

SEM-II MIC ENGLISH

Analysis of Plautus Pot of Gold

Plautus's *The Pot of Gold*, *Aulularia* in Latin, adapts a Greek play that has since been lost and situates it within familiar Roman audiences and literary conventions. Like most of its contemporaries, *The Pot of Gold* is written in verse, using several different meter patterns that were either chanted plainly or sung to the tune of accompanying pipes. Out of respect for the play's Greek origins, Plautus sets the story in Athens, though its themes and styles are decidedly Roman. A comedic satire depicting the anxiety of greed, avarice, and miserliness, *The Pot of Gold* centers around the titular object—a pot of gold once hidden by Euclio's household deity and only recently revealed—and the consequences it has on the host of intertwined characters involved.

Consistent with Plautus's context, the play's plot fits into the patriarchal confines of Roman society. Phaedria's lack of agency aligns with the reality of what life was like for Roman women; her inability to make decisions for herself indicates their vulnerability to the whims of the men in their life. Indeed, even her pregnancy does not appear to be her choice, for Lyconides blames alcohol and lust on his actions, an ambiguous framing that obscures the event itself. Arranged marriage was customary in Roman life and designed to best match daughters to wealthy, successful suitors who might elevate their status. Thus, Euclio's choice to promise Phaedria to Megadorus makes sense, as he intended to use his daughter—and her

suitor's willingness to forego the expected dowry—as a tool to elevate his standing and wealth.

Another token of Roman life embedded into the fabric of the play is the existence of slavery. Staphylla and Strobilus, two key characters who directly and indirectly facilitate the play's happy ending, are enslaved. Their status is important only as a plot device, for they both fit into the Roman trope of the "cunning slave."

Historically, Roman slaves were captured during battle or bought from neighboring provinces; the forced labor of captive foreigners fueled the Roman economy and, soon, became integral to its function. In *The Pot of Gold*, their importance cannot be overstated; indeed, these "cunning slaves" ultimately lead the characters to their ultimate resolution before fading once more into the backdrop.

Plautus's comedy of errors relies on several Roman character archetypes. First, the conflict is structured around a romantic misunderstanding between three characters: Phaedria, who acts as the "meretrix," or object of desire; Lyconides, who plays the role of the infatuated young man, the "adolescens"; and Megadorus, the "senex" who is the older romantic rival or parental figure to the adolescens. These characters recur throughout Roman plays, and their interactions fuel the better part of *The Pot of Gold's* arc.

Euclio, in this case, is a slight distortion of the "leno" archetype, for though he controls Phaedria's marital status, he does so as a father rather than a pimp, as the leno usually appears. Too, Euclio is miserly and greedy, more concerned with

money than his daughter's happiness. Strobilus, Lyconides's servant, is a paradigmatic example of the "servus" character, for he is talkative, witty, and above all, immensely clever. He acts on his own accord, but his cunning manipulation of characters and circumstances usually works to the benefit of the adulescens, as it indeed does in this play. Finally, Staphyla, Phaedria's maid and confidant, is known as the "ancilla." Though the ancilla often overlaps with the cunning "servus," the role is geared toward women; though clever and loyal, Staphyla's role is limited by her gender and domestic concerns.

Using character tropes such as these, Plautus creates an environment to criticize and satirize certain elements of Roman life. The play is a didactic means for its author to discuss Roman values and virtues and reveal the susceptibility of men to immorality. By the end, the undesirable traits he first posed—greed, lust, and promiscuity—have dissolved, and the characters have learned how to live virtuous lives.