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ROMAN PROSTITUTION THROUGH PLAUTUS' THEATRE

Abstract: The main issue addressed in this paper is the study of the prostitution business in the mid-Republican period from the point of view of theatre. Theatre appeared in Rome in 240 BC, and, from that time on, we find plays that are of great value to our understanding of the Roman society of this period.

For this reason, we will focus on the comedies of Plautus, representing the genre of the *fabula palliata*. By taking this documentation as a basis, one can analyse the role of prostitutes and procurers in his comedies, on whom we are given extensive information through humour. Despite possible exaggerations, the models used by the author allow us to approach the reality of that period (the end of the 3rd and the 2nd century BC).

Keywords: prostitution; Roman Republic; theatre; comedies; Plautus

1. Introduction

Theatre in Rome dates back to 240 BC, and it reflects the influence of two cultures: Etruscan and Greek (Cic. *Brut*. 72; Cato 50; Tusc. 1.3.; Liv. 7.2; Gell. 17.21.41). Titus Matius Plautus was born around 250 BC in Sarsina and died around 184 BC in Rome after a life devoted to theatre, according to Cicero (Cic. *Brut*. 60; Codoñer 2011, 30). His homeland, Umbria, which was profoundly influenced by Etrurian culture, might have inspired Plautus' involvement with theatre. Also, this region was very permeable to Greek culture because of the commercial and cultural exchange between the Etruscan city-states and western Greece (López-Gregoris 2012, 42).

Plautus's plays, along with one play by Terence, are the only extant representatives of the kind of literary model the former developed, the *fabula palliata* (Beard 2014, 90). Plays of this genre drew inspiration from the *Néa* of the Greeks: they reproduced the world in a Greek manner and were visually identified by the attire normally attributed to the *Néa*: the *pallium*. They were probably a result of a subconscious, natural evolution of the translation work of the first comedians. With regard to the language used in the comedy, there was a certain similarity to that used in everyday life by the Roman bourgeoisie. Likewise, the characters of Latin comedy were much more universal (Jocelyn 1988–1993, 611).

Regarding the audiences, we find spectators from all social strata. In the prologue of the comedy *Poenulus*, we see the necessity of asking for order and silence, so that everyone could take their place and the actors could be heard (López-Gregoris 2012, 33).

The plot lines of Plautus' comedies usually follow a similar archetypal story, always concluded with a happy ending. With respect to the characters we are going to analyse, their role in these comedies would be the following: a young man falls in love with a prostitute and seeks to obtain her favours, while the *leno* hinders the happy development of the action, stifling the love between the young man and the prostitute. Love is one of the most powerful plot devices in Plautus' comedies, and such characters are fundamental in the *fabula palliata* (González-Vázquez 2004, 137). These comedies are one of the main sources informing our understanding of their role in society at the end of the Republic. Since they are literary works belonging to the theatrical genre, one might think that they distort reality in a way. However, later sources, written from a male point of view, confirm Plautus' depiction of his characters (López 2003, 145).

2. The *meretrix*

Roman women could earn a living through prostitution (McGinn 2004, 40). In many cases they would not voluntarily choose this profession, but were sold or forced into it by others, sometimes very close relatives (Knapp 2011, 276). Many of these women would probably have started as children, so that their youth, as well as their low social background and lack of autonomy, made them unable to oppose or escape (Foxhall 2013, 102).

The *meretrix* the object of desire of the Plautine *adulescentes*, is usually a beautiful young woman who works as a prostitute under the tutelage of her mother, also a former prostitute, or of a procurer, who sends her to the client's

house or admits her to the brothel if the latter has funds to cover the fees of young women (López-Gregoris 2012, 51). Without a desired and expensive girl, there is no comedy; love and the lack of money to pay for amorous satisfaction is the Plautine key. His comedies popularized the stereotype of the avid prostitute, capable of anything to ruin a son of a good family, an old man she arouses, or a military man she seduces: "Mater, is quaestus mihi est: lingua poscit, corpus quaerit; animus orat, res monet" (Plau. *As*. 511.; Strong 2016, 138). Plautus went further in psychological character development in the case of Phronesium (*Truculentus*), giving her depth, doubt and regret, and going beyond the image of a greedy and predatory harlot that makes up the type (Moore 1998, 140–157).

