

**William W. BATSTONE**  
**Menander and Plautus: Metatheatre met a Farce**

For centuries the appreciation of Plautine comedy has been linked to an appreciation of Menandrian comedy to Plautus' disadvantage. The publications of some lines from Menander's *Dis Exapaton* seemed to confirm the communis opinio: Plautus like his comedy broader, more theatrical, more conventional; he was not subtle, realistic, or urbane. About 20 years ago, Nial Slater argued that Plautus' theatricality and indifference to realistic illusion were the virtues of a playwright who knew his audience and celebrated his creativity. This was not, however, a new evaluation but a transvaluation: the staginess, the interrupted plot, the two-dimensional characters who stepped out of role, all that was wrong with Plautus for Leo and Norwood, were now considered iself-consciousî, îcreativeî, and îoriginalî. This was given the name îmetatheatreî: it was theatre about theater.

It is my view that this transvaluation has still not moved our understanding of Plautus forward. The problem has been in seeing how the plays of each poet are connected to the life of the audience. Granted that there have a number of historicist interpretations (Plautus as the proto-feminist; Plautus against slavery; Plautus against barbarian soldiers), but these local explanations are not sufficient to explain Plautus' transhistorical appeal. A re-evaluation of Menander's *Dis Exapaton* and the parallel lines from Plautus' *Bacchides* in light of a return to Abel's view of metatheatre can help us find a new perspective on both poets.

Comic metatheatre, like it's tragic counterpart, was for Abel, who invented the term, theatre about the theatricality of life, not theatre about theatre. If the metatheatrical hero of tragedy is undermined by the failure of inexorable truths in a rhetorical world (Abel), the metatheatrical hero of comedy is liberated by the fact that the symbolic world is already an act. It is this sense that reality is both contested and improvised that connects the Plautine play to the world of the forum and Plautine comedy to the ways that even today we laugh at ourselves and others. The breaches of realistic decorum not only exploit energies and desires that polite society always represses, but they tell a truth about who we are, who we might be, and how we can and do play within the symbolic world. They play with the play of the world.

The fragments from Menander's *Dis Exapaton*, when compared with Plautus' *Bacchides*, confirm this. I will argue that Plautine farce arises from this play with the symbolic construction of reality and allows him to tell truths that must remain as suppressed in Hellenistic New Comedy as they are in polite conversation. The humanistic sophistication of New Comedy turns out to depend upon the social conventions and repressions that it stages: it is a drama about how to act (act like a friend, act like a grown-up). Plautine comedy, on the other hand, tells us who we really are: adventitious, improvised, desirous beings, who find their greatest freedom in improvising and manipulating the symbolic.