ROMAN LAUGHTER
The Comedy of Plautus

Second Edition

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THE COMEDY OF PLAUTUS

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Erich Segal

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To My Mother

and to the Memory

of My Father

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Preface to the Second Edition

In the years since this book first appeared, over a thousand articles and reviews have been written about Plautus.[1] They were mainly the result of the "Menandrian explosion," the sudden discovery and publication of substantial portions of the Greek New Comedy master who was the model for so many Roman playwrights, not merely Plautus and Terence. What was once a collection merely of aphorisms and a few long fragments is now a full-fledged Oxford Text.[2] Perhaps the most important single piece of scholarship was E. W. Handley's *Menander and Plautus: A Study in Comparison.* Among other things, it invalidates my claim (p. 7) that there is no extant Greek model to which a Plautine play — or even scene — might be directly compared in order to see precisely what Plautus did in his process of adaptation (or, as he calls it, *vortere.*)

Handley published forty-four lines of Menander's *Dis Exapaton* ("The Double Deceiver") and set them beside the Plautine scene they inspired, *Bacchides* lines 494–562. Even from such a relatively small sampling, Handley was able to demonstrate a great deal of Plautine technique. We see, for example, that the Latin playwright changes some of the names of bland stereotypical characters, endowing them with new, colorful ones.[3] Plautus excises a scene — for the sake of speed, perhaps — and places jocular quips in the mouth of the youth at a point where Menander had him speak pensively. As Handley concludes, "We have seen, on a small scale but by direct observation, how Plautus likes his colors stronger, his staging more obvious, his comedy more comic" (p. 18).

Handley's stylistic observations confirmed some of the intuitive conjectures on Plautine expansion and elaboration made by Eduard Fraenkel nearly half a century earlier.[4]

The new corpus of Menandrian drama also reinforced another of Fraenkel's theories, namely, that Plautus "invented" — or at least greatly amplified — the role of the clever slave. There have been scholarly attempts to find *servi callidi* hidden in the lines of Menander, but to no avail.[5] As a recent study concluded, "there is no comparable emphasis in ancient Greek comedy." [6]

As a consequence, the essential thesis of this book — that Plautus presents a "saturnalian" reversal of Roman values to evoke Roman laughter — has found tangible support.[7] Still, a valid criticism of this book when it first appeared was that it tended to be overschematic.[8] While allowing that I may have been too dogmatic at times, I have nonetheless tried to respond to this opinion head-on by appending three essays on Plautine "problem plays," that is, those apparently least likely to fit the scheme set out in the book itself. (Economic realities made extensive internal revisions of the book unfeasible.)

I would like to thank W. G. Arnott, Eric Handley, Malcolm Willcock, Gordon Williams, and John Wright, who were kind enough to go over the new material and offer helpful comments. I am also grateful to Professor G. P. Goold, my chairman at Yale, and to its former president, A. B. Giamatti for their friendship and generous support, which allowed me the time to complete this work.

Finally, an expression of heartfelt appreciation to William Sisler and Robin Denniston of Oxford University Press, who allowed this book to be born again.

Wolfson College, Oxford E.S.
January 1987

Preface

Laughter is an affirmation of shared values. It is, as Bergson constantly reminds us in his essay, a social gesture. Comedy always needs a context, a community, or at least a communal spirit. Moreover, the fact that ancient comedy was presented to an audience which constituted an entire citizenry suggests that laughter might at times even be a national gesture. Certainly this notion is implicit in the time-honored view of Aristophanes as "soul of an age." How to know Athenian democracy? Plato suggested a reading of Aristophanes. No one has ever suggested anything of the sort for Plautus. In fact, few people suggest reading Plautus at all.

A study of Rome's most popular playwright has certain occupational hazards, for he seems to contradict the convenient stereotype of what Romans and their literature ought to be. Hence Ennius is hailed as the "father of Latin literature," although Plautus was writing before Ennius could read. It is undeniable that without Plautus the history of Latin literature is ever so much neater. But Plautus is not isolated merely because he wrote for the stage. "Neat Terence" (as Ben Jonson praised him) has never been out of favor — except during his lifetime. But Terence was *puri sermonis amator*; he wrote good, decorous Latin. Fastidious Horace, who could barely brook the vulgarisms of Catullus and refused to admit him into the ranks of Latin lyric poets, vehemently argued (*Ars Poetica* 270ff) that both Plautus' wit and metrical skill were vastly overrated. Doubtless the Dean of Roman Critics was also outraged by Plautus' playful pleonasms, his wanton waste of words, complex comic *coronae* woven out of inexcusable verbal extravagance; *Persicos odi, puer, apparatus*. Worst of all, Plautus is conspicuously lacking in "high seriousness." *Dulce*, perhaps (*in loco*, that is), but

utile? And of course *levitas* could not be a shared value of a people renowned for *gravitas*. But then why did they love Plautus so?

