The Longest Night: Time, Plot, and Characterization in Plautus's Amphitruo

Angeline Chiu

University of Vermont

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INTRODUCTION

In the Amphitruo Plautus stages an imaginary world of mischievous gods and bewildered mortals, a place where personal identities, literary sources, and genre expectations are all in flux and a magically long night is center stage and played for laughs. While a great deal of analysis has focused on this night’s mythological and astronomical aspects, its narrative function has received less attention.\(^1\) The Amphitruo has, instead of the oft-discussed carnival day of Roman comedy, a carnival night.\(^2\) The plot draws much of its energy from this extraordinary nocturnal setting—a fantasy world in which the line between mundane reality and divine intervention grows ever more blurred and even the common turning of day and night has become unreliable. The night is integral to the story; fully half the play takes place during

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\(^2\) Segal (1987).
it (i-550), and the other half consists of the characters’ reactions to that night in the morning after. Furthermore, the play’s distorted time defines the characters on stage. In their responses to this temporal anomaly, Sosia, Amphitruo, and Alcumena reveal their drastically different personalities; in turn this intensifies the mayhem that arises when these personalities meet and clash. The long night, like the pole star, is at the center of Amphitruo.

CHARACTERIZING THE GODS: MERCURY AND JUPITER

The presence of this unusual night first emphasizes the gulf between gods and mortals. The artificial distortion is entirely Jupiter’s handiwork; it is an instance of specific, purposeful divine intervention into the natural order. Gods appearing on earth to interact with mortals are a frequent occurrence in mythology, but actual interferences into the rhythms of day and night are less common. Tellingly, the intrusion in the Amphitruo is tied to the mingling of gods and men on the comic stage, itself a peculiar occurrence, as Mercury himself declares in the prologue (50-63). It is, in fact, unique in extant Roman comedy. Mercury even fabricates a new term for the play to come—not comedy per se, but tragicomoedia (59) to accommodate gods, kings, and elements of tragedy on a comic stage. Then literally under the cover of darkness, Jupiter appears on that stage to play the adulterer, even senex amans. Mercury takes his place as his father’s henchman in that enterprise—a god as servus callidus and currens. The night is their vehicle and instrument; they appropriate it in order to inhabit their comic roles, and fittingly they take over Nature itself so they may play

3 Admittedly the play is incomplete. See Fantham for attempts to reconstruct the missing portions (1973).
4 See for instance Heraclitus fr. 94: “Helios will not go beyond the limits. If he does, the Erinyes, guardians of Dike, will find him out.” I owe this point to Philip Ambrose per litt. Other notable exceptions besides Jupiter’s here include Athena prolonging the night for the reunion of Odysseus and Penelope at the end of the Odyssey, Hera ordering the sun to set prematurely in Iliad 18 at the burial of Patroclus, and the reversal of the sun’s course during the conflict of Atreus and Thyestes.
5 See too Moore (1995), Dumont (1998), Bond (1999), Manuwald (1999), and Schmidt (2003) on tragicomoedia, genres, and tragic elements deployed in a comic manner. The Amphitruo has also been regarded as a parody of tragedy.
with the nature of Roman comedy.\(^7\)

Additionally, the abnormally long night defines the gods’ relationship to mortal characters. As time itself becomes a plaything, so do the mortals who inhabit it. The gods’ knowledge of the truth is a sign of their superiority, and Mercury takes gleeful pleasure both in knowing what his father has done to time and in announcing it in his prologue: this night has been made longer, *haec…nox est facta longior* (113), he proclaims grandly to the audience.\(^8\) He includes the spectators in the joke from the very beginning and thus grants them the ability to appreciate the dramatic irony along with him and his father; in a sense, he transforms the spectators into little godlings for the duration of the play. Furthermore, deploying the conceit of night engages the imagination of the crowd. Roman plays were typically performed during the day, so the declaration of nighttime already invites the audience to suspend disbelief; this is compounded by the extension of the night.\(^9\) Fantasy has been unleashed as festive ludic pursuit for both gods on stage and playgoers in the stands.

