I. Introduction: Early Roman Literary Drama (derived from the Greeks)

The turning point in Roman drama came in 240 BCE, when a Greek-speaking slave living in Rome, Livius Andronicus, translated Homer's Odyssey into Latin. As it turned out, this was a watershed experience that inaugurated the Romans into a century-long fascination with Hellenic culture. In more ways than one, that moment in history constitutes the inception of Latin literature. But who was this Livius Andronicus and why were his adaptations of Greek literature so significant in the evolution of Roman civilization?

A freed slave, we are told, Livius Andronicus served in the house of the Livii, a noble family of Rome, from whom he took his name. As such, he probably came to Rome when he was still a child and, no doubt, grew up bilingual, putting him in an excellent position to bridge Greek and Latin civilization. Besides The Odyssey, his adaptations included several Greek tragedies, mostly from originals by Sophocles and Euripides (Ajax, Andromeda, Danae, Tereus), and also comedies adapted from unknown sources (Gladiolus, Ludius).

It's a fair question to ask why he did not write his own original works—indeed, the same could be posed for every Roman playwright whose works survive—and the answer must be that he considered it wasted effort to till a field when the world doled out free grain. In other words, why make a play when you can steal one? It was an age when copyright did not yet exist and it was considered neither illegal nor immoral, or even inadvisable, to adapt another's work.

A more compelling question concerning the originality of Roman drama
revolves around why the Roman public sought out Greek drama so avidly. The answer to that riddle lies, no doubt, in the nature of Greek drama itself. The complex but coherent plots of Greek tragedy and comedy had no parallel in this age. For much the same reason, the cinema of a few nations today commands most of the world's attention and, like Greek drama in antiquity, has attracted a large viewership outside its native land.

But plays written for the amusement of Athenians did not necessarily carry over to other countries and cultures wholesale. Filled as Greek comedies were with local references and all sorts of Hellenisms, many of them proved incomprehensible, and occasionally reprehensible, to other peoples. Thus, these plays had to undergo more than translation to make them workable in other venues. They required adaptation, sometimes quite a bit, and in the process Roman playwrights reconceived Greek drama, whether they intended to or not—odds are, they did—creating along the way some of the most effective multicultural efforts ever produced on the stage.

That Roman Comedy has survived across time to our day is really no surprise, then. It was, by definition and from the very outset, a multicultural form of drama designed to blend different social contexts, in a way the Greek originals on which it was based were not. Thus, Plautus' work has appeared on the modern Broadway stage—for instance, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, a musical adapted from his plays—where Menander's comedies for all their subtle virtues, brilliant characterization and prescient humanity never have.
An increasing demand for drama after 240 BCE opened the way for new opportunities to present drama in Rome. Livius Andronicus had premiered his work at the central Roman festival, the *Ludi Romani* ("the Roman games"), but soon other festivals joined the theatre fray: the *ludi Plebeii* ("the Plebeians' games"), the *ludi Apolinares* (those in honor of Apollo), the *ludi Megalenses* (in honor of the Asian goddess Cybele), and others. The funerals of important Romans also offered opportunities for Rome's best families to make a show of public benefaction in the form of sponsoring free entertainment for all. Thus, many doors in and around the city opened to drama, encouraging prospective playwright-adapters.

Among the first and most successful of those early Latin dramatists was **Gnaeus Naevius** whose career spanned several decades (ca. 235-204 BCE). A native Roman and a citizen, he adapted Greek tragedies, mostly Euripides' (*Hector, Iphigenia, The Trojan Horse*), and also comedies, especially Menander's (*Kolax*), blending with great skill Hellenic and native Italian elements to suit his audience's taste. If not the originator of Roman drama, he was, without doubt, its first major star.

