

MERCURY AND METATHEATRE II:
THE ARGUMENTUM IN PLAUTUS' AMPHITRUO¹

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Introduction

The term “metatheatre” is used by Abel for “theatrically self-conscious theatre” (1963:passim), while it is used by Gentili to indicate “plays constructed from previously existing plays” (1979:15, 33-35). The title of Slater’s work, *The Theatre of the Mind: Metatheatre in Plautus* (1981), offers in itself the most succinct definition of metatheatre. In “theatre of the mind”, Slater refers to Plautus’ creation of “a form of drama strikingly self-conscious of its own theatrical nature” (1981:iv). This self-consciousness is what constitutes metatheatre, and is prevalent throughout the Plautine corpus, especially in those plays in which one of the characters actually takes on the role of playwright (1981:v). In addition to this, there are numerous references to the play as a play,² to the performers as players and playwrights, and to theatrical conventions, all of which imply a keen theatrical awareness on the side of playwright, players and audience. Slater’s fusion of the two definitions (1981:15) as plays modelled on the Greek originals (Gentili 1979) and manifestations of theatrical self-consciousness (Abel 1963) is therefore perfectly accommodated in Plautus’ comedies which may be regarded as the very paradigm of metatheatre.

The play chosen to illustrate the concept of metatheatre is Plautus’ *Amphitruo*, unique in the sense that it is the only example of a mythological travesty in Plautus and, indeed, in the *palliata*. As a play constructed from a previously existing play, the *Amphitruo* is generally acknowledged to be an adaptation of one or more Greek models, but no consensus has yet been reached on the source. As self-conscious drama the *Amphitruo* displays a self-awareness that is evident mainly in the characters of Mercury and Jupiter, who both excel in the conscious adoption of roles. By means of such non-illusory techniques as prologue and epilogue, monologue, aside and direct address, attention is drawn to the play as a play. The result is an acceptance by the audience of the different planes of reality and a willingness to be active participants in the *ludus*.

The *Amphitruo* prologue is a metatheatrical prologue *par excellence*. The *antelogium*³ is succeeded by the *argumentum*⁴ (vv.97-152), which can be described as “thoroughly Euripidean” (Sedgwick 1960:63), in the sense that it is explanatory in nature. In the *antelogium* the *prologus* Mercury demonstrates his prowess in *captatio benevolentiae*: by means of clever metatheatrical tactics he gains the attention of the

1 This article is meant to be read in conjunction with the my article on the *antelogium* in the same play: see Schoeman 1998:32-42.

2 Jokes about the play as a play go back to Aristophanes.

3 Discussed in detail in Schoeman 1998:32-42.

4 The term *argumentum* is used interchangeably with “explanatory”, “omniscient”, “expository”, or “narrative” prologue.

audience, secures its goodwill and establishes an enduring rapport. In the *argumentum* Mercury once again emerges as a brilliant story-teller in his version of the myth of Amphitruo and Alcumena and the birth of Hercules. In this paper an attempt will be made to show how he uses the expository part of the prologue not only as a vehicle for the recitation of facts but also as a vibrant medium to set the dynamics of interaction in motion.

The expository part of the prologue is introduced by a reference to the locale: (v.97):⁵

Haec urbs est Thebae...

This is the city of Thebes...

This is theatre of the imagination, for the spectators are no longer in a theatre, but become citizens of far-off, exotic Thebes, the illustrious name of which must have conjured up images of myths and heroes. The next part of the speech (vv.98-101) also abounds in mythological names and genealogical terms, such as *Argis*, *Argo*, *Alcumena*, *Electri*, *Telebois* and *Thebano populo*, evoking a wealth of associations in rapid succession. Plautus' use of these mythological names shows that the Roman audience could not have been such "a bunch of barbaric dimwits" (Handley 1975:123) as it is sometimes thought, and that it had obviously already absorbed much of the Greek cultural heritage.⁶ There is ample evidence of the popularity of the *Amphitruo* theme and the birth of Hercules in Greek culture: Homer, Hesiod, Aspis and Pherekydes mention Alcumena; there is also an *Amphitryon* by Euripides, while the theme is also examined in comedy, for example, by Rhinthon⁷ who is said to have been the author of an *Amphitryon*.⁸ The popularity of the theme is illustrated by vase-paintings found in Southern Italy, such as the *phlyax* vase-painting⁹ depicting what may well be Zeus and Hermes at Alcumena's window (Fig. 1).

Reference to Alcumena in a Roman play is made in *Rudens* where Sceparnio calls the storm *non ventus...verum Alcumena Euripidi* (vv.86-87), which might be a reference to the violent rainstorm sent by Jupiter to prevent Alcumena from being set ablaze by her husband. Thus, an audience could enjoy that with which they were familiar, while at the same time relishing any adaptation of extant plays: metatheatre *par excellence*.