Although no book in English has been devoted solely to the comedy of Plautus, several great continental scholars have dealt with aspects of his art, particularly in relation to Greek New Comedy. Still, no one has studied Plautus in relation to contemporary Roman culture or to the comic tradition. Is it merely chance, as some critics would have it, that so much of Plautus is extant and so much of Ennius lost? Is the immense "influence" of Plautus attributable merely to the fact that he happened to be part of the curriculum in Stratford England and at the Collège de Clermont? Is there any inherent value to Plautus *ipsissimus*? Obviously, my own answer to this last question is affirmative, or else this would not be a preface to a book, but an apology for not writing one.

A word about the translations, which, except for instances duly signaled, were prepared by the author for this volume. In a study of the comic significance of Plautus, it seemed to me inappropriate to follow the standard scholarly practice of rendering quotations into literal prose. His happy repartee deserves live dialogue, and his musical moments should be translated into song. Following the principles I set out for my translation of *The Braggart Soldier* (Samuel French 1963), I have tried to approximate the length and rhythm of the Latin verse, adding rhyme where the analogous situation on the English stage would call for it. I have taken no liberties with the Latin, except to omit a conjunction or expletive now and then. Very rarely a metaphor was altered, in the hopes of better conveying Plautus' comic intent. I hope no anachronisms have intruded. My argument is, of course, based on the Latin text, but I confess that my translations were, to some extent, based on my argument.

If I have contributed anything toward an understanding of Roman comedy, Romans, or comedy, it is due in large measure to guidance and insights received from Harry Levin and Mason Hammond, both of whom read many versions of this book, each time offering valuable advice, new ideas, and welcome stylistic corrections. My colleague A. Thomas Cole also pored over these pages more than once, leading me on many occasions from the path of error to areas of fruitful inquiry. Some of his memos have become paragraphs, others footnotes; all were helpful. Needless to say, the errors that remain are my own.

I am also grateful to Cedric Whitman, who read an early draft, and to Craig LaDrière, who read a later one, for their comments and their constructive criticism. My good friends Frederick H. Gardner and Julius Novick cast sharp eyes on my prose and did much to improve it. C. L. Barber has not read my book, but anyone familiar with the brilliant *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* will see that I have read *his* and found much inspiration. This volume was patiently and perceptively edited by Anne Miller Whitman of the Harvard Press, to whom I will be ever grateful for giving my manuscript so much of her *t. l. c.* (*tempus*, *labor*, *cura*).

Finally, may I thank Eric Havelock, Chairman of the Yale Classics Department, for arranging a leave in the fall of 1965, which enabled me to put much of this book in order. During this time, my research was "subsidized" by various theatrical assignments, for which I am indebted to Mrs. Sylvia Herscher and the William Morris Agency. Very special thanks go to Mrs. Lillian Christmas, who with unflagging good cheer typed draft after draft, and to the friends who encouraged me along the way.

E. S.

Ezra Stiles College
Yale University
January 1968

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Introduction

Of all the Greek and Roman playwrights, Titus Maccius Plautus is the least admired and the most imitated. "Serious" scholars find him insignificant, while serious writers find him indispensable. He deserves our careful attention, not merely because his twenty complete comedies constitute the largest extant corpus of classical dramatic literature (more plays than Euripides, nearly twice as many comedies as Aristophanes, more than three times as many as Terence), but because, without any doubt, Plautus was the most *successful* comic poet in the ancient world. We know of no setback in his artistic career comparable to Aristophanes' frustrations with the *Clouds*, or to Terence's inability to hold his audiences in the face of competition from gross athletic shows. What is more, Plautus is the first known professional playwright. Like Shakespeare and Molière (to name two who found him indispensable), Plautus depended upon the theater for his livelihood. Terence could afford to have the *Hecyra* fail twice. Subsidized by the aristocrats of the so-called Scipionic circle, he had merely to satisfy his patrons. Plautus the professional had to satisfy his public.

