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Metatheatre as Social Critique:

Temporary Transgressions in Plautus and Shakespeare

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Abstract

This essay, consisting of three parts, investigates Plautine metatheatre as a means of social critique. I begin by examining the prologue of the *Menaechmi*, which illuminates Plautus' view of the theater as a space in which to embrace fluidity and experimentation. I then show how Plautus brings this view of the theater to life in his *Miles Gloriosus*, focusing on Palaestrio the clever slave as a paradoxical figure who simultaneously upholds and destabilizes social convention in his role of "playwright." Finally, I argue that Palaestrio the "playwright" serves as an effective agent of social critique by prompting audience members to question the world they inhabit without directly advocating for subversive or radical change. In this respect, I propose that Palaestrio's moments as "playwright" fulfill a function similar to that of the trial scene in Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice. Through this novel comparison, I aim to demonstrate that Plautus, like Shakespeare, adopted metatheatricality as a technique to challenge the status of socially designated "others" and elevate his ideas beyond the stage.

Keywords: Drama, Literature, Classics, Shakespeare, Roman History

From crafting witty asides to breaking the fourth wall to staging plays-within-plays, Plautus often infuses his work with the art of metatheatre. Scholars have long debated the precise definition of "metatheatre;" however, we can understand the term broadly as "drama about drama, or any moment of self-consciousness by which a play draws attention to its own fictional status as a theatrical pretence" (Baldick, "Metatheatre"). This essay, consisting of three parts, investigates Plautine metatheatre as a means of social critique. I begin by examining the prologue of the *Menaechmi,* which illuminates Plautus' view of the theater as a space in which to embrace fluidity and experimentation. I then show how Plautus brings this view of the theater to life in his *Miles Gloriosus,* focusing on Palaestrio the clever slave as a paradoxical figure who simultaneously upholds and destabilizes social convention in his role of "playwright." Finally, I argue that Palaestrio the "playwright" serves as an effective agent of social critique by prompting audience members to question the world they inhabit without directly advocating for subversive or radical change. In this respect, I propose that Palaestrio's moments as "playwright" fulfill a function similar to that of the trial scene in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. Through this novel comparison, I aim to demonstrate that Plautus, like Shakespeare, adopted metatheatricality as a technique to challenge the status of socially designated "others."

To begin, the Prologue's speech in the *Menaechmi* offers a glimpse into the dynamic nature of the Plautine stage. The Prologue sets the scene in a very particular location as he explains, "*haec urbs Epidamnus est, dum haec agitur fabula."* (This city is Epidamnus, so long as

this play is being acted out." ; Plautus*, Menaechmi,* I.72*).* As in other Plautine comedies (Schoeman, 39; cf. Plautus, *Amphytrio* I.97 and Terence, *Dyskolos* I.1-2) the specific locale situates the audience in a "theater of imagination," removing viewers from their daily lives and transporting them to another world entirely. But as he inserts the qualifying phrase "*dum haec agitur fabula"* ("so long as this story is being acted out")*,* the Prologue also establishes that the nature of this transformed stage is as definitive as it is temporary—it lives only so long as the story lasts. His words recall the fact that all Roman stages were improvised during Plautus' lifetime, and continued as such until Pompey established the first permanent theater at Rome in 55 BC. Thus, the Prologue generates a kind of security for the audience, assuring them that the scene before their eyes is soon to vanish like all the others that have come before. And so, as he simultaneously dismantles and preserves the world as we know it, the Prologue invites the audience into his "dynamic stage," a realm of finite duration but infinite possibility.

