

DIDASKALIA 

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photo: P. Winters/Theater of War

Didaskalia is an electronic journal dedicated to the study of all aspects of ancient Greek and Roman performance.

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About Didaskalia

Didaskalia (διδασκαλία) is the term used since ancient times to describe the work a playwright did to teach his chorus and actors the play. The official records of the dramatic festivals in Athens were the διδασκαλῖαι. *Didaskalia* now furthers the scholarship of the ancient performance.

Didaskalia is an English-language, online publication about the performance of Greek and Roman drama, dance, and music. We publish peer-reviewed scholarship on performance and reviews of the professional activity of artists and scholars who work on ancient drama.

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Note

Didaskalia is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 8 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at didaskalia.net, which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

The Delayed Feast: the Festival Context of Plautus' *Pseudolus*

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References to food in Plautine plays are frequent and vivid. We hear mention of sweet honey, juicy bacon, and banquet platters piled high with food. Examinations of food in Plautus have focused previously on Plautus' Greco-Roman hybridity, particularly in the cook characters. Food is also featured as evidence of Plautus' additions to original Greek texts.¹ Yet the performance of plays at public festivals and funerals, where there was a sense of "carnival"² and a public banquet, has implications for the way in which the appearance of food in Plautus' plays should be understood. In 1971, anthropologist Mary Douglas noted that the sharing of meals marks out stages within the tempo of life.³ She explains: "The meaning of a meal is found in a system of repeated analogies. Each meal carries something of the meaning of the *other* meals; each meal is a structured social event which structures others in its own image."⁴ Food in Plautus has this same temporal and referential quality. The mention of food in Plautine plays marks the progress—and sometimes the *lack* of progress—of the plot. While my larger study considers five plays by Plautus, here I will focus on the *Pseudolus*, and examine how food references punctuate the action of the play, remaining something continually hoped for but rarely attained. In the same way, the audience awaits its festival feast. Plautus' actors stand in for the audience members themselves: both want the resolution to the problems presented in the plot, and both want to get to the feast which is continually mentioned.



Conference Presentation

video: Randolph College
youtube.com/watch?v=taIHVIS2js0

Public banquets and theatrical performances

We know from the *didascalia* that *Pseudolus* was first performed at the Ludi Megalenses of 191 BCE.⁵ We can say generally that in the republican period Plautus' plays would have been exclusively performed in public at annual religious festivals with *ludi scaenici* and at public funerals that chose to sponsor theatrical events.⁶ At least eight of the public festivals in the Roman calendar had associated feasts, but access to festival food was not universal, despite the public, communal nature of the celebrations. The only festivals that had feasts open to the whole populace were the Saturnalia and the Compitalia. Otherwise, the Ludi Romani and Ludi Plebeii had the *epulum Iovis*, where only men of the senatorial class ate the meat of the sacrificial animal.⁷ The Ludi Megalenses also had an exclusive feast. It was an occasion for the exchange of food between patrician families held from the 4th to the 10th of April.⁸ The Ludi Cereales, held from the 12th to the 19th of April, were exclusive to plebeian families. This restriction was perhaps a mirror of the patrician custom, giving the plebs their own opportunity for exclusivity.

The evidence for the order of events at public festivals is fragmented and, as is often the case for evidence of civic cult, largely from the imperial period. At the Saturnalia, a public banquet ended the several-day holiday.⁹ At festivals connected to military triumphs the feast seems to have occurred at the end of the procession and performance events.¹⁰ For example, Caesar is supposed to have provided multiple banquets following the conquest of Hispania: "*adiicit epulum ac viscerationem et post Hispaniensem victoriam duo prandia.*"¹¹ Augustus' reinvention of the Saecular Games in 17 BCE featured seated banquets, *sellisternia*, following the theatrical performances on two consecutive days.¹² Therefore, though we cannot say with certainty that the public meal happened uniformly at every festival in the republican period, there was at least a tendency for banquets to finish these events. Plautine food references would be

tantalizing reminders of all of this feasting, even if they did not directly precede them.

