



THE MENEACHMEUS AS A MIXTURE OF OLD AND NEW COMEDY

Eski ve Yeni Komedinin Karışımı Olarak Menaechmi Oyunu

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Öz

Antik Yunan edebiyatında komedi popüler bir tiyatro türüydü ve Romalı oyun yazarları tarafından bir takım küçük değişikliklerle taklit edilip Roma edebiyatına uyarlanmıştır. Antik Yunan'da edebî bir tür olarak komedi, değişiklik gösterdiği zamanlar esas alınarak üçe ayrılmaktadır: Eski komedi, orta komedi ve yeni komedi. Eski komedi (480-430 M.Ö.) siyasi özgürlük ve entelektüel canlılıkla karakterize edilirken orta komedi (405-336 M.Ö.) milattan önce 404 yılında Atina'daki mali krizin sonucu olarak çok az siyaset ve sanatla karakterize edilmiştir. Yeni komediye gelince, o da romantik aşk ilişkileri, evlilik, klişeler ve yanlış anlamalar gibi konularla karakterize edilir. Komedi türleri konusunda ayrımlar net olsa da, Plautus'un yeni komedinin günümüze ulaşan bir el yazması olarak kabul edilen Menaechmus isimli oyununu kategorize etmek kolay değildir. Çünkü yeni komedi türünde yazılan oyunların aksine, bu oyun Menachemus kardeşlerin oyun boyunca açgözlü ve ahlaksızca davranmalarına rağmen mutlu sonla bitmektedir. Bu sebeple, Menaechmus yeni komedinin niteliklerine ilişkin veriler sağlamasına rağmen sonu açısından sorunlu sayılabilir. Bu nedenle, bu makale Menaechmus'u sonu açısından ne yeni komediye ne de yeni komedi tekniklerini kullanması açısından eski komediye uymayan bir oyun olarak incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Diğer bir ifadeyle, bu makale oyunu, toplumu ve oyundaki kahramanları yozlaşmış ve yalancı olarak göstererek aslında toplumu hicvetmesi bakımından eski komedi ve yeni komedi türlerinin bir karışımı olarak analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Antik Roma Tiyatrosu, Antik Yunan Tiyatrosu, Yeni komedi, Plautus ve *Menaechmi*.

Abstract

Comedy was a popular theatrical style in ancient Greek literature and was imitated and adapted by the Roman playwrights with small changes. In Ancient Greek, comedy as a literary genre is split into three categories based on the time periods in which it differs: Old Comedy, Middle Comedy and New Comedy. Old comedy (480-430 B.C.) is characterized with political freedom and intellectual vitality while middle comedy (405-336 B.C.) is characterized with a little politics or poetics as a result of Athens' financial ruin in 404 B.C. As for the new comedy, it is characterized with romantic love, marriage, stereotypes, and misunderstandings. Although the distinctions are clear about the types of comedy it is not easy to categorize Plautus' *The Menaechmus* which is considered as a surviving manuscript of new comedy. That is, although the play provides data concerning the

qualities of the new comedy it may be considered as problematic with regards to the ending as it does not provide relief in contrast to the plays written in the new comedy genre. Therefore, this paper aims to study *The Meneachemus* as a play which neither fits into new comedy in terms of the ending nor into old comedy in terms of employing the techniques of new comedy.

Keywords: Ancient Roman Drama, Ancient Greek Drama, New Comedy, Plautus and the Meneachemus.

