

PLAUTUS

From *The Menaechmi*

Source: Plautus, *The Menaechmi*, Act IV. Translated by Richard W. Hyde and Edward C. Weist. In Kevin Guinagh and Alfred P. Dorjahn (eds.), *Latin Literature in Translation*. New York: Longmans, Green and Co, 1942.

Plautus, one of the few playwrights of the New Comedy school whose work has survived, lived 254–184 BCE, but we do not know the circumstances of this play's original performance. It is one of the inspirations for Shakespeare's Comedy of Errors.

Synopsis: Moschus, a merchant of Syracuse, had identical twin sons. When the boys were seven years old, Moschus took one of them, Menaechmus, with him on a business trip to Tarentum. There the boy became separated from his father and lost in the crowd. He was found later and adopted by a wealthy merchant of Epidamnus. In this city he grew to manhood and married a rich wife.

Meanwhile, so great was the parents' grief for the lost boy that the remaining twin, Sosicles, was renamed Menaechmus. When the latter reached young manhood he set out with his slave Messenio in search of his twin. At the opening of the action, Menaechmus Sosicles has arrived at Epidamnus after six years of wandering.

Just prior to their appearance on the street where Menaechmus of Epidamnus lives, the latter has as usual been quarreling with his wife. To spite her he has stolen a rich mantle of hers to give to the courtesan, Erotium, who later unwittingly gives the mantle to the other twin, asking that it be repaired.

[Prelude]

[Enter MENAECHMUS SOSICLES, R.]

MEN. II: That was a foolish thing I did a while ago when I handed over my purse and money to Messenio. He has got himself into a chop-house somewhere, I suppose.

[Enter WIFE, from her house.]

WIFE: I'll watch and see how soon my husband will get home. Ah ha, there he is. I'm saved! He is bringing back the cloak.

MEN. II [*to- himself*]: I wonder where Messenio can be rambling now.

WIFE: I'll go up to the fellow and welcome him as he deserves. [*to MEN. II*] You scoundrel, aren't you ashamed to come into my sight with that garment?

MEN. II [*surprised*]: What's this? What is troubling you, madam?

WIFE: You shameless wretch, do you dare say a single word to me? Do you dare to speak?

MEN. II: Pray, what have I done, that I shouldn't dare to speak to you?

WIFE: You ask me? Oh, the shameless impudence of the man!

MEN. II [*mockingly*]: I suppose you know, madam, why it was that the Greeks used to call Hecuba a bitch?

WIFE: No, I do *not*.

MEN. II: Because Hecuba used to act just the way you do now. She used to heap abuse on everybody that she saw. That's how she got to be called a bitch, and she deserved it, too.

WIFE: It's impossible to put up with such outrages. I'd rather be husbandless all my life than stand for such outrages!

MEN. II: Is it any of *my* business whether you can put up with the state of marriage or whether you are going to leave your husband? Or is it the custom here to babble to perfect strangers?

WIFE: Babble, you say? I swear I'll remain married not an instant longer—to put up with your ways!

MEN. II: For all of me, by heaven, you can be a widow as long as Jove sits on his throne.

WIFE: For that, by goodness, I'll call my father and tell him about your outrages. [*calls within the house to slave, who comes at once*] Here, Decio, go find my father, and ask him to come with you to me. [*Slave runs off L.*] Tell him it's absolutely necessary. [*to MEN. II*] I'll tell him of all your outrages!

MEN. II: Are you mad? What outrages? [*mocking her*]

WIFE: You steal cloaks and money from your wife and take them to your mistress. Is that straight enough?

MEN. II [*applauding*]: Bravo, woman! You certainly are a bad one, and a bold one, too! Do you dare *say* that I stole this when I got it from another woman, who wanted me to have it repaired?

WIFE: A few minutes ago you didn't deny stealing it; and are you going to hold it now before my very eyes? Aren't you ashamed?

MEN. II: I beg of you, woman, tell me, if you can, what potion I can drink that will make me able to put up with your bad humor. I don't know whom you take me for. As for you, I don't know you any more than I know the man in the moon.

WIFE: You may make fun of me, but you won't be able to make fun of my father. He's coming now. [*pointing off L., where FATHER appears hobbling towards them*] Back there. Do you know *him*?

MEN II [*facetiously*]: Yes, I knew him when I knew Methuselah. I met him the same day I met you.

WIFE : You deny that you know me? that you know my father?

