T.H.M. Gellar-Goad, *Plautus:* Curculio, Bloomsbury Ancient Comedy Companions, London-New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, 181 pp., $95.00, ISBN 978-1-350-07974-8.

When I teach courses on the history of Latin, I try to pick short, representative texts from different periods. For early Latin drama, Plautus' *Curculio* is my preferred choice: not only is it the shortest extant comedy, with few metrical complications, it is also a very representative one, containing most stock characters and topics found throughout the genre. My favourite Plautine play, the *Captiui*, would not do; it is fairly long, metrically complex, and the beautiful theme of devoted friendship and self-sacrifice makes it a very untypical comedy, as Plautus himself remarks in the epilogue. Hence my pragmatic decision to go for the *Curculio*, and hence my enthusiasm when I saw that Gellar-Goad's new companion volume for undergraduate students was dedicated to this play. Unfortunately, this book turned out to be somewhat disappointing; despite a number of strengths and positive elements, it falls short in several respects.

My review falls into four parts. First, I shall present a brief plot summary of the *Curculio*, then I shall outline the structure of Gellar-Goad's book, and all the good things in it. Next, I shall have to focus on the weaknesses and shortcomings of the book, and finally, I shall outline what I would recommend to a student interested in reading the *Curculio*.

1. The plot of the *Curculio*

In the middle of the night, Phaedromus, a lovesick young man, accompanied by his witty slave Palinurus, goes to the house of the pimp Cappadox. He wants to have a secret meeting with Planesium, a slave-girl he is in love with. Since Cappadox suffers from a liver disease, and since our play is situated in Epidaurus, where people often went in order to be healed by divine intervention, the pimp sleeps in the sanctuary of Aesculapius, the god of healing, so as to find out through dreams how he could recover. Phaedromus tells us that Planesium does not yet work as a prostitute and that he does not have the money to buy her and set her free; for this reason, he has sent his hanger-on Curculio abroad to procure money.

When he arrives at the pimp's house, Phaedromus sprinkles some wine in front of the door. The old doorkeeper Leaena, who is always keen on drink, opens immediately. In exchange for the wine, she brings out Planesium, but the romantic dialogue between Phaedromus and his girl becomes comical because of Palinurus' constant interruptions.

Planesium has to leave, and Phaedromus heads home. The pimp returns to his house and meets Palinurus and then Phaedromus' cook, who interprets his rather obvious dream for him; Aesculapius does not want the pimp to get better. Next we encounter the ever-hungry Curculio, who has just returned from abroad, without money, but with a clever plan. While abroad, Curculio met a soldier, Therapontigonus Platagidorus, and dined with him. He found out that the soldier also wants Planesium and that he has an agreement with the pimp and the banker Lyco: he deposited money at the banker's, and this money is meant for Cappadox in exchange for Planesium. Curculio got the soldier drunk, stole his signet ring, and rushed back. Now he has Phaedromus write a letter to the banker and seal it with this ring.

Next, Curculio disguises himself and goes to the banker, claiming to be the soldier's freedman Summanus. With the sealed letter, he manages to convince the banker; they go to the pimp, who receives the money and hands the girl over to Summanus. When the soldier arrives, he goes to the banker, but is told that the money was already taken by his freedman Summanus. Angry and confused, the soldier goes to the pimp, who tells him that the girl has been handed over to Summanus. Only then does the soldier realize that he was tricked by Curculio.

Curculio has handed over Planesium to Phaedromus. She has seen the signet ring and enquires about it. It transpires that it used to belong to her father, making her and the soldier siblings. When the soldier arrives at the scene and meets Curculio, Phaedromus, and Planesium, he learns that Planesium is his sister; he has to give her up as his love interest and agrees that she may marry Phaedromus. Since it is illegal to buy and sell freeborn girls, a clause in the sales contract forces the pimp to return the money to the soldier. The ending is a thoroughly happy one: Phaedromus and Planesium can marry, the soldier has found his sister, Curculio is promised plenty of food, and the evil pimp has lost a large sum of money. It is time to return to Gellar-Goad's book.

