

The trochaic septenarius, Roman comedy's most common accompanied meter, is throughout the plays of Plautus and Terence the meter of action. The standard metrical progression of Roman comedy, as has long been noted (e.g., Spengel, Leo, Law, Duckworth), is a repeated movement from iambic senarii through other meters to trochaic septenarii. Moves to extended passages of trochaic septenarii almost inevitably mark moments at which characters proceed from other matters such as exposition or banter to the key business at hand. The first four extended trochaic septenarii passages of Plautus' *Menaechmi*, for example, all begin when an entering character first encounters the character with whom he or she will have business (135, 369, 604, 775). The introduction of trochaic septenarii thus sends the message to the audience, "things are now going to get moving." On numerous occasions, Plautus and Terence insert very short passages of trochaic septenarii into other meters. These shorter passages tease the spectators with the expectation that the plot will proceed, only to disappoint that expectation promptly.

The frisson that comes with this disappoint of expectations has two major effects throughout Roman comedy: it draws attention to words of special importance, and it produces humor. The music of *Menaechmi*, for example, begins with a polymetric *canticum* sung by Menaechmus of Epidamnus. The song includes two short sets of trochaic septenarii. First, in five septenarii, Menaechmus reveals that he will lunch with Erotium, and Peniculus, in an aside, says he fears losing his free meal (123-127). After five septenarii the audience will have the impression that the polymetrics have ended and the plot will move on. Menaechmus cannot resist boasting about his exploits, though, so he interrupts the trochaic septenarii for a direct address to the audience in iambic octonarii (128-129). Then he reveals in another trochaic septenarius that he has stolen his wife's *palla* for his girlfriend (130). Again Menaechmus cannot resist boasting, and he sings more iambs until Peniculus addresses him and brings the play's first series of uninterrupted trochaic septenarii (135). Besides underlining Menaechmus' humorous inability to stop boasting, the two short sets of trochaic septenarii call attention to the three actions that will drive most of the play's plot: Menaechmus' planned rendezvous with Erotium, Peniculus' exclusion from lunch, and the theft of the *palla*.

Trochaic septenarii singly and in small groups tend to have less importance in Terence's plays because Terence so frequently mixes trochaic septenarii, trochaic octonarii, and iambic octonarii. There are occasions, however, when isolated trochaic septenarii carry special significance in his plays as well. In *Hecyra*, for example, the prostitute Philotis curses the *senex* Laches' hatred of her friend Bacchis in a single trochaic septenarius inserted into the opening iambic senarii (134). The astonishing "false start" calls attention to Laches' hostility toward women, which will drive much of the plot.

Modern scholars have abandoned the practice, popular in antiquity (Amsel), of assigning a specific *ethos* to each individual Greek and Roman meter (e.g., Maas, West). Metrical studies of Roman comedy have therefore, with a few exceptions (e.g., Lindsay, Tobias), concentrated on the alternation between unaccompanied iambic senarii and other meters (e.g., Dupont, Marshall, Moore), the technical aspects of meter and prosody (e.g., Boldrini, Questa), or the changes of meter in themselves (e.g., Braun, Bruder) rather than on the qualities of individual meters. The clear association of trochaic septenarii with movement of the plot suggests that, though we should not return to the excesses of many ancient scholars, at least some individual meters did have specific associations that made important contributions to the plot and tone of the plays.