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PLAUTUS  
**MOSTELLARIA**

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George Fredric Franko

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# Plautus: *Mostellaria*

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George Fredric Franko

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# Preface

D.M.

(*Dis Manibus*, to the Departed Shades of the Dead)

2020 was a horrific year for the world. Composing this companion amid isolation and uncertainty, I was conscious of the privilege I enjoyed as an individual on sabbatical with employment and health care assured. Working on a comedy named after a ghost during a pandemic infused my thinking with a gravity unforeseen but I hope helpful to readers.

I wish to thank the series editors Toph Marshall and Niall Slater for their kind invitation to contribute this companion. Their careful, rigorous criticism of the manuscript removed much of my foolishness, but no team could possibly find it all. Their offer came as a *hermaion*, a lucky strike at an opportune moment with the completion of *A Companion to Plautus* (a pleasure to co-edit with Dorota Dutsch), from whose contributors I learned much. Thanks also to Bloomsbury's insightful anonymous referees and the friendly, efficient people of their production team, including Georgie Leighton, Lily Mac Mahon, Rachel Walker, Merv Honeywood, and Paul King. Gratefully I acknowledge a debt owed to students, with whom I have explored the classical world in over forty different courses spanning nearly three decades at Hollins University, a small liberal arts college for women. Chapter 1 and parts of Chapter 4 are informed by courses on Greek and Latin literature, both in translation and the original languages; Chapter 2 by courses on both Greek and Roman history. Chapter 3 draws upon experiences co-directing plays of Plautus in Latin at the Virginia Governor's Latin Academy, a three-week intensive program for high school students. Co-directing *Mostellaria* with Daniel McCaffrey was a hoot, and the student actors working with only a dozen rehearsals totaling twenty-odd hours would have made Tranio proud with their

improvisational abilities. Parts of Chapters 3 and 4 draw upon graduate study in Shakespeare and Performance at Mary Baldwin University in conjunction with the American Shakespeare Center. Warm thanks to Paul Menzer for his critique of Chapter 4, and special thanks to Daniel McCaffrey, Dorota Dutsch, and Donovan O'Daniel, who read and made perceptive comments on the entire manuscript.

# Playbill

## Summary and Highlights

Playbills routinely include a plot summary, which serves as both an advertisement and an aide-memoir. If you have not read or seen *Mostellaria*, I hope that the following sketch will pique your interest. If you already know the play, consider the following thousand words a refresher on the play's distinctive episodes. Either way, you probably know that a bare bones plot summary buries all the fun of farce.

**Scene 1** opens with a slap and an abusive slanging match between the rustic slave Grumio and the urban slave Tranio, the star of the show. Grumio accuses Tranio of corrupting the young man Philolaches in the absence of his father Theopropides, who has been away on business in Egypt for three years. Tranio celebrates the prodigal, Greeky lifestyle of prostitutes, drinking parties, and gourmet dining. Both depart, Grumio to the farm and Tranio to shop for dinner.

**Scene 2** features a long solo song by Philolaches that introduces the play's leitmotif of houses. Addressing the audience, he compares a youth to a house: after parents carefully lay a lad's moral foundation and edify him with education, neglect and storms of passion can demolish the structure. Love has ruined Philolaches.

**Scene 3** introduces us to his beloved Philematium emerging from her bath. Philolaches purchased the freedom of this former sex laborer, and she now resides in his home along with her older attendant Scapha. As Philematium grooms, Philolaches makes comical (and creepy) asides to the audience praising Philematium and critiquing Scapha. This is Plautus' longest eavesdropping scene. It offers rich, complicated commentary on the precarious position of unmarried women in Roman comedy. Finally, Philolaches greets them and dismisses Scapha. The couple professes their mutual affection in financial terms before reclining in the street to drink.

**Scene 4** treats us to boisterous carousing with the entry of a drunken Callidamates and his girlfriend Delphium. Song and dance enliven the impromptu symposium. After the two couples recline, Tranio bursts on stage with a tragic message: Theopropides is home! To save Philolaches, Tranio shoos the revelers inside the house, orders them to keep quiet, and double locks the door so that no one can enter or exit. Alone and locked outside the house, Tranio promises the audience that he will stage a comedy/funeral games for the old man.

**Scene 5** introduces Theopropides, a superstitious, gullible, and theatrically obtuse old man. When he asks Tranio why his door is locked, Tranio improvises a tale that the household moved away months ago because the ghost of a man murdered for gold haunts the premises. *Mostellaria* (*The Little Ghost Play*) takes its name from this scene. By banging the door and calling to Tranio, the revelers inside nearly wreck his play-within-a-play at its outset:

**Theopropides**

Sh-sh!

**Tranio**

By Hercules, what happened?

**Theopropides**

The door creaked!

**Tranio** (*pointing to Theopropides*)

He knocked!

**Theopropides**

I don't have a drop of blood!

The dead summon me to Hades while I'm still alive!

**Tranio** (*aside to us*)

I'm dead! *Those* guys are gonna discombobulate this here play.

