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The Economy of Desire in Plautus' *Asinaria*

The opening exchange of Plautus' *Asinaria* establishes a basic parallel between the monetary economy and the economy of sexual desire. Consumption in both spheres is characterized by an apparently limitless economy, so that the *lena* Cleareta can respond to Argyrippus' complaint *quid modus dandi?* by identifying the same 'market forces' at work in his own desire: *quid modist ductando, amando?* Reading the play as a dramatization of economic forces offers a new perspective on its underlying logic and the motivation for a conclusion often found unsatisfactory.

The principle of a generalized desire or demand which is limitless insofar as it cannot be satisfied by a singular attainment of its object is only one of several features of the play which correspond to the Roman theory of money as it is transmitted to us by the jurists. The extraordinary transaction involving the asses, which gives the play its name, also finds its counterpart in Roman monetary theory. The separation of sale and purchase in such a way that the asses can be conveyed to the merchant of Pella prior to the delivery of payment seems without parallel in ancient business practice (Vogt-Spira 1991, 47), and it corresponds to the theoretical principle that money results in the separation into two distinct transactions of purchase and sale, identical in the case of barter exchange. The exceptional form of the sale of the asses is the necessary condition for the deception by which Argyrippus miraculously acquires his 20 *minae*. Analogously, political economy since Marx sees the disjunction of purchase and sale as the mechanism which enables the 'magical' production of capital.

Argyrippus' rival Diabolus takes an opposite approach, seeking not to exploit the money economy but to escape it altogether. He attempts to remove the love object Philaenium entirely from the society in which she circulates as commodity, imposing, among others, the condition of monolingualism: *neque ulla lingua sciat loqui nisi Attica* (793). Although the 'Attic' language here is usually read as either a trace of the Greek original or a gesture toward *palliata* conventions (Bertini 1968, 304), the phrase takes on new meaning when read against the peculiarly Roman notion of *commercium sermonis*. *Commercium* (distinct from *permutatio* or barter trade) falls, like *conubium*, under the *ius civile*, and is therefore conducted (notionally) only in Latin. The Roman notion of 'linguistic commerce' (as attested, for example, in Pliny and Sallust) correspondingly implies Latin. Viewed from the perspective of Plautus' Roman audience, therefore, Diabolus' proviso entails total exclusion from the sphere of exchange.

Diabolus' plan aims at the destruction of the economy driving the play, and thus represents the greatest threat to the *status quo*. The play resolves this conflict with an ending which has, ironically, found suspicion among critics for its apparent lack of resolution (Vogt-Spira 39). If, however, the play is read as a dramatization of economic forces, the ending appears as the definitive re-establishment of those forces. The limitless economy of desire reappears in the *senex* (*quid modi, pater, amplexando facies?*, 882), while Philaenium is assimilated not merely to the status of a commodity, but specifically to that of the commodity money. Shared out (*in parte* <math>m> *hac* . . . *potirier*, 916) between

father and son in such a way that her worth is evaluated solely in quantitative terms, she accedes to the status which the jurists assigned to money, that of a commodity defined solely by *quantitas* rather than *qualitas*.