The gods’ knowledge of the time distortion also underscores their awareness of larger natural patterns. When Jupiter finally allows the much-delayed day to dawn, he notes that, to compensate for the longer night, he will shorten the daylight hours accordingly: *atque quanto, nox, fuisti longior hac proxuma / tanto brevior dies ut fiat faciam, ut atque disparet* (548–9). Jupiter implies that objective reality exists with a “set” or “correct” length of a day; since night has been prolonged, the day must be shortened in order to keep that normal schedule. The gods seem to know several varieties of time: what it should be—and to what it should be returned when all the divine fun is over—and what they have done to it and for how long. This superior knowledge makes Jupiter’s later conversation with Alcumena all the more ironic and humorous; as he leaves, he tells her that he must go however unwillingly because it is time, *tempus est* (533), pretending he is a human controlled by time.\(^10\)

When the gods play with the flow of time, moreover, they reaffirm themselves as much as directors and producers as actors. Time as divine production is a fitting tactic in a play noted for its metatheatrical sensibilities.\(^11\) Jupiter as the ultimate

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\(^7\) In a sense this is Plautus being rather Ovidian before Ovid. The *Amphitruo* is also shot through with the idea of metamorphosis literal, physical, and metaphorical.

\(^8\) This and all translations are my own.

\(^9\) Other plays also incorporated the conceit of night on stage – such as the opening of the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus – but the *Amphitruo* presents this conceit to a much greater extent.

\(^10\) See Pelliccia for a tradition of unwilling departure scenes (2010–11).

producer/director combines divine power and dramatic art from altering time to changing his own appearance in his desire to enjoy Alcumena. In terms of narrative, the gods’ manipulation of time is much more prominent in Plautus’s version of the myth than in other accounts as he exploits its comic stage potential. In the Amphitruo, Alcumena is already pregnant and very much so. This flies in the face of the mythological tradition that Jupiter visited Alcumena only once and that Hercules was conceived during that one divinely prolonged night; if here she is already carrying Hercules, then this is manifestly not the first time Jupiter has visited her. The mythological joke is that this is not the fabled night of Hercules’s conception after all. Mercury at lines 479–90 says that Alcumena is twice pregnant—ten months along with Amphitruo’s child, and seven with Jupiter’s. On this point, Christenson suggests, “Plautus may be broadening the sexual farce,” and that is clearly the case. Jupiter has evidently developed a taste both for visiting Alcumena’s bed and for cheerfully cuckolding Amphitruo. The idea of divinely lengthening the night to spend it cavorting yet again with a very pregnant Alcumena costumed in padding readily turns the tryst from a hero’s origin story into sexual farce.

Also important is why Jupiter chooses this particular night to engineer the time distortion. This is the last night before Amphitruo returns from war; once he is back, Jupiter’s window of opportunity to enjoy Alcumena while disguised as her


13 Other accounts of the prolonged night focus on Jupiter’s fathering Hercules with Alcumena, not on its effect on Alcumena or Amphitruo, much less Sosia, a character who seems wholly the creation of Plautus. The first extant literary reference to the long night occurs in a fragment of Pherecydes, the 5th century BC Athenian mythographer in FGrH 3 F 13 b/c. Other references include the scholiast on Hom. Odyssey 11.266; Diod. 4.9; Hyginus, Fab. 29; Apollod. Biblio. 2.4.8; Ovid, Heroides 9.9–10; Seneca, Agamemnon 808–28 and Hercules Oetaeus 1864–6; Lucian, Dialogues of the Gods 10; and the Anth. Pal. 5.172. Scholars of later antiquity, including several church fathers, debated the actual length of time involved for Jupiter and Alcumena; temporal candidates ran from one to nine nights’ time. In terms of the comic stage, the Athenian New Comedy playwright Plato Comicus composed a Nyx Makra, now lost but for a few scattered fragments, frs. 89–94 K-A, PCG VII 469–471.

14 This is also implied in lines 107ff, 479ff, and 1122.

15 The Romans counted inclusively, so Alcumena’s ten months would be our nine.


17 See Segal: “… the principal characteristic of the classical myth of Amphitruo is that Jove paid a single visit to Alcumena and on this one occasion he lengthened the night. … But here we find the opposite: a sensual Roman who takes perverse pleasure in repeatedly cuckoldling another.” (1987, p. 184).

husband would close. This also explains his eagerness for one last encounter with Alcumena the next morning (978-81), even while the actual Amphitruo is running about Thebes. Jupiter, it would seem, has a devilish sense of humor as well as an insatiable libido.

