

In Plautus' *Casina*, a play whose plot and action are controlled by its female characters, the female slave Pardalisca stands out as the strongest character of the work, and in fact as the strongest *ancilla* in extant Roman comedy, a fact heretofore unnoticed by scholars of New Comedy. Fulfilling the normally male role of the clever slave (becoming herself an *ancilla callida*), Pardalisca demonstrates dominance over all the other characters, of both genders and both classes (free and slave). Although she does not conceive the play's central trick, she is instrumental in its execution. In speech, imagery, action, and interactions with others, Pardalisca exercises power not only over the rest of the characters, but also—by associating herself with the absent yet omnipresent figure of Casina—over the entire play.

Interpretations of *Casina* focus mostly on the relationship between the play's *uxor dotata*, Cleostrata, and her husband (e.g., Moore, Rei, Franko). Slater briefly discusses Pardalisca as an assistant to Cleostrata in her deception plot; Questa discusses Pardalisca's metatheatrical influence on *Casina*'s plot and the light it can shed on the play's manuscript tradition. Other scholars have interpreted Pardalisca as producer of a paratragedy (Andrews), as an example of scent-related puns and imagery in *Casina* (Connors), or as part of *Casina*'s program of gender-switching and class inversions (Gold). I discuss four previously unexamined components of Pardalisca's characterization to argue that her subversion and transcendence of gender and class roles are the most profound in the work and indeed are unprecedented in Roman comedy.

[1] Pardalisca is the only character in *Casina* (and in Plautus overall) to cross both gender and slave status advantageously and she does so by verbally and theatrically displaying her dominance not only over the free male *senex* and his male slave *uilicus*, but also over the free women of the play and the male slave Chalinus, who masquerades as the bride Casina.

[2] She is integral to *Casina*'s deception plot: she “plays” the *senex* (685), humiliates the *uilicus* (875–936), instructs Chalinus how to behave as a subversive woman (815–824), and distinguishes herself from her female co-conspirators—women of the master class—by mocking their gluttony (775–779).

[3] Her speech is remarkably inconsistent with Plautine womanly speech as explicated by Adams, a fact that underscores her near-complete, if temporary, transcendence of social barriers.

[4] Finally, the fantastic image of a raging Casina created by Pardalisca (621–719) gives a provocative glimpse of what a slave girl in Casina's situation could have been feeling, thinking, and wishing she could do—an image strengthened because Pardalisca, herself a female slave, is the character creating it. *Casina*'s male slaves may joke elsewhere about resenting the master's sexual abuse (e.g., 460–462), but the female slave Pardalisca enacts that resentment and thereby gains not only power but some revenge over the master. At this point in the play, Pardalisca becomes Casina and wields transgressive dominance over all other characters, just as the imaginary Casina in this scene brandishes her two swords at both men and women, both masters and slaves.

Though a female slave, Pardalisca exerts power over all other characters and the play's action itself, not only by taking on the role of the *seruus callidus* but also by invoking the potentially explosive emotional reaction of the female household slave subject to male exploitation. Tricking her male oppressors and mocking her citizen female allies, Pardalisca becomes *Casina*'s strongest character and also the strongest *ancilla* in Roman comedy.

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