
Peter Barrios-Lech
University of Massachusetts, Boston

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Dorota Dutsch, Sharon L. James, and David Konstan, eds.,
*Women in Republican Drama.*

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Scholars have scrutinized the plays of Plautus and Terence for information on marriage and the family, Rome’s démimonde, and female speech, to name some areas of interest in the scholarship. Written by outsiders – Plautus was probably an Umbrian of low social status and Terence a freed slave – the 26 more or less fully extant *palliata* plays feature women of various classes manipulating men, debating with them, and (often) getting their way. These dramatists’ characterizations of matrons, maidservants and courtesans complement and enrich images of women found in epitaphs and texts authored by élite men.

In line with continued and intense interest in the topic of Roman women, the present volume aims to offer discussions of “the portrayal of female characters in the drama of the Roman Republic” (p. 4), directing itself mainly to students and teachers. To date, there has not been a collection of essays like this, aimed at non-specialists, and dealing with women in the republican Roman dramas, despite the fact that the topic is “of interest to contemporary students” (p. 4).

An overview of the results from this book’s eleven stimulating essays will hopefully encourage prospective readers to explore the volume on their own. In *palliata* especially, women use what they have—sexual allure and persuasion—to make the best of their situations (Feltovich; Richlin); in contrast to lustful and judgmental men, they emerge as centered, compassionate, and ethical (e.g. Nausistrata of *Phormio* or Cleostrata of *Casina*) (Fantham; James). Nor do comic women blush from openly critiquing the society which marginalizes them, particularly with respect to (male) abuse of power (Richlin, esp. pp. 45-47). *Togata* (“comedy dressed in the toga”) focuses more on pragmatic aspects of marriage and its women are surprisingly more independent than they are in the *palliata*: for instance, in Afranius’ *Divortium*, a father forces his daughter to divorce; the daughter later proudly lists her virtues and shows no inclination to marry again (Welsh, esp. pp. 162–164). Readers like Cicero found in the women of Roman tragedy negative or positive paradigms for conduct;
in accordance with the genre’s subversion of social norms, we find women assuming roles typically ascribed to men (Manuwald, esp. pp. 177, 179).

The interaction of gender with performance forms one of the volume’s themes, and the subject of its first section. Dutsch and Richlin think through the implications of male actors performing female roles; Moore’s essay deals with the interaction of music and gender in *Hecyra* — a suitable choice, given the prominence of women in it—as he illustrates how Terence manipulates metrical patterns to create suspense, link related elements in the play, and frustrate audience expectations.

To single out just one of these excellent essays, Amy Richlin, in “Slave-Woman Drag” (pp. 37–67) selects passages and scenes from the plays which, as she argues, speak directly or indirectly to audience members’ experience of exploitation (pp. 37–50); other scenes emphasize that sexual orientation is not always necessarily fixed, particularly when male actors, ostensibly portraying a heterosexual relation, flirt, embrace or kiss one another onstage, and so intimate a same-sex relationship (pp. 50–60).

I found that Richlin does a great job of highlighting passages in the play which might have “spoken to” the less-fortunate among the audience members (see, e.g., pp. 45 and 57); she asks us to keep in mind that an interpretation of a passage as an oppressed playwright’s or actor’s commiseration with his equal in the audience is “there for the taking, and any one audience member may pick it up or not” (p. 42). Her fresh stagings could be taken up by a modern director (Amphitruo pointing to a phallus, p. 46; Astaphium dropping her voice an octave to effect a “butch basso”, p. 55). (As an aside, may I suggest re-punctuating *Truc.* 783 to read *vis subigit verum fateri, ita: lora laedunt bracchia*, which would explicitly convey the underlying meaning that Richlin sees in that line?)

In the next three essays, Fantham, Feltovich, and James discuss portrayals of women in their various familial and romantic relations. While Fantham’s and Feltovich’s essays focus on women in their often fraught relationship with men, Sharon James, in “*Mater, Oratio, Filia*”, discusses women as mothers. I was struck especially by James’ decision to dispense with the typical stock-character roles, in order to categorize matrons as either mothers of sons, of daughters, or of both; additionally, mothers are either wedded or not. From this “re-parsing” (so to speak) of the comic matrons, surprising results emerge. For instance, sons are never the product of rape (p. 123 n. 9); mothers of daughters are dependent on men and weaker (cf. Phanostrata of *Cistellaria*) compared to mothers of sons, who are assertive on their male offspring’s behalf (think Cleostrata in *Casina*). These striking and original observations promise to stimulate further thinking on the characterization of women.
in Roman comedy.

Three essays on the reception of Plautus and Terence in later authors conclude the book. These engagingly written pieces will certainly stimulate students to explore the plays discussed on their own. Konstan and Cinaglia integrate their reading of Machiavelli’s comedy Mandragola with the amoral realpolitik of Prince, which results in thought-provoking interpretations (for instance, on the confessor Timoteo at p. 205). In her essay on Shakespeare’s debts to New Comedy, Traill, armed with the concept of the “theatergram” (p. 214), finds traces of the Roman comic meretrix in, surprisingly, the figure of Shakespeare’s virtuous matron. The idea of the “theatergram” will prove useful to students seeking Roman comic influence in later dramatists, while Traill’s stimulating readings expose Shakespeare’s deft and eclectic use of his various sources. Finally, Gonçalves is to be thanked for bringing to attention a work with which most Classicists probably are not familiar, the Anfitrião, a puppet opera based on Plautus’ Amphitryo, composed by the mid-18th c. Brazilian Portuguese playwright Antônio José da Silva. Gonçalves’ detailed essay brings out the play’s complex characterization of Juno (yes, Juno plays an important role in this adaptation of Plautus’ play!) and shows how the puppet opera conveys implicit criticism of the arbitrary justice meted by the agents of the Inquisition, under whose authoritarian grip Portugal was still suffering.

In sum, the volume is a good companion to have in a course on Roman comedy. An instructor in such a course might assign any one of its essays to supplement or enrich discussions of a play, or for a unit on representations of gender in Roman comedy. It also provides readers a snapshot of current issues and perspectives on the study of gender and Roman comedy, particularly performance, reception, and “linguistics-based” approaches. (Typos are relatively few and unobtrusive; let me take this opportunity to note that at p. 9 n. 12, read, for Leo 1913, Jachmann 1931 [repr. 1966]; the bibliographical reference at p. 12 should accordingly read Jachmann, G. 1931 instead of Leo, F. 1913.) Armed with Women in Roman Republican Drama and some of the many other available resources (p. 8 n. 2; p. 9 n. 7 helpfully provide lists of these), instructors will be enabled to present Roman comedy to students in all its fascination, controversy, and contemporary appeal.

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