As the morning dawns, Jupiter’s and Mercury’s cool knowledge of the truth contrasts ever more sharply with the responses of the befuddled mortals. Thus far, the prolonged night of the Amphitruo has driven the plot and the characterization of Jupiter and Mercury. The night is also critical for the characterization of the mortals in the play. Amphitruo, Alcumena, and Sosia can neither ascertain the true nature of the night nor pinpoint its preternatural extension. Each one reacts to the night differently; the play presents a kind of Plautine theory of temporal relativity at work. Furthermore, those responses are indications of what kind of personality each one possesses—and a hint of his/her behavior in the chaos that erupts as the morning dawns.

CHARACTERIZING MORTALS: SOSIA

Sosia as the clever comic slave comes closest of all the mortals to grasping the actual nature of the night. It is no accident that he is the first mortal character to appear on stage and that his opening comment is a complaint about the time: *qui me alter est audacior homo aut qui confidentior, / iuventutis mores qui sciam, qui hoc noctis solus ambulem?* “What other guy’s a bolder, braver man than I am—I know the ways of the young—and I’m wandering out alone at this time of night!” (153-4). Possibly because he is already out in the night and “out of bounds” and thus in a liminal space, Sosia has a better chance of seeing what is actually transpiring as the gods take time itself “out of bounds.” Sosia, as a slave, also has a schedule that is always subject to the arbitrary whim of his master. He is out because Amphitruo has forced him (163-4), and he complains that he has been awake for three nights in a row already, *continuas has tris noctes pervigilavi* (314). If Sosia has been thus awake, then he may be

19 In the nocturnal portion of the play Sosia repeatedly refers to *hoc noctis,* “this time of night,” e.g., 164, 292, 310.

20 Sosia specifically states his fear of being arrested, jailed, and beaten by the *tresviri capitales or nocturni* (155-61), minor magistrates charged with keeping order in the City. Also compare Sosia’s “out of bounds” quality with Arcturus, the star “out of bounds” in the opening of the *Rudens.*

21 This may also be a joke referring to the tradition that Alcumena’s long night lasted three normal nights’ time.
more attuned to distorted time because he himself has not observed a “normal” 24-hour schedule. Such subjection and subjectivity may render him more amenable to perceiving time as being more or less arbitrary or vulnerable to the whim of another. Add Sosia’s status as a comic servus callidus who typically has wit and knowledge exceeding that of his master, and his encounter with the supernatural night holds the most potential for humor and mischief.

Almost immediately Sosia senses that something is fundamentally wrong with the passage of time. Soon after his first appearance he is already looking skyward, attempting to establish the hour. Significantly, this surprises Mercury, who comments as he watches, sed quid illuc est? caelum aspectat. observabo quam rem agat. “But what’s that? He’s looking at the sky! I’ll see what he’s doing.” (270). Aside from a hint of parodying traditional stellar fortunetelling, Mercury’s attention implies curiosity whether Sosia can actually stumble on the truth. In fact, Sosia’s next line is the extraordinary declaration that he knows something for a certainty: certe edepol, si quicquamst aliud credam aut certo sciam / credo ego noc noctu Nocturnum obdormivisse ebrium—“Certainly, by Pollux, if I believe or know anything for sure, I believe Nocturnus went to bed drunk tonight!” (271-2). No other mortal in the play makes such a declaration of knowledge, and Sosia’s joking statement is surprisingly close to the truth; the trickster slave almost uncovers the work of the trickster gods. Nocturnus as a divine figure who has left his post to indulge himself resonates strongly with the actions of Jupiter who has left Olympus to pursue his own gratification.

So far Sosia has more or less sensed or intuited the length of the night, but he goes farther still: he peers at the constellations and concludes that they and the moon have all stopped in their courses as time has stopped mid-stream (273-6). In a humorous bit of relativistic comparison, Sosia says he had never seen a longer night except for the one when he was left strung up as punishment (279-80). Even as he says this, though, he changes his mind: eam quoque edepol etiam multo haec vicit longitudine—“By Pollux, this [night] even beats that one by far.” (281). Sosia seems to be on the cusp of real discovery. Moreover, he soon declares that such a long night would be ideal for an extended lovers’ tryst (287-8) and so unwittingly articulates the true reason for the time distortion. Mercury himself agrees: judging by Sosia’s words—pro huius verbis—Jupiter is acting sensibly (289-90). For that brief moment, Sosia, remarkably and independently, becomes party to the gods’ escapades.

