

MERCURY AND METATHEATRE: THE ANTELOGIUM IN PLAUTUS' AMPHITRUO

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In the early nineteenth century in England an actor by the name of Robert Coates¹ is said to have become so popular on account of his bad acting that people flocked from all over to attend his performances in the Regency Theatre in London. He went about for years in a Romeo costume, hoping to gain the part. When this eventually came to pass, his atrocious acting made him an overnight star: he tried to rewrite Shakespeare; he improvised scenes; he sometimes addressed the spectators in the middle of a scene; and he actually threatened to assault them if they laughed too loudly!

It is not known whether Titus Maccus Plautus was as bad an actor as Robert Coates. What is known, however, is that some of the English actor's idiosyncrasies had been features of Plautus' plays two thousand years before, and that the Plautine plays were a resounding success. These features sound remarkably like the *vitium frequentissimum* (i.e. actors' habit of communicating directly with the audience) that Plautus was accused of by Euanthius² and which could well be designated by the term "metatheatre".

The term "metatheatre" is used by Abel (1963:77 *passim*) for theatrically self-conscious theatre, in other words, for theatre about theatre, and by Gentili (1979:15, 33-35) not for play-within-a-play, but for theatre based on pre-existing theatre, notably Greek New Comedy. A fusion of the two definitions by Slater (1981:iv) is perfectly accommodated in Plautus' plays, which may be regarded as the very paradigm of metatheatre: on the one hand, they are plays modelled on previous plays; on the other, they constitute "theatre of the mind" and are therefore aware of their own theatrical nature. Closely related to the concept of metatheatre is non-illusory drama with features like prologue, epilogue, monologue, direct address, aside, role playing and improvisation, all of which become metatheatrical by their emphasis on the play as a play.

Among the extant *palliata* the *Amphitruo* is unique as mythological travesty, or parody of tragedy, or *tragicomoedia*,³ in which gods are characters in the play. The plot is as follows: the heroine, Alcumena, is made pregnant by her husband Amphitruo, before he leaves on campaign. She is also made pregnant by Jupiter who assumes the appearance of her husband. In his turn, Mercury, Jupiter's son and *aide de camp*, takes on the guise of Amphitruo's slave, Sosia. The mistaken identities give rise to a quarrel between Amphitruo and Alcumena which is resolved only after she

1 See the *Perdeby* of 1 October 1993: "Die wêreld se slegste akteur".

2 Euanthius 3.8: *illud quoque mirabili in eo (i.e. Terentio)...quod nihil ad populum actorem velut extra comoediam loqui, quod vitium Plauti frequentissimum.*

3 Plautus *Amph.* 59 and 63. Also see Slater's article (1990) which unfortunately only became available to me after I had written this, but whose conclusions are strikingly similar to my own.

has given birth to the twins, Hercules (son of Jupiter), and Iphicles (son of Amphytruo), and after everything has been satisfactorily explained by Jupiter.

Although the *Amphytruo* may not be the most representative of Plautus' metatheatrical plays (the mythological plot is essentially a fixed one), it nonetheless displays a great deal of dramaturgical self-consciousness. It is Mercury in particular who, by consciously adopting the role of *servus callidus* and repeatedly commenting on his own actions and on those of the other characters, makes the play a metaplay. This veritable busybody gives the impression of not only deciding on his own actions, but also wielding his not inconsiderable manipulative powers over the other characters, notably Sosia, who becomes his favourite target. By means of asides and *ex persona* speeches, Mercury continually moves in and out of the world of the play, constantly reminding the audience of the play as a play. This, in turn, activates the multiconsciousness of the audience, that has to leap from illusion to reality and back again in order to become a participant in the fullest sense of the word (Styan 1975:187).

The *Amphytruo* prologue may well serve as a paradigm for Plautine prologues in general, since it contains a highly entertaining blend of *captatio benevolentiae* and *argumentum*, which succeeds in capturing the audience's attention, gaining its goodwill, and easing it skilfully into the world of the play. A distinguishing feature of the *Amphytruo* prologue is the fact that the prologizing deity, Mercury, is also an active character in the play: as such he virtually becomes an improvisational lead player or poet-producer who can make changes to the genre of the play.

