

It has long been recognized that the idiomatic use of *amabo* to mean “please” in Roman comedy is a feature of female speech (Blasé 1896, MacCary and Willcock 1976, Adams 1984, Nuñez 1995, Martin 1995, Karakasis 2005). While *amabo* is never spoken by a male character in Terence, Plautus does put it in the mouth of a male character ten different times. Thus, it seems to be an important piece of evidence that “In Terence female speech is more sharply distinguished in this respect from male than it is in Plautus” (Adams 1984: 55). Yet this undeniable connection between *amabo* and women has led to an under-appreciation of the ways in which Plautus has deliberately used the female associations of the word to characterize the male speakers. This paper will show that when speaking this word the male character sometimes exhibits a passion more appropriate to a female and reveals the female position in which he finds himself.

The appearance of *amabo* accompanies a question or imperative and Adams includes his discussion of the word in a section entitled “polite modifiers.” More importantly, however, he goes on to note that it usually occurs in a context of high emotion (both anxiety and affection). For example, in the *Asinaria* the prostitute Philaenium and her young lover, Argyrippus, have been unable to find the money that would buy her freedom and allow them to marry. Libanus, the slave of Argyrippus’ father, has gotten hold of the necessary funds but refuses to give them the money. After Argyrippus has begged, promising to grant Libanus his freedom and even addressing him as *patronus*, Philaenium tries: *Mi Libane, ocellus aureus, donum decusque amoris, / amabo, faciam quod voles, da istuc argentum nobis* (*Asinaria* 691). Philaenium is trying almost to seduce Libanus, with sweet, passionate language, and in this context she uses *amabo* to intensify the imperative.

Argyrippus’ subservience to Libanus is brought out just a few lines later when the slave insists that his master’s son allow him to climb on his back. After this horsing around, Argyrippus begs Libanus twice to stop: “*Amabo, Libane, iam sat est?*” (*Asinaria* 707, 711). The homosexual innuendo of the scene is obvious and the use of *amabo* contributes to Argyrippus’ feminization. Similarly, Menaechmus displays various feminine characteristic, most obviously when he exits his house wearing underneath his cloak the *palla* of his wife which will be a gift for Erotium – a choice of clothing that will later lead to his loud protest that he is not a *cinaedus*. Later in the play (*Menaechmi* 678), when Menaechmus needs to give the *palla* back to his wife, he begs Erotium to return it using *amabo te* as part of his plea.

The most interesting example occurs in the *Casina*. Olympio initially uses *amabo* (*Casina* 137) in a speech that he imagines Casina will address to him when he has married her, all in order to make his rival Chalinus jealous. By the end of the play (*Casina* 917-918) the tables have turned as Olympio describes how he begged the supposed Casina (actually the disguised Chalinus) not to spurn his advances: *amabo, mea uxorcula, cur virum tuum sic me spernis*. The use of *amabo* helps to bring out his misplaced passion and sudden reversal of roles.