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Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2009.07.03

**David Christenson (ed.), *Plautus: Four Plays. Casina, Amphitryon, Captivi, Pseudolus. Focus Classical Library.* Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2008. Pp. 265. ISBN 9781585101559. \$14.95 (pb).**

**Reviewed by Vincent Hunink, Radboud University Nijmegen  
([v.hunink@let.ru.nl](mailto:v.hunink@let.ru.nl))**

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Until relatively recently, the archaic Roman comedies of Plautus (ca. 254-184 B.C.) used to find little favour with classical scholars. His plays were often labelled rude and primitive, lacking in dramatic finesse and psychology, aiming at easy success with his audience, without much sense for serious, moral values. The poet earned some praise, meanwhile, for the liveliness of his works, which offer a unique insight into daily life in early Rome, and for his creative use of the Latin language. In recent years, by contrast, Plautus has been given much attention and he seems to have become almost fashionable among liberal-minded scholars. For example, English translations of some Plautine plays were published by Amy Richlin (2006) and John Henderson (2007), which each in their own way could be described as radical and postmodern (I reviewed both books in [BMCR 2006.05.35](#) and [2007.01.03](#) respectively).

Obviously in reaction to such trends in Plautine studies, David Christenson has now published a new translation of four comedies by Plautus that aims to steer a middle course between translations that "seemed either ineptly stilted or too far removed from Plautus' Latin and his culture", and between "accuracy and liveliness" (p. 31). That is, Christenson has tried "to navigate between the Scylla and Charybdis of slavish literalism on the one side, and the temptation to over-indulge in contemporary slang and other imminently doomed, ephemeral references on the other." (p. 31).

When an author aims at balance and compromise, he or she will not easily satisfy extreme sides in modern readership, which often make themselves readily heard. Christenson's translation will seem needlessly free to the very strictest of philologists, while it will inevitably be considered bleak and flat to the hard core innovators of classical studies. But readers of Plautus who do not wish to be counted to either extreme (and I hope that this still goes for a large majority) will probably appreciate or even like this book.

Christenson has given us a clear, readable rendering of four interesting plays, without a desire to surpass or outdo the original in any way, but rather to make the Plautine text and context come alive for a non-Latinist audience. The target group, defined as "students and teachers in literature in translation courses" as well as "the general reader" (p. 32), will profit from Christenson's easy, low-key style, his informative introductions, and practical footnotes, which do not suppose prior experience of Plautus, or indeed of antiquity as a whole, and duly explain all that is needed to understand the text.

Since the book is primarily aimed to be read to get to know Plautus and his world, the translation itself will not be immediately practicable for stage performances (stage directions have been kept to an absolute minimum, particularly in comparison with Nixon's old Loeb versions). But since these are fair, reliable versions of Plautus' plays, the texts might be reworked into stage texts.

In his choices as a translator, Christenson has opted for compromise as well. While avoiding idiosyncratic style or a clearly poetical form (whether metrical or in free verse), he does maintain Plautus' division of lines and adopt what may be called a fairly neutral idiom. This results in texts such as are not often written nowadays, with, at first glance at least, the typographical "look and feel" of poetry, combined with the flow and rhythm of prose. While this style is not distracting or calling for attention to itself, it is also, I have to admit, a bit indeterminate and does not seem quite convincing as a mirror of Plautus' enchanting Latin.

But quite possibly, Christenson did not primarily wish to convey the essence of Plautus' style. A closer look at this particular selection of plays shows that it is rather the themes of the plays, their social "messages", that are of interest to the translator (or "editor", as Christenson calls himself).

In all four plays, Plautus seems concerned with larger social issues, such as the role of women, the position of slaves, and the relations between masters and slaves. Fortunately, Christenson does not go so far as to argue that Plautus is a revolutionary thinker wishing to exert direct influence on Roman society and to introduce real change. Indeed, such a theory would not convince many readers of Plautus, since he mostly seems to care precious little about matters of general interest and rather more about immediate comic effect.

What Christenson does argue is that in these four plays, something serious is happening and that more is at work than merely "letting off of steam". The plays lay bare the conventions both of comedy and of Roman views on status, power and gender at large, and by showing and lightly questioning such conventions, they make their audiences think about what they see. Theatre in such a form challenges common assumptions about larger issues without actually changing them.

Admittedly, it is not easy to accept that Plautus can have a "serious" side, but Christenson does have a point with these plays.

The ***Captivi*** in particular is an almost un-Plautine, pure play with no markedly obscene or coarse language, no quarrels or fights, and no disreputable, funny characters (prostitutes, pimps), as is explicitly stated by the speaker of the prologue (lines 54-62). The play's greatest hero is a slave, Tyndarus, who risks his life in order to save his master from slavery. This shows how good or bad character need not be directly correlated with social status: Tyndarus is, indeed, something like "a noble slave". (That is, until he turns out to be not a slave at all, but rather a freeborn son of the very man whom he served as a slave -- the plot is a little too complex to describe in one or two lines.) Yes, this may have made Roman viewers think about the essence of slavery and "the arbitrariness of rank and status" (p. 24) without making them rebellious and ready to change the law on slavery.

Likewise, the ***Amphitryon***, with Jupiter and Mercury appearing on stage, makes one think about the vulnerability of even mighty men when faced with the gods; the ***Casina*** shows a woman, Cleostrata, gradually getting the upper hand and gaining control of the play, while ***Pseudolus*** seems so full of reflection about being a comedy that it may properly be called "Plautus' most consciously theatrical play" (p. 25).

It is a clear merit of Christenson's book to draw attention to this underrated aspect of Plautus' theatre, in the form of a combined translation of the socially most relevant comedies, if I may call them thus. Of course, there is more Plautus than merely these four plays, I am happy to add. Many readers will, as I do, still prefer Plautus' more raw and funny side, with bawdy talk, bad jokes, laughable stock characters, and brilliant Latin puns, regardless of any ethics and morals.

To sum up: Christenson has offered readers a useful and informative edition of four Plautine plays in neutral, accessible English that, unlike some recent Plautus translations, reaches out to a wide modern audience, both classicist and general, both in Anglophone

countries and elsewhere in the world. Within the range of Plautus translations as currently available, this is certainly a most welcome contribution. Christenson's thematical focus on some of Plautus' more serious plays, in which he seems almost like a social critic, is interesting and provides food for thought.

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