The Prologue also captures this idea of a "dynamic stage" in the very language that he uses to introduce the play. He notes, for example, "*quando alia agetur, aliud fiet oppidum / sicut familiae quoque solent mutarier."* (*"*Epidamnus will soon become another town when another story is performed, just as the individual households will also be changed." ; Pl., *Men.* I.74-75)*.* The repetitive rhythm of "*some other* story" and "*some other* town" in this sentence reflects the continuous cycle of names and places that shuffle through Plautine theater. Meanwhile, the passive verb *mutarier* diminishes the agency of the *familiae* themselves, recalling the power of the playwright to engineer (and promptly extinguish) a world of his own. The use of the word *familiae* also reinforces the idea of roles and identities shifting onstage to suit a given context: A.S. Gratwick suggests translating *familiae* as "households" here, although

the word can of course mean “troupes” (of actors) in other moments. Thus, the wordplay conjures a self-reflexive image of actors being “changed” into members of particular households. As Frances Muecke points out, this persistent theme of doubleness or “impersonation” in Plautine comedy draws our attention to the “double nature of theater as representation (or fictional imitation of reality) and performance.” The sense of “doubleness” also reflects the idea that Plautine actors were “playing parts once removed” from their Greek originals” (Muecke, 221). At this particular moment in the play, the Prologue’s allusion to the “doubleness” of the *familiae* and other theatrical pretenses serves to ground us in the world of the play itself, reminding us that this whole story is, after all, only fiction. As he describes each imagined city or town fading in and out of our experience, the Prologue returns to Plautus’ vision of a “dynamic stage” where the audience can, for a short while, dare to inhabit a world beyond their own.

The Prologue goes on to highlight the transience not only of places and settings in Plautine theater, but also of characters. He next offers up a list of stock characters in Roman theater, all of whom, he claims, have called home to this very stage at some point, as he says: "*modo habitat leno, modo adulescens, modo senex, / pauper, mendicus, rex, parasitus, hariolus”* (“Now a pimp lives here, now a young man, now an old man, a poor man and a beggar, a king, a parasite, and a soothsayer” ; Pl. *Men.* I.75). He brings forward one figure at a time, allowing the audience to hold each in their minds before making way for the next in line. This list draws from both comedy and tragedy, in both the Greek and Roman styles. The range here further emphasizes the versatility of the stage and the continuous cycle of stories that it has to tell. Thus, the Prologue confronts us once again with a continuous shuffle of names and

identities, reminding the audience that nothing lasts forever onstage. Instead, he leaves us to preserve all that we have seen in memory alone. This repeated emphasis on the fluid, fleeting presence of individual characters reflects another important characteristic of Roman comedy, namely, that each play consisted of only a few actors who would cycle through the kaleidoscope of different parts. As he draws our attention to these features of the fantasy world he inhabits, the Prologue solidifies our understanding of the theater as a place of experimentation, of continuous definition and re-definition of roles, where the playwright himself will bring different people and places to life at different times for the audience to behold.

In these profoundly metatheatrical lines, the Prologue also brings out Plautus' embrace of paradox. He jokes with the audience about his paradoxical environment when he quips, "*verum illuc redeo unde abii, atque uno asto in loco* ("Indeed I'm back where I began, and yet I'm standing in the same spot" ; Pl. *Men.* I.56), as if to underscore the absurdity of different worlds coming together in one physical space. This moment resonates with the fact that the Prologue himself is also a kind of paradoxical figure, straddling the world of the audience and the world of the play, simultaneously serving as an actor and an outsider in his own story. Thus, he offers paradox as one more feature to characterize the theater overall, and Plautus' work in particular (McCarthy, 83; Gruen, 10; Christenson, 138-149). The Prologue's attention to paradox here fits into his previous statements about the nature of Plautine drama, as he removes his audience one step further from reality and reaffirms our standing in the realm of the impossible.

