

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE LANGUAGE OF PLAUTUS (BITLOP)

The language of Plautus differs in two significant ways from the Latin of Cicero, Catullus, Vergil, and other Roman authors with which you are familiar:

- 1) **Plautus reproduces the free style and tone of daily speech**, and so its syntax is significantly freer, regulated less by strict adherence to grammatical laws than the principle of *constructio ad sensum*. Compare how you talk, even in a formal setting, with how you write. Spoken language is full of fragments, implied words and phrases, and mixed constructions.
- 2) **It is among the earliest Latin that survives**, and so old pronunciations, forms, and constructions abound. We normally refer to these aspects of Plautus' style as *archaism* and speak of him using an *archaic form* (e.g. *quom* for the Classical *cum*), but this is not exactly correct. Technically, *archaism* refers to the conscious attempt by an author to imitate outmoded forms of spelling and diction. Were I to write this handout in the style of Shakespeare or Chaucer, that would be an example of archaism (and a perverse one at that). Plautus is using the common language of his time, it just so happens that his time is well before the "classical" period of Latin prose and verse, and so we call it "archaic".

I. BASIC FEATURES

- (a) Parataxis ("setting alongside"), where short independent clauses are strung together to express more complicated ideas (cf. Cicero, whose style is full of subordination).
- (b) Spelling changes, especially of vowels.
- (c) Plautus uses more pronouns than common in Classical Latin.
 - ▶ Ultimately, this makes understanding the play easier, once you adjust your expectations.
- (d) Prodelision of *sum* => *praefectust* for *praefectus est*, *quidemst* for *quidem est*
- (e) Prepositions often follow nouns

II. SPELLING

- (a) the use of *qu* instead of *c*, as in *quom* instead of *cum*, *quoius* for *cuius*
- (b) -ō- for -ē- (*vorto* for *verto*; *vostrum* for *vestrum*)
- (c) -i- for -e- or -ae- (*spicit*; *specit* from *specio*, *specere*; *tutin* > *tute-ne*; *hicine* > *hic-ce-ne*)
- (d) -u- and -i- in superlative ending => *optumus*, *maxumam*
- (e) -ōs for ūs (*servos* for *servus*)
- (f) -ōm for -ūm (*servom* for *servus*; esp. in relative and interrogative *quom* for *cum*; *quoius* for *cuius*)
- (g) loss of -u- between -cl- and -pl- (*hercle* for *hercule*; *periculum* for *periculum*)
- (h) Contraction: *sis* for *si vis*

III. VERBS

- (a) often the forms of *sum* are joined to the preceding word; prodelision: *praefectust* for *praefectus est*
 - ▶ e.g. *auden* > *audesne*; *pergin* > *pergisne*; *vin* > *visne*; *satīn* > *satisne*
- (b) future and past stem formed with -s- (~ Greek future and aorist) *faxo* > *fac-s-o* (future indicative); *faxis* > *fac-s-(er-)is* (perfect subjunctive).
- (c) Perfects contracted; -u- (*sisti* for *siuisti*) *instruxti* for *instruxisti*; *dixis* for *dixeris*
- (d) -ss- for -uer- (*amassis* for *amaueris*, *verberassis*)
- (e) *siet* for *sit*
- (f) *foret* commonly for imperfect *esset*.
- (g) Parataxis is particularly common with verbs like *sino*, *volo*, *facio*: *sinite abeam*; *fac felix sis* = classical *fac ut felix sis*; *vis* or *vin dicam*
- (h) The final -e of singular imperatives is frequently omitted: *dice*, *face*, *duce* for Classical imperative (*dic*, *fac*, *duc*); but *fer*.
- (i) the use of the -ier ending for the present passive and deponent infinitive (*sectarier* for *sectari*; *haberier* for *haberi*)
- (j) -ibo in future of fourth conjugations (*mentibitur* for *mentietur*)
- (k) the deletion of the final -s and final -e when enclitic interrogative -ne is added to a second singular verb
- (l) *cēdō* is frequently *dō* (old form of the imperative of *do dare*) with the intensifying prefix *cē*, rather than *cēdō* ('I yield')

IV. NOUNS & PRONOUNS

- (a) the replacement of *-u* with *-o* in noun endings
- (b) the use of the *-ai* genitive singular ending (*comoediāi* for *comoediae*; *sapientiāi* for *sapientiae*)
- (c) the use of *-īs* as the nominative and accusative plural ending *-ēs*; a form familiar from epic.
- (d) pronouns forms are less defined:
 - ▶ routinely see *qui* for classical *quo/qua/quibus*
 - ▶ *quis* for feminine interrogative *quae*
- (e) *-ūm* common ending of second declension genitive plural (*deum* for *deorum*; *vostrum* for *vestrorum*)
 - ▶ this is not a contraction of *-orum* but borrowing from *-um* genitive of other declensions and Greek *-ων*.
- (f) Irregular forms are sometimes regularized (*ipsus* for *ipse*)
- (g) Archaic forms of *is, ea, id: eae*, dative singular for *ei; ibus* for *eis*

V. PREFIXES AND SUFFIXES

- (a) *-ce* or *-c:* deictic added to many cases of demonstrative pronouns, *istuc* for *istud*, *hasce* for *has*
- (b) *ec-* with forms of relative, interrogative, and indefinite pronouns (*ecquis* for *quis*)
- (c) combinations of *ecce* (*ed+ce*) with pronouns (*eccillam* for *ecce illam*)
- (d) there is sometimes the addition of a final *-pte, -te, or -met* to pronouns as intensifiers
- (e) the addition of a final *-d* onto personal pronouns in the accusative or ablative to eliminate hiatus (*med* for *me; ted* for *te*)

VI. CONSTRUCTIONS

- (a) Partitive genitive with neuter pronouns (*quid negoti, quid modi*) in place of interrogative adjective
- (b) *similis* with genitive (rather than dative)
- (c) Paratactic subjunctive frequently for Classical infinitive with accusative subject
- (d) Some verbs can be either parenthetical or paratactic: *quaeso, credo, opinor, obsecro, amabo* (“please”)

VII. ADVERBS & INTERJECTIONS

- (a) *nē* is an affirmative particle, borrowed from Greek (*nai, vai*)
- (b) *quī* = adverbial ablative “how” and ablative of means “whereby”
- (c) adverbs in *-o* (perhaps from ablative but this is uncertain): *eo, isto...quo, hoc, aliquo, quo...alio, illo, alio*