

Research Article

Plautus' *Casina* and its uses in General Education-Level Gender History

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Abstract

This article details how Plautus' *Casina* has been used in a general education comparative gender history class over multiple semesters. Since *Casina* was based on an Athenian New Comedy play (*The Lot-Castors* by Diphilus), it incorporates elements of late fourth/early third century BCE Athenian ideas on gender, gender roles, and sexuality as well as Republican Roman views on these same areas from approximately a century later. For an introductory comparative gender history course which is designed for a wide time span, this play therefore offers the opportunity to look at two related cultures in just one work. The article highlights areas of the play emphasising those cultures' ideals and values, and also deals with which areas students have most commented on and which ones are often ignored, in terms of characters, gender roles, and sexualities. The role and representation of slaves in those societies and within the play are also remarked upon.

Keywords: *Casina*; Plautus; gender roles; general education

Since 2011, this university, a state HBCU¹, has offered students several options in addition to the traditional World Civilisation courses (one General Education history course is still required for all students). The original two new courses were Atlantic History and Gender History. The former was designed to act as a more-specific alternative for the modern world history course, while the latter was designed to provide a view of a 'longue durée' subject area. The university's catalogue description for the gender course reads:

This course provides an introduction to the methodology of history and historical thought, through the comparison of the role of gender in three or four different societies. Societies from at least two different continents are compared, and at least one society from the ancient (to 500 CE), medieval/early modern (400–1750), and modern (1600–present) eras are examined. Gender is used as the thematic lens in developing a historical analytical approach in identifying and explaining long-term historical developments over time in the context of the intersection of gender with culture, religion, politics, and economy both within specific societies and in relation to cross-cultural encounters and exchanges over time. Students are introduced to different methodological approaches used by historians to study gender as both a category and an agent of historical change in global history.

Both courses were also designed to fulfill current university requirements for 'critical thinking' and 'globalisation' as well as the basic history writing requirements.

Several instructors, both full time and adjunct, have taught the course since its inception, all with different approaches. The way this instructor has approached the course since the first time it was offered has been to assess the three required societies' views of gender and gender roles through the comparison of primary literary sources which highlight in some way(s) that society's perceived attitudes towards gender and gender role expectations. A variety of such sources has been used to investigate and illuminate attitudes of ancient societies. These have included somewhat obvious choices such as Euripides' *Medea* and Sophocles' *Antigone*. When concentrating on Classical India rather than the Mediterranean, Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* has been utilised. Since 2021, the work used to illustrate Hellenistic attitudes has been David Christenson's translation of Plautus' *Casina* (Christenson, 2008).²

As noted in the above course description, three cultures and periods have to be covered in this course (currently the Hellenistic Mediterranean, Renaissance England, and contemporary America) and each unit must cover the general historical epoch, gender and gender roles within that culture, and background information on the source (in addition to *Casina*, the current primary sources are Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* and the graphic novel version of Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*). While the students' understanding of the period and other background material is tested with a short quiz on each unit, of greater importance is their demonstration of critical thinking, putting all the above information together into a reaction paper on the source (see note for the assignment and context).³

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One disadvantage of using *Casina* rather than more well-known and obvious works such as *Medea*, *Antigone* or *Lysistrata* is that there are fewer additional resources available. While full English productions which fully utilise the original versions of some of the above plays might be difficult to come by, the internet is filled with analyses, reviews, summaries and excerpts from works such as the above, as well as about their authors. Fifth century Athens also has an overwhelming amount of material analysing the culture, including sexuality and gender ideas and ideals – possibly more than most other pre-modern cultures.

Casina, like many of Plautus' plays, was based on a fourth century New Comedy play, in this case one called *The Lot-Casters* by Diphilus.⁴ Plautus lived roughly from 254–184 BCE. Just as Classical Athens has more secondary (print and internet) content than Fourth Century and early Hellenistic Athens, so do the sources for the downfall of the Roman Republic outshine the period between the start of the Second to the end of the Third Punic Wars (219–146 BCE). As of the writing of this article, there are no commonly available complete productions of *Casina*, and fewer on-line resources for Plautus when compared to Sophocles, Euripides, or Aristophanes. This of course does not mean that either the period of the original play or Plautus' adaptation are devoid of a plethora of sources, merely that neither period is as well-covered by media as easily accessible to intro-level students as some others, and neither is Plautus himself.⁵ Instead, the instructor must be prepared to provide much of the necessary information, rather than relying on pre-created secondary content.