The schedule for the beginning of the Ludi Megalenses—the occasion of the first performance of *Pseudolus*—is clearer. They began on the first day with theatrical and circus games: Cicero defends Marcus Caelius Rufus on April 4th while plays are performed nearby.¹³ The exchange of patrician dinners occurred on this first night: a calendar from CE 6-9 inscribed in the forum in Praeneste explains that on April 4th “reciprocation of dinners among the nobility habitually occurs in great number.”¹⁴ So the *Pseudolus*’ first audience, comprising diverse social classes, would have consumed dinners ranging from the very modest to the lavish.¹⁵

Meat and the festival context

Meat is by far the most frequently mentioned food in Plautus, yet meat did not form a regular or substantial contribution to the Roman diet.¹⁶ Annual festivals with state-sponsored sacrifices and funerals would have been the main contexts for the consumption of meat by a large majority of the populace of Rome. The close connection between festivals and the distribution of sacrificial meat dates back at least to Iron Age Latium. Dionysius of Halicarnassus mentions the *Feriae Latinae* on the Alban Mount, a festival at which Latin cities came together and worshipped Jupiter Latiaris.¹⁷ Because it was a ceremony creating and re-affirming the unity of the Latin tribe, if any group “failed to obtain its fair share of meat, the whole ceremony needed to be repeated.”¹⁸ In the city of Rome itself, public feasting began as early as 328 BCE with the *visceratio*, the distribution of the sacrificial meat.¹⁹

When a more specific word than *victus* is used to refer to meat in Plautus, pork is most often mentioned, followed by fish. In zooarchaeological remains from Roman Italy, pig bones are attested in increasing quantity from the pre-Roman into the Roman period. By the Roman period, pig bones make up 40 to 80% of recovered quadruped bones at urban sites in Italy.²⁰ Pig is typically described as the defining Roman foodstuff and “the choicest of all the domestic meats consumed,” having more Latin names than any other animal.²¹ It is no wonder that it appears so often in Plautus.²²

Food in the play

In the *Pseudolus*, food comments mark the progress of the plot and move us toward the completion of the story. The first mention of food is made by the brothel owner Ballio, who enters the stage scolding his slaves and demanding that they prepare his home for a banquet in the evening:

tu esto lectisterniator. tu argentum eluito, idem exstruito.
haec, quom ego a foro revortar, facite ut offendam parata,
vorsa sparsa, tersa strata, lautaque unctaque omnia uti sint.
nam mi hódie natalís dies est; decet eum omnis vos concélebrare.
pernam, callum, glandium, sumen facito in aqua iaceant. satin audis?
magnifice volo me summos viros accipere, ut mihi rem esse reantur.
intro abite atque haec cito celerate, ne mora quae sit, cocus cum veniat.
ego eo in macellum, ut piscium quidquid erit pretio praestinem.²³

You! Be the couch-arranger! You! Clean the silverware and pile it up!
Have these things prepared for when I return from the forum.
Everything should be swept, prepped, wiped, spread, and washed and oiled.
For today is my birthday; you should all celebrate it with me.
Make sure that the ham, hide, tenderloin, sow are tossed in water. Do you hear me?
I want to host important men magnificently, so they’ll marvel at my property.
Go inside and do these things quickly so there’s no delay when the cook arrives.
I’m going to the market to buy up whatever fish is there.

The sense of haste in this passage occurs in many discussions of food in Plautus. Characters always need to rush to prepare for an important party or are extremely hungry and stress that the meal must be ready upon their return. Although when other characters in the *Pseudolus* later mention feasting it is not clear that they are alluding to this particular party, Ballio's initial request for spotless couches, gleaming silverware, and cooking meat sets up an image of lavishness which persists.

Later, when Ballio is negotiating the sale of the prostitute Phoenicium with Pseudolus and Calliadorus, he explains:

Respiciam istoc pretio; nam si sacrificem summo Iovi
atque in manibus exta teneam ut poriciam, interea loci
si lucri quid detur, potius rem divinam deseram.
non potest pietati opsisti huic, utut res sunt ceterae.²⁴

I will reconsider it for a price; for, if I were in the middle of sacrificing to highest Jove, holding the entrails in my hand, offering them as a sacrifice, and some cash were offered, I would rather abandon the sacrifice. It's impossible to resist that type of piety, however other events play out.