I'm terribly terrified *this* guy is gonna catch me red handed.

**Theopropides**

What are you saying to yourself?

**Tranio**

Get away from the door!

Run away! Please, by Hercules!

**Theopropides**

Where should I run to? You run too!

**Tranio**

I'm not terrified. I'm at peace with the dead.

**Voice inside:**

Yo! Tranio!

**Tranio** (*to "ghost" inside*)

You won't call me by name, if you're smart!

I did nothing wrong! And I didn't touch your door!

[line and a half lacuna in manuscripts]

**Theopropides**

What's troubling you, Tranio?

Who are you talking to?

**Tranio**

Oh, sorry, *you* called my name?

So help me gods, I was sure that dead man

sounded off because you knocked on the door!

506–21

The terrified Theopropides runs away. Victory is short lived, for one line later Misargyrides the moneylender enters to dun Philolaches for a huge debt. And ten lines later Theopropides returns, having heard the previous owner's denial of the murder story. At the play's epicenter, Tranio faces double trouble from the moneylender yelling and Theopropides simmering. Tranio invents his second extemporaneous trick: Philolaches is in debt because he bought a house . . . just next door! Investment in real estate appeals to Theopropides, who quickly promises to pay the moneylender tomorrow and asks to inspect his son's big purchase.

**Scene 6** shifts our focus to the house next door. The merry neighbor Simo—Tranio's new target—emerges singing an upbeat song about his tasty lunch and avoiding sex with his wife. After joining Simo in a duet, Tranio lies to him that Theopropides would like to inspect his home as a model for architectural renovations.

**Scene 7** begins with a short, slow duet in which Tranio convinces Theopropides that Simo has seller's remorse. Once again facing double trouble, Tranio unleashes metatheatrical jokes that critique the

construction of Simo's house (and Plautus' play) and figure himself as a tricky crow deluding two vultures (Simo and Theopropides). Simo heads to the forum, Tranio and Theopropides inside to tour the house, and finally we get a breather.

**Scene 8** feels like an interlude when Phaniscus sings a solo song about his role as Callidamates' good slave coming to fetch his owner. After almost thirty verses, his fellow-slave Pinacium arrives and generates a duet. Their arguing echoes Scene 1, and their banging on Theopropides' door shifts our attention back to the "haunted" house.

**Scene 9** presents Theopropides elated with his son's purchase of Simo's house, and he sends Tranio to fetch Philolaches. But in Tranio's absence, Phaniscus and Pinacium reveal all of Philolaches' prodigality to an incredulous Theopropides.

**Scene 10** confirms Theopropides' figurative funeral when Simo denies the sale of his house. Theopropides plots to punish Tranio with Simo's help. They exit into Simo's house, allowing us another breather before the finale.

**Scene 11** begins with Tranio updating us that the revelers have vacated the house, and he knows that his time for trickery is running out. He catches sight of Theopropides plotting an ambush for him and maneuvers to take refuge atop an altar. From there he taunts Theopropides, who threatens to smoke him out. In this apparent stalemate, a now sober Callidamates returns to mediate like a *deus ex machina*. Tranio boasts that his deceptions surpass those of famous Greek comic playwrights. He receives a reprieve after promising to pay double for hijinks today and tomorrow, and Theopropides ends today's play with a slap.

## Character Names and Meanings

In order of appearance:

**Grumio**, *Clod*

**Tranio**, *Tanner / Galley Slave / Revealer / Woodpecker*

**Philolaches**, *Luck-Lover*

**Philematium**, *Little Kiss*

**Scapha**, *Dinghy / Little Goblet*

**Callidamates**, *Beauty Killer / Lady Killer*

**Delphium**, *Little Dolphin*

**Sphaerio**, *Ball Boy*

**Theopropides**, *Son of the Prophet*

**Misargyrides**, *Son of Silver-Hater*

**Simo**, *Snub-Nosed / Monkey Man*

**Phaniscus**, *Little Torch / Revealer*

**Pinacium**, *Little Tablet*

Names in Plautus suggest personality or function in the story, thereby providing a target for actors. The meaning of Tranio's name is unclear and likely elicited different connotations for different members of a Roman audience. Possible derivations from Greek words include: "tanner's bench," i.e., a slave whose hide has been tanned by whipping (Sonnenschein 1907: 60); "rower's bench," i.e., a galley slave (López López 1991: 204); "piercer" or "revealer," which contrasts Tranio's acuity with the obtuse Theopropides; or an epithet of Hermes, the archetypal Olympian trickster (Fay 1903: 249–60). Staging and wordplay link Tranio to crows, woodpeckers, and a bird called the *bōmolochos* ("altar-lurker"). Aviary allusions make Tranio an ancestor of the mischievous cartoon magpies Heckle and Jeckle.