The *Amphytruo* prologue falls naturally into two parts: the *antelogium* (the part preceding the expository part of the prologue, 1-96) and the *prologus argumentativus* (the plot exposition, 97-149). The *antelogium* contains the *captatio benevolentiae* and, with its predominantly Roman themes of financial gain, illegal canvassing, and comedy versus tragedy sentiments, could not have failed to impress a Roman audience. According to Abel (1955:39) the first part of the *Amphytruo* prologue does not belong to the *fabula* proper, but, filled as it is with didactic and propagandistic elements, it serves the essential purpose of "Bekämpfung des Claqueunwesens", its jokes contributing to the festal atmosphere and sweetening "die bittere Pille der pignoriscapio der Zuschauern". True as these statements may be, they perhaps do not go far enough in assessing the real value of the *antelogium*.

The prologue to the *Amphytruo* offers a fascinating glimpse into the workings of Plautus' mind,⁴ as manifested by the interplay and virtual give-and-take relationship between *prologus* and audience. The prologue sets the mood of the whole play, the prevailing tone of banter doubtlessly delighting an audience flocking to the theatre in a festive mood. The brilliance and wit, the shock tactics and the jokes, must all have contributed to a mood of excitement, tension and laughter, and have resulted in the rapport so essential in bringing about a successful performance.

4 Since the whole question of interpolation is beyond the scope of this article, I shall regard the *Amphytruo* prologue as an integral part of the drama, while agreeing with Beare (1955: 5) that, if changes were made, "they were made with an eye to performance and an intimate knowledge of Plautus' style".

Following some sort of instrumental overture,⁵ the opening *ad spectatores* is obviously designed to make the greatest possible impact on the audience. The *prologus*, in a slave's costume,⁶ in a brilliant stroke of genius, mentions profit, which, apart from its universal appeal, was something dear to the heart of every Roman. At the same time, an appeal is made to the Romans' well-developed legal sense, by a "slave" declaring himself prepared to bless their business endeavours in return for a favour. The mock-heroic, quasi-legal language of a slave declaring (lines 1-3):

*Ut vos in vostris voltis mercimoniis
emundis vendundisque me laetum lucris
adficere atque adiuvarē in rebus omnibus...*

Just as you want me to bless and help you to make a profit in the buying and selling of your merchandise and in all your enterprises...

would indeed have outraged some of the spectators, but the underlying irony would have been apparent in the fact that it was often slaves who were in charge of their masters' financial affairs (Paoli 1944:170-171). The *ut voltis* clauses, with their grandiloquent sound, culminate in the statement of the two conditions to be fulfilled: silence and fair judgement (15-16). The formal tone of the passage is maintained by the use of ritual words like *laetum*, *auctare* and *adprobare* (Sedgwick 1960:54-56), stylistic devices, such as alliteration and assonance, which are deeply rooted in the Latin soil,⁷ and the plodding rhythm of the iambic senarii, the metre so appropriate for legal documents and business transactions.⁸ The eloquence of the speech is worthy of the messenger god whose real identity is soon to be revealed to an audience already alerted by certain verbal hints: *mercimoniis emundis vendundisque, lucris, rationes, lucro* and *bonis nuntiis*, while the following is virtually an express statement of his divinity (line 12):

mi esse ab dis aliis, nuntiis praesim et lucro...

I [have been entrusted] by the other gods to be in charge of messages and gain...

These innuendoes culminate in a total revelation of his identity (with an accompanying change of metre for full impact) in line 19:

Iovi' iussu venio: nomen Mercuriost mihi...

I have come at Jupiter's command: my name is Mercury...