In sum, the Prologue convinces us that Plautine drama is conscious of its own fictionality. Even as he draws us into an outrageous plot, the Prologue urges us to remember that Plautus' work ultimately dwells beyond the confines of daily life. This dramatic mode ultimately lends itself to a distinctive method of social critique that extends beyond the *Menaechmi* and into the rest of the Plautine corpus. Although his characters often transgress social norms, Plautus repeatedly calls our attention to the unlikeliness of their transgression and thus reinscribes the established social order once his actors exit the stage. In this way, he invites the audience to question their surroundings without confronting them with an explicit call to action. I now turn to one character who exemplifies Plautus' ability to stabilize and deconstruct social order through the use of metatheatre: the playwright-slave Palaestrio in *Miles Gloriosus.*

One of Plautus' most metatheatrical works, the *Miles Gloriosus* brings the *Menaechmi*'s characterization of a Plautine stage to life. The story centers on a pair of tricks engineered by the slave Palaestrio in order to deceive his master, the braggart soldier Pyrgopolynices, who has recently abducted an Athenian woman named Philocomasium. In his first trick, Palaestrio instructs Philocomasium to pose as her own identical twin so that she can conduct an affair with Pleusicles, her former lover and Palaestrio's former master, who happens to be staying next door as a guest. In the second trick, Palaestrio enlists a prostitute to feign her love for the Major, capturing his attention and prompting him to send Philocomasium back home with Pleusicles. Both tricks rely on doubleness and disguise, casting Palaestrio as the mastermind of a "play-within-a-play." This "play" shatters any illusion of Pyrgopolynices' grandeur and exposes the reality of his foolishness. Paradoxically, it draws our attention to the Major's "reality"

through theatrical pretense, ultimately rendering him a "failed spectator" to the plot unfolding in his midst (Moore, 77). In this way, the slave emerges freer than his master, claiming victory in a quintessentially Plautine world where "only the shrewd are free" (Segal, 2005). As he upends the conventions of Roman social order, Plautus immerses the audience in an imaginary world that celebrates the transformative power of drama and casts Palaestrio as a triumphant "playwright."

At first glance, the outcome of the *Miles* might lead us to interpret this work as the pinnacle of subversive stagecraft. After all, our story ends with the provocative image of Pyrgopolynices naming Palaestrio as his conqueror and acknowledging that justice has been served, saying: "*Vae misero mihi…. / is me in hanc inlexit fraudem / iure factum iudico" ("Alas for wretched me… Palaestrio lured me into this trick, and I judge it was justly done" ;* Pl. *Mil.* V.1433-1435). Taking such moments into account, Kathleen McCarthy identifies Palaestrio as a clear manifestation of the "farcical," or transgressive, mode in Roman Comedy, which she opposes with the "naturalistic," or stabilizing, mode (McCarthy, 83). I want to suggest, however, that Palaestrio does not leave the world (completely) upside down and therefore cannot be understood as (completely) "farcical." Instead, I propose that Palaestrio simultaneously upends *and* restores the established social order, crafting a distinctly subtle critique of Roman society that sows the seeds of doubt without directly advocating for radical change. His complexity develops over the course of the work, revealing in layers who he really is and what he really aims to accomplish.

In many ways, of course, Palaestrio is the archetype of the *servus calldius* in Plautine theater. While a "clever slave" appears in many Roman comedies, this figure plays a uniquely

"exuberant" part in Plautus' work (Fitzgerald, 189). Palaestrio casts himself in this role most clearly when he sketches out the plot of his second trick. Here he assumes a position of leadership and begins telling his co-conspirators exactly what to do, as if to provide them with "stage directions." He exclaims, "*igitur id quod agitur, hic primum praeverti decet / nunc hoc animum advortite ambo."* ("Therefore as to that [plot] which is being acted out, it's fitting to attend to this first; now both of you pay attention." *;* Pl. *Mil.* III.765-766*).* His use of the phrase "*id quod* ***agitur"*** *("that's being* ***acted out****")* in this speech echoes the line "*dum haec* ***agitur*** *fabula" ("so long as this story is being* ***acted out"****)* from the prologue of the *Menaechmi*. His imperative "*animum advortite"* also appropriates a command typically given to audience members at the onset of a performance (Pl. *Men.* I.5; Pl., *Cap.*, I.38*)*. This explicitly theatrical language confirms that Palaestrio is not just the mastermind of a prank, but in fact the writer and director of his own play. Accordingly, he also adopts the verb *decet ("*it is fitting") in these lines*,* granting himself the power to determine what is "right" and "proper" from this point forward. Thus, he launches into the details of his plot, true to the form of the Plautine *servi callidi* who don the "magic armor" of wit and "possess the imagination to remake the world and themselves" (Segal, 146). In doing so, he invites us to explore a fictional land where the lower orders of society can rise up to take control over their own destinies.