Introduction

The Meneachemus starts with a prologue mentioned by an unnamed character, which is a typical start for a Roman comedy. He greets the audience and requests that they pay attention to what Plautus has to say. He claims that comedies are often set in Athens, but that this play breathes a Grecian air in Sicily in the sense that the action takes place in Epidamnus, Greece, but the backstory takes place in Italy. He then sets out the backstory of the play which is written in verse. A merchant from Syracuse had identical twin boys. The word identical is highlighted because it is crucial to the storyline. Their father took one of the children on a business trip to Tarentum, Italy, when they were seven years old, while the other was left at home with his mother. There was a festival in Tarentum and there were lots of people there. An Epidamnian trader separated the child from his father and took him to Epidamnus. The father was distraught and died in Tarentum a few days later. When the grandfather in Syracuse learned this, he changed the name of the remaining brother, Sosicles, to Mannaechmus, because he favored the lost sibling. The grandfather's name was likewise Menachemus. The unnamed character, then, informs the crowd that when the twins arrive, they will both be called Menaechmus. As the plot reveals, Roman humor was quite basic. At the Ludi Romani festivities, the theatre had to compete with other entertainments. Therefore, playwrights had to repeatedly remind the audience of the plot, which is why, there are so many asides in the play. The unnamed character goes on describing that the Epidamnian trader who kidnapped Menaechmus was a childless man. When the boy reached at the age, the trader gave him a wife, dowry, and inheritance. Menaechmus adopted the trader's enormous estate, where he lives now, when the trader died. Onstage, the unnamed character points out a house. He tells the audience to watch and says that they will soon see the Syracusan twin arrive with a slave in search of his brother and to find him.

This play is regarded as a surviving text in line of new comedy tradition in the sense that Plautus composed it by employing the techniques of new comedy as well as enriching it with satire, a literary device which is not used in new comedy. In order to analyze the play as a mixture of old and new comedy, comedy as a genre and its types should be studied. Dithyrambs are the earliest connection between Dionysus and performance and these

were odes spoken in favor of the god, and a tragic chorus in Euripides' *The Bacchae* uses them. Comedic renditions of these songs are known as phallic songs¹. Comedy is believed to have been evolved from primitive "phallic-songs," and, then, has become a literary genre. Phallic songs were performed at religious festivals particularly fertility rituals. Besides, according to Storey & Arlene, comedy is "'revel-song' may be nothing more than an intelligent observation based on the festive parades (*komoi*) that marked many Greek festivals, and the statement about 'phallic-songs' as the ancestor of comedy could just be Aristotle's extrapolation from his conclusion that tragedy arose from those who led the dithyramb" (2005, s. 170). Therefore, it may be concluded that while tragedy arose from dithyrambs, comedy arose from comedic version of dithyrambs known as phallic songs.

Different kinds of comedy used to be held in festivals in Ancient Greece such as a festival dedicated to Dionysus, that is, fertility divinity, held in March and *Lenaea* held in January. These festivals included singing, dancing, bantering with spectators and criticizing the famous people in the city (Duckworth, 1952, p. 21). In that time, there were three types in Greek comedy: old comedy (480- 430 B.C.) in which there is political freedom and intellectual liveliness, middle comedy (405-336 B.C.) in which there is a little politics or poetics as a result of financial ruin of Athens in 404 B.C., and new comedy which includes romantic love, marriage, stereotypes and misunderstandings. Many things changed from old comedy to new comedy, which is explained as follows:

Imagination gives place to observation, fantasy to realism. The predicament of humble obstinate humanity in the organized State, protesting against wars and taxes and regulations and the power of money, is replaced by the predicament of the ordinary husband, son or lover, who in a world complicated by multifarious division into hostile camps - rich and poor, slave and free, old and young, native and foreign, and above all male and female - struggles through mischance and bewilderment to be in some degree faithful both to himself and to his neighbor (Vellacott, 1967, p. 13).

Comedies written in line of new comedy were the most popular style in Roman theatre. Because Athens was definitely under Macedonian sovereignty in 336 B.C., Athens stopped to become the center of the Greek world. As a result, current political and social problems were no longer under the control of the Athenians. Therefore, "the life of the Athenian, his home, his friends, his slaves were limited to eating and making love: Comedy, then, only deals with these limited subjects in this limited environment" (Lesky, 1966, p. 643). In this regard, Anderson also writes that there are no gods in the world created by the new comedy. He continues as follows: "There are no abstractions other than Prolog. The poet does not

¹https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Joukowsky_Institute/courses/13things/7415.html

speak for himself in plays now. There are not political advice or satire. The existing order in society is not questioned and people stick to their social-class relations” (Anderson, 1978, p. 27).