5 Cf. the opening lines of the *Dyskolos* prologue.

6 See Sedgwick 1960:5 and Chalmers 1965:25, 42 and *passim*.

7 See Beare 1955:15 and Stewart 1958:364.

8 See Shero 1956:202, Stewart 1958:369, and Romano 1974:874.

9 Although there is no proof that the *phlyakes*-vases from Southern Italy represent performances of the literary *phlyakes*, they are still often cited as evidence for the plots of Rhinthonic comedies (Stewart 1958:368-369).



Figure 1: Red-figured bell-krater made at Paestum about 350 - 340 BCE and signed by the painter Asteas, to be seen in the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities at the British Museum, Vase F 150. (Sketch by E Swanepoel.)

The plot

The distinguished lineage of both Amphytrou and Alcumena having been established, the next part of the prologue (100-102) shows Amphytrou to be a soldier and leader of men. Of primary importance for the story, and something on which the plot hinges, is Amphytrou's absence from Thebes and from his wife, while he is on campaign. The emphatic use of *is Amphytrou* (100), *is* and *ipsemet* (102) leads to the climactic information that Amphytrou has impregnated his wife before his departure (103):

gravidam Alcumenam fecit uxorem suam...

He made his wife Alcumena pregnant...

which is beautifully paralleled in 109:

et gravidam fecit is [= Jupiter] eam compressu suo.

He (Jupiter) made her pregnant by his embraces...

The comic balance created by the use of *is* (100, 102), referring to Amphytrou on the one hand, and *is* (107, 109), referring to Jupiter, on the other, serves to highlight the

preposterous situation: a woman pregnant by two men!¹⁰

But before imparting this earth-shattering information, Mercury steps out of his role to comment on Jupiter's behaviour in an aside to the audience, addressing it in the second person (104-108):

*nam ego vos novisse credo iam ut sit pater meus,
quam liber harum rerum multarum siet
quantusque amator siet quod complacitum est semel.
is amare ocepit Alcumenam clam virum
usuramque eiius corporis cepit sibi.*

For I believe you already know what my father is like,
how liberal he is in many of these matters,
and what a great lover he is when someone catches his fancy.
He (Jupiter) began to love Alcumena unbeknownst to her husband
and he used her body for his own enjoyment.

The use of direct address here certainly adds to the comic effect, but it also serves to establish (and maintain) a bond between stage and audience: here Mercury and the audience, in almost conspiratorial fashion, share their awareness of Jupiter's peccadilloes. Zeus' notorious infidelities and "Erotomanie" (so Abel 1955:36) would have been a common place for the Greeks, and probably no less for the Romans, though the extent is difficult to assess. Apart from the prurient innuendo in these lines (104-106), there appears a hint of criticism as well in the juxtaposition of *clam* and *virum* (107) and in the use of the word *usuram* (108): adultery was regarded in a very serious light by the Romans.

Although prologues in general may be regarded as audience address, there are certain prologues and certain passages which are more than a mere recital of facts, but act as an intensification of a relationship between actor and audience. Such a passage follows where Mercury apparently superfluously repeats the information already given (110-111):

*nunc de Alcumena et rem teneatis rectius,
utrimque est gravida, et ex viro et ex summo Iove.*

And now, so that you may grasp Alcumena's situation even better:
she is pregnant by two men: her husband and supreme Jove.

The laboured repetition here is functional, serving to ensure the audience's complete possession of the facts, but also to stress Alcumena's ridiculous situation, as well as to give some sort of indication as to what she is going to look like. The audience is given definite pointers that events in the play are to be interpreted in a comic, not a

10 This is not as impossible as it sounds. DNA tests have conclusively proved that twin girls born in 1994 in Arizona have different fathers, as reported by Drew Mackenzie in *You Magazine* (7 March 1995 pp.20-21) under the heading: "'Twins – with two dads. A one-in-a-million chance – but it happened.'

tragic, light (Abel 1955:34), while the knowledge thus over-deliberately imparted sets the scene for dramatic irony.

The long night

Alcumena's predicament having been made clear, Mercury, while perhaps pointing to the house, informs the audience that "his father" (Jupiter) is at that moment with Alcumena (*meu' pater nunc intus cum illa cubat* v.112) and, furthermore, that the night has been lengthened for the sake of this father's enjoyment. Jupiter's omnipotence is emphasized by the intelligence that even the forces of nature are under his command (113-114):

*et haec ob eam rem nox est facta longior,
dum <cum> illa quacum volt voluptatem capit...*

And for this reason the night has been made longer
while he enjoys the woman he wants to be with...

The νύξ μακρά theme raises certain interesting issues and gives tantalizing glimpses into the possible sources of the play. In antiquity, the "long night" was the night of the conception of Hercules—the length of the night being appropriate for the procreation of such a mighty hero.¹¹ Plato Comicus wrote a νύξ μακρά¹² which might have been used by a later Greek comedian, which then could have served as the model for Plautus' *Amphitruo* (Sedgwick 1960:4 and Shero 1956:203). Plautus' version differs from Apollodorus¹³ with regard to certain details in the length of the miraculous night. In Apollodorus it is three times longer than usual: in Plautus it is just "somewhat longer", though later Sosia's complaint that he has been up and about for three nights in a row (*nam continuas has tris noctes pervigilavi*, v.314) seems to echo the idea of three.