So, what are the counter-balancing advantages of using *Casina*? First, because this is an early Second Century BCE Roman adaptation of what would have been either a late Fourth Century or early Third Century Attic play, Athenian, Hellenistic, and Republican Roman ideas of gender, gender roles, and sexuality must be explored, as these are all touched upon in the play to various degrees. As this is a general survey class, the fact that such a wide number of issues and distinct if related cultures can be addressed are advantages.

Like many New Comedies (and later *Commedia dell'arte* and many forms related to both), *Casina*'s characters and plots rely on variations of stereotypes and stereotypical plots which could be given twists unique to any particular play. A 'typical' play based on the conventions used would have the young 'hero' in love with the maid/slave next door (who would turn out to actually be a citizen, abandoned or kidnapped as an infant, technically called simply the *puella*), often with the hero's father or some other older male lusting after the girl as well. Assisted by his wily slave, the hero would win the girl. The lecherous older man would at least be embarrassed, if not worse.⁶ Wives/mothers may or may not feature in the plot.

However, in *Casina*, neither the hero nor the maiden (the title character in fact) appear on stage, although both, especially *Casina* herself, are mentioned throughout the play, and the audience learn they are given the prerequisite happy ending only in the play's brief epilogue. Instead of the hero struggling against the lecherous character directly, here it is a struggle between the hero's father (a *senex amator*), who lusts after *Casina* (aided by the enslaved foreman of his farm who is also a former sexual partner of his owner) and his mother (who raised *Casina* and wants her son to have her – and she is aided by her maid and her son's slave). The couple next door also aid their respective neighbours, somewhat reluctantly. Not counting the narrator of the prologue and epilogue⁷ but including the very minor role of a cook, there are therefore only eight speaking parts for students to keep track of.

As mentioned above, the play exhibits elements of both Hellenistic Athenian and Republican Roman societies. Greek names are used throughout, yet the father (Lysidamus) can at least as easily be seen as a very middle-class Roman of ca. 200 BCE, or at least a parody and commentary on such. On the one hand, Lysidamus' overwhelming desire to make *Casina* his at any cost could be seen as either as a commentary on Roman stereotyping of their contemporary Athenians, or as why he is an allowable figure of mockery, as opposed to the honour a Roman *paterfamilias* was to be held in. After all, while the *paterfamilias* might (at least in terms of legality) take any slave of his that he desired, it was seen as at least somewhat normal for the young Roman male to burn with desire, and perhaps even set up a small flat with a slave or two⁸ (one of which may also serve as his mistress), not a middle-aged man. What was seen as 'typical' versus what was seen as 'permissible' (or at least 'doable') in these societies can therefore serve as points of discussion for all the cultures under consideration.

Both the custom/expectation of the high emotions in a Roman late adolescent male and the expectations of the *gravitas* expected of the fully-adult Roman male can also be explored through Lysidamus' treatment of his son. Even if his lines

So he's an only son – That makes him no more my only son
than I'm his only father. He should be giving into my wishes –
not vice-versa! (Christenson, 2008, 47)

could at first glance be seen as reinforcing his status as absolute head of the household, Lysidamus is really admitting he is making wishes, not issuing commands.

Throughout the play, Lysidamus plots with his favourite slave as well as bribing him while attempting to do so with another, pleads with his neighbour, intrigues against his wife – at no point is he shown to be able to enforce the authority which should have been automatically his in both Athenian and Roman cultures. Lysidamus undermines his own authority at all levels by putting his lust for *Casina* over all his duties, reputation, and cultural expectations. This can most easily be demonstrated by the fact that Lysidamus, returning from the forum to defend a relative, one of the more important functions of a man acting as both *paterfamilias* and patron to his family and his clients, dismisses this obligation with the lines:

... what could be more stupid than for a man in love to go to
the forum ... ? That's exactly how stupid I was, wasting the
day in court helping some damn relative of mine! And I'm
damn pleased he lost his case ... (Christenson, 2008, 64).

