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**Adultery in the *Amphitruo*: An Affair to Remember**

Modern criticism has completely changed the face of the *Amphitruo*. While earlier scholars concentrated on the "tragic" elements in this tragicomedy, more recent scholarship sees the play as a mythological burlesque or sex farce. I will engage both ideas: I argue that the play is more realistic in its portrayal of adultery and marital strife than any other, and therefore may have serious elements; but while this "psychodrama" is not incompatible with comedy, it argues against interpreting the play purely as broad farce.

One element of the *Amphitruo* is unmistakably serious: Plautus' only onstage confrontation with real adultery--*stuprum*. The *Amphitruo* plays upon the realistic consequences of female adultery (uncertain paternity and divorce) rather than showcasing fun holiday philandering. In addition, Amphitruo and Alcumena's fighting is more disturbing than usual: they employ unusually harsh language towards each other, and Amphitruo's belief in his wife's unchastity is certainly a worse insult than the usual Plautine dead-wife jokes. Alcumena, for her part, initiates legal action by bringing in witnesses and asking for a divorce. The fighting is made all the more distressing because earlier scenes have established the couple's previous *concordia*.

That this portrayal of adultery and marital discord might have upset some ancient spectators is demonstrated by the recurring re-assurances in the form of prologues. The *Amphitruo* contains not one, but three prologues distributed throughout the play, all of which re-iterate that the happy ending will eventually re-unite the spouses, and that Alcumena will suffer no consequences. No other Plautine play displays such concern for marital concord, suggesting that the three prologues are not merely redundant, but serve an important function.

I argue that the "tragic" elements of the play are not, in fact, mutually exclusive of comedy. [Thomas Veatch](#), a modern humor theorist, has posited that if humor is the violation of expectation, then the perceiver's moral commitment to that expectation is the key to whether something is humorous or offensive. If the perceiver's expectation is one that is held dear, such as a moral or religious belief, he or she is less likely to find humor in something that violates it. Plautus acknowledges the possibility that unchastity and adultery are un-funny violations, but encourages his audience to laugh by reassuring them of a happy ending.

The *Amphitruo* displays a more nuanced form of comedy than can be explained by broad farce or Saturnalian inversion. It plays upon contemporary societal mores about marriage and sexuality, but not in an unrealistically grotesque manner. Rather, the issues at stake are all too serious. The mythological setting adds to the audience's comfort, as it allows the audience to feel secure that, while the domestic situation pictured might seem dangerously familiar, the setting is mythical. In this way, then, the *Amphitruo* increases the level of fantasy in its context to make up for the naturalism of its themes.

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