MEN. II : Yes, and your grandfather too, if you want to lug *him* in. [*stalks to extreme R.*]

WIFE: By heaven, that's the way you always are about everything.

[*Enter FATHER.*]

SONG—FATHER

I'm getting along just as fast as my age will permit and this business requires,

But if some of you say that that's easy for me—very briefly I'll show that you're liars:

My body's a burden, my nimbleness gone, and of strength I've a notable lack,

I am quite overgrown with my years—oh, confounded old age is a curse on the back!

Why, if I were to tell all the terrible evils that age, when it comes, brings along,

I'm certain as certain can be that past suitable limits I'd lengthen this song.

However my mind is a little disturbed at this thing, for it seems a bit queer

That my daughter should suddenly send to my house with directions for me to come here.

And how the affair is related to me, she has not let me know up to now;

But I'm a good guesser, and feel pretty sure that her husband and she've had a row.

That's what usually happens when men are enslaved by their wives and must come when they call;

And then it's the wives who are mostly to blame, while the husbands aren't guilty at all.

And yet there are bounds, which we all must observe, to the things that a wife can endure,

And a woman won't call in her father unless the offense of her husband is sure. .

But I think very soon the suspense will be over, and then I'll know what is the matter-

But look, there's my daughter in front of the door, and her husband; he's not looking at her. It's just as I suspected. I'll speak to her.

WIFE: I'll go meet him. [*meeting him C.*] I hope you are well, father.

FATHER: I hope you are well. Do I find you well? Are you well, that you summoned me? Why are you sad? Why does he [*pointing with staff*] stand apart from you, in anger? You have been quarreling about something. Tell me which of you is at fault, and be brief about it; no rigmarole.

WIFE: I am guilty of nothing on my part; I'll ease you on this point first, father. But I can't live here, and I can't stand it another minute. Take me away.

FATHER: Why, what's the matter?

WIFE: I'm made fun of, father.

FATHER: By whom?

WIFE: By *him*, to whom you gave me: my husband.

FATHER [*to audience*]: Look at that now! A squabble! [*to WIFE*] How many times have I told you to see to it that neither of you come to me with your complaints?

WIFE [*tearfully*]: But father, how could I help it? I think you could understand—unless you don't want to.

FATHER: How many times have I told you to humor your husband? Pay. no attention to what he does, or where he goes, or what he is about. .

WIFE: Why, he has been making love to a courtesan who lives right next door.

FATHER: That's sensible enough. And I'll warrant he'll make love to her all the more, with you spying on him this way.

WIFE: And he drinks there, too.

FATHER: Well, will he drink any the less on your account, here or anywhere else that he chooses? Devil take it, why will you be so foolish? You might as well expect to forbid him to accept dinner invitations or to entertain guests at his own house. Do you want husbands to be slaves? You might as well expect to give him a stint of work, and have him sit among the slave-girls and card wool.

WIFE [*resentfully*]: Apparently I had you come here to defend my husband's case, father, not mine! You're *my* attorney, but you plead *his* case.

FATHER: If he has been delinquent in any way, I'll be even more severe with him than I was with you. But since he keeps you well supplied with gold trinkets and clothes and gives you servants and provisions as he should, it is better for you, girl, to take a sane view of things.

WIFE: But he steals my gold and my cloaks from the cupboard. He robs me and takes my trinkets to courtesans on the sly.

FATHER: He does wrong if he does; you do wrong if he doesn't: that's accusing an innocent man.

WIFE: But he has the cloak right now, father, and the bracelet that he took to the woman. He is bringing them back now because I have found out about it.

FATHER: I'll find out from him just what has happened. I'll go speak to him. [*goes over to MEN. II and taps him with staff*] Menaechmus, for my enlightenment tell me what you are quarreling about. Why are you sad? Why does she stand apart from you, in anger?

MEN. II: Whoever you are, whatever your name is, old man, I call as my witnesses great Jupiter and the gods—

FATHER: Why? Wherefore?' And for what?

MEN. II: That I have neither wronged this woman, who accuses me of stealing this cloak from her house—

WIFE: Perjury, eh?

MEN. II: If I have ever set my foot inside the house in which she lives, may I be the most accursedly accursed!

FATHER: Are you in your right mind, to make such a wish? Do you deny that you have ever set foot in the house you live in, you utter madman?

MEN. II: Old man, do you say I live in that house?

FATHER: Do you deny it?

MEN. II: I' faith, I do deny it.

FATHER: No; you deny not "in faith" but in joke -unless, of course, you have moved out overnight. [*motions WIFE to C.*]—Come here, please, daughter. What do you say? You haven't moved from the house, have you?

WIFE: Why should we, or where should we move *to*, I ask you?

FATHER: By heaven, I don't know.

WIFE: It's clear that he is making fun of you. Don't you get that?

FATHER: Menaechmus, you have joked long enough; now attend to business.

MEN. II: I ask you, what business have I with you? Or who are you? Are you sane? And this woman, who has been plaguing me this way and that—is she sane? [*tears his hair in exasperation*]

WIFE [*to FATHER, frightened*]: Do you see the color of his eyes? See how a green color is coming over his temples and forehead! How his eyes shine!

MEN. II [*to audience*]: Alack, they say I'm crazy, whereas it is they who are really that way themselves. What could be better for me, since they say I am mad, than to pretend to be insane, to scare them off? [*begins to jump about madly*]

WIFE: How he stretches and gapes! What shall I do, father?

FATHER: Come over here, my child, as far as you can from him. [*retreating L.*]

MEN. II [*pretending madness*]: Ho, Bacchus! Ho, Bromius! Where in this forest do you bid me to the hunt? I hear. but cannot leave this place, so closely am I guarded by that rabid bitch upon my left. And behind there is that bald goat, who often in his time has ruined innocent citizens by his false testimony.

FATHER: Curse you!

MEN. II: Lo, Apollo from his oracle bids me to burn out the eyes of that woman with flaming torches. [*charges at WIFE, then immediately retreats*]

WIFE: I am lost, father! He threatens to burn out my eyes.

FATHER [*to WIFE, aside*]: Hist, daughter!

WIFE: What? What shall we do?

FATHER: Suppose I summon the slaves? I'll go bring some people to take this man away and chain him up indoors before he makes any more disturbance.

MEN. II [*aside*]: I'm stuck; if I don't hit upon a scheme, they'll take me into the house with them. [*aloud*] Apollo, you forbid me to spare her face with my fists unless she leaves my sight and goes utterly to the devil? [*advances threateningly*] I'll do your bidding Apollo!

FATHER: Run home as fast as you can, before he thumps you.

WIFE : I am running: Watch him, father; don't let him get away! Oh! am I not a miserable woman to have to listen to such things! [*Exit into her house.*]

MEN. II [*aside*]. I got rid of her rather well. [*aloud, threatening FATHER*] No, Apollo, as for this most filthy wretch, this bearded tremulous Tithonus, who is called the son of Cygnus, you bid me break his limbs and bones and joints with that staff which he holds?

FATHER [*retreats, shaking his staff*]: You'll get a beating if you touch me or come any closer.

MEN. II I'll do your bidding! I'll take a double-edged axe and chop the flesh of this old man to mince meat, down to the very bones!

FATHER [*aside*]: Well then, I must beware and take care of myself Really, I am afraid, from the way he threatens, that he may do me harm. [*MEN. retreats C.*]

MEN. II: You give me many commands, Apollo! Now you bid me take my fierce untamed yoked horses and mount my chariot, to crush this old stinking toothless lion. Now I've mounted! [*business*] Now I hold the reins! Now the goad is in my hand! Forward, my steeds, make loud the clatter of your hooves! And in swift flight make undiminished the fleetness of your feet! [*gallops about the stage*]

FATHER: Do you threaten me with yoked horses?

MEN. II: Lo, Apollo, again you bid me make a charge at him, this fellow who stands here, and slay him. [*rushes forward, then suddenly stops*] But who is this, who drags me from my chariot by the hair? He alters your commands, even the commands of Apollo! [*pretends to fall senseless to the ground*]

FATHER [*advances cautiously*]: Alas, by heaven, it is a severe disease! O gods, by your faith, what sudden changes do ye work! Take this madman—how strong he was a little while before. This disease has smitten him all of a sudden. I'll go get a doctor as quick as I can. [*Exit, L.*]

MEN. II [*getting up*]: Lord! These idiots who compel me, a sane man, to act like a madman! Have they got out of my sight now, I wonder? Why don't I go straight back to the ship while the going is good? [*as he starts to go, R., to audience*] I beg of all of you, if the old man comes back don't tell him what street I've taken. [*Exit, R.*]