It was primarily his economic motives which put Plautus into disrepute with the "classicists." Horace threw one of the first stones when he taxed the Roman comedian for seeking only to make money, and therefore ignoring all the rules for proper dramatic construction.[1] But it was easy for Horace to criticize, doubtless in the comfort of the Sabine farm given him by the eponymous Maecenas, far away from the *profanum vulgus* to whom Plautus had to cater — in order to eat. For,

if such an attitude be a fault, Plautus must share Boileau's objection to Molière, that of being "trop ami du peuple." Terence could afford to call the Roman audience *populus stupidus* (*Hecyra* 4), but Plautus knew only too well that those "who live to please must please to live." Even the characters within his plays keep an eye on the mood of the spectators. "Be brief," says one of them as the plot nears its conclusion, "the theatergoers are thirsty." [2]

One of the few indisputable statements which can be made about Plautus the man is that he enjoyed great popular success. The ancient biography states that he twice amassed a fortune in the theater. Having lost his first profits in a disastrous shipping venture, he bailed himself out of a Roman version of debtors' prison by writing once more for the comic stage.[3] Thereafter, he entertained no further business schemes; he merely entertained the Romans.

Plautus' popularity reached such phenomenal proportions that his very name acquired a magic aura. It seems that the mere words "I bring you Plautus" were enough to captivate a huge, unruly — and probably drunken — crowd.[4] In contrast, the prologues of Terence, which work feverishly for the spectators' attention, never once mention their author's name, although they refer to *Plautus* three times. And it is well known that unscrupulous producers would put Plautus' name on plays by others to enhance their market value. A century after the playwright's death, there were in circulation over 130 comedies of allegedly Plautine authorship. It had long since become a scholarly enterprise to determine the authenticity of these plays.[5] And Varro's diligent triple cataloguing of definitely-, probably-, and probably-not-Plautus was by no means the final word. Several centuries thereafter, Aulus Gellius is found passing judgments on Plautinity, as is Macrobius still later, on the threshold of the Dark Ages.

The tribute of such prolific plagiarism and forgery is unique

in the annals of literature. One never hears of any Aristophanic apocrypha, of pseudo-Menander or pseudo-Terence. The only valid analogy would seem to be with the Spanish Golden Age, when Lope de Vega's name was forged on dramatic manuscripts to increase their commercial value. Even the Shakespearean apocrypha cannot be considered in this regard, since the counterfeits were never so numerous, nor did they entice vast audiences into the theater, as the names of Plautus and Lope obviously did.

No less amazing than the strength of Plautus' name is the durability of his comedy. This phenomenon of vitality is evident not only on the pages of works like Karl von Reinhardtstoettner's exhaustive chronicle of *Spätere Bearbeitungen*,[6] but on the stages wherever comedy has flourished. The Roman playwright is still very much alive in our own day. As recently as 1962, an unabashed *contaminatio* of the *Pseudolus*, *Casina*, and *Mostellaria* entitled *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* delighted Broadway audiences for almost a thousand performances, repeated its triumph throughout the world, and was transformed into a motion picture. Horace might boast that he created a *monumentum aere perennius*, but Plautus created a perennial gold mine.

And yet few scholars of the last century have been willing to examine Plautus for what he undeniably was — a theatrical phenomenon. While the ancient professors like Varro (*diligentissimus*, as Cicero praised him for his research methods) concerned themselves with giving Plautus his due credit by rescuing his name from inferior Latin comedies, the modern approach has shifted from integrity to disintegration. Plautine comedy has become the child in the Judgment of Solomon. From Friedrich Ritschl in the mid-nineteenth century to T. B. L. Webster in the mid-twentieth, a possessive family of scholars have stressed the Roman playwright's "echt-attisches"

parentage, considering the value of Plautus to consist solely in what may be discerned of his Greek models which lie beneath an exterior defaced by jokes, puns, songs, and anachronisms.[7] Webster states his views in temperate terms, and a few sentences from his *Studies in Later Greek Comedy* may serve to epitomize the attitude of the Hellenists toward Roman comedy in general. He begins by stating that "the Roman copyists . . . are known quantities," and continues:

> Plautus may elaborate the particular scene to the detriment of the play as a whole; he remodels his text to produce song and dance where there was plain dialogue before; he substitutes elaborate metaphor and mythological allusion for the plain and "ethical" language of the original. But this colouring and distortion is a recognizable quality for which allowances can be made.[8]