While Lysidamus is really the central character in that all revolved around him – his lust for *Casina* defined the reactions of his wife and son as well as many of the reactions of their slaves – students rarely concentrate on him by himself in their essays.⁹ It is his conflicts and relationships (or lack thereof) which define him, and whichever of those conflicts/relationships any particular student discusses as likely as not will concentrate on the other side of the relationship and Lysidamus' expected role as *paterfamilias*, rather than on the actual character of Lysidamus.

If Lysidamus was unable to fulfill the traditional aspects and expectations of the Roman *paterfamilias*, his wife *Cleostrata* was more than ready to take full advantage of her position while ignoring the traditional limits on hers. This is the character and personality most students concentrate on in various ways. While the *paterfamilias* might by custom and law be in charge of the

family and the family's estate and possessions (including the slaves), his wife was expected to be the actual manager of the household. While Cleostrata does not show her husband any real respect throughout the play, her initial direct declaration on why she could oppose her husband's plan was the more allowable:

It's hardly decent and proper of you to be so concerned with the maid – that's my job! (Christenson, 2008, 47).

One interaction most students pick up on in their reaction papers is the exchange between Cleostrata and her neighbour Myrrhina, as Cleostrata is told after she tells her friend what her husband is planning for Casina and her own objections:

Don't fight with your husband. Let him lech and do what he wants, so long as he provides for you at home The one thing you don't want your husband to say is . . . "out of the house, woman!" (Christenson, 2008, 43-44).¹⁰

That would constitute a divorce, not getting Cleostrata any more rights, just substituting being under the legal purview/control of her husband to that of her father or other male relative/guardian. Instead of taking her friend's advice, in the very next scene Cleostrata challenged her husband over his conduct, even before he tried to get her to allow his plans for Casina to go forward. (Christenson, 2008, 46-47) Still, other than repeated attempts to cajole her husband's foreman, chastise her husband, and fool both, the most she could directly do was refuse her husband two meals. (Christenson, 2008, 41, 77).¹¹

Another way to illustrate both gender and class roles is to consider the case of Casina herself – the object of desire for four of the characters (Lysidamus, his slave/former lover Olympio, his son Euthynicus, and to some degree Euthynicus' slave Chalinus) and the concern of possibly two others (Cleostrata and presumably her neighbor Myrrhina – as the epilogue would reveal she is actually Casina's birth mother). Yet Casina has no agency in the play: she is the object of desire for father and son, the object of contention between Lysidamus and Cleostrata, and the object of both desire and contention between Lysidamus and his slave Olympio and between the two slaves Olympio and Chalinus. She is fought over and talked about, but the audience never knows what she thinks or feels.¹² This holds true for most students, who tend to either ignore Casina entirely or attribute what other characters say about her to her. Even compared to such characters in similar plays, Casina is treated more as a MacGuffin¹³ than as a character. Although Roman girls and women had more rights than their Athenian counterparts, they might still end up be treated as ciphers and thus Casina's lack of agency as both a young woman and a slave can provide topics for discussion.

One area which most students actually usually ignore in their discussions of the play is the bisexual interplay between Lysidamus and Olympio, as well as Chalinus' actions and comments before and after dressing as Casina (as well as the cross-dressing itself) for a false marriage and 'wedding night' with Lysidamus and Olympio. While bisexual feelings were certainly at least tolerated if not always encouraged to a point in ancient Athens and some other Greek poleis, it was seen as more scandalous in mid-Republican Rome than it would be later on. In any event, Olympio, the manager of the family farm, would be beyond the 'beardless youth' favoured as receptive partners in Classical Athens and later Imperial Rome.¹⁴

Believing that Olympio has won Casina and would be sharing her, Lysidamus' reaction and initial exchange with his slave is:

Lysidamus: Shh! And as the gods as my witness, I can barely keep my lips off you! I could kiss you so hard, my dear!