Metatheatrical implications, here especially in the Gentilian sense of the word, cannot pass unobserved. The audience must have been familiar with at least some of the plays or stories in which the "long night" theme occurred. Mercury is playing on this theme, parodying it, and of this the audience must have been aware. He creates a complete reversal of the lofty ideas inherent in the "long night" of Hercules' conception, by making it instead the night before the birth,¹⁴ a night lengthened "solely for the prolonging of Jupiter's rapturous delights in company with a lady just on the point of giving birth to twins" (Shero 1956:203).

11 Shero (1956:203 and 204 n.18) quotes Diodorus Sic. 4.9.2; Costa (1965:120) adds Ovid *Heroides* 9.9-10, Lucian *Dialogues of the Gods* 10.

12 Sedgwick (1960:4) refers to Casaubon's suggestion that this was Plautus' source, on the strength of ap. Athen. 700f; see also Costa 1965: 88.

13 *Bibl.* 2.57ff.

14 Stewart (1958:356 n.24) comments on the strange phenomenon that Hercules' name is never mentioned in the *Amphitruo*. Shero (1956:203), Sedgwick (1960:6) and Costa (1965:88) take it for granted that this version of the tale was not invented by Plautus. Galinsky (1966:225) sees no reason for this assumption.

The telescoping of two sets of events by Plautus (or his source) originally at least seven months apart has been variously termed by commentators as the “cardinal defect in the plot” (Palmer 1906:xvi), as a difficulty from which Plautus “vainly sought to extricate himself”, as “extreme clumsiness of construction” (Sedgwick 1960:4), as “preposterous” (Shero 1956:203), as “the play’s weakness” and “hopeless confusion” (Costa 1965:89), and as something “für modernes Empfinden höchst anstößig” (Abel 1955:32). But surely Plautus was first and foremost a playwright (neither a biologist nor mathematician), and one who would obviously regard dramatic and theatrical effect as of far greater importance than logic. Here the audience is again given an opportunity to take part in a game of pretence: awareness of absurdity and irreverent appreciation of innuendo can lead to even greater enjoyment.

The “long night” theme is not confined to the prologue, but recurs frequently in the main body of the play, often in the context of dramatic irony. When Sosia comments on the long night as being ideal for conducting dirty business (*exercendo scorto conducto male*, v.288), he is closer to the mark than he imagines: Jupiter is *scortator* (adulterer) and Alcumena, an unwitting *scortum* (adulteress). Mercury, who is in the know, can comment in an aside that his father *qui complexus cum Alcumena cubat amans* (290)¹⁵ is indeed making good use of his time. A further example of irony is inherent in the description of the motif on the *aurea patera*, according to which the sun is rising with his four-horse chariot (422), while it is the very fact of the sun *not* rising that adds to Amphitruo’s troubles (Forehand 1971:648). Various other references to the “long night” are made (271-276; 279; 548-550), but it is only when Jupiter dismisses Night to make way for Day (*nunc te, nox, quae me mansisti, mitto ut concedas die...*, v.546) that Light can break through—not yet, however, in the havoc that has been wrought in the lives of Amphitruo and Alcumena.

The disguise theme and innovation

The “long night” theme is followed by the disguise theme (115-130) where we are told that Jupiter has disguised himself as Alcumena’s husband (*sed ita adsimulavit [= Jupiter] se, quasi Amphitruo siet*, v.115). The hint of a clear understanding of female psychology suggested in this line can be fully appreciated only as Alcumena’s character is developed during the course of the play. Abel (1955:33) rightly remarks that the reason for the disguise can be traced to Alcumena’s character: her chastity, loyalty and “hoheitsvolles Selbstbewußtsein” are traits which would have precluded her from accepting a lover.

The disguise theme is continued with Mercury’s entreating the audience not to be surprised at his slave’s costume (116-117):

*nunc ne hunc ornatum vos meum admiremini
quod ego huc processi sic cum servili schema...*¹⁶

15 Perhaps a reference to the *senex amans* of comedy.

16 What exactly the *servili schema* entails, is not certain. See Beare 1955:180.

Now do not be surprised at my costume,
at my appearing on stage in slave's clothing...

The spectators would have been aware for some time now that it was the "god" Mercury who was addressing them (cf. 19 and 53), and may have been wondering about his outfit. But the tension is shortly to be relieved by the information that he has taken on a slave's (Sosia's) appearance in order to assist Jupiter in his illicit love affair (124-130). But before imparting this titbit, he whets their curiosity by saying (118-119):

*veterem atque antiquam rem novam ad vos proferam,
propterea ornatus in novom incessi modum.*¹⁷

I shall present you with an age-old thing in a brand new way
on account of my having come on stage dressed in a novel way.