5 See Sedgwick 1960:4, but see also Beare 1955:159 for his reservations on the matter.

6 See *Amph.* 117: *servili schema*.

7 See Palmer 1996:104.

8 See Beare 1955: 215.

What has been accomplished thus far in this brilliant opening *ad spectatores* is contact with the audience and a willingness on its part to be involved in the *ludus*, particularly in the role of fair judges of the play (line 16):

itaque aequi et iusti hic eritis omnes arbitri.

and so all of you here will be just and fair adjudicators.

The probable compliment inherent in these words could perhaps serve as an extra incentive for the audience to maintain its goodwill, even at this early stage, since popular applause influenced the awarding of the prize (Palmer 1906:129; Beare 1955:157-158; *Poen.* 36-39). The line is also significant in the light of *Amph.* 65-85 where the injunction is repeated and the theme expanded. It serves, in addition, as a transition to the following passage.

Justice is the theme of lines 17-49 which exemplify the spirit of *captatio benevolentiae* in the fullest sense of the word. Now that a virtual pact with the audience has been made, the *prologus* is ready to explain, in strongly accented words, on whose orders he has come, what his name is, and why he has come (lines 19-20):

*Iovi' iussu venio: nomen Mercuriost mihi:
pater huc me misit ad vos oratum meus...*

I come at Jupiter's command: my name is Mercury: my father has sent me here to request you...

In spite of the incongruity of a god dressed like a slave, the formal ring of the speech is such as behoves the son of Jupiter and messenger of the gods. The first explicit mention of Mercury's name must have had a great impact on the audience, while flattery, cajolery and blandishments, or "scherzhafte Begründung" (Abel 1955:37), expressed in terms like *precario*, *leniter*, and *dictis bonis*, and the omnipotent ruler's willingness to *orare* rather than to *imperare*, are designed to win the audience over.

The movement into the world of the play is interrupted by a momentary suspension of illusion, as the play is played on two levels (lines 26-27):

*etenim ille quous huc iussu venio, Iuppiter
non minu' quam vostrum quivis formidat malum...*

For Jupiter, at whose command I'm here, fears trouble just as much as any of you...

The ambiguity lies in the fact that *ille Iuppiter* quite likely refers not only to the character of Jupiter, but also to the actor (who might have been troupe manager [Cutt 1970:64] or even Plautus himself!) playing the role of Jupiter. Mercury might have pointed his finger backstage to emphasize his point, in this way reminding the audience of the play as a play, and of the actor as an actor.

The use of the word *malum*, with its ambiguous meaning, is as hilarious as it is clever. *Malum* means "anything bad", therefore it can also mean "punishment" or

“injury” (Lewis and Short 1969:1104), and hence “a flogging” or “a thrashing” (Palmer 1906:132; Cutt 1970:64), indicating the punishment normally given to an unsuccessful actor.⁹ The irony lies in the fact that the king of the gods fears misfortune, while the actor playing his role fears a flogging (perhaps as a result of *malum* as unfair judging). The reason why everybody fears *malum* is that everybody is human; even Jupiter (as god and as actor!) is (line 28)

humana matre natus, humano patre.

born from a human mother and a human father.

Mercury, on the grounds of his close association (*contagione*) with Jupiter, both as his son and his co-actor, fears *malum*. Nor is the audience exempt (*vostrum*): the communal fear of *malum* puts everybody on a par and leads to closer ties between stage and audience, while comic reversal (Segal 1968:20) manifests itself in the irreverent attitude towards the gods.¹⁰ But lest the negative impact of fear (*vereri*, *metuere* and *formidat*) and evil (*malum*) upset the audience, Mercury is quick with assurances of peaceful intent (line 32):

propterea pace advenio et pacem ad vos fero...