Prostitutes could freely use their bodies, so they could not be accused of adultery, nor could *stuprum* be committed against them. They offered their sexuality to men, as an object to be bought and sold. It is important to remember that the male figure is the patron of sexuality in patriarchal societies; as Eva Cantarella says, the Roman man is educated to conquer (Cantarella 1991, 12).

Having sex with a prostitute was not considered adultery, let alone a crime for which one could be found guilty. Given such a view of female sexuality in patriarchal society, it is not surprising that Romans did not restrain themselves in their relations with prostitutes (Knapp 2011, 278). In fact, they considered physical pleasure as an indispensable component of life, not to be renounced. Therefore, there was widespread tolerance for female prostitution in Rome. Like the Greeks, the Romans defined it as a necessity, a "remedy" for the security of their wives. This is because, paradoxically, prostitutes preserved the morality and fidelity of Roman women, since relations with a prostitute did not endanger the consanguinity of the family, nor did they compromise the sexual purity of a potential wife (Rabaza *et al*. 1998, 278). Thus, with these professionals, adolescents from a good family, who did not yet have enough money to pay a courtesan, served their apprenticeship in love (Salles 1983, 173).

In the general context of this revolution in customs, the same Roman conservatives agree with the Greeks that the pursuit of physical pleasures is indispensable in society, and, as a result, prostitution is an essential element of the social order. Cicero was of the opinion that if anyone thought that young men should be forbidden to visit prostitutes, he would be excessively strict, at variance not only with the licence of his time, but also with the morals and tolerance of his ancestors, since, for him, there had been no age in which such conduct would have been considered unlawful

(Cic. *Cael*. 48). In fact, only if one was too old could it be a valid reason for recrimination. In *Mercator,* the *adulescens* told an old man that he should leave pleasures to young people (Plau. *Mer.* 983–987).

As for social penalties suffered by prostitutes, they were sanctioned in the legal framework. Prostitutes were subject to infamy, just like actors and gladiators (McGinn 1998, 65). Members of these infamous professions were generally not allowed to speak on behalf of others in a court of law, let alone bring accusations against others. They were thought to undermine the *dignitas* of high citizenship, the *gravitas* that a Roman should possess. Infamy was an inescapable consequence, because they exposed themselves to the gaze and admiration of the public, and were financially rewarded for it (Edwards 1997, 67; Strong 2016, 23).

By the end of the Republic, in order to avoid being legally considered adulteresses, some married women registered as prostitutes. In imperial times, we find other laws, such as that of Augustus, who, with the *Lex Iulia* and the *Lex Papia et Poppaea* (18 BC and 9 AD, respectively), forbade prostitutes to marry free-born Romans and to receive inheritance (Faraone and McClure 2006, 17; McGinn 2011, 646). Therefore, the authorities tried to ensure that these women did not mix with the rest of the population by legally reinforcing existing rules or creating new ones, which shows the changes that took place in Roman society at the end of the Republic and the Empire. It is curious to observe to what extent prostitutes are aware of this separation: an example of this is in the comedy *Cistellaria*, where a matchmaker explains the condition of prostitutes (Plau. *Cist*. 22–41).

Prostitutes would generally offer their services in the forum, which was the heart of urban life. In fact, in the comedy *Curculio*, there is a description of the areas in Rome where the less commendable people could be found (Plau. *Cur*. 466–485). The Aventine was the area where high-end brothels were located, managed by *lenae/lenones*, who provided the rent of prostitutes for a certain time: a day, a month, or even a year (López 2003, 150). Therefore, there would not be a specific place for these establishments, but their location would depend on where the most clients were to be found (Vanoyeke 1991, 91).

The prostitutes of the Aventine despised those of the Subura, which, because of its overcrowding, was destined to attract representatives of trades on the fringes of city life, thus becoming a neighbourhood specializing in low-end prostitution (Marcos-Casquero 2005, 243). The prostitutes lived there, without hygiene or comfort, and offered their services at a very low price (Rabaza *et al.* 1998, 208). Thus, those who came in search of pleasure to this

area were people of lower status, such as slaves or immigrants. Moreover, the most disadvantaged found in the procurement of their daughters or their wives a means of earning money, and the Romans were well aware of the general lack of charm of the professional women of the Subura (Plau. *Poen.* 264–270 and *Cist.* 406–408; Salles 1983, 171).