This type of theatrical comment, that is, comment on theatrical and playing style, (i.e. typical self-conscious playing) is common in Plautus as we have noted above. While all the implications of the statement are difficult to pin down, the close proximity of the words *veterem* and *antiquam*, as opposed to *novam* and *novom*, indicates some sort of antithesis or contrast between the traditional and the innovative. The old may refer to the "old and time-honoured usage", the "amours of Jupiter with mortals" (Sedgwick 1960:64) or to Jupiter's disguise as Amphitruo, while the new may refer to Mercury's disguise as Sosia (Cutt 1970:74).¹⁸ However, although it is possible that the impersonation of Sosia was derived from a model (Shero 1956:203-204), the possibility (and indeed probability) of Plautus' inventing this impersonation cannot be ruled out. After all, Plautus was an innovator *par excellence* and nobody can deny that to retheatricalize into Latin, as implied by *vortit barbare* (As. 11), was his forte. As the crux of the prologue, perhaps, line 118 goes far beyond the novelty of a god delivering a prologue in slave's clothes, and was probably inserted as a theatrical comment on the play as a whole, in the sense that Plautus is presenting an old and well-known story¹⁹ in a new guise. He has created something new, not elevated Rhinthonica, but *tragicomoedia*, in which gods play the roles of mortals (one of them a slave at that), consequently suffering an "astronomical drop in status" (Forehand 1971:642). This, in turn, leads to many farcical situations and much comic irony. Other aspects of Plautus' innovation are, for example, his distortion of accepted mythological data, such as the combination of the "long night" with the birth of the

17 Cf. also *Pseud.* 568-570:

*... nam qui in scaenam provenit,
novo modo novom aliquid inventum adferre addecet;
si id facere nequeat, det locum illi qui queat.*

Handley (1975:128) remarks that the actor here is speaking of himself as the purveyor of novelty.

18 See also Forehand 1971:642 n.13 for Sosia's role as parasite.

19 Shero (1956:194-203) mentions that the theme was treated by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Ion, Euripides, Archippus, Plato Comicus, Dionysius the Elder, Astydamas the Younger, and possibly as a *hilarotragoedia* in a Greek play by an unknown author, as well as by Rhinthon.

twins, the delivery by a “slave” of the prologue, and the development of the *servus callidus* character (here, Mercury impersonating Sosia), who, in the *Amphitruo*, assists his master without attempting to hoodwink him at every possible opportunity.

Plautus’ innovation seems not only to be the involvement of Olympian gods in a comedy, but these gods’ taking on roles in an extremely self-conscious manner (121-124):

*in Amphitruonis vortit sese imaginem
omnesque eum esse censent servi qui vident:
ita vorsipellem se facit quando lubet.
ego servi sumpsi Sosiae mi imaginem...*

He changes himself into the spitting image of Amphitruo
and all the slaves think they see *him*:
in this way he changes shape whenever he feels like it.
I have taken on the appearance of the slave Sosia...

The theme of mistaken identity as one of the primary elements of comedy, has universal appeal and is common in Plautus.²⁰ Although it might be said that Mercury’s impersonation of Sosia reduces the plausibility of the plot, the theatrical impact of the play is thereby greatly enhanced. The involvement of two pairs of identicals or “duality method” (Duckworth 1952:157) must have placed “exceptional strain on the ingenuity of the dramatist” (Fantham 1973:197): the two pairs of doublets are supposed to confuse the other characters in the play, but to remain distinct in the eyes of the audience. This major difficulty in the staging of the *Amphitruo* is overcome by a series of techniques: for example, repeated signposts to show which of the identicals is speaking (861).²¹

IU. *Ego sum ille Amphitruo, quoui est servos Sosia...*

JU. I am that Amphitruo whose slave is Sosia...

This type of prompting has to be maintained almost to the end of the play, no mean feat, since the *anagnorisis* occurs in line 1121 ff. only, when the nurse Bromia²² at last reveals Jupiter’s identity (1121-1122):

AM. *quis homo?* BR. *summus imperator divom atque hominum Iuppiter.
is se dixit cum Alcumena clam consuetum cubitibus...*

AM. What man? BR. The great ruler of gods and men, Jupiter.

20 See Duckworth 1952:151: deception is probably also common in Menander, Diphilus, Philemon and popular comedy, while recognition scenes occur in Homer and may well have come into both tragedy and comedy from epic poetry.

21 Fantham 1973:200 and McDonnell 1986:575. See also Abel 1955:35: “Damit ist ein recht kompliziertes System von Kunstgriffen aufgedeckt, das den Zuschauer vor Mißverständnissen bezüglich der Doppelgänger bewahren soll.”

22 For the nurse’s role, see Duckworth 1952:254.

He said that he used to sleep with Alcumena in secret...

The revelation is concluded in Jupiter's final explanatory and conciliatory speech where the supreme god and worker of miracles promises to bless Amphitruo and his family and assures him that he has nothing to fear (*bono animo es, adsum auxilio, Amphitruo, tibi et tuis: nihil est quod timeas*, vv.1131-1143).

Dramatic irony

The dramatic irony to which the theme of mistaken identity gives rise results from the omniscient audience's superior knowledge. In the case of the *Amphitruo*, the very conscious assumption of roles, together with the audience's awareness of this fact, intensifies the idea of a play as a play, and the actors as actors, at the same time enhancing the audience's role as accessory that must interpret such "play-acting" in order to enjoy its full flavour.