And Webster is far more objective than was Gilbert Norwood, who argued:

> When the plays are strongly suffused by Plautus' own personality and interests, they are mostly deplorable . . . The result is that we find only one rational principle for discussing his work. The genuinely Greek passages should be distinguished from the far larger bulk where the original has been smothered by barbarous clownery, intolerable verbosity, and an almost complete indifference to dramatic structure.[9]

Norwood's views have not gone out of fashion. And, although recent discoveries of Menander have done little to strengthen the myth of "the perfection of New Comedy," many scholars still attribute everything that sparkles in Plautus to his models, and everything that falters to his fault.[10]

But the case for Roman artistry has not lacked partisans. Eduard Fraenkel's monumental *Plautinisches im Plautus* dem-

onstrated, even to the satisfaction of the Hellenists, that certain turns of phrase, rhetoric, and imagery are uniquely Plautine — and praiseworthy.[11] Indeed, Webster himself acknowledges a debt to Fraenkel's perceptive work.[12] Moreover, in recent years, sound and persuasive studies, particularly by D. C. Earl, Gordon Williams, and John Arthur Hanson, have pointed out the dramatic purpose of many seemingly random Roman references in the comedies, thereby directing Plautine studies into the area which the present writer considers the most vital: the playwright's relation to his public.[13] And yet the Greco-Roman tug of war still occasions extreme arguments on both sides. Thus, in passionate defense of his countryman's art, Raffaele Perna can loose Plautus entirely from his Greek moorings and eulogize "l'originalità di Plauto." [14]

But what exactly is the "originality" being debated? The "fresh new jokes" which Aristophanes keeps boasting of? That "novel something" which Boccaccio presents in each of his hundred tales? If innovation alone were a standard of excellence, King Ubu would take the palm from King Lear. Clearly this is a notion both unclassical and unsound. Ancient theories of art were based on mimesis within traditional genres: an imitation of life. To this Platonic-Aristotelian concept, Roman aesthetics added a second mimetic principle: imitation of the Greeks. Horace in the *Ars Poetica* states it as the first rule of artistic composition. But this had been Roman practice long before it became Horatian precept. One thinks of Catullus and Sappho, or (more to Horace's liking) Virgil and Homer or, for that matter, the odes of Horace himself. Conscious emulation of Greek models was the tradition in Rome from the very beginning.

And for us Plautus *is* the beginning, the very earliest surviving Latin author. After all, Livius Andronicus is some lines and a legend; Plautus is a literature. There is nothing which distinguishes his treatment of Greek models from that of later

Roman artists. The *Ars Poetica* enjoins the poet: *exemplaria Graeca . . . versate manu* (lines 268–269). Plautus frequently describes his technique of composition in a similar manner, e.g. (*Trinummus* 19):

Philemo scripsit: Plautus vortit barbare.

Philemon wrote it: Plautus made the "barbarian" version.

What a paradox that Horatian *versare* is a praiseworthy practice and Plautine *vortere* (the same root, after all) is looked upon as a reverse alchemy which transmutes the gold of Athens into Roman dross.[15] The problem is not eliminated even when a scholar of Fraenkel's stature sets out to redeem the Plautine *vortere*,[16] for this merely aggravates the general tendency to anatomize the playwright, to separate "Plautinisches" and "Attisches." But the real Plautus only exists as the sum of his parts — whatever these parts be: *invenies etiam disiecti membra poetae.*

We cannot deny the value of studying a playwright's sources. It is interesting, for example, to know that Shakespeare took Enobarbus' colorful description of Cleopatra on the barge directly from North's Plutarch. The bard copied it almost word for word, altering it chiefly to turn (*vortere?*) prose into pentameter.[17] But are these lines, once in the play, any less Shakespearean? Did it matter to the groundlings who wrote them first? Surely the Roman audience did not care whether what they heard was copied or concocted, as long as it made them laugh. Like Shakespeare and Molière, Plautus begs, borrows, and steals from every conceivable source — including himself.[18] But we must acknowledge that once the play begins, everything becomes "Plautus" just as Plutarch becomes "Shakespeare."