In most of the plays, the goal is to have a happy reunion of the youth. This happiness is due to class distinctions, dowry problems, poverty or illegality. Problems brought by children and parents' disapproval of young people's marriages create obstacles. Storyline going from bad to good arranged in line (Lever, 1956, p. 187). At the end of the play, father and son, husband and wife, who have been separated for years, usually find each other using rings. Everything is resolved by signs such as the medallion, the 'I' on the back of the neck, or a conversation that one of the characters in the play accidentally listens to.

These mentioned features employed in comedies were borrowed from Greek plays, especially from the plays of Menander. That is why, the majority of the characters and settings in Roman plays had Greek names. However, in the plays of Plautus, the events and current topics and street names were Roman. These plays include farces and are called as *Fabulea Palliatea* in which there are stock characters and outdoor urban settings. The hero of the play is defined as an *adulescens*. He falls in love with the girl called *virgo* which means the girl next door. He cannot get married to his lover for a variety of reasons such as either because of her dubious parentage or because she is a prostitute which is known as *meretrix*. In addition to these characters, there are other stock characters such as *senex* who is the father or an old man, *servus* who is a wily slave, *leno* who is a pimp, *miles gloriosus* who is a bragging soldier, and a parasite who exploits his master.

The playwrights created stock plots with these stock characters often followed with subplots. For instance, there were couples who were hindered by their parents, conflicts between the parents and child, or mistaken identities as examples of stock plots. Because they were comedies as genre, there were almost always happy endings for the lovers. Because of this reason, new comedy's incidents are frequently improbable since a happy ending is required for a new comedy play's resolve, which is resulted in a large version of chance and coincidence (Harsh, 1944, p. 317). Because the plays of Plautus are regarded as the examples of new comedy, they are observed as recognizable characters who have limited roles to play in the plots. For instance, heroes want to get married to the girls but they are prevented either because heroes are coming from a lower social class or because of their parents for a variety of reasons; however, they get married at the end of the play and this happy ending like a device is employed commonly in almost all plays by Plautus (Hadas, 1965, p. xii)

Being one of the earliest Roman dramatists Titus Maccius Plautus was born in c.254-184 BC in Umbria and died in 184 BC in Rome. Plautus uses the Greek new comedy for the Roman stage. Although it is hard to know how original he is as a playwright it is claimed that “he does not seem

to have translated exactly, but he certainly worked within the Greek convention using the same stock characters—miserly fathers, spendthrift sons, boastful soldiers, resourceful parasites, courtesans, and slaves—and often borrowing the plots of his Greek models” (Drabble, 2000, p. 797). His twenty plays have survived although one hundred and thirty plays are estimated to have been written by him. Plautus banishes Roman gloom by reflecting the celebratory atmosphere and turning common attitudes and beliefs completely upside down. He delivers saturnalian anarchy to a civilization with a tremendous compulsion for hierarchy, order, and obedience. Plautus shows an audacious disdain for all elders that treated a parent's authority with religious awe and could punish any infraction with death. His comedy has a similar mood to the medieval Feast of Fools (a product of another very constrained culture), which some perceive as a safety valve for suppressed emotions that may otherwise break their bonds more forcefully (Segal, 1987, p. 13-4).

Plautus' plays are adaptations of Greek comedies of Menander, Diphilus and Philemon. Although he wisely made use of Greek characters and traditions in his plays in order to avoid criticizing Roman audience directly, his plays were enriched with Roman life. In this regard, Plautus is regarded as one of the greatest practitioners of the Roman comedy. For instance, it is stated that “Plautus, after the manner of Latin writers, depends upon the wiles and schemes of his characters for much of the comedy element, so that he very naturally makes prominent the gayer, less moral brother” (Gill, 1975, p. 85). Plays of Plautus are about middle-class people and their slaves. These plays are almost regarded as musical because they were written in meter.