The comic irony resulting from the information given in the prologue has far-reaching effects on interpretation throughout the play. Even the most innocent remarks take on new meaning and become redolent of innuendo, while the most commonplace expletives, such as *fecit hercle* (408), *hercle* (556), and *Iuppiter te perdat* (569) assume a spectrum of nuances when interpreted within the framework of dramatic irony. The two gods' invocation of their own names in order to bring down wrath upon others (392), is hilarious to the omniscient audience:

SO. *quid si falles? ME. tum Mercurius Sosiae iratus siet...*

SO. What if you deceive me? ME. Then may Mercury be angry with Sosia...

and 933-934:

IU. *id ego si fallo, tum te, summe Iuppiter, quaeso Amphitruoni ut semper iratus sies.*

IU. But if I deceive you, greatest Jupiter, then
I beseech you to heap wrath upon Amphitruo for ever.

The audience would also have appreciated Alcumena's innocently ambiguous use of *uxorem* as she tests her quasi-husband's regard for her, while not realizing that wife here refers to (the wrathful) Juno (508):

AL. *ecastor te experior quanti facias uxorem tuam.*

AL. Good heavens, I'm just testing your regard for your wife.

In much the same way, the word *mortalis* takes on a new dimension in Mercury's statement that no mortal has ever loved his wife to such distraction as did Alcumena's husband (516-517):

*numquam edepol quemquam mortalem credo ego uxorem suam
sic ecflictim amare, proinde ut hic te ecflictim deperit.*

By gosh, I don't believe there is any mortal man who loves his wife to such distraction as this man dotes on you.

When Alcumena swears by the king of heaven and his wife that no mortal man except her husband has ever touched her (*ut mi extra unum te mortalis nemo corpus corpore contigit*, vv.833-834), she may technically be correct, but quite unaware of the fact that she has been touched by a *divinus*.

Also comical in the light of the audience's privileged knowledge of the quasi-Amphitruo's divinity are the latter's attempts to placate Alcumena's wrath like any (henpecked) human husband (923-924):

*IU. per dexteram tuam te, Alcumena, oro, opsecro,
da mihi hanc veniam, ignosce, irata ne sies.*

IU. I beg you and beseech you by my right hand, Alcumena, pardon me, forgive me, do not be angry with me.

The height of comic irony is attained when the king of the gods (as pseudo-Amphitruo) prepares to sacrifice to himself (983):

...atque ut ministres mi, mihi quom sacrificem.

...so that you can assist (abet?) me when I sacrifice to myself.

Mercury's drop in status also provides opportunities for irony, particularly when he bemoans his condition as a slave (176-178):

*ME. satiust me queri illo modo servitatem:
hodie qui fuerim liber, eum nunc
potivit pater servitutis...*

ME. It is more fitting for *me* to complain about being a slave in this way, because I, a free man until today, have now become my father's slave...

The audience would have been fully aware that as slave-actor he could hardly have been free (*Digest* 23.2.44).

But the culmination of comic irony and the paradigm of metatheatre occurs when Mercury makes a direct reference to the *servus currens* of comedy, while deliberately assuming his role (984):

ME. *Concedite atque apscedite omnes, de via decedite...*

ME. Make way, go away and get out of my way, everybody...

The Roman audience would presumably have been familiar with the phenomenon of the running slave²³ and would have been able to enjoy the parody of a stock type.

Imago theme

One last issue to be addressed in this passage (116-130) is the use of the word *imago* in 121, 124 and 141, and the related question, a vexatious one, concerning the use of masks in the Plautine productions. The theory that masks were not worn on the Roman stage until after the time of Terence is supported by various scholars,²⁴ while others believe that masks were indeed worn.

The word *imago* indicates “imitation”, “copy”, “image”, or “likeness”, but can also mean “mask” or “ancestral image” (Lewis and Short). When Mercury informs the audience that *Jupiter in Amphitruonis vortit sese imaginem* (121), the word seems to indicate an abstract likeness, while its use in *ego servi sumpsit Sosiae mi imaginem* (141) seems to admit the meaning of a physical mask, in the light of what is to follow in 143-145 when the distinction between the two pairs of identicals by means of a feather and a tassel is discussed.²⁵ This is corroborated by the fact that, for more than three hundred lines, Mercury and his double confront each other, giving Sosia ample time to compare his appearance with that of Mercury, especially in lines 441-446. That line 458 refers to a more concrete use of the word is indisputable—the meaning of *imago* as “death mask” is necessary for the joke to succeed (458-459):

*nam hiquidem omnem imaginem meam, quae antehac fuerat, possidet.
vivo fit quod numquam quisquam mortuo faciet mihi.*²⁶

For this rascal is filching my whole appearance (or death mask), the one which I have always had up to now.

What is happening to me now while I’m alive will not happen to me when I am dead.

