

The phrase *confossioem soricina nenia* at Plautus *Bacchides* 889 has been an interpretational difficulty for a long time. This paper is an attempt to refine the usual definition of *nenia* as given in Latin dictionaries and to offer a satisfactory interpretation of the crux in Plautus.

A brief review of the etymological possibilities and the attested meanings of this word indicate three things: the word cannot have originally meant ‘plaything’ as often assumed after Heller’s influential study (1943), it did not mean ‘lower intestine’, and it nowhere meant ‘mincemeat’. The latter two definitions can be shown to be the result of antiquarian and modern scholarly misunderstandings. These possible meanings can therefore be ruled out at *Bacchides* 889 as, it will be argued, can other proposals of varying quality: ‘sausage’ (Lambinus 1595, Schneider 1878), ‘vox penetrans’ (Ussing 1875), ‘anus’ (Sedgwick 1930), ‘boil’ (Riess 1941). Similarly unconvincing are attempts to excise the entire passage (Anspach 1882, Zwierlein 1992) or to emend the phrase (Nowicki 1997/8).

The solution to the passage proposed here builds on the work of Hübner 1970, who showed that the shrew (*sorex*) numbered among the *oscines*, or animals whose cry was a meaningful omen. The scene depicts a threat to kill someone (N.B. *mactare*), who is like an inauspicious shrew, by means of a spit (*veru*, with its sacrificial overtones) so that they are left ‘more full of holes than a shrew’s *nenia*.’ In this context *nenia* must mean ‘end’ or ‘death’, as it does elsewhere in Plautus (*Pseud.* 1277, *Poen.* 231), a semantic development by synecdoche from the *nenia* ‘mourning song’ offered at the end of one’s life. It is probably a colloquial bit of language in which ‘mourning song’ has become an expression for the end of any sort of activity (cf. *conclamare* ‘to mourn’ and *funus* ‘funeral,’ both of which indicate ‘end’ at Ter. *Eun.* 348, Plaut. *Men.* 492). The idea is supported by the Greek saying (*paroimia*) *katà muòs ólethron* ‘like a mouse’s death,’ reported at Aelian 12.10. Importantly, this phrase was used by Menander in his *Thaïs* (219 Koerte) and by the comic Philemon (211 Kock), a fact which suggests that here in his *Bacchides* Plautus has adapted for his Roman audience a proverb from Greek comedy.