2. The structure and contents of the Companion

Gellar-Goad divides his book into nine chapters, followed by a section on key terms and their definitions, notes with recommended reading, a bibliography, and an index. Chapter 1 is a very basic introduction to Roman comedy, so elementary in fact that it feels more appropriate for students younger than undergraduates. Chapter 2 provides the reader with a plot summary of our play, but it also outlines the three stock themes of Roman comedy that can be seen in the *Curculio*: the love theme; the deception theme; and the *anagnorisis* theme, the recognition of long-lost relatives. These three main themes are explained nicely and clearly, and a student who has never read a Roman comedy will benefit from the discussion. Chapter 3 expands on some topics specific to the *Curculio*: animal imagery, money and law, and illness and disability. Again, the novice can learn something here.

Chapter 4, on music, song, and dance, left me feeling quite frustrated. I appreciate that it is difficult to write about early Latin metre concisely and helpfully; but as the chapter stands, it is unsatisfactory – the reader who knows how to scan Plautus will not learn anything, and the reader who is not yet capable of doing so will remain incapable.[1] On the other hand, chapter 5, on stagecraft, is much better, and especially the importance of the ring is emphasized very nicely (p. 76). However, the convoluted diagrams on p. 79-80 do not really make things any easier to follow. Chapter 6, on metatheatre, is clear and convincing; addresses to the audience and other instances where the dramatic illusion is broken are explained in a sensible way. In my plot summary above, I did not mention the speech of the *choragus*, the 'stage-manager', because it stands somewhat outside the plot; in this long passage, the *choragus* describes the main sites of Rome and explains which types of crooks can be found where. The entirety of chapter 7 is dedicated to this speech, the most obvious example of Plautine metatheatre.

Chapter 8 deals with aspects of the play that are connected with day-to-day events many Romans experienced. Gellar-Goad talks about slavery and prostitution, poverty and starvation, and religious ritual. In connection with religion he mentions gender-specific uses of language (p. 128): only men swear by Hercules, only women swear by Castor, and Pollux is invoked by men and women alike. This absolute distinction is well known; but I wish Gellar-Goad had expanded a little, because we also find statistical distinctions between men and women in Roman comedy that are very telling: women often use different politeness markers from men, and where the same ones are used, women employ them far more frequently. This would then raise the interesting question to what extent Plautus and Terence represent female speech accurately.[2]

Chapter 9, finally, turns to the afterlife of our play: how it was copied in antiquity; the first printed edition and the first critical edition; and revival performances and modern adaptations. Sadly, I was left with the feeling that the chapter contains too much and too little at the same time. Does the American student this book is written for really need to know about a 2018 production of our play staged in Czech, a language rarely taught in American schools? The author's staging experiences at his own university will not be of interest to most people either. At the same time, how can a chapter be dedicated to the transmission of the text without actually naming the main manuscripts, for example A, the Ambrosian Palimpsest; or B, the Codex Camerarii and the most significant manuscript of the Palatine family? It makes little sense to talk about the first printed edition and the first critical edition,

[1] Incidentally, the first vowel of *potate* (p. 51) is long, but this does not affect the metre.

[2] When it comes to absolute distinctions, they were probably accurate; but the statistical distinctions may or may not reflect linguistic reality as neatly: it is quite conceivable, perhaps even likely, that the writers of Roman comedy exaggerated certain female speech habits, while being entirely unaware of others.

which most students will never be able to hold in their hands, without a single mention of the two most important complete critical editions of the modern era, those by Leo (1895-1896)[3] and Lindsay (1904-1905)[4]. If my own teaching experience is anything to go by, students are fascinated when they hear about the Ambrosian Palimpsest, how parchment was too valuable to waste, and how the Plautine text was scraped off to be replaced with texts from the Old Testament; they love hearing how Cardinal Angelo Mai, a distinguished philologist himself, used chemicals to make the original writing more visible, but how this had the opposite effect; and they are amazed when they hear how Wilhelm Studemund spent years and years deciphering this palimpsest, losing his eyesight in the process, and when they realize that the motto attached to his work, taken from Catullus, acquires quite a different meaning: *ni te plus oculis meis amarem*, 'if I did not love you more than my own eyes'.

Traditional philological skills such as textual criticism, grammar and style, or metre, are the foundation of every element of Plautine scholarship; staging, metatheatre, and reception studies need this underpinning or they will collapse. All too often throughout the book, Gellar-Goad rides his hobby horses with little regard for these most basic building-blocks, and the student who relies on this book alone as an introduction to Plautus will end up with a deficient understanding of Roman comedy. On this note, let us move on to the specific shortcomings and failures of the work.

