

History, Irony, and Jokes as Evidence for the Composition of Plautus' Audience

Who was in Plautus' original audience, how educated or socially stratified were they, and how do we know? In recent years scholarship has offered mutually incompatible answers to these historical questions.

At one extreme is Richlin 2005 (similarly Segal 1987), who "imagin(es) a pretty trashy context for... Roman comedy" designed to please "a wide [elsewhere "huge, mixed"] audience," including women, immigrants, slaves, and other marginal groups, while the "cultural context of Plautine comedy in its state-sponsored form" was "the equivalent of stock-car racing and professional wrestling."

At the other is Fontaine 2010 (similarly Gentili 1979), who argues for an "enthusiastic, philhellenic, and aristocratic audience" that was both "exclusive and predominately elite" and "more sophisticated, alert, and familiar with Greek language and literature" than is often assumed, a group "to whom Plautus would [particularly] cater and strive to please."

Though falling variously in the middle, most scholars have tended closer to Richlin's position (e.g. Moore 1994, Wilson 1998, Goldberg 2005).

In this paper I review the internal evidence (prologues, epilogues, asides, etc.) in light of the external evidence supplied by historians (Livy, Valerius Maximus) and archaeology (Goldberg 1998) to challenge the "huge, unruly" hypothesis and to defend the hypothesis of Fontaine 2010. This entails questioning the method of reading straightforward statements ironically to establish historical reality and other problems of interpretation.

Relying on theorizing by the historian Carlo Ginzburg, I then turn to advocate the use of jokes and enthymemes as better evidence for the composition of Plautus' audience. Special attention is given to legal wordplay in *Rudens* and *Persa*; the paper concludes with a number of points for discussion.