Another circumstance cannot be left unnoticed: Shakespeare's sources fill several well-edited volumes, but there is

not a single Greek original to which a Plautine version may be directly compared. There is not even a scene or a speech * that we might contrast with its Latin counterpart in the way Gellius is able to compare Menander and Caecilius.[19] But we do have twenty-one thousand lines of Plautus, twenty Latin plays which share many common elements, regardless of origin. Of course our view of Roman popular comedy, like that of Old Attic comedy, is somewhat distorted, since the work of only one of its many authors is extant. What will be said of Plautus in the succeeding pages may well have been true of the comedy of Naevius and Caecilius.[20] Terence, of course, represents an entirely different tradition: drama for an aristocratic coterie.[21] The Elizabethans who paid their penny at the Globe would not have stood for the theatricals composed in the polite circle of the Countess of Pembroke any more than the Roman groundlings put up with the *fabulae statariae* of Terence.

Even if he disagrees with some of the conclusions put forth on the pages that follow, the reader should not view this study as yet another round in the *agon* between "Plautinisches" and "Attisches." For whether we insist upon calling Plautus' comedy Greek, or dissect it so minutely that we can term it "Greco-osco-etrusco-latin," [22] there is one undeniable fact to be faced: Plautus made them laugh. And the laughter was Roman.

It is impossible to understand Plautine comedy without appreciating the context in which it was presented; for Roman drama from the earliest times is inextricably connected with Roman holidays. Livy (7.2) associates the beginning of theatrical activity with the *ludi Romani* in 364 B.C., when Etruscan *ludiones* were imported to perform for the populace. At this same September holiday in 240 B.C., Livius Andronicus

* See now E. W. Handley, "Menander and Plautus: A Study in Comparison" (London 1968).

introduced the first (Greek-into-Latin) "play with a plot." But there is evidence that some kind of performance took place at this harvest festival long before Livy's traditional dates, in the *lusus iuvenum*, which Varro regarded as the true ancestor of Roman dramatic art.[23] Horace describes the "rustic banter" that delighted the farmers during September holidays of a bygone age (*Epist.* 2.1.145–148):

> Fescennina per hunc inventa licentia morem
> versibus alternis opprobria rustica fudit,
> libertasque recurrentis accepta per annos
> lusit amabiliter . . .[24]

> From this tradition [of primitive holidays] the Fescennine verses developed, and rustic abuse poured forth in dialogue-verse. This freedom, playing happily along, was welcomed year after year . . .

What characterized these festive occasions (and we need not discuss the precise nature of the "entertainment") was *licentia* (line 145) and *libertas* (line 147), attitudes which also describe the *ludi* in the poet's own day (*Ars Poetica* 211ff), as well as the "libertà e licensiozità carnevalesca" of later Italian festivals.[25] Sir James Frazer found this phenomenon in various cultures throughout the world:

> Many people observe an annual period of license — when the customary restraints of law and morality are thrown aside [for] extravagant mirth and jollity. Though these festivals commonly occur at the end of the year, they are frequently associated with one or another of the agricultural seasons, especially the time of sowing and harvest.[26]

The best known of such festivals is, of course, the Roman Saturnalia held in December.[27] There is a strong possibility that this holiday may have originally taken place in September, that is, at the time of the *ludi Romani*. Many scholars

even see in the name Saturnus the suggestion of an agricultural deity.[28] Fowler cites the frequent incorporation of winter "saturnalian" customs into harvest holidays — like the *ludi Romani*.[29]

But I am not arguing for the direct influence of specific holiday customs on Roman comedy. The important connection is the fact that "the holiday occasion and the comedy are parallel manifestations of the same pattern of culture." [30] With this principle as his point of departure, C. L. Barber has provided brilliant new insights into Shakespearean comedy. But if Barber's premise is at all valid for Elizabethan drama (which was basically a year-round activity), how much more so would it be for ancient Rome, when the holiday occasion and the comedy are not merely "parallel manifestations" but simultaneous occurrences. All Plautus is literally "festive comedy," since the various *ludi* were the only occasions for dramatic presentations, a condition which prevailed even as late as Juvenal's day.[31]

The festive feeling, as Freud described it, is "the liberty to do what as a rule is prohibited," [32] a temporary excess which implies everyday restraint. Comedy, likewise, involves a limited license, a momentary breaking of society's rules. Man's inner urge to "misbehave," the psychological tension between restraint and release, is not a concept new with Freud. Plato long ago recognized this unconscious desire as one of the prime appeals of comedy.[33] Moreover, if there is truth in Max Beerbohm's statement that "laughter rejoices in bonds," [34] that the joy of the release is in direct proportion to the severity of the restraint, then Roman comedy must have given rise to a laughter of liberation which even the art of Aristophanes (albeit *fecundissimae libertatis*, according to Quintilian)[35] could not equal.

For the "bonds" in Plautus' day were literary as well as social. Greek Old Comedy was distinguished for its παρρησία,

that celebrated freedom of speech which licensed even the most brutal personal attacks on individuals of high rank. But the Roman Twelve Tables (those antique *tabulae vetantes*, as Horace calls them) [36] forbade the merest mention of an individual by name — even to praise him. Cicero mentions this in the *De Republica* (4.10): *veteribus displicuisse Romanis vel laudari quemquam in scaena virum, vel vituperari*, "the ancient Romans looked askance if a particular person was either praised or criticized on the stage." [37] "Censorship" is, after all, a Roman invention and originally involved much more than jurisdiction over words. The Roman censor was essentially a guardian of behavior.

We must constantly bear in mind that the age of Plautus was also the age of Cato the Elder. In fact, when he wishes to describe the historical period of the late third century B.C., Aulus Gellius links the names of comic author and authoritarian censor in what at first glance seems a most curious tandem (*N.A.* 17.21.46):

> Ac deinde annis fere post quindecim bellum adversum Poenos sumptum est . . . M. Cato orator in civitate, et Plautus poeta in scaena floruerunt.
>
> And then, almost fifteen years after the beginning of the Punic War, the men of prominence were Marcus Cato the orator in the state, and Plautus the poet on the stage.

The atmosphere in Rome of this era is constantly described by scholars as "spartan" or "puritanical," and it was, without question, conservative in the extreme. Early Roman society was distinguished for its "thou shalt not" attitude which was embodied in a unique series of restrictive, moralistic ordinances, about which Crane Brinton comments in *A History of Western Morals*:

> We here encounter clearly for the first time another persistent theme in the moral history of the West, and one that confronts the sociological historian with some difficult problems: sumptuary, prohibitory, "blue law" legislation accompanied by official or semi-official educational propaganda toward a return to "primitive" virtues.[38]

Plautus was just beginning his theatrical career when the first of these laws, the *Lex Oppia*, was enacted in 215 B.C. And the date traditionally given for Plautus' death — 184 B.C. — was the famous year in which Cato and Valerius Flaccus assumed the censorship, to wield their power with a reactionary rigor that became a legend. Plutarch reports that they expelled one man from the senate for kissing his wife in public.[39] What actual effect these "blue laws" had on the Romans does not bear upon our arguments.[40] Whether or not they were strictly adhered to is less important than the fact that the rules were promulgated; they were there. And to appreciate what Plautus' characters are doing, we must be aware of what his contemporary Romans were not supposed to do.

Of course conservatism by definition yearns for the good old days, and Byron's wry observation is quite true: "all days when old, are good." Yet in Rome the conservative conscience was very special. For the Romans had created an impossible ideal and transferred it to the past, making myths out of the men who were their forefathers. The Roman obsession with the greatness of their ancestors is epitomized in Cicero's well-known apostrophe (*Tusc. Disp.* 1.1):

> Quae enim tanta gravitas, quae tanta constantia, magnitudo animi, probitas, fides, quae tam excellens in omni genere virtus in ullis fuit ut sit cum maioribus nostris comparanda?

> What people ever had such dignity, such stoutheartedness, greatness of spirit, uprightness, loyalty, such shining qual-

ities of every kind that they could possibly compare with our ancestors?

The guiding principle for behavior was *mos maiorum*, our forefathers' precedent. But which forefathers? Cicero lavished praise on Cato's day, and Cato himself evokes the precedent of still earlier *maiores nostri.*[41] No Roman of any age could fulfill the dictates of *mos maiorum* any more than Sisyphus could push his rock to the summit. Roman *gravitas* (at least as it is celebrated in literature), was more than seriousness and avoidance of frivolity. It was a pervasive melancholy nurtured by a vague sense of guilt and personal unworthiness. The final lines of Horace's Roman Odes express this (*Carm.* 3.6.46–49):

> Damnosa quid non imminuit dies?
> aetas parentum, peior avis, tulit
> nos nequiores, mox daturos
> progeniem vitiosiorem.