3. Specific problems: register and identity politics

Gellar-Goad's language, both in his main text and in his few translations, ranges from trendy to slangy. Expressions like 'feckless schmuck' (p. 14) make me smile, and while I find the description of Varro as Plautus' 'biggest fanboy' (p. 139) cringeworthy, it is no more than a slightly desperate attempt to be down with the kids. Things become problematic when Latin is translated in this type of style. For instance, Ovid's *Ars amatoria* is 'The art of love', not 'The Handbook for Getting Laid' (p. 28); Ovid is witty, sensitive, and clever, not blunt, crass, or vulgar. Similar register mishaps are the norm rather than the exception when Gellar-Goad translates bits of Plautus. Plautine language ranges from the coarse and vulgar to the archaizing and solemn, and the translator is faced with a choice between being quite literal and neutral, so as to help students understand the Latin, or being a stylistic chameleon. However, uniformly turning Plautine Latin into slang shows a woeful misunderstanding of register and style, for instance when on p. 56 the mock-solemn sung prayer is rendered too colloquially. That said, even though Gellar-Goad has little feeling for nuances of register, he mostly understands the grammar; the

[3] F. Leo, *Plauti Comoediae*, Berlin 1895-1896.
[4] W.M. Lindsay, *T. Macci Plauti Comoediae*, Oxford 1904-1905.

only translation that shows a failure to understand Latin grammar is on p. 71 (incidentally, this translation does not make sense in English either).[5]

What is very strange is the fact that Gellar-Goad insists on talking about race, a topic which comes up quite regularly in his book, even though it does not play an important role in the *Curculio*. If Plautus and race were of genuine interest to him, he could have written his book about the *Poenulus*, a play with several Punic characters. The *Curculio*, on the other hand, barely touches on racial diversity. It is true that Greeks and their cultural habits are mocked in ll. 288-95, as Gellar-Goad points out on pp. 70-1, where he immediately jumps to the conclusion that this must be racist; but this good-natured teasing goes both ways in Plautus, who also enjoys adopting the Greek perspective and referring to the Romans as barbarians. And let us not forget that everyone in the audience knew that Plautine plays are adaptations of Greek ones. At any rate I doubt whether a Roman could tell with any degree of accuracy whether a specific person hailed from Italy or from Greece simply by looking. When the speech of the inhabitants of Praeneste is mocked in *Truc.* 688-91, it is again not racism or rampant xenophobia, but merely a joke about a different dialect spoken in a town 35 km away from Rome; it is not that different from Bavarians mocking Austrians and *vice versa*, often with identical jokes, and with a clear understanding that the cultural and dialectal differences are minuscule. Let us look at a few of Gellar-Goad's ideas about race, which, despite coming up at regular intervals, are poorly thought through. Already on p. 1 we are told that the people attending theatre performances 'have diverse bodies, skin, hair, and eye colors, and none of them are "white," because the Greeks and Romans weren't white, and whiteness is a modern racial construct.' On pp. 66-7 we are again reminded that the Greeks and Romans were not white, and we are informed that they had curly hair. On p. 98 it is said that the Romans cared about 'bloodlines' and that this was racially motivated. Well, some Romans did have curly hair, but it was a feature rare enough to give rise to a *cognomen* like *Cincinnatus* 'Curly-hair', and why would the pimp in our play have a curling-iron (l. 577) if people's hair was naturally curly? As for skin colour, despite some late antique and medieval migrations, it is reasonable to assume that the ancient Greeks and Romans did not look that different from their modern counterparts. Then why this peculiar idea that the Greeks and Romans were not white? Gellar-Goad makes reference to an online article by Sarah Bond which I found rather misleading and somewhat disingenuous; she points out that ancient statues were painted, but that this paint is largely lost and that all that remains is the whiteness of the marble. But the Greeks and

[5] On the issue of Latin grammar and usage, one might add that the statement that *uaciuitas* 'emptiness' is a Plautine coinage which does not exist anywhere else in Latin literature (p. 41) is misleading; *uacuitas* is attested many times, and it continues the Plautine form in exactly the same way as *uacuus* continues the earlier *uaciuus*.

Romans were not as white as that marble, an impression modern museum visitors might get. Well, no, of course not, no human being is the colour of marble. That does not mean that the ancient Greeks and Romans were not white in the racial sense, with the range of skin colours that we see in current Mediterranean populations. Race is a sensitive issue these days, and especially so in the United States. We should of course talk about it when appropriate, but we do not need to shoehorn it into every discussion, and we do not need to pretend that the Romans were physically very different from modern Italians, out of a misguided fear that we might offend someone's sensibilities.

