus*, the titular character, a slave, demonstrates intelligence and strategic thinking, using his wit to outmanoeuvre freeborn citizens. Although the play does not focus on freedmen, it reinforces themes of social mobility and personal agency—qualities that were particularly relevant to freedmen as they sought to define their roles in society. The play's emphasis on resourcefulness and manipulation of power structures mirrors the way freedmen, in reality, had to navigate their newfound freedom and its associated challenges (Mouritsen, 2011).

Unlike slaves and freeborn individuals, whose roles are clearly defined and frequently explored in Roman comedy, freedmen occupy an ambiguous space within the dramatic structure. Playwrights like Plautus and Terence did not emphasise their experiences or challenges, choosing instead to focus on the well-established comedic dynamic between masters and slaves. This lack of emphasis may reflect the playwrights' preference for characters whose social positions were more rigidly defined, making their struggles and triumphs more easily recognisable to audiences. In either case, the depiction of freedmen in Roman comedy remains an area where societal realities and theatrical representation diverge, offering insights into how these plays both reflected and reshaped perceptions of social mobility in Rome (Mouritsen, 2011).

Portrayal of the “guardian slave” in Terence’s *Adelphoe*

One of the defining elements of Roman comedy is the use of role reversals to generate humour and offer social critique. This technique is particularly evident in Terence’s *Adelphoe* (The Brothers), where

characters—whether fathers, sons, or servants—swap expected roles, subverting traditional social norms. These reversals not only serve as comedic devices but also prompt reflection on authority, personal agency, and social adaptability.

The central contrast in *Adelphoe* revolves around the opposing parenting styles of Demea, a strict traditionalist, and Micio, his indulgent brother. The play challenges conventional expectations by presenting Micio, an adoptive father, as lenient and permissive, while Demea, the biological father, initially enforces rigid discipline. As the story unfolds, Demea undergoes a dramatic transformation, adopting an exaggerated form of Micio's leniency in an attempt to win his sons' favour. This inversion of paternal authority raises questions about the effectiveness of strict versus permissive parenting.

Initially, Demea distinguishes between his two sons, prioritising Ctesipho while dismissing Aeschinus as Micio's responsibility:

Yes, I'm definitely off to the country, since the person I came here for is there. He's the one I care about, he's the one I'm concerned with! My brother can worry about the other one, if that's the way he wants it. (*Adelphoe*, lines 435–437).

However, by the end of the play, Demea's strict demeanour gives way to indulgence, reversing his earlier stance. This exaggerated shift not only serves as a comedic resolution but also satirises the extremes of both rigidity and leniency (Fitzgerald, 2019).

Aeschinus and Ctesipho also embody role reversals that subvert societal expectations. Aeschinus, under Micio's permissive guardianship, engages in reckless behaviour that contradicts the ideals of a young Roman nobleman. Micio, despite his leniency, does not ignore these actions and directly confronts Aeschinus about his misconduct:

I believe that. I know you're an honourable person. But I'm afraid you're a bit too careless. In what sort of city do you think you're living now? You raped a girl you had no legal right to touch. This was your first big mistake—a very big mistake, though an excusable one. Other men from respectable families have done the same. But afterwards now,

didn't you stop and consider, and, for your own benefit, didn't you think about what should be done and how to do it? (*Adelphoe*, lines 683–690).

Here, Micio's response highlights that while he permits freedom, he still upholds moral accountability, demonstrating that role reversals do not erase personal responsibility.

Role Reversal in *Adelphoe*

One of the defining elements of Roman comedy is the use of role reversals to generate humour and offer social critique. This technique is particularly evident in Terence's *Adelphoe* (*The Brothers*), where characters—whether fathers, sons, or servants—swap expected roles, subverting traditional social norms. These reversals not only serve as comedic devices but also prompt reflection on authority, personal agency, and social adaptability.

Servants also play a crucial role in upending traditional power structures. Syrus, Micio's clever slave, manipulates events to his advantage, displaying intelligence and agency that challenge his servile status. His cunning interventions facilitate his masters' schemes, allowing him to momentarily assume control over situations. This reflects the common trope of the *servus callidus* (clever slave) in Roman comedy, where slaves exhibit wit and strategic thinking that often surpass their masters' (Sharrock, 2009). The climax of these role reversals occurs when Demea, in an effort to reconcile with his sons, adopts an exaggerated form of Micio's leniency, granting unexpected freedoms and shocking the other characters. This over-the-top transformation satirises both extremes of parenting and authority, ultimately advocating for a more balanced approach. By using role reversals, Terence not only entertains but also invites his audience to question rigid social structures and reflect on the nature of familial and societal relationships (Richlin, 2017).

Through its use of inverted hierarchies and unexpected shifts in character behaviour, *Adelphoe* exemplifies how Roman comedy employs role reversals as a key comedic element. These shifts challenge traditional expectations, highlight the adaptability of social roles, and provide insight into the broader cultural attitudes of Roman society.

Conclusion

The study of Roman comedy has long explored the roles of slaves and freedmen, but this research undertakes a re-examination of these portrayals, focusing on role reversal and the discrepancy between comedic representation and historical reality. Rather than introducing entirely new interpretations, this study revisits well-known plays—*Adelphoe*, *Pseudolus*, and *Menaechmi*—to highlight how comedic techniques such as role reversals serve not only as sources of humour but also as subtle critiques of Roman social hierarchies. This approach sheds light on nuances that have often been underemphasised in previous scholarship, particularly in how comedy distorts social structures for entertainment purposes.

By analysing the clever slave archetype, this research reaffirms the widely recognised view that Roman comedy frequently empowers enslaved characters to outwit their masters. However, the study further explores how this temporary inversion of power serves as a theatrical device rather than a reflection of reality, offering audiences a brief suspension of societal norms without fundamentally challenging them. This re-interpretation aligns with existing scholarly debates while emphasising the performative nature of comedic subversion.

Additionally, the study addresses the limited portrayal of freedmen in Roman comedy, an aspect often overlooked in broader discussions of Roman social dynamics. While freedmen played vital roles in Roman economic and political life, their subdued representation in comedic narratives suggests that playwrights preferred to focus on the more dramatic master-slave dynamic. This observation reinforces the idea that Roman comedy selectively engages with social realities, amplifying certain figures for comic effect while diminishing others.

Through its detailed textual analysis, this study highlights the complexity of Roman comedy as a medium that both reflects and reshapes societal attitudes. The role reversals depicted in these plays illustrate the inherent tensions between social order and personal agency, prompting audiences to consider the fragility of hierarchical structures without directly advocating for social change. This reassessment not only deepens the understanding of Roman comedy but also contributes to the broader discourse on how literature both upholds and questions societal norms.

Notes on Contributors

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