If *imago* does indeed refer to “mask” in these passages, it would give further proof for my argument that this is a metatheatrical prologue, in the sense that the audience is reminded of the play as a play by this reference to the actors’ wearing of masks. On the other hand, it might well be reasoned that the use of masks is not essential in identity plays, since probably any audience (and especially a modern one) can “see” a

23 Anderson (1970:229-236) quotes examples from *Dyskolos* 81f. and *Aspisi* 399ff.; cf. also the running sequence as a conscious “act” on the part of the runner: *Ep.* 194ff., *Capt.* 776-779, Terence, *Adelph.* 299ff. and *Andria* 338ff.

24 See Beare 1955:293-299, Duckworth 1952:94, Fantham 1973:198-200, and Slater 1981:3 n.5.

25 Fantham (1973:197-200) regards the use of the word here, together with its use in *Capt.* 39 and *Mil.* 150-151 as the strongest proof for the wearing of masks in the Plautine productions.

26 According to Duckworth (1952:93-94) this passage refers to the use of masks; see Fantham 1973:19.

similarity between dissimilar persons (Fantham 1973:198). That would then turn it into theatre of the imagination par excellence.

The exact meaning of *imago* may be uncertain here, but what is quite certain is that the (minute) visual aids mentioned in 143-145 (the feathers/wings on Mercury's hat and Jupiter's golden tassel) would have been totally inadequate for the audience to distinguish between the two pairs of identicals. Since there are sufficient verbal clues throughout the play to indicate which of the identicals is speaking,²⁷ as noted above, these devices (*pinnae* and *torulus aureus*) do not seem to feature for the sake of the visual aid they provide. The question can be asked why they are mentioned at all. Closer scrutiny of the words²⁸ reveals no double-entendre,²⁹ although such a possibility cannot be completely ruled out. Any risqué connotations (unknown to us) would have contributed greatly to the prevailing mood of hilarity at a Roman performance.

The reason for mentioning these aids is probably to be found in Mercury's next direct address to the audience (146-147):

*ea signa nemo (homo) horum familiarium
videre poterit: verum vos videbitis.*

Not a single one of these household slaves
will be able to see those tokens, but *you* will see them.

By his use of the second person (*vos* as opposed to *nemo horum familiarium*) and his assuring the audience of its superior knowledge, the bond between him and the audience is strengthened, which, in turn, is highly conducive to audience participation.

The previous narrative passage (131-139), introduced by *pater nunc intus*, creates a sense of immediacy, as the audience is titillated by what they are told, but what cannot be seen. The passage is framed by two similar statements, both of which emphasize Jupiter's self-centredness (131):

pater nunc intus suo animo morem gerit
Father is now in there enjoying himself

and (139):

...facile meu' pater quod volt facit.

27 Cf. the lantern that Sosia is carrying, which, apart from showing that it is dark, distinguishes him from Mercury.

28 According to Lewis and Short *pinna* means a small plume or feather. Palmer (1955:141) regards Mercury as having been represented with a traveller's hat with wings at the side, which, according to Sedgwick 1960:66 suggests Mercury's usual headwear. *Torulus*, the diminutive of *torus*, seems to have meant a tassel hanging under Jupiter's hat, according to Palmer (1906:1).

29 Though *torus* can mean "marriage", and *obscenus torus* an "illicit connection" (Lewis and Short), these connotations seem to be later than Plautus.

...my father does exactly as he pleases.

He follows his inclination by taking what does not belong to him: in the first instance, Amphitruo's wife; in the second, the credit for Amphitruo's heroic exploits; and, in the third, in a more concrete sense, the gifts bestowed on Amphitruo after the battle. In this character sketch of Jupiter, with its description of the god in his role as *miles gloriosus*, the word *moechus*³⁰ (135) indicates Mercury's understandable envy, considering the great discrepancy between their roles.

The other two main protagonists are here tied in with Jupiter (133-135):

*facta sunt quae illi ad legionem memorat pater
meus Alcumena: illa illum censet virum
suom esse, quae cum moecho est...*

My father is regaling Alcumena with all that happened to him on campaign:
she believes he is her very own husband...
and *that* while she is actually (sleeping) with an adulterer...

The juxtaposition of the words representing the main characters (*pater meus* and *Alcumena*, *illa* and *illum*, and *virum suom*), the repetition of the word *pater* (four occurrences in 131-139), and the focus on the theme of the play (134-135), highlight the tragicomic dilemma of a woman believing herself to be true to her husband, while unsuspectingly committing adultery.

The enlightened audience with its superior knowledge has been drawn into the world of the play. They are further placed *in medias res* by Mercury's announcement that Amphitruo will be returning that day (140) and that, in fact, at that moment, Sosia is on his way (149) from the harbour. With this, Plautus' longest prologue draws to a close. All is in readiness: the scene has been set, the audience is in the know, and tension is mounting. The audience is expectantly waiting for the first unsuspecting victim to appear on stage. That the action will be fast and furious is made clear by Mercury's assurance that he will chase the real Sosia away from the house: *abigam iam ego illunc advenientem ab aedibus* (150).