As for the play *Menaechmus*, it is a comedy about two identical twins one of whom has been lost for a long time. Menaechmus of Epidamnus is a really interesting character. For instance, at the beginning of the play, he is introduced as a silly man has a quarrel with his cruel wife. In order to take an exact vengeance, he arranges a dinner date with his parasite and his mistress. He is joined by his long-lost brother, who has the same name with his brother Menaechmus of Epidamnus and is quickly mistaken for him. The mistress, the parasite, and a dress stolen by the greedy Menaechmus of Syracuse for his mistress are involved in a series of humorous meetings. The reunion comes exactly when everyone involved has come to the conclusion that Menaechmus of Epidamnus is insane. At the end of the play, although the Menachmei brothers are immoral throughout the play they are not punished for their immoral and greedy behaviors and they end up happy. Not only the brothers but also all of the characters are portrayed as immoral and greedy, which may be taken a satirical approach to the society. The plot of Menaechmus is not original. Many early Greek plays have a similar topic, and Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* is based in part on

The Menaechmus. However, in this play, it is Plautus' employing the features of new comedy not the storyline, that keep the audience entertained. Therefore, this paper aims to provide a new perspective on the play which used to be considered as an example of new comedy because of its techniques. It will be shown that this play does not fit to the new comedy because it includes satire and does not fit into old comedy because of the techniques such as misapprehension and misunderstandings as a result of misidentifying, asides, and overhearing shared by new comedy employed skillfully by Plautus.

The Meneachmeus as a Mixture of Old and New Comedy

The Meneachmeus starts with a prologue which is a common practice employed by Roman comedy writers. In the play, Menaechmus of Syracuse who is a typical stock character of *adulescens* seeks his twin brother who got lost when he was about seven years old. He devotes his last six years to searching for his brother in different countries. The twin brothers are called with the same name because their grandfather gets upset after one of his grandsons got lost, and, thus, he changes the name of the remaining one's name from Sosicles to Menachemus. Sosicles, or Menaechmus the traveler, is mistaken for his brother Menaechmus by mistress, wife, parasite, father-in-law of Menaechmus, and others. The Menaechmus the traveler has a slave called Messnio who is very smart and guides his master. Both of the twin brothers get angry because everybody mistakes them with each other and neither of them can find a solution. For instance, Menaechmus the citizen finds that his mistress and his wife are angry with him and he cannot explain the events when they ask for explanations since he cannot understand what is happening there. As a result, a series of misunderstandings arise. Following the recognition scene in which the twin brothers understand that they are brothers, Menaechmus the citizen decides to sell his property and goes to Syracuse with his brother. While Messnio is selling the property of Menachemus he asks if Menaechmus the citizen wants to sell his wife as well. Then, Menaechmus the citizen says that nobody will buy her. This last sentence is important in the sense that portraying women as the property of men is a common trait in the plays of Plautus. In this regard, Erich Segal explains,

In Plautus, the henpecking wife and cringing husband are commonplace. Menaechmus's spouse is a constant source of irritation, as he complains to her: *me refines, revocas, rogatas* (line 114), 'You detain me, delay me, demand every detail.' When his wife later asks the parasite how to behave toward Menaechmus, he tells her *idem quod semper, male habeas* (line 569), 'the same as always, make him suffer.' No wonder a wife is so often likened to a barking dog (Segal, 1987, p. 23).

There are many examples even from the beginning of the play about displaying women as nuisances for men. For instance, Menaechmus appears

at the door and shouts his wife by saying that, “if she weren’t such a mean, stupid, obstinate, and impossible woman she would not want to do anything that he disliked. He also threatens to divorce her. It is interesting to see that his wife does not have a name in the play. She is referred as wife. He says that he is going to see his mistress and his wife cannot do anything about it. Aside, he reveals that he is wearing one of his wife’s gowns under his cloak and says that he has stolen it to give to his mistress, which creates humor among the audience.