On that account I come in peace and peace I bring to you...¹¹

The groundwork for mutual goodwill having been prepared, the appeal to the Romans' sense of justice is echoed in a splendid piece of rhetoric. The word *ius* and its derivatives are repeated no fewer than nine times in five verses (33-37: *iustam*, *iustae*, *iustis*, *iustus*, *iniusta*, *iustis*, *iusta*, *iniustis*, *ius*), the resulting “Silbenklingel” (Abel 1955:37) or “jingle”, regarded as a typical Plautine device (Sedgwick 1960:58), sounding almost like a parody on justice.¹² Mercury's flattery of the audience (*bonis* and *merito*) is sustained and good relations are maintained by the intimate manner of his address: *advortite*; *debetis velle quae velimus*; *de vobis*; *a vobis*; and *vobis*. Further metatheatrical implications, in the sense of the awareness of the actors as actors, can be inferred from Mercury's mention of the gods (and on another level the actors) having benefited the people and the state (lines 39-40):

9 See Abel 1955:37: “Denn *malum* *formidare* ist ein Ausdruck, der im Sklavenmilieu zu Hause ist, und bezieht sich auf die Prügelstrafe...Da der römische Bürger bis zu den *leges Porciae* vor Hieben nicht sicher war, kann auch das *Malum* der Zuschauer im konkreten Sinn *virgis caedi* verstanden werden, wenn der *Am* (sic) während des hannibalischen Krieges oder kurz nachher entstanden ist.”

10 Abel 1955:37: “Die Demaskierung des Theatergotts als eines Menschen wird bewußt als komisches Mittel gehandhabt.”

11 Various interpretations of this line are possible: peace may be the foreshadowing of the “all's well that ends well” conclusion of the play; Galinsky (1966:217) regards it as support for his theory on the Scipionic overtones in the *Amphitruo*.

12 Cf. Menander *Epitrepontes* 2.20 for similar sentiments on justice.

meruimus

et ego et pater de vobis et de re publica...

both my father and I have done a lot for you and for the country...

The word *architectus*, too, has hilarious connotations, as it must have been quite clear to the audience that the “boss of all mankind” (Cutt 1970:66) was at the same time an actor or troupe-leader, bossing the other actors around.¹³ The self-consciousness, as manifested in Mercury’s word-play, is enhanced by his stepping out of his role to make a brief comment on acting style (vv.41-44):

*nam quid ego memorem (ut alios in tragoediis
vidi, Neptunum, Virtutem, Victoriam,
Martem, Bellonam commemorare quae bona
vobis fecissent...?)*

for why should I call to mind (as I have seen others - Neptune, Virtus, Victoria, Mars, and Bellona - recount the good deeds they had done for you)...?¹⁴

The use of *alios*, here indicating prologue speakers other than himself, strengthens the impression of non-illusory playing, while Mercury’s implicit criticism of tragedy must have increased his solidarity with the audience by their communal (perhaps pretended) dislike of tragedy. Now follows the last part of the *antelogium*, in which the closely knit themes of *tragicomoedia*, *ambitus* and the gods’ involvement in the play are introduced.

The *excursus* on *tragicomoedia* (50-63) is begun by Mercury’s announcement that (line 51)

post argumentum huius eloquar tragoediae.

afterwards I will set out the plot of this tragedy.

It is the word *tragoediae* which must have shocked an audience all geared up for *comoedia*, and it may have been used “um das Publikum ein wenig zu foppen” (Abel 1955:38). Mercury’s anticipation of the audience’s reaction is an exquisite piece of gamesplaying which gives the impression of improvisation,¹⁵ even as he guides audience response (vv.52-53):

13 It is also ironic that although it is Jupiter who is called the *architectus* it is often Mercury who masterminds the action with his wit and inventiveness.

14 These gods of tragedy are presumably prologue gods (Abel 1955:37) and, as thoroughly Roman gods, not based on the Greek original (Sedgwick 1960:58). See also Abel 1955:39: “Plautus setzt hier selbständig Traditionen der griechischen Komödie fort, wo der Tragödienspott von jeher zu Hause war.” Cf. also *Poen. 2: ...ind’ mihi principium capiam, ex ea tragoedia.*

15 For quasi-improvisation or “scripted” improvised theatre, see Slater 1981:13 and Beacham 1991:34-35.

*quid? contraxistis frontem quia tragoediam
dixi futuram hanc?*

What? Are you frowning because I said this would be a tragedy?