Naevius is also remembered for several bold developments, for instance, having his "Greek" characters make obvious references to current Italian life, even using the stage at times as a soapbox for airing the playwright's views on contemporary politics and society. Short of a *parabasis*—but not by much!—these moments earned him many important enemies and later sources recall his entanglements with powerful Romans, one of which encounters is said to have landed him in jail. Unfortunately, very little of his work survives so we cannot judge any of this for ourselves, but in terms of theatre history, it is clear that Naevius played an important role in accelerating the "Romanization" of Greek drama, a path that would eventually lead Roman literature to new and original heights.
While others composed and produced comedies in this incipient phase of "literary drama"—among them the important early Roman poet Ennius—they all pale by comparison to the first truly great theatrical voice from Rome, Plautus, who is pre-eminent in many ways: he is the earliest Roman dramatist whose work survives whole; he is, in fact, the earliest Roman author in any genre who has a work preserved entire; and he is the first known professional playwright in Western Civilization. That is, he's the first theatre practitioner we know of whose next play and next meal were intimately connected, what would become an enduring tradition carried on by the likes of Shakespeare, Molière and O'Neill. His "professional" status shows in his sturdy, practicable comedy, drama which has clearly been tested and proven on the Roman stage and, from there, virtually every type of performance space imaginable. Indeed, it takes a real gift to make Plautus' comedy not work on the stage.

II. Plautus (ca. 254-184 BCE)

The full name, or so we are told, of the Roman playwright popularly known as Plautus is **Titus Maccius Plautus**, but there is much to make us suspect this was not his real name. For one, his own plays never refer to him by this three-word name, only parts of it: Titus Maccius, Maccus, or just Plautus. For another, this sort of tripartite name was a way of denoting Roman aristocrats, wherein each part of the name designated particular information—the first name (*praenomen*) was the name given a nobleman within his immediate family, the second name (*nomen*) denoted his *gens* or the larger family group he belonged to, and the third (*cognomen*) his clan or branch within that *gens*—but it is highly unlikely Plautus was born into the upper classes, at least, to judge from his dramas and what little we are told about his life. (**note**) Why, then, does he come down to us with such a noble-sounding name?
The names themselves are odd—there is, for instance, no known Maccius clan of the Plautus family—instead, all three appear to be jokes mocking this complex, aristocratic nomenclature. To wit, Titus is slang in Latin for "penis," Maccius can be translated as "son of Maccus (the clown of Atellan farce)" and Plautus has a number of possible associations, most likely of which is "flat-footed" referring to a type of mime actor. Thus, the name says in Roman terms, "Titus belonging to the Flatfoot clan of the Maccus family" or, expressed in modern equivalents, "Dick Bozo Tapdancer."

Thus, it seems safe to say this was not the playwright's birth-name but a stage name made up for comic purposes. And it conforms with other data ascertainable about Plautus from his drama: his taste for puns and broad comedy, his love of song and dance, his mockery of the upper classes and his strong ties to Atellan farce—he may even have been trained as a performer in that genre. Even if this humorous designation does not stem from Plautus himself, someone who knew his work intimately must have concocted it, which makes it as good as true.

What little else we are told about Plautus' life is probably later fabrication. That he was supposedly a freed slave who lost several fortunes and had to work in the mills is, no doubt, biographical detail invented out of his own comedies where slaves often win and lose large sums of money and fear the threat of being sent to labor camps. This fiction closely resembles the false information we receive about Euripides— that his home life was as troubled as that of his characters — just another tabloid tale abstracted at some later date from the playwright's drama in the absence of valid historical data.
About the only fact we can be certain of concerning Plautus as a person is that he was a highly successful, comic playwright in late third-century and early second-century Rome. And because, as noted above, Plautus is also the first Roman author belonging to any genre whose work survives entire, he is a valuable source of not just theatre history, but also the linguistic and cultural history of Rome. This sort of primogeniture, no doubt, played a large role in the later preservation of his comedy which grammarians valued for its use of peculiar and archaic Latin vocabulary, just as much as Roman audiences loved Plautus' rollicking, lively humor. In this respect as well as his earthy humor, he resembles Aristophanes more than Menander or any of the New Comedy poets whose plays he hammered into Latin.

A. Plautine Comedy

Plautus' comedies revolve mostly around daily life and average people, superficially the stuff of Greek New Comedy as opposed to the politically oriented Old Comedy of the Classical Age or the spoofs of tragedy popular in post-classical Middle Comedy. Plautus, however, generates humor in a different way from Menandrean comedy. Often extreme personality types set in outlandish situations, Plautine characters as a group recall Aristophanes' creations more than Menander's. Indeed, devious pimps, mercenary prostitutes, lustful young men, lustful old men, tortured mothers and torturing wives and, most of all, crafty slaves who delight in deception populate Plautus' plays.
This feast of broad stock types is a far cry from Menander's subtly shaded characters, and in a way, Plautus's comedy rewinds the evolutionary clock and returns Menander's characters to the caricatures from which they arose. Lest, however, this be seen as some sort of step backwards toward more "primitive" comedy, he did it all to excellent effect. Plautus's sense of comic timing, exactly how far to take a joke or run a scene, is unsurpassed in Western drama, even by Shakespeare, all of which presupposes a shrewd understanding of his audience's needs, intelligence and the reason they are sitting in the theatre at all.