Besides, Menaechmus asks his parasite to smell the dress and offers him to smell its skirt, which is a farcical scene. He visits his mistress Erotium whose name means Miss Erotic, with his parasite. He has a drinking battle with his parasite and whoever wins will spend the night with Erotium. While Erotium is preparing the meals Menaechmus and Peniculus go outside. The cook of Erotium, Cylindrus, sees Sosicles and thinks him Menaechmus. This is the first case of mistaken identity. Cylindrus calls Sosicles as Menacehme and Sosicles is surprised how he knows his name because Sosicles knows that he is called as Menacheme until he was seven years old. Another case of mistaken identity occurs when Erotium opens the door and sees Sosicles. She asks him to come but Sosicles thinks that Erotium is drunk or insane. His servant Messenio claims that she is a harlot trying to get money from him. Erotium also thinks that Menacehme must be mad. Sosicles meets Peniculus but does not know him. Peniculus gets angry for this and tells everything to Menachemus’s wife in order to avenge him. On the other hand, Sosicles wants to take advantage of this situation. For instance, a maid comes out of Erotium’s house and says that Erotium wants Menachemus to take a bracelet to the jewelers to add an ounce of gold so it can be remodeled. Sosicles says that he will do anything else she wants him to do. The maid says that he must remember the bracelet because he stole it from his wife’s chest a while ago. Sosicles denies it. The maid says that, if he does not recognize it, he had better give it back to her, so Sosicles says that of course he remembers it. He, then, asks where the armlets that he gave Erotium at the same time are. The maid says that there never were any armlets. Sosicles agrees with her and promises to return the dress and bracelet at the same time. The maid asks if he would get her some gold earrings made. He says he would gladly if she gave him the gold. She says she thought he would provide the gold and she would pay him back later, he says that she should provide it and he will pay her back with interest. She says that she does not have any gold so she says he will get the earrings made when she has some. As seen, both Sosicles and Menachemus are so called heroes of the comedy but they are immoral. In other words, there is a subversion of typical adulescens characters. As adulescens, both twin brothers should be male heroes. For instance, Sosicles lies and cheats people here in order to gain money and have sex. Sosicles and Menachemus are

morally corrupted throughout the play but they end up happy. This implies a corrupted society in which everybody including supposed heroes are liars and cheaters. They get away from any sort of punishment.

At the end of the play, the slave solves the complicated situation and the twin-brothers recognize each other and reunite. Their fortune turns for the better. As seen, the plot gets complicated with the use of intrigues, overhearing and eavesdropping. For instance, in the second scene while Menaechmus the citizen is talking to himself Parasite overhears him:

Men. Cit. We that have loves abroad and wives at home, are miserably hampered, yet would every man could tame his Shrew as well as I do mine. I have now filched away a fine cloak of my wife's, which I mean to bestow upon one that I love better.

Pen. Come, what share have I in that?

Men. Cit. What? Damn! I am caught!

Pen. True, but by your friend (Plautus, 2021, p. 7).

Overhearing occurs as a deliberate part of an intrigue. That is to say, Peniculus tells this to the wife of Menaechmus the citizen in order to avenge Menaechmus. When Peniculus sees Menaechmus the traveler, or Sosicles, he is ignored by him. Peniculus gets angry as he thinks that his master ignores him. He thinks that his friend Menaechmus the citizen pretends not to know him. The play includes eavesdropping or overhearing as a stage device more than once and “the frequency of eavesdropping results from the fact that the action is continuous and the characters who utter link monologues remain on the stage and listen to an entrance monologue or dialogue before engaging in conversation with the newcomers” (Duckworth, 1952, p. 109). In addition, the Roman stage was shallow and long to allow for the common eavesdropping scenes in Roman comedy.