The mention of animal sacrifice should not be separated from the idea of meat consumption, since the two were necessarily linked. When an animal was sacrificed, the inner organs, *exta*, were burnt in offering to the gods, while the rest of the animal's body was consumed by individuals at the ceremony.²⁵ In Greek New Comedy the cook himself is charged with the slaughtering of the sacrifice to be served to the diners at the later feast.²⁶

Throughout the play there are one-word food references without much context. Pseudolus promises Calliadorus that if Ballio breaks their deal, *exossabo ego illum simulter itidem ut murenam coquos*: "I will debone him like a cook does an eel."²⁷ This is interesting, since we know Ballio has gone to the market to purchase fish and that he has appointed a cook to arrive at his home. Later, Harpax, the servant of the Macedonian soldier, is exhausted and explains, *Quin ubi prandero, dabo operam somno*. "When I have lunched, I will take a nap."²⁸ These unconnected food references keep the idea of food alive in the background of the main action and on the minds of the audience. We are reminded that we have yet to see any food in the play, although a banquet was mentioned hundreds of lines ago.

The cook scene in *Pseudolus* is one extended food reference which has been handled quite thoroughly by other scholars.²⁹ It is yet another explicit reminder of the promised feast which has yet to appear. The many spices mentioned by the cook sound made up, but they contribute to the exoticism of his food preparation:

nam vel ducenos annos poterunt vivere
meas qui essitabunt escas quas condivero.
nam ego cicilendrum quando in patinas indidi
aut cepolendrum aut maccidem aut secaptidem,
eae ipsae se patinae fervefaciunt ilico.
haec ad Neptuni pecudes condimenta sunt;
terrestris pecudes cicimandro condio aut
hapalopside aut cataractria.³⁰

Those who eat the food which I have seasoned will live for 200 years.
For when I put into the saucepan cookedender, or onionmeg, or clownon, or beheadish,
the dishes themselves immediately become warmed.
These are spices for the flocks of Neptune; the flesh of the earthly animals I season with

castoroilapple or halfboiledander or allspiceria.

As the cook attempts to convince Ballio that his services are worth a high fee, we witness the importance of spices in Roman cuisine, perhaps more specifically in *haute cuisine*. Roberto Danese argues not only that Plautus' made-up spices were meant to convey a Greek origin (with their ending in *-endron*),³¹ but also that the addition of a velar *-l-* before this ending adds a "touch of rustic Sabine" to the Greek. For Danese, this multiethnic, multilinguistic allusion contributes to the cook's snobbery and the ostentation of his meal.³² While the contemporary audience's recognition of such linguistic intricacies is not certain, the passage does place an extended emphasis on taste: there is a concerted effort to create not just food imagery, but to activate some other sensory response to imagined food. Later in the cook's speech he continues to boast about his own abilities when he suggests,

Quin tu illos inimicos potius quam amicos vocas?
nam ego ita convivis cenam conditam dabo
hodie atque ita suavi suavitate condiam:
ut quisque quidque conditum gustaverit,
ipsum sibi faciam ut digitos praerodat suos.³³

Why don't you invite your enemies rather than your friends?
For I'll give the guests a banquet which is so flavorful
today and I'll season it with such pleasant sweetness,
that I'll make anyone who tastes each thing I've seasoned
nibble off his own fingers.

The word choice (suggesting the food is "finger-lickin' good") and the description in the cook scene creates a tangible sense of food. If the frequent direct addresses made to the audience in Plautine drama made them "more like participants in the drama than spectators,"³⁴ then we can think of food and its appearance in these plays as contributing to the metatheater. Timothy Moore emphasizes the metatheatrical qualities of *Pseudolus*, imagining Plautus adding self-conscious elements to the dialogue to heighten the comedy and, consequently, the audience's pleasure. Moore posits that even when the plot has not progressed at all, the play has been loaded with jokes, frivolities, and novel twists "purely for the fun they provide the audience."³⁵ In a similar vein, provoking the audience's sense of taste and smell reminds them of the roasting spits and festival treats awaiting them outside the theater.

