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Ensemble Scenes in Plautus

If, as some evidence suggests, Greek New Comedy observed a limit of three speaking actors, then any scene in Plautus or Terence with four or more speakers probably contains renovations by the Roman author. This presentation explores the entire Plautine corpus to uncover general principles surrounding the use of ensemble scenes, thus expanding upon some observations by Gaiser and Barsby on just a few specific examples. A closer examination reveals that Plautus utilizes a fourth, fifth, or sixth speaking actor in readily definable ways, which can be characterized as follows:

First, Plautus likes a grand finale: eight of his plays present four or more speakers onstage concurrently in the final scene, and two others cannot be staged without four speaking actors. The end of *Bacchides*, for example, presents a double seduction of two old men by two coaxing courtesans.

Second, Plautus often exploits a fourth or fifth speaker to punctuate his most farcical scenes. The most illustrative examples are *Asinaria* III.3, in which the two wily slaves taunt their master and girlfriend with Saturnalian glee, and V.2, in which the matrona and parasite disrupt the raucous party of father, son, and girlfriend.

Third, meter reflects and reinforces the excitement of ensemble scenes. Scenes with four or more speakers seldom employ iambic senarii; most frequently they employ trochaic septenarii, with a few scenes in polymetric cantica. For example, a shift from iambic senarii to trochaic septenarii marks the arrival of a fourth speaker to begin the lively lottery scene in *Casina*.

Fourth, there is no apparent correlation between the chronology of the plays and the use of a fourth speaking actor. Among early plays we find *Stichus* (3 speakers) and *Asinaria* (5 speakers); among later plays we find *Casina* (5 speakers) and *Pseudolus* (3 speakers, except for three words by a slave).

Fifth, there may be a correlation between Plautus' Greek original and the number of speakers he saw fit to use. The plays from originals by Menander and Philemon are conservative in the number of speakers used, while those from Diphilus and Alexis require a minimum of five speakers. This may reflect different comic sensibilities of the Greek authors, differences magnified by Plautus' introduction of additional speakers; or it may suggest that the so-called "three actor rule" was not as rigid as is often thought.