Throughout this same scene, Palaestrio strengthens his claim to the role of "playwright" by manipulating the identities of those involved in his trick. He envisions the details of the prostitute's disguise, reminding his co-conspirators,"*memineris ne Philocomasium nomines… [sed] Diceam" ("*you must remember that her name is no longer Philocomasium…but Dicea.*" ;* Pl. *Mil.* 807-808*).* As he invents a new name for the girl and weaves her into his grand scheme,

he evokes the image of a playwright spinning characters out of thin air and promptly dismissing them at his own discretion. Noting derisively that Pyrgopolynices fancies himself an "Alexander," he presents his victim as one more "character" to claim for his own. Thus he aligns himself once again with the Roman *poetae* who, like Plautus himself, reappropriated Greek figures in their own plays. Significantly, Palaestrio's role redefinition here comprises far more than humorous diversion; in fact, it carries very real consequences in the world of the *Miles*. As Moore observes, Plautine metatheatre tends to further the action of the play rather than appear only in backhanded comments or allusions (Moore, 73-76). Fitting himself neatly into this pattern, Palaestrio seizes metatheatricality as a means of control, obtaining the privilege to determine what happens both in the trick and in the larger world of the play to which he belongs.

At the same time, however, Palaestrio also reinforces the play's more "naturalistic" tendencies, reaffirming the familiar slave-master dynamics embedded in Roman society. To understand Palaestrio in this somewhat counterintuitive light, we must first recall the Prologue in the *Menaechmi* insisting that all theater is only temporary. If we follow his logic, the world of the *Miles Gloriosus* constitutes a kind of holiday from real life, an occasion to cast aside our traditional experience of the world and revel in the novelty of the imagination. In this view, Palaestrio's scheming takes on the character of Saturnalia, the Roman festival during which masters would provide table service for their slaves for one night each year. The inherent irony in this ritual is, of course, that it relies on the institution of slavery itself: the slave's very participation in the festivities *presupposes* his status as a slave. Paradoxically then, we can understand the Saturnalian ritual as "temporary anarchy that implies order" (Segal, 166-172).

Palaestrio devises a similarly carnivalesque inversion of the social ladder in *Miles Gloriosus,* upending society for one brief moment before vanishing along with the rest of the play. Just like a Saturnalian celebration, the thrill of the whole affair relies on social standards remaining intact beyond the spatio-temporal limits of the stage.

Palaestrio also acknowledges the looming threat of slave punishment throughout the *Miles,* continually reasserting the very social order that he aims to overturn. In general, we can observe that "the verbal texture of Plautine comedy is saturated with the language of punishment and torture" (Fitzgerald, 193). For all its plotting and scandal, the *Miles* nonetheless offers a prime example of this phenomenon. Palaestrio himself invokes the cruel reality of slave punishment in his own trick, urging Sceledrus not to go spreading stories that could get him into serious trouble. He urges his companion, "*verum enim tu istam, si te di ament, temere hau tollas fabulam: / tuis nunc cruribus capitique fraudem capitalem hinc creas"* (*"*Indeed, may the gods love you, take care not to tell this story with abandon: know that your limbs and head will pay the price for such an offense.*" ;* Pl. *Mil.* II.294-295)*.* Moments like this one, scattered throughout the play, serve as a constant reminder that the real world still lurks behind the scenes of Palaestrio's triumph. Each harkens back to the Prologue's assurance in the *Menaechmi* that all drama is only fantasy in the end, that it cannot touch the hierarchical reality of Roman life. And so, by scripting his "play" against the backdrop of slave torture, Palaestrio in fact confirms the very features of the Roman world that he simultaneously dares to challenge.

Palaestrio's genuine loyalty to Pleusicles, his former master, also establishes a more "naturalistic" dimension to his character. In the prologue to the *Miles*, Palaestrio tells us, "... *itaque ego paravi hic intus magnas machinas, / qui amantis una inter se facerem convenas"*

("…and so I have prepared great schemes, in order that I might bring about the lovers' reunion" *;* Pl. *Mil.* I.138-139). In this passage, Palaestrio reveals that his motivations transcend his own self-interest. He differentiates himself from the typical clever slave in an *adulescens/senex* paradigm, where the slave indulges the lustful yearnings of the *adulescens* to stage a joint rebellion against the hierarchy of both the family and the established social order (Fitzgerald, 189). Palaestrio, by contrast, takes the side of true love (rather than lustful debauchery), breaking up one domestic union but restoring another at the same time. Thus, he remains at least partially subservient to external authority; he typifies the virtues of a "good slave" in his devotion to Pleusicles while rejecting these same virtues in his hatred for the Major. Palaestrio proceeds to emphasize his own ambiguous nature, meanwhile, when he casts himself as an "actor" in his own play (Pl. *Mil.* IV.3-5*)*. This move makes him out to be a pawn in his own scheme, framing him as both the "creator" of the story and as one of its "created" parts. The paradox of Palaestrio's self-presentation thereby mirrors his paradoxical effort to both tear at the fabric of social order and stitch it back together.

On another level, Palaestrio's devotion to reuniting the two lovers also leaves him subservient to the genre of comedy itself. The "love plot" that Palaestrio works to resolve is a defining feature of the *Miles* that helps situate it in the tradition of Greek New Comedy and *fabulae palliatae* (Duckworth, 28). As the slave propels us toward the play's resolution, Plautus uses Palaestrio to drive his own plot forward and establish himself in the world of Roman drama. Thus, Plautus reminds us that the "engineering playwright" we see onstage, Palaestrio, was first engineered by *another* engineering playwright, namely, Plautus himself. This reminder also serves to reinforce the naturalistic sensibility of the play: Plautus affirms that despite the

slave's scheming ingenuity, the real locus of control ultimately lies beyond his grasp. In effect, Palaestrio toils throughout the play in the service of Plautus and Pleusicles, his author and his master, alike.

But while Palaestrio's selfless devotion renders him subservient, it also invites a more destabilizing question about the humanity of slaves. If, as Plautus ventures to suggest, the slave is capable of great emotional depths, of devising "*magnas machinas" ("*great schemes") at his own peril, the audience cannot help but question his standing in the social order. Indeed, Palaestrio's loyal, empathetic stance renders him more "humane" than someone as bestial and repulsive as the Major—who, unlike Palaestrio, would have been considered fully "human" under Roman law (Shumway, 636). As Christenson observes, Roman comedy often exposes this kind of "elaborate social script" underlying Roman life, with its manufactured hierarchy of slaves and masters, network of patrons and clients, and array of "social rituals" that were performed throughout the day (for example, a client's morning salute to his patron). As Roman playwrights toyed with these structures in their plots, they left their Roman audience with "a model for evaluating their own social lives" (Christenson, 149). In this same way, the *Miles* invites its viewers to take a second look at the "roles" that they have assigned one another in real life and ask themselves whether or not they really find these roles to be justified.

Ultimately, Palaestrio both challenges and reaffirms the social status of the Roman slave in his moments as playwright. On the one hand, he topples the Major in a spectacular display of brilliance and cunning. At the same time, however, his self-conscious "staging" evokes the fleeting, carnivalesque atmosphere of the Saturnalian rituals that, paradoxically, rely on the institution of slavery itself. In addition, he devises his scheme with the cruel reality of slave

punishment looming in the background. Finally, he displays a fervent loyalty to his former master and even comes forward as subservient to the genre of comedy itself. These distinct elements join together to reassert the boundaries crossed and put Palaestrio back in his place on the fringes of the Roman social order. But as Palaestrio's clever mind and loyal heart fade out of sight, Plautus plants a seed of doubt about the justice of his subordinate status. His query rings out centuries into the future, as the figure of Shylock from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* takes up this very Plautine question concerning the place of "the other" in society.

Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* clearly establishes an "other" in the figure of Shylock. Some have proposed that Shylock represents an Elizabethan counterpart to the Latin slave-dealer. "Possessive," "hostile," and often accused of "godlessness," Shylock does indeed share some defining traits with this stock character (Uzmen, 276). Like many slave-dealers in Roman comedy, he serves as a kind of *agelast,* or "blocking figure," in the plot of the *Merchant*. He clings to his desire for a "pound of flesh" with a grotesque insistence that recalls his miserly predecessors in Roman drama.[1] He sneers and snarls onstage until the resolution of the play proceeds from his humiliating defeat in court. These parallels, however, do not tell the whole story of his complicated character. I aim to demonstrate that Shylock in fact resonates most with the lowest orders of society in Plautine theater, and in particular, with the playwright-slave Palaestrio from *Miles Gloriosus.*

While Shylock is not enslaved, his subhuman status in Venetian society recalls that of the Roman slave. By the early seventeenth century, Venice claimed to be "tolerant, bourgeois, and republican," a city where men of all different backgrounds could come together and

[1] See Sannio in Ter. *Ad.*,Dormio in Ter. *Phorm.*, Labrax in Pl. *Rud.,* et al.

engage in commerce (Bloom, 5). But Shakespeare's play probes beyond the surface to reveal the fissures within this model. Again and again throughout the play, the play shows us spiteful Venetians replacing Shylock's name with "The Jew" or other insults, reducing his identity to slurs and stereotypes. They dismiss him as "violent" and "bloodthirsty," denying him a capacity for the warmth of human connection. In these moments, Shakespeare reveals that legal protections alone could not erase the hard boundaries established between different groups. In spite of the basic rights afforded him by law, Shylock occupies the bottom rungs of a rigid social order, repeatedly deprived of the same human selfhood that Romans once denied their slaves. Thus, he occupies the role of "the other" in a world that was, much like Elizabethan England, predominantly Christian.

Even as Shakespeare goes along with the Venetian narrative of a "Jew-villain," he also grants Shylock the space to assert his humanity. In a moment riddled with raw emotion, Shylock delivers some of the most moving lines in all of Shakespeare:

> I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall

> go hard but I will better the instruction. (William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice,* III.1.57-72).

This passage offers a new perspective on Shylock's behavior. In all its pleading sorrow, the speech condemns Venetian society as a whole, suggesting that the city itself, stratified and hypocritical as it is, has fostered Shylock's thirst for vengeance by its own "Christian example." Here Shylock steps back from the minutiae of his daily concerns to see himself trapped in a relentless cycle of "sufferance," hatred, and misunderstanding. For this reason, Herbert Bronstein concludes that Shylock is more complex than meets the eye, "a villain and comic, but also sympathetic" (Bronstein, 9). He plods along against the myriad charges hurled against him, confined to the stereotype that Shakespeare simultaneously embraces and, in glimmering moments of rebellion such as this one, rejects. In this way, the play strikes a delicate balance between its subversive and stabilizing undertones. It sparks a question in the viewer's mind without encroaching on the realities of daily life, challenging the audience to peer beyond external appearances and ask themselves what they really see in the world around them. And so, as Shylock operates within the social paradigm and dares to break outside of it at the same time, he recalls Palaestrio's own dual nature as a playwright-slave.

Like Plautus, meanwhile, Shakespeare goes on to devise a metatheatrical framework for his play. In particular, the trial scene at the end of the *Merchant* stages a kind of "play-within-a-play" that recalls the central conceit of Palaestrio's trick. As Shylock proclaims, "I stand here for law" and "I stand for judgment" (IV.1.104; V.1.144), he adopts the language of roleplay, as if to "try on" the part of justice like an actor in costume. These statements imply that Shylock aims to transcend himself and speak as the very embodiment of "the law" in the trial scene. Antonio,

the wealthy nobleman indebted to Shylock, mirrors his opponent's decision to speak "in character" as he laments: "I am a tainted wether of the flock / meetest for death" (IV.1.116-117). Thus he assigns himself the role of "the victim," framing Shylock as the antagonist in his role of "the law." Meanwhile, as the group waits for their trial to begin, stranded in suspense like an audience before curtain call, Bassanio asks Shylock: "Why dost thou whet thy knife so earnestly" (IV.1.123)? His pointed question conjures an image of Shylock wielding his knife like a prop, gesturing wildly as if to rehearse his upcoming scenes in pantomime. Weaving these moments into our anticipation of the decisive event to follow, Shakespeare characterizes the scene of the trial as a theater in which Shylock will plead his case and assume the part of "the law."

Portia, the beautiful and wealthy heiress of Belmont who comes to save Antonio, only heightens the metatheatricality of the trial scene upon her arrival, appearing in disguise to play the part of Balthasar the "young and learned doctor." Here she adopts a trick from the repertoire of Plautine deceptions and presents a fake letter explaining that the court's usual judge has fallen ill. She inserts herself in his place, setting the "play" in motion. At first she casts herself Shylock's ally, declaring, "Why, this bond is forfeit; / And lawfully by this the Jew may claim / A pound of flesh" (IV.2.239-241). In this moment, however, it is important to note that she replaces his name with "the Jew," once again paring his identity down to socio-ethnic status. This choice in language foreshadows her intention to put Shylock back in his place on the established social ladder and reclaim the law from his hands. Accordingly, she soon dismantles his claim as the trial proceeds, pointing out that Shylock cannot seek the life of a citizen under Venetian law. Thus, we see that she has been following a "script-within-a-script"

all along, advancing a plot contrived to undermine Shylock's claim to justice. Restoring the world to its former stratified status, Portia draws the "play" to a close and sends Shylock away in disgrace.

On the surface, Shylock's humiliation in court stands in direct contrast to Palaestrio's triumph over the Major. But if we look closely, the trial scene in fact invites the same subtle kind of critique as the *Miles*. Once again, we must begin from the Prologue's words in the *Menaechmi* and recall his insistence that the world of the theater is fluid, dynamic, and experimental, a place of infinite possibility where people and places are constantly in motion. Shakespeare picks up this theme in the *Merchant,* as Shylock morphs before our eyes from "bloodthirsty" to pitiable to vanquished in the end. His character transports us into a space where, for one brief moment, even the lowly can "try on" power like a costume, only to find the old boundaries redrawn as reality sets in at the close of the play. Thus, Shakespeare brings us a story that is neither dangerous nor overtly radical, but questioning instead. His careful attention to the "humanity of the foreigner," coupled with Portia's long speech on the virtues of Christian mercy for *all*, prompts the audience to ask themselves whether justice has really been served (Frye, 1; Bronstein, 8). And so, in the same way that Palaestrio plants his Saturnalian scheme in our minds before fading away into the folds of memory, here too we leave the world of theater with Shylock's demands for justice still ringing in our ears. Neither figure can hope to upend the world as we know it, but instead simply leaves us all to ask: what if?

And so, entering into dialogue across the bounds of time, both Shakespeare and Plautus immerse their audiences in the sorrows, triumphs, and fundamental humanity of those whom society

would deem “others.” Through the use of metatheatre, each playwright sets up a fluid, experimental, and dynamic stage where Palaestrio and Shylock temporarily overturn the conventions of the established social order. Although their subversive victories ultimately give way to the “real world” in the end, each leaves his audience with a sense of restlessness and discomfort as he exits the stage, leaving viewers to re-evaluate the social “roles” that they both inhabit and enforce in their own lives. Engaging with a question that continues to grip the human conscience, Shakespeare and Plautus each seize on the power of literature to spark conversation and leave transformative ideas lingering well beyond the realm of dramatic performance.

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