## Synopsis and Arcs

This synopsis outlines *Mostellaria's* arcs, scenes, and meters. Plautus structures his plays not in five acts but through scenes and metrical shifts. "Arcs" are units of action that begin with spoken iambs and end with musically accompanied trochees or mixed meters (see further pp. 88–90). Since this companion proceeds by topics rather than scene-by-scene, this synopsis also can serve as an index for locating discussions of a scene greater than a brief mention.

### Arc 1: 1–408

Scene	Lines	Meter	Recap and discussions.
1	1–83	<i>ia</i> <sup>6</sup>	Grumio and Tranio argue. Pp. 19–23, 37–8, 67–8, 72.
2	84–156	mix	Philolaches' monody on the ruined house. Pp. 79, 85–6.
3a	157–247	<i>ia</i> <sup>7</sup>	Philematium grooms with Scapha; Philolaches eavesdrops. Pp. 28–31, 65, 79–80, 87, 95–6.
3b	248–312	<i>tr</i> <sup>7</sup>	continuation; Philolaches greets Philematium; Scapha leaves. Pp. 28–31, 79–80, 96–7.
4a	313–347	mix	Callidamates and Delphium arrive; party. Pp. 41–2, 63–4, 67–8.
4b	348–408	<i>tr</i> <sup>7</sup>	Tranio enters and ends the party. Pp. 63–4, 72, 78.

### Arc 2: 409–746

Scene	Lines	Meter	Recap and discussions.
5a	409–531	<i>ia</i> <sup>6</sup>	Tranio tricks Theopropides: the ghost story. Pp. x–xi, 49–50, 64, 72–4, 77, 96.
5b	532–654	<i>ia</i> <sup>6</sup>	Misargyrides the moneylender. Pp. 35–6, 41, 74, 82.
5c	655–689	<i>ia</i> <sup>6</sup>	Tranio tricks Theopropides: Philolaches bought a house. Pp. 74–5.
6a	690–746	mix	Simo greets Tranio. Pp. 32, 86.

**Arc 3: 747–992**

Scene	Lines	Meter	Recap and discussions.
6b	747–782	<i>ia</i> <sup>6</sup>	Tranio tricks Simo: Theopropides wants to renovate. Pp. 15–16, 75.
7a	783–804	mix	Tranio tricks Theopropides: Simo has seller's remorse. Pp. 87–8.
7b	805–857	<i>tr</i> <sup>7</sup>	Tranio tricks Simo and Theopropides: a crow and two vultures. Pp. 16, 56, 75, 77, 95.
8a	858–884	mix	Phaniscus' monody on the good slave. P. 24.
8b	885–903	mix	Phaniscus and Pinacium duet. Pp. 24–5.
9a	904–932	<i>tr</i> <sup>7</sup>	Tranio and Theopropides delighted with Simo's house. P. 75.
9b	933–992	<i>tr</i> <sup>7</sup>	Phaniscus and Pinacium reveal all to Theopropides. Pp. 25, 45.

**Arc 4: 993–1181**

Scene	Lines	Meter	Recap and discussions.
10	993–1040	<i>ia</i> <sup>6</sup>	Simo confirms the trickery to Theopropides. Pp. 45, 69.
11a	1041–1121	<i>tr</i> <sup>7</sup>	Theopropides corners Tranio on the altar. Pp. 57–9, 75–6.
11b	1122–1181	<i>tr</i> <sup>7</sup>	Callidamates mediates between Theopropides and Tranio. Pp. 57–9, 62–3, 92.



## Why Plautus? Why *Mostellaria*?

Twenty-one comic scripts attributed to Titus Maccius Plautus (c. 254–184 BCE) are our earliest surviving works of Latin literature. Seniority alone merits Plautus a mention in the history of Western literature and theater, and several qualities in his drama continue to draw our attention: his Latin is briskly imaginative; his characters flamboyantly memorable; his staging infectiously playable. Plautus was Rome’s most popular playwright, and drama figured prominently in the Romans’ formulation of their national cultural consciousness. For example, according to the Roman narrative, Latin literature began with a play when in 240 BCE a certain Livius Andronicus staged a translation or adaptation of a Greek play during a public festival. Today, comedy in film, television, and theater is a multi-billion-dollar industry in the world’s economy, and many of comedy’s plotlines and character types descend directly or indirectly from Plautus.

*Mostellaria* (*The Little Ghost Play*) is one of Plautus’ most breezy and amusing farces. The plot is ridiculously simple: when a father returns home after three years abroad, a clever slave named Tranio devises deceptions to conceal that the son has squandered a fortune partying with pals and purchasing his prized prostitute. Tranio convinces the gullible father that his house is haunted, that his son has purchased the neighbor’s house, and that he must repay a moneylender for the housing loan. Plautus animates this skeletal plot with scenes of Tranio’s slapstick abuse of a rustic slave, the young lover’s maudlin song lamenting his prodigality, a woman’s grooming scene (played by male actors), a drunken party, a flustered moneylender, a rakish neighbor, bold slaves rebuffing the father, and Tranio hoodwinking father and neighbor simultaneously. In many ways, *Mostellaria* offers a spirited introduction to the theater of Plautus.<sup>1</sup>