Mercury's tongue-in-cheek behaviour and his identification with the spectators' disappointment must have won their sympathy and endeared him to them. But their fears are soon laid to rest by Mercury's assurance that (lines 53-55)

*...deu' sum, commutavero.
eandem hanc, si voltis, faciam <iam> ex tragoedia
comoedia ut sit omnibus isdem vorsibus.*

...I am a god. I will change it. If you want me to, I will change this very play from a tragedy to a comedy without altering a line.

It is as god, and god omniscient, he reminds himself, that he can do this thing (line 57):

quasi nesciam vos velle, qui divos siem.

as if I do not know that you want this: I who am a god!¹⁶

His role as improvisational lead player or theatrical director is nowhere more prominent than here, when a well-timed brainwave induces him to make adjustments to the genre of the play (line 59):

faciam ut commixta sit; <sit> tragico[co]moedia...

I'll wangle it so that it is a mixture - a tragi-comedy...

The impression of this random transformation of the play's genre results in a kind of "generic self-consciousness"¹⁷ which is subsequently developed in the following passage (60-63) with its implicit commentary on theatre and the problems of genre. The explanation that the play cannot be pure comedy because of the *reges et di* (61) taking part,¹⁸ nor pure tragedy because of the slave-part (*hic servus quoque partes habet*, 62), reflects the ancient distinction between tragedy and comedy.¹⁹

The word *tragicomoedia* seems to be mentioned only here in ancient literature (Romano 1974:875 n.6). The word closest to this is probably *ἰλαροτραγωδία* ("mythological travesty") to which Rhinthon had given a literary form in the third

16 See Stewart 1958:366-367 for the term *metarrhythmizein* meaning "transforming tragedies into something humorous", which corresponds exactly to Mercury's plan for his tragedy: *deu' sum, commutavero...*

17 Beacham's (1991:41) term.

18 But see Abel (1955:38) who correctly maintains that there are no kings in the *Amph.*: "Vielleicht entfernt sich der Verf. von der Wahrheit, um die sensationslüsterne Neugier der Theaterbesucher zu reizen."

19 "The fate of little men may be very sad, but it cannot be tragic"; Hadas 1965:3.

century BCE (Beare 1955:15; Sedgwick 1960:5; Romano 1974:874; Beacham 1991:19). Akin to this type of drama were the φλύακες-farces or comic travesties of myth and legend depicted on the so-called φλύαξ-vases of southern Italy (Wright 1974:186; Beare 1955:15). Despite the fact that these farces seem to have had at least some influence on the *palliata* (Wright 1974:187; Costa 1956:88), Galinsky (1966:208) regards it as improbable for the *Amphitruo* to have belonged even to “exalted Rhinthonica” (Palmer’s [1906:xv] term) on account of Plautus’ consistent character delineation and his “knowledge of the female psyche”. Be that as it may, parody as a feature of Old, Middle (viz. the *Plutus* of Aristophanes) and New Comedy would also have influenced Plautus, who indeed virtually calls it by name in *Pseud.* 707: *ut paratragedat carnufex!* (“How tragically the scoundrel expresses himself!”).

In the *Amphitruo*, the tragic element is supplied by the divine and heroic personages, that is, the two gods, and the exalted personages, Amphitruo and Alcumena, while the comic element is supplied by the ordinary characters, such as Sosia and Blepharo. But the play oscillates between serious and comic, with many scenes being played on two levels. The vision of the pregnant Alcumena (virtually a Euripidean heroine),²⁰ being impersonated by a padded male-actor, eulogizing her husband’s *virtus*, would have raised a laugh. Again, in the case of *Amphitruo*, the repetition of the *cu*-sound (290, 735 and 1122) may suggest the cuckoo and the notion of marital infidelity (Hough 1970:95-96). Perhaps Mercury, in his dual role of god and slave, can be seen as the perfect embodiment of both the tragic and the comic modes in the play, while his ambiguous position would have given rise to a great deal of irony. The underlying tension between serious and comic, and between divine and human, is maintained throughout the play. But despite its serious overtones, the delicate balance between tragedy and comedy, and Plautus’ designation of the play as tragicomedy (perhaps the most perfect description of life itself!), it is perhaps as comedy that the *Amphitruo* will be remembered.²¹ It may be concluded, then, that Plautus, in this one extant example of mythological comedy, created something new, and, moreover, that he was completely aware of the fact: *veterem atque antiquam rem novam ad vos proferam* (“I will bring you an age-old thing in a new guise”, *Amph.* 118).

The *ambitus* passage (64-85) revolves once more around the favour that “Jupiter” wants to ask the audience, namely, no illegal canvassing. The parallel drawn between the illegal solicitation for the *palma*, and canvassing for office by means of bribery, leads to the question of the part that this passage plays in the prologue. According to Abel (1955:39), the extension of the original Greek prologue may be due to practical considerations summed up in these words: “Bekämpfung der Theaterambitio”, while the jokes and banter are aimed at sugarcoating the bitter pill of the *pignoriscapio*. Galinsky (1966:209-216) regards the *ambitus*-passage as an

20 See also Duckworth 1952:150: “...she is the noblest woman character in Plautine comedy...”; and Romano 1974:875 n.51: “Alcumena is clearly not meant to be a comic figure and her style has its closest counterpart in Greek tragedy.”

21 See also Slater 1990:106-107.

integral part of the prologue since it has a close thematic connection with the rest of the play: *ambitio* was a quality of the Scipios (who, according to Galinsky [1966], are to be identified with Jupiter and Amphitruo) especially in the promotion of their ancestors to offices they had never actually held. McDonnell (1986:566-575), on the other hand, regards the *ambitus*-passage as “intrusive” and irrelevant, and therefore probably an interpolation of a later date parodying a specific *lex de ambitu* which could have been the *lex Cornelia Baebia de ambitu* of 181 BCE or a *lex de ambitu* of 159 BCE. Whatever the origin of the passage, it must have had great appeal for the Roman audience with its alliteration, parody of legal *formulae* and recurring archaic words, such as *duint* (line 72) and *sirempse* (line 73).

Jupiter’s lofty sentiments, pompously declaimed by Mercury in alliterative verse (lines 75-76),

*virtute dixit vos victores vivere,
non ambitione neque perfidia...*

he said that it was by valour that you live victoriously, and not by solicitation or treachery...

would have been quite convincing, had not Jupiter himself been guilty of *ambitio* (or *ambitus!*)²² in the sense that he uses Mercury to win *favitores* for him. Moreover, he is also guilty of gross *perfidia* in his unremitting solicitation of the favours of another man’s wife!

The bombshell dropped by Mercury in the following passage (86-96) explains Jupiter’s concern for the actors: he is becoming one himself (line 88):

ipse hanc acturust Iuppiter comoediam.

Jupiter himself will act in this comedy.

The metatheatrical impact of these words is due to the fact that Mercury once again refers to an actor as an actor and to the play as a play. The juxtaposition of the words *Iuppiter* and *comoediam*, with the implied paradox, must have shocked an audience not familiar with Jupiter as a character in the *palliata*. That the audience is expected to be surprised is underlined by Mercury’s urging them on three occasions not to be surprised: *mirari nolim vos, ne miremini* and *quid? admiratin estis?* It seems as though Mercury doth protest too much, and with reason, since his arguments are rather feeble: in the previous year, Jupiter was summoned on stage to give help, and he also appeared on stage in a tragedy. Two appearances are implied, the first, to promise help and the second, during the action. That this is not a parallel situation at all would have been apparent to both *prologus* and audience, there being a vast

22 According to Lewis and Short (1969:102-103) the word *ambire* means “to go round after”, “solicit”, “to canvass for votes”. *Ambitio* means “the going about of candidates for office” and “the soliciting of individual citizens for their vote”, “a canvassing by just and lawful means”. *Ambitus* denotes an “unlawful striving for posts of honour by means of bribery”, and was prohibited by several laws of which the *lex Calpurnia*, *lex Fabia* and *lex Licinia* are examples.

difference between divine intervention and a god as character in a play. How or why Jupiter was helpful to the actors is not known, but it may have been *as deus ex machina* from a θεολογεῖον, perhaps in a play called *Alcumena*²³ which could have been written either by Ennius (Sedgwick 1960:62) or as an as yet undetermined Roman playwright, on the basis of Euripides' play.

The very idea that the gods are to become *histriones* is preposterous. The Etruscan word *histrion*, which the Romans used for *actor* (Lewis and Short 1969:858), was a word of contempt from the earliest days. Actors were probably not far removed from slave status, their social standing was not high, and their profession not particularly honourable (Beare 1955:156-157; Romano 1974:878). As a group, they were ranked so low that they were not entitled to citizenship.²⁴ Indeed, bad acting could probably lead to a thrashing (cf. *Amph.* 27, 31; *Cist.* 785), and good acting, to the reward of a drink. Thus *declassés* (Romano's [1974:875 n.6] term) the gods became symbols of the topsy-turvy world of comedy. No free Roman was ever depicted on stage in the *palliata*, which makes the appearance of Roman deities on stage even more shocking. The audience must have been well aware of the conscious inversion of roles - Jupiter playing a human and Mercury a slave. So important is the notion of the two gods taking part in the play (it is repeated later), that Abel (1955:36) regards this feature as the main attraction of the play: "Am Schluß seiner Einführung in die Handlung unterstreicht Merkur die Hauptattraktion des Am (sic): Jupiter und Merkur als Schauspieler."

It follows that the *antelogium* forms an integral and essential part of the prologue, and indeed of the play itself. The *antelogium* succeeds in capturing the spectators' attention, luring them into a state of benevolence, and involving them in the play, in this way setting the dynamics of interaction in motion and confirming Styan's (1975:1) statement that "a play must communicate or it is not a play at all".

As *prologus*, Mercury quiets down a mob of unruly spectators by proposing a business deal with them. He emphasizes their role in the play, particularly as fair adjudicators. He shocks, flatters and confuses them in turn. The play is now a tragedy, now a comedy, now again a tragicomedy. He threatens them with dire punishments should they in any way be guilty of *ambitus*. As a final *coup*, he delivers the astounding news that Jupiter will be taking part in the play. All this is done with constant reference to the play as a play, while theatrical terms like *partis*, *histriones*, *comoediam*, *prosaeniam*, *histrioniam*, *hanc fabulam* and *tragoedia* abound.

Characteristic of the *antelogium* is the way in which Mercury, in typical metatheatrical fashion, moves in and out of the world of the play, now drawing the audience in, and now, with non-illusory guile, bringing them back to earth. This manner of "Plautine gamesmanship" (Slater's [1981:83] term) must have maintained a high level of tension and anticipation, while continually keeping the audience on

23 Cf. Plautus *Rud.* 86: "non ventus...verum Alcumena Euripidi...". See also Galinsky 1966:208 n.21.

24 According to Paoli (1944:360 n.1) a man who practised the *ars ludicra* was deprived of the right of voting and of being elected a magistrate (*ius suffragi et honorum*) and his rights were also limited in private law; he could not marry into a senatorial family (*Digest* 23.2.44).

tenterhooks. The *antelogium* draws to a close with a plea for attention and a promise of plot exposition. This time, without further ado, Mercury, in an enthralling passage, will sketch the background to one of the most intriguing tales of ancient mythology.

It seems only fair to conclude that it was Mercury and metatheatre that contributed most magnificently to the success of the opening *ad spectatores* and indeed to the success of the whole play - a play which up to our own day has inspired a multitude of playwrights from a variety of languages and cultures to write their own versions of the *Amphitruo*.

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