Moreover, asides are used in the play all the time and they can be spoken “not only by eavesdroppers but also by characters engaged in conversation with others. Here, the danger of improbability is greater, especially if the aside is of any length or it causes an unnatural interruption in the conversation” (Duckworth, 1952, p. 111). Despite the fact that Plautus uses asides astutely with different aims such as to inform the audience about the real intention of the speakers, to make the situation clearer for the audience, there may occur some situations in which we can observe the danger of improbability. For instance, in act IV and in the scene II, Peniculus talks in aside both to Menaechmus the citizen and his wife at the same time as follows:

Men. Cit. What is it?

Mul. My cloak.

Men. Cit. Your cloak?

Mul. My cloak! Why do you blush?

Pen. He cannot cloak his blushing. (Aside to Men. Cit.) Nay, I might not go to dinner with you. Do you not remember? (Aside to

Mul.) To him, I say.

Men. Cit. Hold your peace, Peniculus (Plautus, 2021, p. 15).

According to Duckworth, ignorance of misapprehension seems equally to be the basis of the complications in the plots of new comedy. It must have been full of incidents turning upon both innocent mistakes and guileful deceptions with regard to identity (1952, p. 142). We can consider the bad treatments of the mistress and wife of Menaechmus the citizen as innocent mistakes. Apart from these, there are guileful deceptions in the play. For instance, Menaechmus the traveler enjoys himself when the mistress supposes him as Menaechmus the citizen. He also takes the watch and a golden chain pretending that he will bring them later. Additionally, Menaechmus the traveler cheats Messinio pretending that he is the master of him. When Messinio says that he keeps the purse Menaechmus the citizen acts as if he were the Menaechmus the traveler and asks him to bring his purse.

Although there are lots of farcical scenes such as Menaechmus the traveler's playing as if he was mad it is hard to describe this play as a pure farcical play because the language of Plautus is witty. He not only depends on the farcical scenes but also on puns and a witty language. Plautus himself condemns pure farcical kind of comedies. Besides, he touches upon some serious topics even if it is done shortly. A case in point is his contemplation scene:

Men. Cit.(Aside) It would make a man at his wit's end, to see how scabbling causes are handled at the Court. Consider: If a poor man ever so honest have a matter come to be judged, there is he outfaced and overlaid with falsity: yet, if a rich man - ever so vile a wretch -come before them, they are all eager to rule in his favour. Do you see my point? What with supporting bad causes for the oppressors, and patronizing a few just actions for the wronged, the lawyers then pocket up all the gains. Am I right, here? Why, just this morning, as favour to a friend, I went to plead in his defense. I was no sooner entered into it, but his adversaries laid so hard into him, and brought such matter against him, that do what I could, I could neither assist him nor get away from court till now: so long would they debate over trifles! Lawyers! (Suddenly realizing the time.) But I am afraid Erotium will be angry and think ill of me that I stayed so long; yet I think she may not be so angry this time considering the gift I gave her to-day (Plautus, 2021, p. 17).

In conclusion, in contrast to the traditional evaluation of the play as an example of new comedy in terms of themes, description of characters, and techniques used in the play, *Meneachemus* may be considered as a play being mixture of old comedy with its satiric approach towards the characters and the society. In other words, the features that makes the play as an example of new comedy can be counted as follows: That is to say, themes are not serious as they do not aim at teaching but relaxing the audience. The

content produces laughter within the scenes. Despite the fact that there are different scenes, there is a unity of action in the play. However, there is no unity of time and place. Characters are portrayed as liars, imperfect and impostures, namely stereotypes. In accordance with this, their language is common instead of an elevated one. In terms of techniques that have been used in the play, there are misapprehension and misunderstandings as a result of misidentifying, asides, and overhearing shared by new comedy. As for the feature which adds the characteristic of old comedy is its including satire that lacks in new comedy. Both brothers are liars and cheaters in contrast to the male heroes portrayed in new comedy plays. However, they end up happy at the end of the play, which implies a corrupted society.