By coming so close to solving the mystery, Sosia displays his openness to

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22 Hannah concludes that time has been arrested at the start of the evening, at the rising of the full moon (2009, pp. 24-6).
things supernatural and illogical; there are more things in heaven and earth in his philosophy than in those of his fellow mortals. That mental flexibility will be his great characteristic, setting him apart from the others. It remains intact even after his boisterous encounter with Mercury, who comes disguised as Sosia himself and “steals” his identity in a memorable scene (341–462). After the first shock of seeing his double, Sosia swiftly accepts this “fact” and even cheerfully considers how it might be personally profitable: perhaps his master Amphitruo will fail to recognize him, and he will no longer be a slave (460–2)! This mental agility and ability to accept apparent impossibilities also escalate the comic animosity between him and his rigidly rational lord (e.g., 551–4, 561–70). On any Roman comic stage, the sometimes violent antagonism between master and slave is a commonplace, but here it has the additional clash of the mysterious and the mundane. Sosia can bend, adapt, and roll with the punches, even the most startingly strange ones, and this sets him apart from the other mortals, beginning with his flustered, unhappy master.

CHARACTERIZING MORTALS: AMPHITRUO

Amphitruo, in contrast to the nimble Sosia and the playful gods, is the aggravated, increasingly frustrated straight arrow of the play. As the dupe, he is not unlike a senex iratus or a blocking character; furthermore, the martial hero of myth here takes on some of the features of Roman comedy’s miles gloriosus. His reaction to the long night is what first delineates the sort of man he is, and it is significant that he sends Sosia out on the nocturnal errand that begins the dramatic action. The servus complains, haec eri immodestia / coegit, me qui hoc noctis a portu ingratiis excitavit. / nonne idem hoc luci me mittere potuit? “It’s my master’s unreasonableness that forced me to this; he pushed me out of the harbor at this time of night, against my will! Couldn’t he have sent me during the day?” (163–5). Irascible Amphitruo cannot or will not wait for the dawn. Somehow he senses that the night is taking too long, though he cannot articulate it, and sends Sosia out anyway. He does so as if by forcibly conducting normal activities despite the obvious disjunction in time, he can push ahead

23 On doubling in this play, see Dupont (2001).

24 Another slave in the play, Bromia, also has the ability to accept supernatural occurrences; see Bond (1999, pp. 218–9). Note also Bromia’s Dionysiac name.

a normal schedule. He attempts to regulate and control time according to his schedule, desires, and expectations. 26 The inescapable corollary is that the spontaneous, the unfathomable, and the uncontrollable have no place in Amphitruo’s conception of the world. His frustration, furthermore, may well be compounded by another factor, his desire for his wife: according to one version of the myth, Alcumena refused to sleep with him until he had returned from battle. 27 The night is blocking his goal, and arguably even a night of normal length would seem insufferably long to the impatient Amphitruo.

When he first appears onstage, he regards the night peevishly. Unable to make sense of it, he is on the verge of losing his temper. When Alcumena says that she saw him the night before, he retorts: *Quor igitur praedicas, / te heri me vidisse, qui hac noctu in portum advecti sumus? / ibi cenavi atque ibi quievi in navi noctem perpetem*—“Why are you saying that you saw me yesterday, when I reached port just last night? I ate dinner there and I spent the whole endless night there on board!” (730–2). He was waiting restlessly for a dawn that did not come fast enough; *noctem perpetem* evokes his sense that the night dragged on, and while it lasted, he was champing at the bit. This response paves the way for his later frustration as he grows increasingly confused and agitated, even violent, when nonsensical events unfold all around him.

