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The Sophisticated para prosdokian in Plautus and Its Use in the Poenulus

In modern texts of Plautus, jokes of the type para prosdokian are generally punctuated in such a way as to indicate the surprise turn ending of the line. Usually this is indicated by a long dash between the two words. The method is passable if not perfect in illustrating the joke, but in its current state it may be masking from us jokes that the Roman spectator would have clearly understood: some of Plautus' para prosdokian jokes do not just depend on a sentence break, but, as I will argue, a break mid-word, whose identification is essential for understanding Plautine humor.

When, for example, the Menaechmi's parasite Peniculus announces his entrance with

Iuventus nomen fecit Peniculo mihi,
ideo quia mensam quando edo, detergeo. (77-8)

The youngsters have given me the name 'Peniculus'
because when I eat, I clean off the table.

the joke is not merely in defeating the expectation of a salacious pun (so Gratwick 1993). It is mensam that is hedging its bet, since the diminutive of penis ought to mean not only "little brush (made from a tail)" but more obviously "little penis." The joke lies in the word mensam, which skirts the expected vulgar mentulam. A pause in breath or an appropriate gesture easily brings out the joke: indeed, since no stage directions of any kind are given in our manuscripts, we must recognize wordplays of this sort that affect performance for a proper appreciation of Plautine humor. Punctuating the para prosdokian is an editorial decision (Leo notably did not punctuate any of the jokes), but if they are consistently punctuated, character consistency becomes more sharply focused.

This Plautine mannerism of the "sophisticated" para prosdokian has never been studied by scholars, nor even acknowledged by those particularly concerned with Plautine wordplay (Mendelsohn 1907; Brinkhoff 1935). The Poenulus has one scene in particular (III.2) that contains a notable cluster of jokes that defeat expectation mid-word; these jokes are of particular interest because all of them have escaped excision by that most severe analytical critic, O. Zwierlein (Zur Kritik und Exegese des Plautus I: Poenulus und Curculio [Mainz 1990]), and may thus claim at least a general agreement as to their authenticity. By illustrating the phenomenon with a selection of examples from this scene, I will discuss the implications that a proper understanding of the technique may hold for Plautine chronology, textual emendation, performance, and characterization.