This exciting piece of information is succeeded by Mercury's next direct address to the audience, a request that they stay put (*adeste*³¹ [151]) in order not to miss the *pièce de resistance*: two gods acting in a comedy, one of them the great Jupiter, ruler of the gods.³²

The above has shown that the expository part of the prologue fulfils an essential function. Its primary purpose is to set out the *argumentum* so as to acquaint the audience with the extremely complicated situation at the beginning of the play, as well as with the true identity of the two sets of doubles which constitute the theme of

30 The word *moechus* is the very word used in connection with the braggart soldier: *magnus moechus mulierum* (*Mil.* 775).

31 Similar injunctions are to be found in *Trin.* 22 and *As.* 14.

32 Discussed in my article 1998:40-41. See Duckworth 1952:296-297 for references to deities in Plautus' plays. See also Abel 1955:36-37.

mistaken identity, in preparation for the *anagnorisis*. In the *Amphitruo*, a “comedy of errors” in the true sense of the word, the plot hinges on the confusion arising from the double identities, this confusion being the direct result of divine intrigue. Not everything is revealed in the *prologus argumentativus*, since neither the totality of misunderstandings and the birth of Hercules are foreshadowed, nor the outcome disclosed.³³ Although the audience has been placed in a privileged position of greater knowledge than the characters, it is not completely omniscient. The effect of gradual exposition is that there is still ample opportunity for suspense and surprise, and dramatic tension occurs precisely because not everything has been revealed.

Second prologue

But Mercury’s role as *prologus* is not yet done. In an extended piece of metatheatre within the course of the comedy, he again regales the audience with exposition, which amounts to a “second prologue” (463-498), closely related to the first. The second prologue is not a “deferred prologue” in the true sense of the word, since there has already been a prologue, but, in addition to the “vorgestellten” and “nachgestellten”, this third form of prologue may be termed the “aufgespaltene” or “split prologue” (Abel 1955:34). Whether or not this prologue formed part of the original play is not the question here (and there is a great deal of uncertainty on account of its repetition, unacceptable metre, corrupt manuscripts, and so on),³⁴ but even if the whole passage (or parts of it) is an interpolation, for the purpose of my discussion I regard it as part of the play as it was performed. The unity between the expository part of the prologue and the second prologue is emphasized by the fact that both underline the comic framework of the play, forecast the same events, and set out the intricate situation.

The second prologue follows close upon a long and brilliant scene³⁵ of slapstick comedy in the best Plautine tradition, a scene whose theatrical effectiveness is enhanced by lively stage action, song, and recitative. Mercury has just emerged victorious from his battle with the true Sosia, a battle which might have resembled some sort of *pas de deux* or even a sparring match, and which culminated in Sosia’s ignominious departure. The prologue opens with Mercury’s boastful reminiscence (463-465):

*ME. Bene prospere[que] hoc hodie operis processit mihi:
amovi a foribus maxumam molestiam,
patri ut liceret tuto illam amplexarier.*

33 This occurs later in 463ff. and 867ff. See Duckworth 1952: 215-218.

34 See Palmer 1906:174: “This scene, which could be excised without loss, is possibly later than Plautus, but perhaps by the same hand as the Prologue. There are several instances of metrical license, a direct contradiction of the whole tenor of the plot, v.20 (= 482), and an extremely intricate construction vv.25, 26 (= 487, 488)”; so also Sedgwick 1960:95: “a scene...in which Mercury explains at unnecessary length...what has already been fully explained in the prologue.”

35 See Sedgwick 1960:67, who regards this scene as a brilliant example of Plautus’ skill viz. polymetry, variety, evocation of atmosphere, description and altercation: “It is full of verve: who would wish it shorter?”

ME. Things have gone well for me today:
I have kept a great nuisance from the door
so that Father might make love to her uninterrupted.

He has served his father well, and as *servus callidus* he will be calling the tune: in true metatheatrical fashion, he further sketches his own conniving and manipulatory role in the development of the plot. He will be the one to sow confusion and see to it that events move in the desired direction (470-471):

*erroris ambo ego illos et dementiae
complebo atque Amphitruonis omnem familiam...*

I will fill both of them and Amphitruo's whole household
with confusion and obfuscation...

As *prologus* who is at the same time divinely omniscient he can also predict the future, this "Ausblick in die Zukunft" (Abel 1955:34) being a characteristic of most ancient prologues. He assures the audience that, notwithstanding some marital friction (*uxori turbas conciet and insimulabit eam probri*, vv.476-477), Jupiter will see to it that conjugal felicity finally reigns supreme (*eam seditionem illi in tranquillum conferet*, v.478).

Further assurances of goodwill are given, such as promises of an easy travail for Alcumena (487-488) and the reinstatement of her good name (489-490):

*pater curavit uno et fetu fieret
uno ut labore apsolvat aerumnas duas
et ne in suspicione ponatur stupri
et clandestina ut celetur consuetio.*

My father has seen to it that there will be a once only travail
so that she can give birth to the twins in one shot,
and so that there can be no suspicion of hanky-panky,
and so that their clandestine affair can remain a secret.