Following the cook scene, *Pseudolus* and his assistant *Simia* devise and execute their plan to convince Ballio that he should hand over *Phoenicium*. Both slaves exult at the thought of their celebration when their plan has been successful.

Pseudolus
Ut ego accipiam te hodie lepide, ubi effeceris hoc opus.

Simia
Ha ha hae!

Pseudolus
Lepido victu, vino, unguentis et inter pocula pulpamentis;
ibidem una aderit mulier lepida, tibi savia super savia quae det.³⁶

Pseudolus
How delightfully I'll treat you today once you've finished your duty.

Simia

Ha ha ha.

Pseudolus

With lovely meat, wine, perfumes, and, between our cups, tenderloin.
And there'll be a lovely lady, who will dole out kiss after kiss.

Three hundred lines later and already drunk, Pseudolus again expresses his excitement for wine, women, dancing, and meat.

profecto edepol ego nunc probe habeo madulsam:
ita victu excurato, ita magnis munditiis dis dignis,
itaque in loco festivo sumus festive accepti.³⁷

By god, I'm totally drunk.
With such exquisite meats, such great elegance and worthy wealth,
in such a delightful setting, we've been delightfully entertained.

Finally, a banquet in celebration of united lovers ends the play; but really, we are celebrating Pseudolus' triumph. He has been looking forward to this celebration since the beginning. Pseudolus invites his master, Simo, to have a drink with him, yet when Simo suggests that the audience be invited as well, Pseudolus explains:

Hercle me isti hau solent vocare, neque ergo ego istos;
verum si voltis adplaudere atque adprobare
hunc gregem et fabulam, in crastinum vos vocabo.³⁸

Hell, they're hardly in the habit of inviting me, so I won't invite them either;
But if you wish to applaud and approve this group and this play, then tomorrow I will invite you.

The audience is both excluded from the present, onstage feast, and invited to a later feast. Closing the play with the opening of a feast probably parallels the festival context of the play's performance; with the *ludi scaenici* complete, the banquet can begin. Because this particular play was first featured at the *Ludi Megalenses*, the majority of the audience would not have been able to take part in the eating of the *victus* which is continually mentioned, but drinking and celebration were part of the atmosphere.

Conclusion

Roman public feasting brought people of different social classes together and helped to define different statuses within this collective.³⁹ Food references in Plautus mark the progression towards both the resolution of the plot and the actual public feast, but the theme of eating has deeper significance. There is also a connection between the competition for access to the banquet and the struggle for social status.⁴⁰ Parasites beg for food and complain when they are left starving outside the doors of their patrons' homes; slaves look forward to the coming festival, or skim off the top of the stew being prepared in the kitchen.⁴¹ In addition to class division, however, there is also a struggle for food on the part of the male heads of the households. The host of the meal rarely eats it. The plan is foiled in some way so that someone else steps in to consume his share, and the promised banquet never occurs, or does not occur within the action of the play. In this way, Plautus both reminds us of the divisions which were created in some public festivals and also transcends these divisions and makes his plays about a hunger for food despite one's status. The exclusivity of the meals in Plautus and the difficulty of obtaining food for many characters is a

reminder of the promised but delayed feast in the festival atmosphere of the performance. This is emphasized in the plays through the constant mention of food and through the often vivid sensory descriptions which the speakers employ.

notes

¹ Gowers 1993, 50–108; Lowe 1985a; Lowe 1985b; Hallett 1993; Danese 2002. For the cook as a comic trope in Greek New Comedy see Scodel 1993; for food as a multifaceted device in Old and Middle comedy see Wilkins 1993 and Gilula 1995.

² “Carnival” as suggested by Bakhtin as a communal opportunity for chaos and subversive laughter at the grotesque and the profane. (See for example, Bakhtin 1968, 192–195). Caryl Emerson captures the multivalence of “carnival,” explaining it as, “Christian, godly, eucharistic, inspired by the reverence for transfigured matter. . . . demonic, violent, nihilistic, indifferent to individual pain and death. . . . a form of play – either the dangerous, disobedient sort of playfulness that strategically opposes itself to centralized power, or the more stupefied sort of foolishness that emerges in a population already traumatized by terror. . . . democratic, aristocratic, a carrier of knowledge, an agent for self-correction and relief; it is also healthy.” Emerson 2002, 5, 7.