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**Eski ve Yeni Komedinin Karışımı Olarak Menaechmi Oyunu
Genişletilmiş Özet**

Komediler Roma tiyatrosunda en popüler türdü ve özellikle Menander'in oyunlarından olmak üzere Yunan oyunlarından uyarlanmışlardır. Bu nedenle Roma oyunlarındaki karakterlerin ve kullanılan yerlerin çoğunluğunun Yunanca isimleri vardır. Ancak Plautus'un oyunlarında olaylar ve güncel konular ile sokak adları Roma'dan alınmıştır. Bu oyunlar fars içeriyordu ve tip karakterler ile açık hava kentsel ortamlarının olduğu Fabulea Palliatea olarak adlandırılırdı. Oyunun kahramanı Adulescens olarak adlandırılırdı ve komşu kızı anlamına gelen Virgo adlı kişiye âşık olurdu. Ancak evlenmeleri için engeller olurdu. Bunun yanı sıra, baba veya yaşlı bir adam olan Senex, kurnaz bir köle olan Servus, övünen bir asker olan Mil Gloriosus ve efendisini sömüren parazit gibi başka tip karakterler de vardı.

Oyun yazarları, bu tip karakterlerle klişe olay örgüleri yaratmışlardır. Örneğin, bu oyunlarda ebeveynleri tarafından engellenen çiftler, ebeveyn ve çocuk arasındaki çatışmalar veya birbirine karıştırılan kişiler vardır. Tür olarak komedi oldukları için sevenler için neredeyse her zaman mutlu sonlar olmuştur. Bu nedenle, yeni komedi türünde yazılmış bir oyununun çözümü için mutlu bir son gerektiğinden, oyunun sonu şans ve tesadüfün büyük bir versiyonuyla sonuçlanır (Harsh, 1944, s. 317). Plautus'un oyunları yeni komedi örnekleri olarak kabul edildiğinden şu şekilde tanımlanabilir:

Plautus'un karakterleri küçük ve tanınabilir karakterlerden oluşur ve bu karakterler olay örgülerinde sınırlı rollere sahiptir. Örneğin, kahramanlar kızlarla evlenmek isterler ama onlar daha alt bir sosyal sınıftadırlar. Plautus'un hemen hemen tüm oyunlarında anne ve babaları tarafından evlenmeleri engellenen bu karakterler oyunun sonunda bunu başarırlar (Hadas, 1965, s. xii).

En eski Roma oyun yazarlarından biri olan Titus Maccius Plautus, MÖ 254-184 yıllarında Umbria'da doğdu ve MÖ 184'te Roma'da öldü. Plautus, Roma sahnesi için Yunan yeni komedisini kullanır. Bir oyun yazarı olarak ne kadar özgün olduğunu bilmek zor olsa da Yunan tiyatrosundan aldığı oyunları Roma tiyatrosuna başarılı bir şekilde uygulamıştır. Oyunlarında çoğunlukla “cimri babalar, savurgan oğullar, övünen askerler, becerikli parazitler, fahişeler ve köleler kullanır- ve genellikle- Yunan modellerinin olay örgülerini ödünç alır” (Drabble, 2000, s. 797). Yüz otuz oyununun Plautus tarafından yazıldığı tahmin edilmesine rağmen, sadece yirmi oyunu günümüze kadar ulaşmıştır. Plautus, kutlama atmosferini yansıtarak ve ortak tutum ve inançları tamamen altüst ederek Roma kasvetini ortadan kaldırır. Hiyerarşi, düzen ve itaat için muazzam bir zorlamayla Satürn anarşisini bir uygarlığa teslim eder. Diğer bir ifadeyle, Plautus eleştirmekten kaçınmaz. Bu konuda Segal şunları yazmaktadır:

Plautus, bir ebeveynin otoritesine dini bir huşu ile bakan ve herhangi bir ihlali ölümle cezalandırabilecek bir halka karşı tüm yaşlılara karşı güçlü bir küçümseme gösterir. Onun komedisi, bazılarının aksi takdirde bağlarını daha güçlü bir şekilde kırabilecek olan bastırılmış duygular için bir emniyet supabı olarak algıladığı ortaçağ Aptallar Bayramı'na (çok kısıtlı başka bir kültürün ürünü) benzer bir ruh hâline sahiptir (Segal, 1987, s. 13-4).