Freedwomen also practiced this profession, which allowed them to preserve a certain independence and above all enabled their and their families' survival, as is once again clearly shown in *Cistellaria* (Plau. *Cist.* 38–41). These freedwomen gave a part of their profits to their patrons, or in most cases, patronesses, i.e. ladies of high society who administered their own fortunes, which gave them the right to free their slaves; once they exercised that right, they ensured that their debtors were engaged in "profitable" activities (Salles 1983, 191). We know that they used to set up a "small brothel" in their house. Only few descriptions of these establishments have come down to us, but they speak of small spaces where the women were practically prisoners (Foxhall 2013, 103–104).

To be visually identified, prostitutes wore characteristic dresses and hairstyles. The dress was usually a short brownish *toga*, which designated their profession and would never be worn by any other kind of woman. Moreover, expensive courtesans, could wear dresses of gaudy and transparent silk with luxurious clothes underneath, which indicated their refinement, and consequently the price that could be charged for intercourse with them. Thus, in the comedy *Epidicus*, the slave who gives his name to the comedy tells us how varied and expensive the clothing of these women was (Plau. *Epid.* 223–235). Upper-class women were distinguished from them by the fact that the *matronae* wore a foot-long *stola*, white, embroidered with a frill and adorned with a wide band known as *institа*, which served as a warning to the public of the risk of approaching them; they also wore the *palla*, a kind of cloak with which they covered themselves, and a ribboned hairstyle, *vittae*, completed their attire in its essentials (Marcos-Casquero 2005, 240).

Prostitutes were also present at some festivities and rituals. A well-known example is the *Vinalia*, which took place on 23 April. The *Vinalia* were the festivals of wine and Venus, in her invocation of *Venus Erycina* (McGinn 2011, 644). Rome imported this goddess during the Second Punic War, first installing her on the Capitoline Hill and then, thirty years later, outside the walls of the city, so that married and single young people would not mix during the celebrations and become corrupted (Strong 2016, 173). Beauty pageants, religious rites, and trade activities were all part of

the festival. For the sake of decency, wine was forbidden to Roman women. However, *meretrices*, as opposed to *matronae*, could drink it during the celebrations. Therefore, this goddess, associated with Jupiter, became the protector of *meretrices* (Sabbatucci 1988, 137).

Another festival in which prostitutes took part were the *Floralia*, celebrated in honour of Flora, the goddess of vegetation. These began to be observed in 173 BC and lasted for six days, from 28 April to 3 May. Prostitutes, in this value system, signified natural female sensuality, as opposed to matrons who represented the perfect cultural condition of Roman women (Sabbatucci 1988, 152). These were nocturnal celebrations, in which prostitutes paraded showing their charms, fully undressed if the public requested it (Tert. *De spect*. 17. 3; Ov. *Fast.* 5. 347–354). In a late legend, Flora became a rich courtesan in the Roman Empire, and the Roman people honoured her memory by holding annual games in her name. This story does not do justice to the original complexity of Flora as the protector of vegetation and fertility, as well as of pleasure and sensuality (Salles 1983, 209). In any case, the very fact that the participation of prostitutes in these festivities was fundamental guaranteed to their integration into the body of Roman society (McGinn 1998, 24).

Finally, at the end of the 2nd and beginning of the 1st century BC, the cult of Isis developed in Italy. Her feast was observed on 5 March and the celebrations were open to all social ranks. Prostitutes were not discriminated against, and it seems significant that brothels proliferated around temples dedicated to Isis. The cult of this goddess caused much disturbance to the established power.

Regarding the remuneration of prostitutes, their price is also reflected in the terminology applied to them: the prostitute Adelphasium in *Poenulus* speaks of *scorta diobolaria*, that is, of two-obol prostitutes, a very low price, which according to her defines those who are only suitable "for the filthy rabble of slaves" (Plau. *Poen*. 270). The adjective obviously refers to a Greek coin; therefore, Plautus presumably found it in a Greek comedy that served as his model; there is a perfect Latin parallel, *quadrantaria*, prostitute of the value of a quarter of an *as* (Cic. *Cael.* 62. 15.; McGinn 2004, 41).

We could ask ourselves the following question: to what social strata did the prostitutes in Plautus' plays belong? Evidently, they would not be associated with areas of misery, such as those that characterized the neighbourhoods of the Subura and the Velabrum, since we learn from Plautus that their employers could threaten them with confinement in pigsties if they did not fulfil the tasks assigned to them. This is what the *leno* says on two occasions to Xystilis and Phoenicium in *Pseudolus* (Plau. *Ps*. 214).

Likewise, these characters have slaves at their service and take great care in grooming them, which is to say that they have the aesthetic concern of luxury prostitutes, as demonstrated in *Mostellaria* (Plau. *Mos.* 249 and 272; Rabaza *et al.* 1998, 210).

Thus, knowing already that they are high-end prostitutes, we could classify them into those who are in love and those who are not (Duncan 2006, 257). Regarding the former, they are those who try to remain faithful to a single lover. Almost all of them hear warnings from old slaves, mothers or other prostitutes, trying to convince them that the desire to belong exclusively to one man is a mistake, as shown in *Cistellaria* (Plau. *Cist*. 78ff.). In *Mostellaria*, the old woman Scapha foretells Philematium that she will eventually be abandoned by her beloved, as it also happened to her (Plau. *Mos*. 201).

These sex workers in love do not stop loving and end up sharing with the lover, who has freed them, a happy future (Rabaza *et al.* 1998, 212). As for those who are not in love, they are mercenaries who trade in the sex market for money. They are generally content with their profession, which involves dispossessing lovers of their riches, a situation described by the slave Astaphium in *Truculentus* (Plau. *Truc*. 227–228).

Unloved prostitutes arouse a passion that generates greater evil, that of wasteful spending, the squandering of goods, for they lie about their feelings to get what they want (Duncan 2006, 257). Prostitutes are the vehicle for clients to spend their money, to dissipate wealth, to engage in all kinds of debauchery, as we can see in *Pseudolus* (Plau. *Ps*. 1128ff.). Even so, it has to be pointed out that, while some prostitutes were privileged, most were women who had been forced to trade their bodies by necessity, even hunger. In the same way, there was a great variety of procurers who brought them from places far away from Rome and Italy as another imported commodity to be exploited (López 2003, 156).

Likewise, in order to understand why the Roman elite tolerated the existence of brothels in their world, we should take into account their tolerance of the ubiquity of erotic art that even our culture might consider problematic. There were a wide variety of explicit sexual scenes on display in a number of settings, easily visible to women and children of the upper class. Indeed, these scenes could be found in their dwellings, both on clothes and on domestic objects used by both sexes and by these social ranks (Strong 2016, 119).

According to McGinn (2004, 119): "[w]e cannot simply assume that our notion of erotic art is identical to that of the Romans or that the impact of erotic representations was not informed, or even diminished, by packaging

in a Greek cultural format." In literary sources, Propertius expresses concern with the threat to morality posed by *obscenae tabulae* (Prop. 2. 6. 27–36). As for Pliny, he remains tacit on most depictions of nude or scantily clad men or women. One of his rare attacks on erotic art occurs in the context of denunciation of greed and gold (Plin. *NH*. 33. 4–5).

3. The *leno*

The *leno* is both a slave-owner who subjects his slaves to prostitution for profit and a brothel owner. As a figure personified in several of Plautus' comedies, this character's image is very precise and detailed from a social and moral point of view, providing us with information about the position he occupied in society, the rights he had and the characteristics of his business (Plau. *Ps.* 360–369; Marshall 2015, 123; Mattiangeli 2011, 2). Cicero, in discussing the professions that might be appropriate for an honourable man, comments on the shamefulness of earning one's living by catering to the pleasure of others (Cic. *Off*. 1.150). As such, the *leno* is a figure little appreciated by other characters (González-Vázquez 2004, 118). His appearance on stage triggers mockery, but through the exaggerated ridicule by the actors and the reaction of the spectators, it reveals the economic and social role of the character (Plau. *Cur.* 494–504).

In fact, the *leno* was one of those judged to be infamous and therefore could not hold a public office. Usually a foreigner, the *leno* represented for the Romans the corruption of Eastern lands, such as Greece or Asia Minor, especially despised by the traditionalist spirits of Rome (Salles 1983, 201). Consequently, the comedies represented that carefree and transgressive atmosphere that lashed out against the line of traditional morality with the excuse that what was being performed on stage were Greek customs, open to criticism, but presented in such an attractive way that they were pleasing to watch and even more pleasing to perform (Marcos-Casquero 2005, 234).

Ulpian defines a person who exercises or practices *lenocinium* (*Dig*. 3.2.4.2); according to him, practising *lenocinium* is no more valued than making profit from one's own body (*Dig*. 23.2.43.6–9). The activity of *lenocinium* is considered the same as the activity of prostitution, as if both professions were in the same low esteem from the point of view of society. Therefore, we define this trade as earning a living by selling women's bodies (Mattiangeli 2011, 6).

With regard to the so-called *lenae,* they are those who both initiate other women into prostitution in order to earn money, and live this kind of life in their own name. Furthermore, if an innkeeper in a tavern makes a profit from the bodies of her female employees, she is also considered a *lena*.

Even if the owner uses terms like "love" when talking to his slaves, or seems to treat them modestly, there can be no doubt that it is still a forced sexual activity. Since the owner has full rights over the woman, the use of any kind of violence towards her would be more common. Like all slave masters, the *leno* behaves in a tyrannical manner towards this female group that constitutes his main source of income. He makes his "protected women" believe in hypothetical liberation and demands from them total docility and efficient work (Marshall 2015, 135).

It is important to note that neither prostitution nor speculation in prostitution was, in classical Roman law, forbidden as a professional activity, but persons who engaged in it directly were punished with the mark of *infamia* (Mattiangeli 2011, 9). *Lenocinium* is defined as a "crime" and a penalty is enforced against a husband who profits from his wife's adultery (*Dig*. 48.5.2.2.). According to Mattiangeli (2011, 11), "[i]f this law was really enforced, which is doubtful, a permissive husband could be accused to be a miserable *Leno* and would be punished like a criminal rapist."

The *leno* obviously had the necessary instruments to threaten the women who worked for him, for it was in his hands to grant them freedom or sell them to another owner, who might treat them worse (Plau. *Ps*. 165–172). Through his trade, he logically sought enrichment, and thus Ballio, the *leno* in *Pseudolus*, advises and instructs the prostitutes under his power how they must act to achieve their profits (Plau. *Ps.* 172–184).

"Convenit, cras populo prostituam vos" says Ballio, and, more harshly, threatens one of them with the *pergula*, a shed where prostitutes too old or too ugly to attract good customers are relegated, and offered for a few sesterces to those rejected by society (Plau. *Ps*. 175). Likewise, Ballio divides the girls in his household into "specialised sections", so that each girl takes care of a particular guild and thus ensures the upkeep of the whole household: girls, slaves and the *leno* himself (Plau. *Ps*. 196–217). Thus, Ballio demands of his prostitutes, threatening them with abandonment, that they obtain a year's supply of food from their clients, with Phoenicium, who is in charge of the Roman rentiers, standing out among them.

With the example of this *leno*, we can see that his brothel must have been of a certain status, as it was frequented by notables. However, the clientele of most Roman *lenones* was to be found among the most unfortunate in

Roman or foreign society. All this population was found in the worst environments, as in the case of Lobo, another prototypical *leno* we find in Plautus' comedies, whose slave describes his master's house, which must have had a bad reputation (Plau. *Poen.* 825–844).

These houses were real traps: nice women, amphorae full of wine for the client, so that everything was ready to spend money on such pleasures. Not surprisingly, the atmosphere in these places was often quite hectic: if the prostitutes and the *leno* tried to get as much money as possible from those who entered, the clients did not hesitate to take as much as they could from the brothel. Some had to organize themselves into gangs to steal food and drink, important resources for most of these characters, who were in need themselves. That is why the maid of a *leno* feels the need to warn the others to be careful and on the alert for thieves (Plau. *Truc.* 95–112). Actually, the *leno* thinks that these kind of attacks on the house are part of the risks of the trade; and the more clients he has, the more likely they are to happen, because higher-class clients are less scrupulous as they can have absolute impunity (Plau. *Per.* 566–570).

In addition, there were upper-class women who profited from prostitution of their former slaves by receiving a percentage; however, their husbands or their sons would be the rich clients spending their wealth with the freedwomen (Salles 1983, 191). This explains the bittersweet relations between the mistresses and their clients, as reflected in Plautus' words: "Eas si adeas, abitum quam aditum malis, ita nostro ordini palam blandiuntur, clam, si occasio usquam est, aquam frigidam subdole suffundunt. Viris cum suis praedicant nos solere, suas paelices esse aiunt, eunt depressum" (Plau. *Cist.* 34–37).

In one of Plautus' comedies, we also find an example of what happened when a client, an *adulescens*, did not have enough money and the *lena* prevented him from entering the brothel; for the latter, there was little distance between her past misery and the current economic relief, so any false step could precipitate her back into destitution again. The balance was fragile, as many clients received a low income and their finances were poor (Plau. *As*. 140–143). In these circumstances, business prevailed over sentiment (González-Vázquez 2004, 118; Plau. *As.* 195–201).

As mentioned above, some customers rented young women for a long period of time, so that a rental contract had to be made. Thus, in the comedy *Asinaria* we find a contract between Diabolus, the *adulescens*, and the *lena* Cleareta (Plau. *As.* 746–808). In it, Diabolus' friend who draws it up, the Parasitus, points out the guarantees to prevent the young man's "property"

from having relations with another person. The contract stipulates precisely how the young woman, who could not even communicate with anyone on the outside, is to conduct herself (Plau. *As.* 752–767). Seen as an object, she contributes to her owner's reputation with her beauty and, consequently, she cannot make any decision on her own either in public or in private (Plau. *As*. 768–779). Another contract is also shown in which the price paid to Curculio by the lover of the young woman Planesium is indicated (Plau. *Cur.* 527-532). This includes, in addition to the rental of herself, the rental of her jewels and clothes. In this way, the new owner did not have to worry about the rented woman's attire. When a young woman was sold or rented for a season, she did not make any profit from the money paid for her; in fact, all the profit from her sale or rental generally accrued to the *leno* (Salles 1983, 200).

The women in these plays are familiar to the Roman audience, since domestic slaves were always sexually available to their owners. However, while this behaviour may have been practiced regularly, the combination of humiliation and jealousy expressed by their wives illustrates that society suppressed access to female slaves for sexual relations. Criticism existed, and the comedies show it both against young (*Mercator*) and old men (*Casina*).

With the example of Acropolistis in *Epidicus*, Plautus is able to draw attention to the moral problem inherent in domestic sexual slavery. The domestic slave was aware of the risk of being sold to another or simply discarded and forgotten. Sex work in Roman comedies illustrates the fragile and permeable boundaries that defined female slaves in Roman literature (Marshall 2015, 136).

Another characteristic of the *leno* is a predisposition to betray anyone for the sake of gain. In fact, we see Cappadocium bragging about how he obtained Planesium and how much he has gained from her (Plau. *Cur*. 527–532). Likewise, the first thing Curculio says in his speech is that a *leno* cannot give anyone anything in real estate since he has only a tongue with which to swear false oaths. If we take this statement as real, we have to consider that in Plautus' time most Roman actions were based on words and promises, and it would be understandable that this was inaccessible to the procurers, for they were considered, as we have seen, infamous people. In this period the honour and dignity of a person, the *existimatio*, was of fundamental importance, since the legal system was based on oral forms that were transformed into promises and on the word given, especially in the field of property rights (Mattiangeli 2011, 29). Taking into account these considerations we have to ask ourselves whether an infamous person

like the *leno* could have access to the Roman system of property and its guardianship, which relied on the credibility of promises, or whether he could own property only outside the law. Moreover, Curculio makes a very important claim from a legal point of view: a *leno* cannot obtain guarantees and cannot act as a guarantor for others, which would be a total absence of *auctoritas* (Plau. *Cur*. 513–516).

In the comedy *Pseudolus*, there is a reference to the disloyalty and social indifference of infamous *lenones* (Plau. *Ps*. 130–133). The quality of lying seems to be innate in the *leno*, regardless of his actions (Plau. *Ps*. 193–194). Consequently, we find many Plautine texts where the *leno* laughs at society, since he is proud of getting fortunes by false promises. *Pseudolus* describes *lenones* as a "pestilence" to be got rid of (Plau. *Ps*. 204).

The *leno* also shows disrespect for religion and morality (Plau. *Ps*. 265–269 and 351–356). In this same comedy, while Pseudolus claims that one has to have fear and respect for the gods, Ballio, in order to gain profit, is willing to offend a god by leaving a sacrifice unfinished. Therefore, while servants follow religious and moral customs, *lenones* tend not to. Another example is when Ballio tells Calidorus to steal money from his father in order to pay Phoenicia, and Pseudolus points out that this is not right, to which Ballio replies that good deeds are not for a *leno*. Calidorus tells him that *pietas* forbids it; the *leno*'s reaction is to laugh at Calidorus and his honesty (Plau. Ps. 278–295).

Taking the examples above into consideration, it seems that the *leno*'s infamy has its beginnings in a popular, social and legal reaction to behaviour contrary to *boni mores*, virtue, honesty, *pietas* and *fides* (Plau. *Per*. 347 and Plau. *Mos*. 144). In view of these comments and many other examples in Plautus' comedies, the *leno* can be assumed as a paradigmatic example of infamy both in the social and legal sphere (Mattiangeli 2011, 47).

4. Conclusion

In Plautus' comedies, the figure of the *meretrix* is shown as one who seeks to obtain all the goods and wealth of her client. To do so, she deceives, exhibits her body and sells herself for sexual practices. There are two types of prostitutes: on the one hand, prostitutes who fall in love with their client and end up getting married, the "good" ones, and prostitutes who are not in love with their client, the "bad" ones. *Meretrices* are always spared from any kind of punishment, as it would make no sense to punish them for practising their profession. Yet, as reflected in Plautus, most of them are adept at lying and

pretending when it helps them to achieve their goals. Indeed, the prostitute's dangerous appeal to the *adulescens* in these comedies is a quality by means of which low society becomes an object of desire. Both the good and the bad show the double face of the character, in order to maintain control, through the public's attention, over the *meretrix*. Thus, we see that the negative traits of prostitutes' trade, i.e., their service to someone as long as they can pay and their lack of commitment are what makes them so useful and desirable in the Roman cultural imaginary. In fact, prostitutes were a necessary perverse counterpoint, serving to support the ideal of the loyal *bona matrona*.

It is worth noting that, despite their "evil" actions, these prostitutes are not punished at the end of the comedy. Instead they get what they want or, at the very least, they receive the money for their services without further complication. This can be illustrated briefly by Erotium (*Menaechmi*) and the Bacchides, who have their feast and spend the evening with their lovers, unconcerned with all the trouble their relationship might cause; the height of satisfaction is found in Phronesium, who has been well served by their wiles: "Lepide ecastor aucupavi atque ex mea sententia, meamque ut rem video bene gestam, vostram rursum bene geram" (Plau. *Truc*. 965). Consequently, it can be deduced that the character of the prostitute is treated with sympathy and without moralising zeal on the part of the playwrights.

As for the *leno*, the brothel manager, we have seen that his trade and his way of earning a living actually provoked aversion within his society. The most prominent *leno* in the Plautine literary output is Ballio, although we also find other characters of this type in the comedies *Rudens*, *Persa*, *Poenulus* and *Curculio*. Like for their Greek counterparts, greed and the lust for money are their priorities, which is why they do not hesitate to lie, cheat and swindle. There is no doubt about their important social and economic role, for anyone who wanted to reach the pleasure market had to pass first of all through the procurer. Just like the *leno*, the *lena* is shown with the same function, although in many cases she is usually the prostitute's own mother, and she usually justifies her conduct by the fact that this is the only way they can earn a living. We have also seen, e.g. in the character of Ballio, how the *leno* tends to take advantage of women in his charge by promising them their freedom, whereas any kind of profit that they make goes directly to him.

It is worth noting that both *lenones* and prostitutes, because of their trade and characteristics, would have no honour or prestige, as their social evaluation was quite the opposite. Through the examples of the Plautine comedies, it can be seen that both the *leno* and the prostitute are considered

paradigmatic examples of social and legal infamy. It is certainly no coincidence that all the professions that incurred infamy were associated with transgressive sexuality. Representatives of these trades were objects of other people's desires, but, in serving the pleasure of others, were tarnished by exposure to the public eye. At the same time, prostitutes, unlike the categories constructed by ancient moralists and modern historians, could in practice be occasionally difficult to distinguish clearly from other disadvantaged groups and individuals. Likewise, any attempt to strongly marginalize these characters has little or no corroboration in the visual and archaeological record: erotic art could be found everywhere, making it difficult to distinguish whether women were prostitutes or matrons, and brothels would be integrated into the urban landscape, with no marked social segregation.

With regard to the source used, this goes beyond a specific ideology. Plautus' plays speak of a world that unites two cultures that have come into contact with each other and are very different: Greek and Roman. These plays also show the unstoppable process of Hellenisation of Roman society and how its members perceived these changes in their customs. Therefore, Plautus' comedy – while a direct continuation of the Greek genre of *Néa*, and therefore centred on Hellenic plots, characters, customs and settings – nevertheless includes a very wide range of elements typical of Roman life, customs and society. For this reason, his plays are undoubtedly of great interest for learning about society of his times, since through the different characters, mockery and derision, the audience can identify with the performance.

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