Another topic that comes up again and again is slavery. This is of course more relevant, given Planesium's status. I think we can all agree that slavery was an unsavoury aspect of ancient life and that slaves were often mistreated. By the same token, more than two millennia separate us from Plautus, and there is no need to politicize his comedies or to think of them as social commentary made for our times. The comparison of Roman farms with 'concentration camps' (p. 61), built as a result of '(toxic) masculinity' (p. 61), is inappropriate and offensive. It is a topos of ancient comedy that old women love drinking, and there is no indication that Leaena drinks because of 'enslavement' (p. 42) or 'trauma' (p. 118). I find it more difficult than Gellar-Goad does to feel outraged about the depiction of slavery in an ancient text that is, moreover, fictional. Aristophanes of Byzantium famously asked whether Menander's comedy imitated life, or the other way round; but whatever Gellar-Goad says, Plautine comedy does not truly reflect 'actual lived experience' (p. 117) because it exaggerates and distorts in order to make us laugh. At times, Gellar-Goad seems to confuse his Plautus companion with a manual for social activism.

This particular brand of identity politics tends to divide the world into good (women) and bad (men, and especially the white heterosexual variety). Any nuance is lost and the world is viewed through a lens of sexism and oppression. If we subscribe to such a world view, we are bound to misinterpret Plautus' intentions, as Gellar-Goad does on more than one occasion. Thus, when in l. 29 Palinurus refers to the person Phaedromus is in love with as *id quod amas* 'that which you love', in the neuter, it is not because of sexual objectification (p. 27), but because he leaves the sex of the person open; just a few lines later, boys are mentioned. Similarly, the *matrona* in Roman comedy, though female, is not the 'voice of reasonable conduct' (p. 15), but a nagging battle-axe. Planesium is an oppressed slave, and Gellar-Goad wants us to consider that perhaps she is not in love with Phaedromus at all, but is forced to pretend (p. 28); but as soon as she is discovered to be free-born and has a choice to turn down Phaedromus, she insists that she desires to marry him (l. 673). Again, if Gellar-Goad really wanted to discuss forced marriage, he could have written about a different play, the *Casina*.

Social activism is also reflected in Gellar-Goad's language. He studiously avoids the terms 'slave', 'prostitute', and 'pimp', and prefers to speak of 'enslaved

person', 'sex-laborer', and 'sex-trafficker'. Even a man with an eye-patch is 'non-normatively bodied' (p. 71) rather than 'disabled'. I suspect this is meant to raise awareness of the grim conditions faced by slaves and others in antiquity. Again, I believe we can all agree that slavery and forced prostitution are terrible, and that we should not use insults and derogatory terms; there is no need to preach to the choir. But if we could cure the ills of the world by inventing new, fanciful terminology to replace the standard, neutral terminology currently in existence, they would surely be gone by now. Life is a little more complex than that.

4. How to study the *Curculio*: a beginner's guide

Despite its shortcomings, Gellar-Goad's book is still worth reading; but perhaps not as a first introduction to Plautus, and definitely not instead of other, more detailed and less biased works. It is not a cheap book; especially the student on a budget may find other resources both less expensive and more helpful. As a general introduction to Roman comedy, Duckworth (1952)[6] is still unsurpassed, covering all aspects that Gellar-Goad touches on, and much more. The introduction to my Loeb edition (de Melo 2011-2013)[7] is more concise, but also deals with all the main topics. Lanciotti's critical edition (2008)[8] is excellent in that it contains all the relevant manuscript readings and also the secondary transmission, but it is extremely conservative, avoiding emendation of passages that are not beyond healing. Leo may emend too much, and besides, his work will not be available as easily in the Anglosphere as in continental Europe; but Lindsay's edition or mine will be readily available, and mine comes with a fairly literal translation. For those who want a very detailed, but accessible resource, Fontaine and Scafuro (2014)[9] is a must, even if it is expensive.

Wolfgang D.C. de Melo
Wolfson College
wolfgang.demelo@classics.ox.ac.uk

[6] G.E. Duckworth, *The Nature of Roman Comedy: A Study in Popular Entertainment*, Princeton 1952.

[7] W.D.C. de Melo, *Plautus*, Harvard 2011-2013.

[8] S. Lanciotti, *Titus Maccius Plautus: Curculio*, Urbino 2008.

[9] M. Fontaine, A.C. Scafuro, *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Comedy*, Oxford 2014.