As a result, Plautus' plays may not always be great art, nor do they strive at every moment to educate or improve the audience or advance the technology of theatre, but Plautus' comedies are invariably and without exception entertaining. To the extent, then, that effective comic drama entails art or education or technological advancement, Plautus can be all those things, so long as the final product works on stage and people will pay to see it. The fact is, his comedies continue to be performed with great success today—they were among the first ancient plays produced on stage in the Renaissance, the dawn of the modern age—and even such crusty curmudgeons as the Christian fathers saw worth in his drama. St. Jerome, in particular, seems to have been quite fond of Plautus, at least to judge from how often he quotes Plautine comedy, all of which attests to this playwright's astute and practical assessment of what a general viewership seeks from comic drama: wit and diversion, spiced with sage observation of human life.

Indeed, what audiences really want is a paradox, a stark enigma Plautus understood as well as anyone ever has. While many viewers announce in public that they want to learn from plays or see goodness and morality triumph, all too often what they actually pay for are flashy, vapid, sensual, amoral spectacles. At the same time, if there is nothing to be gained intellectually or esthetically from a play, their attention quickly turns to fresher, slicker, more novel nonsense and they tend not to come
back a second time or send those friends of theirs who own wallets. Plautus' drama shows that he understood this conundrum quite well, and his finest talent is, no doubt, his ability to walk the fine line between fine art and a fine time.

This raises, then, a question that lies at the very heart of studies in Roman Comedy: how did Plautus create theatre so effective in such a place and time? While his cultural situation may look like a disadvantage—especially in comparison to the erudite and drama-mad society that for centuries packed the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens—there is much to say that Plautus' Rome was actually a fertile field for his art. The absence, for instance, of a commanding native tradition of theatre in late third-century Rome gave him carte blanche to create plays in a manner that suited his talent. He could follow his instincts and write with a freedom Menander never had nor even Euripides, a parrhesia ("freedom of speech") , in fact, no Greek playwright had ever had, at least not since Aeschylus' day.

Furthermore, he had an eager audience ready to explore the stage and vast dramatic wealth to draw upon. Far from a poor "niche" for theatre, when seen this way, the Roman world of Plautus' day had everything going for it. He could pull what he wanted from Atellan farce, with which he was clearly familiar, to judge from his stage-name. What's more, he could siphon off ideas at will from the great, untapped reservoir of Greek comic drama. Thus, from one perspective, his plays represent an inspired blend of native Italian drama and Hellenistic comedy, the product of lathering a bawdy slapstick tone over the well-oiled machinery of Menandrean plots. To have seen and utilized the opportunities for making effective comedy in such a situation, that is surely Plautus' finest stroke of genius.
B. The Question of Greek Originals

Another question at the heart of Plautine studies is one that has predominated scholarship for well over a century. In what way and to what extent did Plautus adapt the works of Greek New Comedy, often called "Greek originals"? That is, in adapting Menander or any Greek playwright, how—and how much—did he change the language, tone and plot of his model?

This question has long been a matter of speculation, because the loss of almost all Hellenistic drama has left theatre historians with no Greek originals by which to make comparison. While that situation has not changed much of late—even if we now have slightly better insight into the situation (see below, Bacchides)—a few things are clear about the changes he made as he re-sculpted Greek drama for the Roman theatre. For instance, Plautus' comedies are essentially "musicals" inasmuch as they have songs, discernable from the type of meter in which the text is disposed. That is, where Greek New Comedies typically quarantine lyric passages off in embolima (the musical interludes separating acts), Plautus' characters regularly burst into song—and perhaps also dance—during the course of the drama. As one scholar has noted, he turned "Menandorean Pygmalions into Roman My Fair Ladys."