As Sosia is the most sensitive to the mysterious, Amphitruo is the most resistant. Lines 420–2 describe Amphitruo’s signet ring bearing the image of the Sun rising in a four-horse chariot—*cum quadrigis Sol oriens*. 28 Against the backdrop of the divinely lengthened night, this portrays Amphitruo as an anti-nocturnal figure, an opponent of divine play. In fact, Amphitruo resembles Pentheus in Euripides’ *Bacchae*, a play with which the *Amphitruo* has clear thematic affinities aside from the Theban setting and metatheatricality. 29 Notably also Amphitruo uses his solar signet to lock up his war booty, the defeated Teleboan king Pterelas’s golden drinking bowl, in a chest (418–21)—a clear image of containment and control. 30

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26 In this sense, he is a small, impotent version of the actual Jupiter who is able to bend time to his own will. This adds a further facet of humor to Jupiter’s assumption of Amphitruo’s identity, as well as to Amphitruo’s general frustration. I owe this observation to Tracy Jamison Wood *per litt.*

27 An early version appears in the pseudo-Hesiodic *Shield of Heracles*.

28 The sun image may also call to mind Pentheus famously seeing two suns and two cities of Thebes (*Bacchae* 918–9), with twin suns as a kind of time distortion and muddled perception under divine (there Dionysian) influence.


Given Amphitruo’s hard-headed inflexibility and this play’s resonance with the *Bacchae*, his treatment of the drinking bowl becomes an anti-Bacchic image. This further associates Amphitruo with Pentheus’ violent resistance to the Dionysiac mystery linked to inebriation and madness at night. Moreover, in Amphitruo’s initial encounter with Alcumena, he thinks her mad (*delirat uxor*! at 727) or possessed (*larvarum plenast*, 777), and Sosia (albeit in jest) refers to her as a raving Bacchante (*Bacchae bacchanti*, 703). Amphitruo, like Pentheus, will grow only more agitated as the story unfolds and reality continues to blur. His negative response to the nocturnal time distortion characterizes him as the disconcerted rationalist who will naturally become the butt of the cosmic joke in the morning after.

**CHARACTERIZING MORTALS: ALCUMENA**

Alcumena has a response to the long night that is wholly unlike either Sosia’s or Amphitruo’s. She not only does not notice its extension, but she declares that the night has been all too short. When the disguised Jupiter tells her at night’s end that he must leave, she asks plaintively why he is going so suddenly: *Quid istuc est, mi vir, negoti, quod tu tam subito domo abeas?* “What is it, husband, that you’re leaving home so soon?” (502). That Alcumena can say *tam subito* after such a long night seems incredible even as it prompts Jupiter’s attempt to mollify her. She attempts to keep him at home longer:  

*prius abis quam lectus ubi cubuisti concaluit locus. / heri venisti media nocte, nunc abis. hocin placet?* “You’re leaving before your side of the bed is warm! You arrived at midnight yesterday and now you’re going! Do you think this is all right?” (513-4). By claiming that he came only at midnight and now is leaving right before dawn, Alcumena intimates that she has not even had an entire night with Jupiter-Amphitruo. This is clearly an exaggeration, but she is not as concerned with facts as with her perception of time. The parting lines between Alcumena and Jupiter highlight that subjectivity:

31 At line 509, Jupiter asks her *Satin habes, si feminarum nulla est quam aeque diligam?* Christenson *ad loc* sees a humorous twist to the *satin habes:* “It seems that Jupiter, unlike Alcumena, is for now sated after the long night of lovemaking.” Alcumena appears in a ludicrous light if her mortal appetites can outstrip a god’s, much less Jupiter’s. At the same time, Jupiter leaves himself a loophole by saying he loves no (mortal) woman more than Alcumena; he says nothing about goddesses or Juno, as Mercury is quick to point out (510-1) and joke about later (515-7).

32 Jupiter specifies that he wants to leave the city before daybreak: *exire ex urbe prius quam lucescat volo* (533).
Alcumena: Lacrimantem ex abitu concinnas tu tuam uxorem.
Jupiter: Tace, ne corrumpere oculos, redibo actutum.
Alcumena: Id actutum diu est.
Jupiter: Non ego te hic lubens relinquo neque abeo abs te.
Alcumena: Sentio, nam qua nocte ad me venisti, eadem abis. (529–532)

Alcumena: You’re making your wife cry because you’re leaving!
Jupiter: Shhhh. Don’t spoil your eyes; I’ll be back soon.
Alcumena: That “soon” is a very long time.
Jupiter: I’m not willingly going and leaving you here.
Alcumena: I know, since you’re going away the same night that you came to me.