> What has ruinous Time not tainted?
> Our parents' age, worse than their ancestors',
> Bore us, less worthy, soon to bear
> Children still unworthier.[42]

We find this sentiment everywhere. Cicero begins Book Five of *De Republica* with the same thoughts. The Roman mentality was suffused with guilt feelings analogous to Christian original sin. In the ode quoted above we hear of *delicta nondum expiata.*[43] In Virgil's *Aeneid* it is voiced even more strongly; the sins being purged in Elysium are described as *vetera mala, scelus infectum, concreta labes* (6.735–746).[44] The fact that these are poetic references to the recent civil wars, as well as to the mythical sin of Romulus, does not adequately explain the omnipresence of this motif. It was more than Adam's transgression which caused the medieval loathing

for the flesh. In both societies, the guilt is even more psychological than historical. *Gravitas* may describe a paragon of behavior, but it may also reveal a pathology.

A Freudian psychologist would describe the early Romans as a people with an overdeveloped superego. The superego, as A. A. Brill defined it, is

> a precipitate of all the prohibitions and inhibitions, all the rules which are impressed upon the child by his parents and parental substitutes. The feeling of *conscience* depends altogether on the superego.[45]

These very same words serve as a precise definition of *mos maiorum*, the rules imposed upon the Romans by various parental figures, not the least of whom was *pater* Aeneas! Every Roman institution was a sacred patriarchy, every family the state in miniature. But Aeneas was a myth, and the ideal he embodied an impossibility. It is small wonder that *mos maiorum* is linked with *gravitas*.[46] The superego is the father of melancholy.

But comedy has been described by the psychiatrist Ernst Kris as a "holiday for the superego," [47] and Plautus, reflecting as he does the festive spirit, banishes Roman melancholy, turning everyday attitudes and everyday values completely upside down. To a society with a fantastic compulsion for hierarchies, order, and obedience, he presents a saturnalian chaos.[48] To a people who regarded a parent's authority with religious awe and could punish any infringement with death, Plautus presents an audacious irreverence for all elders. The atmosphere of his comedy is like that of the medieval Feast of Fools (product of another highly restrictive society), which some see as "providing a safety valve for repressed sentiments which otherwise might have broken their bonds more violently." [49] But we need not stress the cathartic value of Plautine comedy; we need only appreciate the fascination

which a flouting of the rules would have had for people so bound by them in everyday life. This very appeal to what Shakespeare called "holiday humor" accounts in large measure for the unequaled success of Plautus.

If we are to understand the whole tradition of popular comedy, we must see Plautus in the proper perspective, and acknowledge that his work is a significant milestone.[50] If it seem bold to compare him with Aristophanes, let us not forget that Cicero did so.[51] Nor should we hesitate to compare to Molière a writer who had also mastered "le grand art de plaire." The most passionate partisan would never place Plautus' achievement on a par with Shakespeare's, but no reasonable man should deny that Plautus was like Noah: great in his age. His art does not give rise to "thoughtful laughter," but Meredith may not be correct in seeing this as the aim of True Comedy. For True Comedy should banish *all* thought — of mortality and morality. It should evoke a laughter which temporarily lifts from us the weight of the world, whether we call it "das Unbehagen," loathèd melancholy, or *gravitas*.

Plautus is our only example of popular Roman entertainment, comedy "as they liked it." His twenty plays show us what delighted a nation on the verge of world domination, in the only age when its theater lived and flourished. Rome went on to build much that remains vital and viable in our own day. The most obvious monuments to her craftsmanship are the aqueducts which still carry water, the bridges and highways which can still be traveled. But when Zero Mostel as Pseudolus trod nightly on his way to the Broadway forum, he was walking another Roman road of astounding durability.

CHAPTER I·

"O Tempora, O Mos Maiorum!"

The most common dilemma presented in Plautine comedy is that of a young man *amans et egens*, "in love and insolvent," turning to his clever slave for salvation. The desperate youth is usually assured of deliverance, especially if his bondsman happens to be the wily Pseudolus (lines 117–120):

CALIDORUS: Dabisne argenti mi hodie viginti minas?
PSEUDOLUS: Dabo. molestus nunciam ne sis mihi.
atque hoc, ne dictum tibi neges, dico prius:
si neminem alium potero, tuom tangam patrem.

CALIDORUS: Will you get me twenty *minae* — cash — today?
PSEUDOLUS: Of course. Now don't annoy me any more.
But so you won't deny I said it, let me say:
If I can't swindle someone else — I'll fleece your father.

The young man's reaction to Pseudolus' plan is vehement indeed (line 122):

Pietatis causa — vel etiam matrem quoque!

Remember love and loyalty — fleece mother too!

This particular comic twist has more significance than the