³ Douglas 1972, 62; Jones 2007, 197.

⁴ Douglas 1972, 70.4

⁵ Willcock, 1987, 1.

⁶ Ross Taylor 1937, 284. Several scholars have done a great deal of work on reconstructing Plautine chronology and the original-performance contexts of Plautus’ plays (For example, Buck 1940; Hallett 1996). For my purposes I take Paul Harvey’s advice that exploring Plautus’ contemporary sociopolitical climate can be more fruitful than attempting to link historical allusions in the text to specific production dates of the plays (Harvey 1986, 302).

⁷ Donahue 2003, 429.

⁸ Ovid *Fasti* IV 179–185, 355–360; Donahue 2003, 430; D’Arms 1984, 336.

⁹ Livy XII.1, 20; Donahue 2003, 429.

¹⁰ Kavaja 1998, 125–127.

¹¹ Suet. *Iul.* 38.1

¹² CIL VI.32323, lines 100–102, and 108–110.

¹³ Cic. *Cael.* 1.

¹⁴ Degrossi 1963, 126–133 quoted in Beard et al. 1998, vol II., 65.

¹⁵ A law was passed in 158 BCE under Gaius Fannius limiting the patrician dinners during the Ludi Megalenses to either no more than “one pullet per table” (Pliny *NH* 10.71) or no more than “one hundred and twenty asses in addition to vegetables, bread and wine; that they would not serve foreign, but only native, wine, nor use at table more than one hundred pounds’ weight of silverware” (Gellius *NA* ii.24).

¹⁶ Garnsey 1999, 123.

- ¹⁷ Dion. Hal. IV.49.2ff.
- ¹⁸ Cornell 1995, 295; Donahue 2003, 430.
- ¹⁹ Livy VIII.22, 2–4; Kavaja 1998 109–110.
- ²⁰ King 1999, fig 2, Appendix Table A. The archaeological evidence for fish consumption is problematic because of the small size and delicacy of fish bones. It is very difficult to account for differing recovery rates of fish bones at excavations in Italy. See Gianfrotta 1987, 55, 57.
- ²¹ MacKinnon 2001, 649; Purcell 2003, 340.
- ²² For pork's *romanitas* and its luxury when in excess see Gowers 1993, 69–73.
- ²³ *Pseudolus*, 162–169. Latin text from Willcock's 1987 edition. All translations are the author's.
- ²⁴ *Pseudolus*, 265–268.
- ²⁵ Kavaja 1998, 116. As discussed in the section above, this meat consumption often did not include everyone present at the ceremony, but perhaps only a select few.
- ²⁶ Scodel 1993, 164, 170.
- ²⁷ *Pseudolus*, 382.
- ²⁸ *Pseudolus*, 664.
- ²⁹ Lowe 1985a; Gowers 1993, 93–107; Danese 1997, 2002. All discuss the cook as a stand-in for the poet and as evidence for mixed culture and ethnicity in Plautus.
- ³⁰ *Pseudolus*, 829–836.
- ³¹ This is a suggestion of Gowers 1993, 103.
- ³² Danese 1997, 528–529. J. Innes Miller says these spices have “an authentic oriental ring,” connecting maccis to mace from South–East Asia (Miller 1998, 9, 58–60), while other scholars read this word as a reference to the playwright, Titus Maccius Plautus, himself (see, for example, Hallett 1993, 23).
- ³³ *Pseudolus*, 880–884.
- ³⁴ MacCary and Willcock 1976, 198.
- ³⁵ Moore 1998, 93–94.
- ³⁶ *Pseudolus*, 946–948.
- ³⁷ *Pseudolus*, 1252–1254.
- ³⁸ *Pseudolus*, 1333–1335.
- ³⁹ Donahue 2003, 425; Potter 2000; Dietler 1996.
- ⁴⁰ This theme is currently under examination by the author.
- ⁴¹ See for example, Gelasimus and Stichus in *Stichus* and Peniculus in *Menaechmi*.

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