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A Sense of Comic Timing: Temporal Distortion, Plot, and Characterization in Plautus' *Amphitruo*

In the *Amphitruo*, the mythical long night of Hercules's conception is center stage. But the night is not merely the prerequisite for a baby Hercules. Rather, this time distortion is a defining principle of the play in both plot and characterization. Instead of the carnival day of Roman comedy (Segal 1987), the *Amphitruo* has a carnival night, in which all the norms of common life are suspended, paving the way for comic confusion. The play's distorted time also defines the characters. Each one, in his/her reaction to the temporal anomaly, clearly delineates his/her personality and, more, sets up further comic chaos. For the gods Jupiter and Mercury, the night is a plaything, and this night marks the difference between gods and mortals; divinities know the truth while befuddled humans do not. Mercury takes gleeful pleasure in knowing (and announcing) what his father has done to time (112-4). Jupiter also knows; when he dismisses the night, he notes that he will shorten the daylight hours accordingly (548-9). That he is able to say so is a marker of the gods' power over time and the mortals who inhabit it. As for those mortals, they cannot pinpoint the preternatural nature of the night, but each reacts to it differently. Sosia, the clever comic slave, comes closest to grasping the true nature of the night, peering at the constellations and concluding, to Mercury's great interest, that they have stopped (273-6). He displays his openness to the supernatural, and this ability will enable him to take the morning's confusion in better stride than the rest of the cast. It will also put him into direct comic conflict with his hard-headed, rational master, Amphitryon, who is the aggravated straight arrow. Significantly, he sends Sosia out on errands in the middle of the night (164-5). Somehow he senses that the night is taking too long and sends out Sosia, as if trying to impose the order of ordinary life. He attempts to control time, and the fantastic have no place in the Pentheus-like Amphitryon's conception of the world. He regards the night with peevisish impatience (730-2), and, unable to make sense of it, he becomes an *iratus* figure, primed for comic mix-up. Alcmena, after spending the night with Jupiter, asks why he is going so suddenly—*tam subito* (502). Despite her heavy pregnancy, Alcmena reveals herself as wholly absorbed in the night's frankly carnal purposes. More, her famous *voluptas* speech (632-53) underscores her comic characterization as a sexually insatiable voluptuary: she says that she has had her husband for only one night—*noctem unam modo* (638-9). Her view of time drives on her later comic animosity with Amphitryon, as her confusion and anger escalate their conflict to the point of divorce. In sum, when day finally comes on stage, it does so with rich complications set in place by the previous supernatural night, which in ancient drama is unique in its comic possibilities.