Thus, Plautus romanized his Greek originals to that extent at least. An important corollary here is the question of which Greek author's work underlies which of Plautus' plays. No doubt, the methods he used in adapting Greek originals were bound in some way to—or to some extent must have varied in accordance with—the mode and style of the particular model he was adapting. In other words, a quiet Menandorean original surely called for a different method of adaptation from that required by a Middle Comedy send-up of myth or a Diphilean "knockabout" farce. That makes knowing who the original authors are central in assessing Plautus' craftsmanship and place in theatre history.
And we know who some of the authors of these "Greek originals" are. For just under half of Plautus' surviving plays, they are named in the Roman text or can be deduced from quotations outside the play, and as far as we can tell, all of them turn out to be playwrights of Greek New Comedy, none from the preceding periods of Middle or Old Comedy. (note) To be precise, Plautus based four of his plays on Menander (Aulularia, Bacchides, Cistellaria, Stichus), two on Diphilus (Casina, Rudens), and two on Philemon (Mercator, Trinummus). (note).

Moreover, the different natures of these Romanized re-creations of Hellenistic drama confirm the supposition that Plautus did, indeed, have to modulate his method of adaptation to suit the varying styles of Greek comic playwrights.

All in all, the situation recalls the works of Shakespeare who also "borrowed" plots from others' work, nor are the reasons that both he and his Roman forebears did not forge entirely new works hard to understand. For one, they could—the Greek plays were there for the taking—so, following in Livius Andronicus' footsteps, Plautus opted to adapt Greek originals rather than construct his own plays from whole cloth. Moreover, the long, complex but coherent plots of New Comedy, a much more difficult thing to fabricate than is often assumed, must have been quite attractive for both playwright and audience in the day.

Some support for this notion is found in the term saturae ("medleys"; singular satura), which was used after the inception of the literary drama (ca. 240 BCE) to refer to the older, native Italian forms of entertainment, the Atellan farce and phlyax plays of the days before the invasion of Hellenic arts. The designation satura argues that the coherent but complex nature of the Greek plots struck later Romans as the major difference between Greek drama and the more episodic, indigenous Roman fare. That is, the scenes in Greek comedy were clearly "linked," while those of early Roman drama looked more like a "medley" of disjointed actions, à la Old Comedy perhaps.
All in all, *why* Plautus adapted Greek comedy is really not the question but *how*, and about that little of substance can be said as long as we do not have access to the Greek originals that lie behind Plautus' plays. In other words, we can go only so far without having more Menander to compare to the Plautus we can see for ourselves and from that assess how the Roman used his Greek prototypes. Unfortunately, however, those Hellenistic originals have for the most part been lost—that is, until recently.

C. *Bacchides*

To our great good luck, that situation changed for the better in the 1960's, when a Greek papyrus emerged from the sands of Egypt, badly damaged but with a hundred lines or so of Menander's *Dis Exapaton* ("The Double-Deceiver"), the Greek original of Plautus' *Bacchides* ("Two Bacchises"). While far from Menander's entire play, the *Dis Exapaton* fragment, as it has come to be called, still sheds new and important light on how Plautus adapted his Greek models. Indeed, for the first time in the modern age, we can survey several scenes and see what Plautus was looking at when he wrote the script of one of his plays. This allows us to measure to some extent whether or not his work was primarily Roman or Greek. And the answer to that question is . . . "Yes!"

That is, "It is and it isn't." For one, Plautus is clearly following Menander's plot—if he were not, how could we even know that a patchy, gap-ridden text torn out of the middle of a Menandrean play constitutes a piece of the Greek original on which Plautus based his *Bacchides*?—but the Roman is also moving very freely about within the general parameters defined by Menander's comedy. For instance, at the same time that Plautus translates some of Menander's dialogue almost verbatim and even retains the Greek name of one of Menander's characters (Lydos/Lydus), he also removes a pair of scenes which do not interest him—two rather dry, father-son tête-à-têtes typical of
Menander's ethical approach to comedy—in other words, not funny scenes and, more important to Plautus' way of thinking, not even potentially funny scenes. In sum, the Roman can be a literal translator or a free adapter, as suits his mood and mode and muse.