All these reassurances reinforce the idea that the play is to be viewed within a comic, not a tragic, frame of reference.

The second prologue is necessary for further privileging the audience with superior knowledge. The spicy bit of information that Alcumena will be giving birth to twins—the younger one Jupiter's son, and the elder Amphitruo's—is now at last revealed (480-482):

*hodie illa pariet filios geminos duos:
alter decimo post mense nascetur puer
quam seminatus<t>, alter mense septumo...*³⁶

36 Palmer (1955:176) believes that v.482 is a direct contradiction to the whole tenor of the plot, while Cutt (1970:121) advises against becoming too technical about the biological implications involved.

Today she will give birth to twin sons:
 the one boy will be born in the tenth month after conception,
 the other in the seventh month...

This prepares the audience for Alcumena's appearance as she comes on stage just before line 499. As Phillips (1985:122) wittily puts it: "we might plausibly guess that the actor is costumed to represent a woman in the very last stages of a very fruitful pregnancy"! Her stuffed appearance is underlined by Sosia's comment that *Alcumenam ante aedis stare saturam intellego* ("I notice a very full Alcumena standing in front of the house", 667).

Before permitting the audience another fascinating glimpse into the future, Mercury, in his direct address to the audience, makes sure that everything is perfectly understood (485):

...iamne hoc scitis quid siet?

...do you know now what is going to happen?

Repetition, particularly in a play like the *Amphitruo* with its complicated plot, was probably essential in the open-air performances of ancient times. If the information had been missed before, the second round would give the gist.

The prologue ends with Mercury's pious statement that "humans should not be made to suffer for the offences of the gods", a sentiment which is later echoed in v.872 (493-495):

...nam deum

non par videtur facere, delictum suum

suamque ut culpam expetere in mortalem ut sinat.

...it doesn't seem fair

for a god to make a human being suffer

for his own (i.e. the god's) offence and fault.

The convention of the creaking door³⁷ (*crepuit foris*, v.496) is used to announce now, nearly 500 lines into the play, the first appearance on stage of Jupiter and Alcumena—something which the audience must have been eagerly anticipated.

The second prologue once again exhibits many metatheatrical features, such as interruption of the dramatic events (as it were "editorial comment"), self-conscious playing as Mercury comments on his own success, taking over the editorial role of playwright as he maps out his future actions, and directly addressing the audience to find out whether they have fully understood his explanation of the situation. The prologue seems to be dramaturgically necessary since, falling as it does directly after a fast and furious scene during which the abundant repartee, witticisms and even

37 Cf. *Aul.* 665, *Mil.* 410, *Curc.* 486, *Poen.* 741. Plautus developed the comic possibilities of the Greek theatrical convention by making fun of it; cf. also *Curculio* where Phaedromus greets the door (15-16), pours wine on it (80), and serenades it (147 ff.).

physical violence must have extracted every ounce of concentration from the audience, it provides a peaceful interlude and a chance for them to regain their breath. We have seen that certain information, vital for the understanding of the play, is repeated, while new information is added designed to increase the privileged audience's enjoyment of the play. Not only is Mercury's standing with the audience greatly increased by his disclosure of future events, but his reassurances of a happy ending pave the way for a full appreciation of the comic possibilities in the play.

Conclusion

The *argumentum* entails far more than a mere disclosure of information in a sober and matter-of-fact tone: it exudes enthusiasm and familiarity and geniality; it makes an appeal to the spectators to become involved and so derive the fullest enjoyment from the play. Everything but a dry and factual recital of data, it exudes an aura of vitality and *joie de vivre*. The bond established between Mercury and the audience during the *antelogium* is now enhanced, as Mercury's information is interspersed with sly digs at his father's faults. His unorthodox treatment of the familiar myth is as outrageous as it is entertaining—a situation relished not only by the audiences of Plautus' day, but also by those of successive ages. While a framework for comic irony is established by Mercury's outline of the plot and his revelation of the identities of the two sets of doubles, allusions to matters of costume, acknowledgement of the *dramatis personae*, and explicit reminders of the play as a play, demonstrate an awareness of his own theatricality. This typically metatheatrical prologue, with its mingling of reality and illusion, is characterized by the way in which the Mercury speaks now from within, now from without the world of the play, his every move closely followed by the spectators with their ability to leap with him from real world to fantasy as the occasion demands.

It follows that the prologue is as essential as any part of the *Amphitruo* "proper", not only for establishing rapport, but also for defining the comic mood of the play and supplying a festive framework, in this way setting the dynamics of interaction in motion. Its very metatheatricality seems to ensure success in the mutual bond that is constantly forged through the contact between actor and audience.

Plautus' exceptional dramatical ability reaches its peak in his metatheatrical treatment of the play since its "shameless theatricality" becomes its greatest boon. Always eager for innovation (*veterem atque antiquam rem novam ad vos proferam*, v.118), Plautus perhaps rushes in where other Roman playwrights fear to tread, showing that he is not afraid to combine tragic with absurd, to put gods on stage, and to make a character possess a persona outside his character—all these factors contributing to the play's resounding success.

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