Olympio: You do like me a little, don't you?

Lysidamus: Oh, more than I love myself. Can I hug you?

Olympio: Okay.

Lysidamus: Holding you is like sipping sweet honey.

Chalinus, who has been stealthily observing (and commenting) on this exchange, breaks the fourth wall to inform the audience:

Oh, so *that's* how he became foreman! You know, one night a while back I was escorting the old geezer home and he tried to make me his butler – by way of my back door! . . . The old guy has always liked the ones with beards. (Christenson, 2008, 59)

As mentioned above, Olympio believed he had married Casina near the conclusion of the play, but it is actually Chalinus under the heavy veil. Olympio and Lysidamus argue over who would deflower Casina, and Olympio tried first. Rather than his 'bride,' Olympio found "a handle. But I realised it was no sword – the shaft would have been colder". And, when he attempted to kiss 'Casina', Olympio found a bearded face. (Christenson, 2008, 84) After Olympio fled the 'bridal chamber,' Lysidamus made his attempt and failed as badly. While Olympio was caught as he ran into the street by Cleostrata, Myrrhina, and the maid Pardalisca, Lysidamus was not only caught by the trio in public, he was pursued by Chalinus, still dressed as a bride but presumably no longer veiled. Worse, Chalinus was calling out, presumably to any passers-by or neighbours (i.e. the audience):

Just where do you think you're going, my Greek-loving friend? If you're planning to mount me, now's the time! Please come back to bed. Oh, you are so dead! I have a little extra-judicial justice for you; this stick of mine is a stickler for punishment. (Christenson, 2008, 86).

Again, Athenian males might engage with a homosexual partner, but only as the 'dominant' partner – those were not reciprocal relationships. Romans of this time period frowned upon even that. Chalinus, implying that Lysidamus was not only interested in having sex with him, but was willing to be penetrated by a male slave, would finish his reputation. Lysidamus had little choice but to capitulate to his wife, in the hopes that the household would gloss over the events of the play:

If ever in the future I lust after Casina, or just start to lust after her, or if from now on I do anything of this sort, you have the right to hang me up and give me a good whipping, my dear (Christenson, 2008, 88).

As shown, *Casina* allows for a wider range of topics than the usual surviving Classical Athenian plays, which demonstrate ideas of gender roles just in fifth century BCE Athens. With Plautus' play, we have ideas borrowed from two centuries of Athenian history buried under a strong layer of Third/Second century BCE Republican Roman ideas, covering not just gender roles but a mix of those cultures' views on bisexuality and the Roman ideas on

slavery. For classes not centred on a theme related to gender, this latter topic can also give rise to interesting discussions, contrasting the various ancient Mediterranean societal views of slavery¹⁵ with the versions of Atlantic slavery which some students may be familiar with. While the slaves in *Casina* may not behave in fully believable ways, their presentation does give insight on how slave owners might have seen the possibilities, providing a starting point for discussions.

All these themes – gender and gender roles, sexuality, family, slavery – are presented in a format which is similar to two media which students should be more or less intimately familiar with – television sit-coms and domestic comedic films. Both Christenson and Bolton's translations are in clear, contemporary language, and provide minimal but informative explanations when needed. In addition to having translated *Casina*, David Christenson has also published what can be considered a companion volume, giving basic background to Plautus, the play and its themes, as well as the story of the play's reception and transmission (Christenson, 2019). In short, *Casina* provides an outstanding work for the discussion of ancient Athenian and Roman gender roles, and an exceptional one for a jumping-off point for discussions of ancient sexuality, slavery, and other cultural/social aspects across the Classical Mediterranean for a variety of university general education history courses.