Alcumena’s insistence of *id actutum diu est* reveals her as a figure fully engaged in the long night and its amorous purposes. Moreover, her time-sense presents her as a character who is both a complement to Jupiter and a foil to Amphitruo. In her fantastical view of time—and in her desire for more time with her lover—she is a fitting match for the indulgent Jupiter. In the same vein she is a counterpoint to her actual husband, the restlessly tetchy Amphitruo; their clash later becomes all the more comically strident. In that confrontation, the truly offended party is Alcumena rather than Amphitruo; he, having impatiently fretted through the night, now fears infidelity, but she, having savored that time, is bewildered by her husband’s sudden suspicious harshness. This intensifies after Jupiter-Amphitruo’s abrupt reappearance to reconcile with another round of lovemaking, a proposal to which she is readily amenable (891ff).

Alcumena’s perception of the long night as a short span has the additional effect of portraying her as a comic character in her own right. She has long been considered a remarkably noble, or even tragic, character within the world of Roman comedy. Nevertheless, her view of time, taken into account with several other

33 On the other hand, she is also displaying the stock behavior of a loving wife wishing to keep her man at home and out of war’s dangers, as Andromache does with Hector in *Iliad* 6.405ff. Alcumena and Jupiter-Amphitruo may even make a parody of Andromache and Hector, especially as her “husband” is not her actual husband at all.

34 See Sedgwick *ad loc*: “Whenever Alcumena appears, P. forgets his clowning and the tone changes to something not unworthy of tragedy, a high seriousness such as would befit a Roman matron. P. makes free with the gods and the general, but is overawed by the ideal wife and mother.” Gratwick considers her “presented powerfully as a tragic heroine.” (1982, pp. 109–110). Other critics have similarly characterized Alcu-
factors, depicts her as a comically sensual figure. First of all, one must remember that Alcumena was played by a man, as all female roles were. The Alcumena-actor would also have been padded (perhaps grotesquely for humor) to appear pregnant. Alcumena is the only speaking pregnant character in extant Greco-Roman drama, and in Plautine comedy pregnancy is common fodder for jokes. Driving home this fact, Mercury repeatedly refers to Alcumena’s condition before she ever appears on stage (e.g., 102-11 and 479-85), and when she does, Jupiter mentions her pregnancy yet again (500). The play highlights the humor of Jupiter’s using the night to enjoy Alcumena, not to father Hercules; the humor intensifies with the knowledge that they have been carrying on the affair despite her exaggerated condition. Moreover, Alcumena’s view of the “short” night reveals a sexuality that deviates comically far from the Roman ideal of a noble matrona as chaste, faithful, and dignified. Besides, sensual insatiability has long been a feature of comic females in the Greek tradition inherited by Rome.

Alcumena’s famous speech on voluptas (632-53), long seen as a sign of her tragic stature, actually underscores her comic characterization via her time-sense. She says that she has had pleasure only for a little while—voluptas parumper datast—and she has seen her husband for only one night—noctem unam modo (639). She repeats yet again how suddenly he left before dawn—atque is repente abiit a me hinc ante lucem (639). This aristocratic matrona’s lofty speech, however, may also be interpreted as the lament of a voluptuary deprived of sexual gratification: voluptas, aside from...

\[\text{mena; see Phillips (1985, p. 121) and Bleisch (1997). Alcumena as tragic heroine has been challenged by Perelli (1985), Phillips (1985), and Christenson (2000-1). See Plautine satire of Roman ideals in Owens (2001).}

\[\text{35 See too Phillips (1985).}

\[\text{36 Note Curculio 221, where the fat pimp Cappadox says he must be pregnant with twins, or Stichus 155-70, where the parasite Gelasimus declares that he has been pregnant with a huge hunger for a decade. When pregnancy is properly applied to a woman, the comic potential is still strong; Nelson: “On stage, the pregnant woman is an irresistibly comic figure; nature has caught her out.” (1990, pp. 58-9). See too Aulularia’s pregnant character of Phaedria. In the comic tradition from Aristophanes, note Thesmophoriazusae’s supposedly pregnant woman and Lysistrata’s woman pretending to be pregnant in an attempt to leave the citadel to have illicit sex.}