Side-by-side analysis of comparable speeches from the plays shows well the nature of Plautus' adaptable style of adaptation. In the Greek play, a young man named Sostratos has uncovered what he thinks is a secret love affair between his girlfriend Chrysis and his best friend Moschos. In a fit of impulsive anger at their purported infidelity, he has returned to his father the money their slave Syros swindled from the old man so that Sostratos could give it to Chrysis. But the discovery of her purported liaison with Moschos has rattled Sostratos terribly and, not knowing whom to trust—or blame!—he soliloquizes:

And now I think I'll go see my fine-and-noble
Lover-girl, and happily, too, since I'm empty-handed,
So let her sweet-talk me, in hopes of getting it—"On the spot!"
That's what she's saying to herself—what I've got, the money:
(imitating Chrysis) "I know he's got it, heavens above, such a gentleman!
No one more so! He deserves me a girl like me."
She's certainly shown herself, by her profit margin,
That she's the sort I used to think she was. Poor fellow—
Moschos, I mean. I feel sorry for him. And I'm mad at him,
But he's not the one I blame for what's happened,
This reckless behavior. She is, the come-on queen
Of all time—that's her.

Here is the equivalent soliloquy delivered by Sostratos' counterpart in Plautus who renamed the character Mnesilochus. The situation in the Roman play is also slightly different. It comes at a point where Mnesilochus has not yet given the money swindled by his slave Chrysalus, the counterpart of Menander's Syros, back to his father.

It is quite unclear which of them I should believe is
Unfriendlier, my friend or my girlfriend Bacchis.
She chose him over me? Let her have him. Perfect!
Well, she did it, by god, and I'll tell you who'll pay for it, too—me! (note)
For, as any god in heaven is my witness,
There'll never be another woman that I—love as much as her.
That's right. I'll show her! She won't say she got the last laugh on me!
I'll go home right now and give her a piece of my—father's property.
Yes, that's what I'll give her. My revenge will be so complete.
I'll tell you who will end up begging—my father, that's who!
But am I really thinking in my right mind,
I who go on this way about what's going to happen here?
I'm in love, god knows, I know, who doesn't know?
But before she ever gets a feather richer
At my expense—a fiber of a feather filament!—
I'd rather go begging from beggars!
She won't laugh at me, by god, not in this life.
I've decided to give my father back the money, all of it.
So, she can coax and wheedle me empty-handed, broke,
When it makes no difference what she says,
Like talking tales to a dead man at his tomb.

In general, the Dis Exapaton fragment shows what many had long
suspected, that Plautus' comedies made for livelier, more humorous and
robust comic drama than their Greek models, especially Menander's. At
the same time, however, the Plautine situation is less realistic than its
parallel Menanderean milieu, with characters more exaggerated in their
responses to the stage action and everything just generally less "logical."
Clearly, making each individual moment in the play work as comedy
mattered more to the Roman than the accumulation of situations
carefully laid out across the smooth convolutions of a well-crafted plot,
Menander's most outstanding characteristic as a playwright. All in all,
this is exactly what one would expect of Plautus, a translator-cum-
adapter whose principal concern is the word and the joke, and who never
devised nor took pride in the superstructure of a play.

But it's important to stress that this doesn't make Plautus' efforts
misguided or in any way a lesser art than Menander's, the way scholars
often saw the situation a century or so ago. The two playwrights simply
wrote from different outlooks on life, for different types of theatre and, most important, to a different community of viewers. Neither is intrinsically better than the other; rather, both are well-suited to their own worlds. And it is to our great fortune that both are at work in Roman Comedy, because with Menander's genius at plot and character development informing Plautus' mastery of comic timing and language, the two amount to one supreme dramatist, the Gilbert-and-Sullivan of antiquity and, without doubt, one of the best and most intriguing pair of stage collaborators never to have met!

But unlike a Rodgers and Hammerstein, if Plautus' and Menander's lives had not been separated by a century, it seems improbable they would ever have actually collaborated! With styles so different, born of worlds so far apart, it is unlikely they could have suffered each other's presence long enough to finish one scene together, much less an entire play. Yet rising above their personal differences and cultural discrepancies, their collective effort, though it comes down to us under only Plautus' name, is, in fact, a bridge between civilizations that represents the early stages of an even grander partnership, Greco-Roman culture. The multiculturalism inherent in their drama is a model for the excellence that this sort of international synergy can produce.

Terms, Places, People and Things to Know
Livius Andronicus (240 BCE)  Greek Originals
*Ludi Romani*  *Saturae*
Gnaeus Naevius  *Dis Exapaton* (Sostratos)
Titus Maccius Plautus  *Bacchides* (Mnesilochus)
Stock Types