Notes

1 HBCU = Historically Black College/University.

2 David Bolton also has an excellent translation, *Casina by Plautus*, Lulu.com, 2019.

3 The current prompt for this unit is: “‘Casina’ plays with the gender and class roles within a (mostly Romanised) middle class household. Both the culture of the original play (Athenian) and this revised version (Roman) were patriarchal societies, where the father/husband was to have firm control over his wife, children, and slaves. Lysidamus clearly did not have such control. This demonstrates that, while societal expectations may be clear about such relationships and the underlying power dynamics, the personalities of the individuals must also be considered.

Considering both aspects (gender & class), which do you believe was more subverted (that is gender roles or class roles) in the play, and most importantly, why?

Your essay should have an introduction, body, and conclusion. As this is not an in-class essay, you have time to consider, revise, expand, and explain. No matter which side you argue (gender or class), you should at least briefly consider the other in explaining your choice. There is no correct answer, the goal of the paper is what your opinion is and your arguments/explanations as to how and why you made your choices based on what you've learned of the societies.”

Note that this assignment is designed to meet the University's current standards for Critical Thinking, as well as AHA standards and our Program's prior and on-going commitment to familiarise undergraduates with working with (and analysis of) primary sources.

4 Except for fragments and titles, none of Diphilus' work survives. While a contemporary of Menander (342-291), Diphilus' exact dates are uncertain.

5 In addition to Christenson's monograph on *Casina* mentioned before, another recent work containing material on the play is the edited collection *A Companion to Plautus* (Franko & Dutsch, 2020). The most relevant essays are James' “Plautus and the Marriage Plot” 109-123; Dinter's “Comic Technique in Plautus's *Asinaria* and *Casina*” 269-287; Witzke's “Gender and Sexuality in Plautus” 332-347; and especially Gold's “The Wife in Charge, the Husband Humiliated” 165-179.

6 Taking bits and pieces of different Plautus plays, the 1960s musical *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (Sondheim, 1962) illustrates these and other clichés. See also the “Preliminaries” section of Gold (2020), and for Lysidamus and his role in particular, see the “Older Men” section of Witzke's “Gender and Sexuality in Plautus” (2020).

7 It would not be uncommon for one of the actors to undertake to speak the prologue/epilogue, perhaps with a different mask.

8 For example, see Cicero's famous defense of Marcus Caelius Rufus (Berry, 2000, 122-161). For a brief modern iteration of the idea, see the introductory section (Glazebrook & Henry, 2011).

9 Gold also points this out in the “The Heart of Matter” section.

10 For a recent examination of this exchange, including some historiographical background, see Feltoovich (2015, pp 245-266). Also see “The Heart of Matter” section of Gold (2020).

11 Just previously, Cleostrata's maid was sent to persuade Lysidamus that Casina had grabbed swords and was threatening to kill both Lysidamus and Olympio, pp. 69-72. It is unknown if Casina was actually to have gone along with this play-acting or not off stage. Some productions may have a person acting out as ‘Casina’ offstage at least according to Way (2000, 187ff). Of course, May also stated that Casina had been kidnapped by pirates rather than found as she was about to be exposed, as Christenson has it. (Christenson, 2008, 37)

12 Although the maid claims Casina has ‘gone mad’ and is threatening harm to both Lysidamus and Olympio, the audience is unaware of how much, if any, truth there is in those statements. (Christenson, 2008, 67-72) See also the above note.

13 A ‘MacGuffin’ is usually thought of as an object that motivates a plot but is in many ways easily interchangeable with many other objects – famous examples would be the ‘Maltese Falcon’ or to lesser degrees the ‘transit papers’ in *Casablanca* or even the Ark of the Covenant in the first *Indiana Jones* movie.

14 There is a long and complicated historiography regarding homosexual practice and attitudes towards it in the varied periods of Rome and periods and poleis of Greece, but the noted sentence is the current general consensus.

15 It must be remembered when dealing with slavery in the period the play was written in (ca. 190 BCE), the political, social, and economic problems caused by the replacement of the traditional *villae rusticae* with the more plantation-style *latifundia* (or at least when this became a major issue) was still two generations away. Of course slavery in the later Republic and Empire can also be examined.

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