\[\text{37 Hirst sees this as the defining joke of the play: “It (the Amphitruo) is an exception only in that it mixes gods and noble characters and comic servants, but since the two gods behave entirely as the coarsest of mortals (which is the comic point) the play is only remarkable because it asks us to believe that Jupiter and Alcmene are having a passionate affair (sic) although she is nine months pregnant.” (1984, p. 8).}

\[\text{38 See Treggiari (1991, pp. 229-61).}

\[\text{39 See, for instance, Aristophanes, Ecclesiazusae 225-8 or Lysistrata 21-5.}
meaning “pleasure,” is also the technical term for sexual congress. Alcumena also says that she is *morigera*—obliging—to her husband (842). Being *morigera* is a traditional Roman virtue for a *matrona*, but given Alcumena’s appetites, *morigera* here takes on a clearly sexual dimension; this resonates with Mercury using similar terms to describe his father’s carnal indulgences. *Morigera* has become a loaded term, and Alcumena, despite her pregnancy and that preternaturally long night, is yet unsatisfied: the supposed tragic heroine reveals herself to be an amorous sexpot. This drives the comic animosity between Alcumena and the actual Amphitruo, for her confusion and indignation at his apparent sudden change of heart stem from her initial devotion. This escalates their conflict amid chaos, confusion, hurt feelings, and even the specter of divorce as she threatens to leave him (925ff).


41  Adams notes that in later Latin, the phrases *morem gerere* and *morigera* are used explicitly of a woman’s sexual gratification of a man (1982, p. 164). For Mercury: *pater nunc intus suo animo morem gerit* (131); *gere patri morem meo* (277); or Jupiter speaking in 980-1: *volo delude illunc, dum cum hac usuraria / uxore nunc mi morigero*.

42  See also the humor of Alcumena talking about her *sedatum cupiditatem* (839ff).

43  Alcumena’s willingness to discuss physical details of her amorous night creates no end of distress for the actual Amphitruo. Segal highlights the similarity between this passage (*lavisti … accubuisti … cenavisti mecum, ego accubui simul*,”You washed … reclined …We dined together and reclined together.” 802-4) with those described by the indulgent Syracusan twin in the *Menaechmi* (*Prandi, potavi, scortum accubui*,”I’ve wined, I’ve dined, I’ve concubined” at 476; or *Potavi atque accubui scortum*, “I’ve wined and concubined” at 1142) (1987, p. 181).

44  See too Deblasi (2003).

45  On divorce in Plautus, see Rosenmeyer (1995) and Braund (2005). An Apulian bell krater from ca. 5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century BC now in the British Museum apparently depicts Alcmena on the verge of being burnt on a pyre by Amphitryon for her adultery; this is perhaps a depiction of a tragedy, likely Euripides’s.
CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, the play has only one night—noctem unam modo, as Alcumena says so regretfully, but it is no ordinary night. Drawn from the long mythological tradition of Hercules’s conception and taken to the festive Roman stage, the long night becomes much more than a timeframe. It is the mechanism by which Plautus drives his comic plot and draws his cast of characters. The creation of a supernatural night delineates capricious gods and befuddled mortals; the norms of everyday (and everynight) life flip upside down, opening the story to the unfathomable world of the divine ludus. It is no accident that wonder is a theme for the play. Jupiter and Mercury wreak merry havoc with the mortal world, of which time is the most obvious limit and time-keeping a crucial measure of reality. While the night defines the gods as directors of the play and the ultimate timekeepers, it also defines each of the human characters and his or her comic potential. Their perceptions of the actual length of the night reveal Sosia as the mentally nimble slave ready for unfathomable events, Amphitruo as the humorless straight arrow bound to be the butt of the joke, and Alcumena as the warmly emotional and surprisingly amorous voluptuary. The personality of this extraordinary play and its characters owes much indeed to its supernatural night, a feature unique in extant ancient comedy.

46 Christenson notes the extensive use of miror and similar words, employed primarily by the mortal characters (2000, p. 29). Note occurrences in lines 29, 86–9, 116, 283, 319, 432, 594–6, 616, 750, 765, 772, 828–9, 858, 954, 1036, 1057, 1080, 1105, 1107, 1117.
Works Cited


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