Ayrıca, Plautus'un oyunları daha çok Menander, Diphilus ve Philemon'un Yunan komedilerinin uyarlamalarıdır. Plautus, Romalı seyirciyi doğrudan eleştirmekten kaçınmak için oyunlarında Yunan karakterlerini ve geleneklerini akıllıca kullanmasına rağmen, oyunları Roma yaşamıyla zenginleştirilmiştir. Bu bakımdan Plautus, Roma komedisinin en büyük uygulayıcılarından biri olarak kabul edilir. Örneğin, Plautus'un oyunlarında, komedi unsurunun çoğu karakterlerinin kurnazlıklarına ve planlarına bağlıdır, böylece, oyunlarında, doğal olarak, daha neşeli, daha az ahlaki kardeşi öne çıkarır” (Gill, 1975, s. 85). Plautus'un oyunları orta sınıf insanlar ve onların köleleri hakkındadır. Bu oyunlar yazıldığı ölçü itibarıyla âdeta musiki sayılır. Bu nedenle bazı oyunların yarısına yakını şarkı gibi söylenir. Bununla birlikte Ortaçağ ve Rönesans yazarları üzerinde büyük etkisi vardır. Örneğin; Moliere ona hayrandır ve Shakespeare Plautus'tan oldukça etkilenmiştir.

Menaechmus oyunu uzun süredir kayıp olan bir çift ikiz kardeş hakkında bir komedir. Epidamnus'lu Menaechmus gerçekten ilginç bir karakterdir. Aptal bir adam zalim karısıyla tartışır ve intikam almak için paraziti ve metresi ile bir akşam yemeği randevusu ayarlar. Uzun süredir kayıp olan Kardeşi Epidamnus'lu Menaechmus ile aynı adı taşır ve kısa sürede herkes tarafından birbirleriyle karıştırılır. Siraküzalı açgözlü Menaechmus sevgilisi ve paraziti ile birlikte bir dizi mizahi toplantıya katılır. Buluşma tam olarak toplantıya katılan herkesin Epidamnus'lu Menaechmus'un deli olduğu kararına varmasıyla sonuçlanır. Görüldüğü gibi Menaechmus Kardeşler'in konusu orijinal değildir; çünkü birçok komedide ikiz kardeşler ve onların birbirine karıştırılmasıyla oluşan yanlış anlamalar ve komik sahneler vardır. Birçok erken Yunan oyununun benzer bir konusu vardır ve Shakespeare'in Yanlışlıklar Komedi'si kısmen Menaechmus'a dayandırılır. Ancak bu oyunda, seyirciyi eğlendiren olay örgüsü değil, Plautus'un yeni komedi özelliklerini kullanmasıdır. Ancak bu nedenle bu makale, söz konusu oyunu Plautus'un ustalıklı kullandığı yeni komedinin özelliklerini betimleme açısından incelemenin yanı sıra oyunun aynı zamanda eski komedi özelliği barındırması açısından da incelemektir. Geleneksel incelemelerin aksine- ki bunlar söz konusu oyunu sadece yeni komedi türünün başarılı bir örneği olarak tartışmıştır. Bu makale oyunun, toplumu ve oyundaki kahramanları yozlaşmış ve yalancı olarak göstererek aslında toplumu hicvetmesi bakımından eski komedi ve yeni komedi türlerinin bir karışımı olarak analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır.