GIUSEPPE PEZZINI

PONTEM INTERRUMPERE: PLAUTUS' *CASINA* AND ABSENT CHARACTERS IN ROMAN COMEDY

INTRODUCTION

This article offers an investigation of an important aspect of dramatic technique in the plays of Plautus and Terence, that is the act of making reference to characters who are not present on stage for the purpose of plot, scene and theme development ('absent characters'). This kind of technique has long been an object of research for scholars of theatre, especially because of the thematization of its dramatic potential in the works of modern playwrights (such as Strindberg, Ibsen, and Beckett, among many others). Extensive research, both theoretical and technical, has been carried out on several theatrical genres, and especially on 20th-century American drama[1]. Ancient Greek tragedy has recently received attention in this respect also[2]. Less work has been done, however, on another important founding genre of western theatre, the Roman comedy of Plautus and Terence, a gap due partly to the general neglect of the genre in the second half of the 20th century, in both scholarship and reception (with some important exceptions). This article contributes to this area of theatre research by presenting an overview of four prototypical functions of 'absent characters' in Roman comedy ('desired', 'impersonated', 'licensing' and 'proxied' absentees), along with a discussion of their metatheatrical potential and their close connection archetypal ingredients of (Roman) comedy.

I shall begin with a dive into Plautus' *Casina*; this play features all of what I shall identify as the 'prototypes' of absent characters in comedy, which will be discussed in the first part of this article (sections 1-5). I shall then briefly discuss the 'archetypal' significance of absence in Roman comedy and its consequent metatheatrical potential, which is openly acknowledged and exploited by Roman playwrights in certain contexts

[1] Cfr. e.g. S. KATTWINKEL, *Absence as a Site for Debate: Modern Feminism and Victorianism in the Plays of Susan Glaspell*, in *New England Theatre Journal* 7, 1996, pp. 37-55; S.-Y. YOON, *Willy Loman's Portrait: Trauma of the Absence of the Father*, in *Journal of Modern British and American Drama* 16, 2003, pp. 181-209, on Miller's *Death of Salesman*; H.J.J. ELAM, *Absent Presence in Lorraine Hansberry and Suzan-Lori Parks: Les Blancs and Topdog/Underdog*, in L. BEN-ZVI, D. KRAESNER (eds.), *Considering Calamity Methods for Performance Research*, Tel Aviv 2007, pp. 39-54; S. GENDRON, *Repetition, Difference, and Knowledge in the Work of Samuel Beckett, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze*, New York 2008, esp. pp. 98-102; S.M. MAHFOUZ, *The Presence of Absence: Catalytic and Omnipresent Offstage Characters in Modern American Drama*, in *The Midwest Quarterly* 53, pp. 392-409.

[2] Cfr. e.g. N. STANCHI, *La presenza assente: l'attesa del personaggio fuori scena nella tragedia greca*, Milan 2007.

(section 6). I shall close by returning briefly to *Casina*, pointing out the exceptional features of its absence(s), from both a technical and a theoretical perspective (section 7), and conclude with a few summarising remarks (section 8).

Before I begin my journey, however, I need to make a further terminological clarification: by 'absent character' or 'absentee' I refer broadly to any character who is not physically present on stage at a given time but who is brought to mind by the characters who are onstage, explicitly or implicitly. This definition encompasses a vast range of types, from characters who are (imagined to be) away in distant lands or even dead before the play begins (i.e. absent *in toto* from the play's world), down to offstage characters who are allegedly visible to onstage actors. I am therefore not specifically interested in the plot-reasons (if any) provided to justify their absence from the stage, such as a visit to an imagined offstage location, a journey abroad, death, etc.: this article considers characters to be absent if and as long as they are not visible to the audience, even if their presence is imagined to be just a few metres away from the stage.

1. WAITING FOR CASINA: AN EPONYMOUS ABSENCE

To begin with, a few words to recall *Casina*'s plot. The old man Lysidamus and his son Euthynicus are in love with the same woman, the eponymous slave-girl Casina. In order to secure her from one another, both father and son have ordered their respective slaves (Olympio and Chalinus) to seek to marry her; this sort of proxy-marriage will allow for and conceal the sexual exploits of the masters. Despite the support of his mother Cleostrata, the son's side is defeated and, after a drawing of lots, a marriage with the father's slave is arranged. However, this is only a provisional victory: the son's slave Chalinus disguises himself as the bride ('Casinus'), and, during the long-expected sexual climax, beats up the groom and his lascivious patron, with a long stick. Later, with a traditional anagnorisis, Casina is revealed as the daughter of a noble citizen, and all ends well with a rightful marriage to Euthynicus.

This plot, however, is just the rough material, which is developed and 'spiced up' by a number of theatrical devices, many of which depend on absence and absent characters.

First of all, the key character of the play is always absent from the onstage action. Despite her key role, the slave-girl Casina never comes on stage at all; even her anagnorisis does not take place within the play's space-time, but is foretold by the maid Pardalisca in a metatheatrical epilogue (*Cas.* 1012-1014):

> *spectatores, quod futurum est intus, id memorabimus.*
> *haec Casina huius reperietur filia esse ex proxumo*
> *eaque nubet Euthynico nostro erili filio.*

> "Spectators, we'll tell you what's going to happen inside. This Casina will be discovered to be the daughter of this man from next door and she'll marry Euthynicus, our master's son."[3]

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[3] All translations of Plautus are from De Melo's Loeb Edition, unless otherwise specified.

Casina's absence from the stage is not inconsequential, but in fact represents the main origin and focal point of the *uis comica* of the comedy.

2. CASINA AS THE 'DESIRED ABSENTEE' PROTOTYPE

First, the absent Casina is the craved object of the sexual desire of many onstage characters, which is continuously focalised throughout the play. With its 27 occurrences, her name is the one most frequently uttered in the comedy (Olympio comes second, with only 11 occurrences), and in most cases it is used in relation to a verb denoting or evoking sexual desire (cfr. 96 *praeripere*, 107 *deperis*, 225 *amo*, 339 *cubem*, 467 *deosculabor*, 470 *deperit*); the same connotation is found in many other instances in which she is referred to by a demonstrative or indirectly (cfr. 61 *illam amare*, 195a *eam amat*, 267 *istuc* [i.e. the proxy-wedding] ... *tam cupide cupis*, 449 *quod ... maxume | cupiebas*, 451 *quod amas clam uxorem*). Four different characters appear as subjects who desire the absent Casina: Chalinus (cfr. 95-96) and Olympio (cfr. 132-138), but especially their masters Euthynicus (cfr. 60-61) and, above all, the lascivious *senex* Lysidamus. The love of a lecherous old man is a conventional event in Roman comedy, and it is indeed the central driver of Casina's action, being thematised especially in Lysidamus' lovesick vignettes (e.g. 217-229, 275-278, 413-415, 515-530, 615-619), and in the fake-wedding scene (798-854).

Casina's protracted absence is crucial to exacerbate and highlight the characters' desire for her. This is shown for instance by the several references to Lysidamus' impatience for her coming (cfr. e.g. 471-472 *iam hercle amplexari, iam osculari gestio | :: sine prius deduci. quid, malum,* **properas**? :: *amo*), his protests at her delay (cfr. 618 *quoi sic tot amanti mi obuiam eueniant* **morae**? 748 *numquid est ceterum quod* **morae** *siet?* 804 *quid illaec nunc tam diu intus* **remorantur** *remeligines?*), his pathetic rejoicing at her (supposed) arrival onstage (812 *di hercle me cupiunt seruatum*, 840-842), and perhaps also by his apparent anxiety at the prospect of her suicide (678-684, see below section 4) and abduction (785 *ne quis eam abripiat*). References of this kind, evoking a relationship between absence and desire, are mainly found in the second part of the play, after Lysidamus has won the drawing of lots, but there are also cases in the first part, and in relation to other characters (including Olympio's prosopopoeia (on which see below, section 4).

Indeed, if Casina 'interrupted' her absence, and became present onstage, the characters' desire would be satisfied in some manner, and thereby lose comic interest for both the playwright and the audience (until/unless she becomes absent again). This happens for instance in Terence's *Heautontimorumenos*: the opening scenes of the play focus on the lovesickness of the young man Clinia for the chaste Antiphila, and specifically on his complaints about her absence and his longing for her arrival onstage (cfr. Ter. *HT* 230-231 *si mihi secundae res de amore meo essent, iamdudum scio | uenissent*, 241 *respira ... adsunt tibi*). After his slave comes back from his girl-fetching mission, Clinia is eventually reunited with Antiphila in a mawkish scene of reunion (*HT* 403-409). Antiphila's absence is thus concluded, for Clinia and thereby the audience, and her storyline in the play is sidelined, apart from a final anagnorisis; once her absence has become a presence onstage, her comic potential is diminished.

The situations mentioned above are common in Roman comedies, which often revolve around a character's desire to be or remain united (sexually or affectively) with another absent character. A frequent embodiment of this stock situation is obviously that of young man in love with a girl, in which the relationship between desire and absence is often thematised. As Chrysalus declares in *Bacchides* (190): *anima est amica amanti:* **si abest, nullus est** ("To a lover his girlfriend is his life. If she's absent, he's lost")[4]. Another common type involves a loving parent who suffers from longing for his absent son or daughter. An example is in Terence's *Heautontimorumenos*, named after the 'torment' of the eponymous Menedemus, longing for his absent son Clinia, who, in the particular plot-framework of the play, is supposed to be away in a foreign country[5]. Menedemus' desire for the return (onstage) of his absent son is a key theme in the opening of the play, and it is explicitly described by Menedemus as directly proportional to the absence of its object (Ter. *HT* 423-425):

> MENEDEMUS *nam mihi quidem cotidie augescit magis*
> *de filio aegritudo,* **et quanto diutius**
> **abest mage cupio tanto et mage desidero.**

> "In my case my sorrow for my son increases day by day, and the longer he's away, the more I long for him and want him back." (Barsby)[6].

In another common variant, the absence of a 'desired' character is presented not as a problem to solve, but as an unfortunate situation to prevent. This is for instance the case of the prostitute Bacchis of Samos in *Bacchides*, who is onstage from the very beginning of the comedy but throughout the play remains in danger of becoming absent, that is (according to the particular plot-motivations of the play) of being taken abroad to the soldier who bought her. The risk of Bacchis' departure and her consequent absence from the comic action are highlighted in the play, as well as the distress of her lover at that prospect and his attempt to prevent it. Cfr. e.g.

> Pl. *Bacc.* 103-104
> BACCHIS *tibi nunc operam dabo de Mnesilocho, soror,*
> *ut hic* **accipias potius aurum quam hinc eas** *cum milite*

> "Now I'll help you out with Mnesilochus, my sister, so you can receive some gold here instead of going away with the soldier.

> Pl. *Bacc.* 590-592
> PARASITUS *uel ut ducentos Philippos reddat aureos*
> *uel ut hinc in Elatiam hodie eat secum simul.*
> PISTOCLERUS *non it.* **negat esse ituram.** *abi et renuntia.*

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[4] Cfr. also Charinus' resolution in *Mercator* to find her lover (862-863).

[5] Cfr. Ter. *HT* 117-118, 149-150.

[6] Cfr. also Nicobolus' concern for his absent son in *Bacchides* (Pl. *Bacc.* 235-238, 348); Phanostrata and Phidippa's searches for their missing daughters in *Cistellaria* and *Epidicus* (cfr. Pl. *Cist.* 543-630, *Epid.* 529-532); Hegio's plot-propelling longing for his captive son in *Captiui* (cfr. Pl. *Capt.* 30-34, 99-101, 142-145, 316, 399-400 etc.).

"PAR. She must either return the two hundred gold Philippics, or she must accompany him from here to Elatia today. PIS. She isn't going. She says she won't go. Go away and tell him."

These kinds of situations are easily paralleled in other plays, with many variations on the theme[7]. I can briefly focus on a passage from *Asinaria*, in which the absence of one's lover is pathetically thematised as an undesirable situation (Pl. *Asin.* 591-597):

ARGYRIPPVS *cur me retentas?* PHILAENIVM *quia* **tui amans abeuntis egeo**.
ARG. *uale*. PHIL. *aliquanto amplius ualerem, si hic maneres.* (...)
PHIL. *quo nunc abis? quin tu hic manes?*

"ARG. Why are you holding me back? PHIL. Because I pine away for you when you go away, I love you so. ARG. Farewell, farewell. PHIL. I'd fare somewhat better if you were to stay here. (...) PHIL. Where are you off to now? Why don't you stay here?".

The main plot-goal *Asinaria* is indeed to prevent the very situation lamented in the above passage; after this has been accomplished, the play appropriately concludes with a final scene in which the two lovers are again present together on the stage, and leave the stage together at the end of it (941 PHIL. *Sequere hac me, mi anime.* ARG. *Ego uero sequor*).

I have therefore introduced a first prototype of absent characters in Roman comedy, which one could call the **'desired absentee'**: one of the archetypal functions of absent characters in Roman comedy is indeed to provide the object of a highlighted, propelling desire. Desire is propelling first of all in a positive sense, as a force that pushes characters to lively and witty behaviour[8] as well as to devise (comic) tricks to secure their desired object. This is of course related to one of the most standard of comic situations, featuring a young man entrusting a cunning slave to find the money to prevent his beloved's absence and secure her presence[9]. An embodiment of this stock situation is found for instance in Terence's *Heautontimorumenos*, in which the slave Syrus has the double task of securing the presence of a girl (Antiphila, Clinia's sweetheart, see above) and later of preventing the absence of another one (Bacchis, Clitipho's lover). Bacchis' presence in the play is in constant danger of becoming an absence, because she continuously threatens to go away unless she is properly remunerated[10].

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[7] Cfr. e.g. the pathetic dialogue between Planesium and Phaedromus at *Curc.* 163-165 PLAN. *sisto ego tibi me et <te> mihi contra itidem ut sistas suadeo.* PHAED. *assum; nam si apsim, hau recusem quin mi male sit, mel meum.* PLAN. *anime mi, procul <a me> amantem abesse hau consentaneum est.* "PLAN. I present myself to you and I advise you likewise to present yourself to me. PHAED. I'm here; if I were away, I wouldn't protest against having a hard time, my honey. PLAN. My sweetheart, it isn't acceptable that my lover should be standing at a distance from me."; also, in *Cistellaria* Alcesimarchus' rage about the prospect of Selenium's departure (*Cist.* 520-527).

[8] As Lysidamus in *Casina* declares: (529) *quid me amare refert, nisi sim doctus ac dicaculus?* ("What's the point of me being in love unless I'm clever and witty?).

[9] Found e.g. in Pl. *Asin.*, *Bacch.*, *Curc.*, *Epid.*, Ter. *HT*, *Ad.* etc. On the typical plot of Roman comedy see also N.J. Lowe, *The Classical Plot and the Invention of Western Narrative*, Cambridge 2010.

[10] Cfr. in particular Ter. *HT* 723-743, esp. 735-736 SYRUS *perii hercle.* **Bacchis, mane, mane**: *quo mittis istanc quaeso? | iube maneat.*

A comic desire, however, is propelling also in **a negative sense**, as a source of confusion, a force obfuscating a character's reason and sense of reality. As the old man Lysidamus in *Casina* acknowledges, mistakes occur when one desires something too much: Pl. *Cas.* 370 CLEOSTRATA *per pol saepe peccas*. LYSIDAMUS *ita fit, ubi quid tanto opere expetas*. ("CLEO. You're making a lot of mistakes. | LYS. That's what happens when you want something so much.") Much of the humour of *Casina* depends on Lyisdamus' losing his sense of reality, starting from his symbolic act of 'putting make-up on' to please the absent Casina (cfr. 225-227). Desired absentees therefore pave the way to tricks and plots, as well as mistakes and deceptions, which are all key ingredients of Roman comedy.

3. CASINA AS THE 'IMPERSONATED ABSENTEE' PROTOTYPE

This leads me to introduce the second important consequence of Casina's absence in the eponymous play, that is leaving room for misleading impersonations. Casina is always absent from the onstage action, but on at least three occasions she becomes surrogately present through the mediation of onstage characters, according to three different patterns, all somehow involving deception.

The first, most conspicuous pattern is of course found in the iconic scene in which the slave Chalinus comes onstage impersonating the bride Casina (835–54): Lysidamus fails to recognise the identity of the fake bride and is mistreated by him/her. Lysidamus' delusion depends on Casina's absence, both because a surrogate cannot be present onstage if the original is present (see below), and also because the content of Lysidamus' delusion arises from the confusion of presence and absence. That is to say, Lysidamus' farcical deception consists in being led to believe that an absent character (Casina) is present, that is, as it were, in confounding absence with presence, under the spell of a counterfeiting mimetic beguilement. This is a key feature of Plautine comic art, and (Roman) comedy in general, which, as noted by ancient and modern theorists[11], capitalises on the clash between reality and unreality, between truth and appearance, between being and mimesis, indeed, between presence and (counterfeited) absence[12].

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[11] Cfr. e.g. Plato Phil. 48a. "SOC. The ridiculous is in its main aspect a kind of vice which gives its name to a condition; and it is that part of vice in general which involves the opposite of the condition mentioned in the inscription at Delphi (...) not to know oneself at all."; Arist. Poet. 5.1449a32-7 "Comedy, as we said, is mimesis of baser but not wholly vicious characters: rather, the laughable is one category of the shameful. For the laughable comprises any fault or mark of shame which involves no pain or destruction: most obviously, the laughable mask is something ugly and twisted, but not painfully"; *EN* 1127b-1128a. Cfr. also Schopenhauer's statement that "laughter is the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects". See G.E. DUCKWORTH, *The Nature of Roman Comedy: a Study in Popular Entertainment*, 2nd ed. Bristol 1994, pp. 305-330; N.J. LOWE, *Comedy*, Cambridge 2008, pp. 1-17; S. HALLIWELL, *Greek Laughter: a Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity*, Cambridge 2008, esp. chapters 5 and 8.

[12] Another example of this pattern is found in Plautus' *Miles*, where Palaestrio's scheme consists in confounding presence and absence, to the eyes of the slave Sceledrus (cfr. *Mil.* 149, 315, 402). Cfr. also *Most.* 431-531, where Tranio strives to convince the old man that the house where the *adulescentes* revel is empty, and this is appropriately (and metatheatrically) described as '*ludi*' (426-427).

There is another case, earlier in the comedy, in which Casina is impersonated on-stage. This is during Olympio's prosopopoeia at the end of his initial clash with Chalinus, through which the absent Casina speaks onstage and proclaims her sexual approval for him (Pl. *Cas.* 134-140).

> *quom mi illa dicet, "mi animule, mi Olympio,*
> *mea uita, mea mellilla, mea festiuitas,*
> *sine tuos ocellos deosculer, uoluptas mea,*
> *sine amabo ted amari, meus festus dies,*
> *meus pullus passer, mea columba, mi lepus,"*
> *quom mi haec dicentur dicta, tum tu, furcifer,*
> *quasi mus, in medio pariete uorsabere.*

> "When she says to me, "my sweetheart, my dear Olympio, my life, my honey, my joy, let me kiss your eyes, my pleasure, let me please love you, my day of delight, my little sparrow, my dove, my hare," when these words are said to me, then you, you criminal, will wriggle in the middle of the wall like a mouse."

This prosopopoeia might be construed as a tantalising onstage surrogate for the actual, longed-for presence of Casina, who is yet (and will remain) absent. Also in this case, Casina's surrogate presence involves a degree of deception, namely the self-deception of Olympio, who wishfully believes that Casina will eventually satisfy his sexual aspirations (of course an unreal situation).

Finally, Casina's absence becomes surrogately present onstage in the scene in which the maid Pardalisca falsely reports her maniacal threats of murder and suicide, to Lysidamus' distress (Pl. *Cas.* 655-685):

> 655-656 PARDALISCA *tua ancilla, quam tu tuo uilico uis*
> *dare uxorem, ea intus* LYSIDAMUS *quid intus? quid est?* (...)
> 659 *quid ergo?* PAR. *ah!* LYS *quid est?* PAR. *interemere ait uelle uitam,*
> *gladium –* LYS. *hem!* PAR. *gladium –* LYS. *quid eum gladium?* PAR. *Habet* (...)
> 678-685 *nec se tuam nec se suam nec | uiri uitam asseuerat sinere in*
> *crastinum protolli: id huc | missa sum tibi ut dicerem,*
> *ab ea uti caueas tibi.* LYS. *perii hercle ego miser!* PAR. *dignus es.*
> LYS. *neque est nec fuit me senex quisquam amator*
> *adaeque miser.*

> "PAR. Your slave-girl, the one you want to give in marriage to your overseer, inside she – LYS. What's she doing inside? What is it? (...) So what is it? PAR. Ah! LYS. What is it? PAR. She says she wants to take his life. A sword – LYS. What? PAR. A sword – LYS. What about this sword? PAR She has it. (...) She's adamant that she won't let your life, her own life, or her husband's life (680) continue till tomorrow. I've been sent here to tell you about this, so that you may be on your guard against her. LYS. Poor me, I'm dead! PAR. (*aside*) Serves you right. LYS. (*aside*) There isn't and there hasn't been an old lover as wretched as me."

Casina's behaviour is imagined to take place just a few metres away from Lysidamus, but that is enough to irreversibly separate her from the comic action, and to keep her absent from the stage: she can be present onstage only through the indirect report of Pardalisca. Pardalisca always speaks in the third person, and her report cannot be properly described as an impersonation of Casina, but its effects and implications are similar: Casina's offstage presence is again surrogately mediated by an onstage character, for the sake of both Lysidamus and the audience, with misleading consequences. Indeed, Pardalisca's report is pure fiction, and its only purpose, just like Chalinus' forthcoming impersonation, is to fool the old man, as she reveals in a key aside (Pl. *Cas.* 685-688):

> *ludo ego hunc facete*;
> *nam quae facta dixi omnia huic falsa dixi*:
> *era atque haec dolum ex proxumo hunc protulerunt*
> *ego hunc missa sum ludere.*

> "I'm fooling him wittily; what I told him has happened was a lie from first to last. My mistress and his woman from next door have hatched this trick, and I've been sent to fool him."

The terms *dolum* and *falsa*, and in particular the verb *ludere* and derivatives, have a strong metatheatrical potential in Roman comedy, referring to the comic activity in itself[13]; Pardalisca's statement could thus be construed as a self-reflective allusion to the theatrical activity, the impersonation *par excellence*[14].

The kind of situation, in which an absent character becomes surrogately present onstage through a deceitful impersonations or sim., is prototypical in Roman comedy. Parallels can be easily found in other plays, all involving the impersonation of an absent character[15]; one might refer to this second prototype as the **'impersonated absentee'**.

A typical example is the slave Harpax in *Pseudolus*: Harpax has been entrusted by the *miles gloriosus* of the play to collect the beautiful Phoenicium from the pimp Ballio, and to take her abroad to his master. Phoenicium, however, is already having a liaison with the young man Calidorus: he obviously does not wish to be deprived of his girlfriend, and has ordered his slave Pseudolus to intervene and prevent her departure

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[13] Cfr. G. Petrone, *Teatro antico e inganno*, Palermo 1983, pp. 202-209; also G. Chiarini, *La recita: Plauto, la farsa, la festa*, 2nd ed., Bologna 1983, p. 215; T.J. Moore, *The theater of Plautus: Playing to the Audience*, Austin TX 1998, pp. 74-75, 178; A. Sharrock, *Reading Roman Comedy: Poetics and Playfulness in Plautus and Terence*, Cambridge 2009, p. 10.

[14] Cfr. C. Questa, *Pardalisca regista della Casina,* in R. Raffaelli, A. Tontini, *Lecturae Plautinae Sarsinates VI, Casina*, Urbino 2003, pp. 45-60.

[15] Cfr. e.g. the absent Selenium in *Cistellaria*, impersonated by her fellow prostitute Gymnasium (cfr. Pl. *Cist.* 306-371); Tyndarus impersonating the absent Philocrates in *Captiui* (cfr. esp. Pl. *Capt.* 533-630). Cfr. also the lyre-girl Acropolistis impersonating Periphanes' daughter in *Epidicus* (cfr. Pl. *Epid.* 570-602), under the instructions of the eponymous *seruos callidus* (cfr. Pl. *Epid.* 591-592). On impersonation in Roman comedy see F. Muecke, *Plautus and the Theater of Disguise*, in *ClAnt* 5, 1986, pp. 216-229, R.R. Caston, *The Divided Self: Plautus and Terence on Identity and Impersonation*, in I.N. Perysinakis, E. Karakasis (eds.), *Plautine Trends: Studies in Plautine Comedy and its Reception*, Berlin and Boston 2014, pp. 43-62.

(incidentally, another example of the 'desired absentee' motif). The key to Pseudolus' scheme is Harpax, who is indeed absent for most of the comic action, and especially in the central, crucial scene of the play. After his fortuitous encounter with Harpax (*Pseud.* 594-666), Pseudolus has managed to win his trust, posturing as the pimp's servant, and manages to send him away from the onstage action (653-654 *apage te, Harpax, hau places; | huc quidem hercle haud ibis intro*, 665 HARPAX *numquid uis?* PS. *dormitum ut abeas.* HARP. *abeo*). He then recruits a fellow-slave, Simia the 'monkey', to impersonate Harpax and steal the girlfriend from under the nose of the pimp (1009-1015). Pseudolus' success (and that of his eponymous comedy in general) pivots on absence, and especially on Harpax' absence, which Pseudolus provokes and later exploits to perform his trick.

Another comedy which depends on 'impersonated absentees' is Plautus' *Amphitruo*, which features even two divine acts of impersonation, those of the absent Amphitruo by Jupiter and Sosia by Mercurius. Both of these acts of impersonation and their comic consequences depend and capitalise on absence: Jupiter and Mercurius can impersonate Amphitruo and Sosia, just as Chalinus can impersonate Casina, or Simia Harpax, as long as the 'real' characters are absent. In fact, when the real and fake character eventually become present onstage at the same time, as for instance in the famous 'duel' between the slave Sosia and the disguised Mercurius (292-462), the real character is forced by his 'fake' rival to become 'absent', both 'existentially' and physically. Cfr. e. Pl. *Amph.* 455-459:

> SOSIA *abeo potius. di immortales, obsecro uostram fidem,*
> *ubi ego perii? ubi immutatus sum? ubi ego formam perdidi?*
> *an egomet me illic reliqui, si forte oblitus fui?*
> *nam hic quidem omnem imaginem meam, quae antehac fuerat, possidet.*
> *uiuo fit quod numquam quisquam mortuo faciet mihi.*

> "SOS. I'd rather leave. Immortal gods, I implore you, where did I get lost? Where did I change? Where did I lose my looks? Did I by chance forget myself and leave myself behind? Well, this man has my complete image, the one I had before. What no one will ever do to me when I'm dead is happening to me while I'm still alive."

Thus, in the category of the 'impersonated absentee', absence is functional for a deceitful impersonation: this, as mentioned, is a prototypical situation in Roman comedy, but it is not the only one in which absent characters play an important role.

4. THE SICK SLAVE AND EUTHYNICUS: THE 'LICENSING ABSENTEE'

Returning to our play, we may note in fact that Casina is not the only character who is characterised by a conspicuous and momentous absence. There are two other important characters who never take part in the action, with vital implications. The first is the old unnamed slave who took Casina away after her (freeborn) mother exposed her (cfr. *Cas.* 39-46): the prologue explicitly highlights his absence, claiming that the slave 'lies in illness ... or rather in bed' (37-38). Since the old slave is never

mentioned again in the play, one might wonder why his absence deserved to be high-lighted in the first place. This is most likely because the old slave is the only character who is aware of Casina's freeborn status and knows the identity of her mother; he is thus (and probably will be) able to play a key role in the recognition of Casina as a freeborn citizen. This anagnorisis, as mentioned above, is described as taking place in the aftermath of the play, but probably occurred during the play's action in the Greek original[16]. In any case, the old slave's absence is a necessary precondition for the whole comedy to take place, since Casina's apparent slave-status is what makes her vulnerable to the predatory desires of Lysidamus.

The other key absent character in the play is Euthynicus, Casina's rightful lover: in this case we do not have to speculate too much about the reason for Euthynicus' absence. The prologue explicitly reveals that Euthynicus was sent away by his father in order to remove an impediment for his (comic) desire, and thereby for the comedy to unfold (Pl. *Cas.* 60-62).

> *ille autem postquam filium sensit suom*
> *eandem illam amare et esse impedimento sibi,*
> *hinc adulescentem peregre ablegauit pater.*

> "But after the father realized that his son was in love with that same girl and was a hindrance to himself, he sent off his lad abroad."

The absences of Casina's old slave and of Euthynicus, both spotlighted in the prologue, are thus functional to create the conditions necessary for the comedy to unfold. They are good embodiments of my third category of absent characters, which I will call the **'licensing absentee'**; in this category the comic complications at the basis of the *uis comica* of the play are allowed or 'licensed' by a character's absence. There is a large variety of patterns within this category, which could be distinguished according to the chronology and duration of the absence and the plot-motivations given to justify it. I will here focus on some representative examples.

a) The most extreme type, of which Euthynicus himself exemplifies in some re-spects, is that of the 'cat away': the absence of a character, for the whole duration of the play, 'licenses' other characters to 'play', that is, to love, drink, revel, in sum 'to act comically'.

An iconic example is found in Plautus' *Persa*, which revolves around the comic misbehaviour of the slave Toxilus, who loves, plots and eventually revels in the far-cical finale. All this is possible only because of the 'comically functional' absence of his master, as explicitly declared in the opening of the comedy (*Pers.* 29-29a):

> TOXILUS *basilice agito eleutheria.*
> SAGARISTIO *quid iam?* TOX. *quia erus peregri est.*

> "TOX. I'm celebrating the Festival of Liberty in grand style. SAG. How so? TOX. Because my master is abroad."

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[16] For some attempts at reconstructing the exact scenario in Diphilus' original see ARNOTT, *Diphilus' Κληρούμενοι*, cit., p. 42 with n. 27.

The implicit message is that without absence there would be no *Persa*, and indeed no comedy in general, if we consider that the misbehaviour of slaves is the most iconic event of Roman comedy, and has itself a metatheatrical dimension (see below section 6). Several other Roman comedies depend on the permanent absence of at least one key character, such as for instance the absence of the Macedonian soldier Polymachaeroplagides in *Pseudolus*, who is forced to be surrogately present onstage through unreliable proxies (see below, section 5).

b) In many other cases the licensing absentee interrupts his absence, often unexpectedly, and turns up onstage, especially in the middle or at the end of the action. A typical example is in *Mostellaria* where the young Philolaches has squandered the family's entire wealth in his father's absence[17]; when his father arrives onstage, at line 431, Philolaches' comic revelling is potentially over, and the rest of the play will be devoted to trying to delay the end of the fun. Another interesting example is in *Trinummus*, in which Charmides' unexpected return in the fourth act (820 ff.) spoils the tricks of Megaronides and Callicles, indeed by exposing the clash between presence and (counterfeited) absence (cfr. *Trin.* 903 *haeret haec res, siquidem ego apsens sum quam praesens longior*). Other good examples of this type, both occurring later in the play, are Hanno's arrival in the fifth act of Plautus' *Poenulus* (930-960), which sets in motion the resolution of the comic complications derived from his absence, and the absence of the *matrona* Dorippa in *Mercator*, which, as long as it lasts, gives license to her husband Lysimachus to enjoy a mistress in their city house[18]. In a more general pattern, the licensing absence occurs only in some particular scenes: for instance, in *Casina* Cleostrata's absence is desired by her husband Lysidamus and later saluted as a 'liberating' condition (cfr. above Pl. *Cas.* 835-836 LYS. *iamne apscessit uxor?* (...) *nunc pol demum ego sum liber*). Finally, in some cases the absence may be restricted to the background of the comedy. Terence's *Phormio* for instance opens with the return of the two old men Chremes and Demipho, whose absence licensed their sons to perform undesirable 'comic' acts, including the contraction of an unsatisfactory love marriage.

c) In other cases a character's absence more broadly allows for the removal of a possible impediment to the comic plot. In *Heautontimorumenos* for instance the young man Clitipho is unable to restrain his sexual drive for the prostitute Bacchis: since Bacchis, according to Syrus' plan, cannot be revealed as his own mistress, Clitipho is unceremoniously sent away (Ter. *HT* 585-589):

> SYRUS *Iube hunc*
> *abire hinc aliquo.* CLITIPHO *quo ego hinc abeam?* SY. *quo lubet: da illis locum:*
> *abi deambulatum.* CL. *deambulatum? quo?* SY. *vah quasi desit locus.*

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[17] Cfr. *Most.* 11-12, 1139-1140.

[18] Cfr. also the arrival of Phidippa in *Epidicus* (Pl. *Epid.* 526-538), of Amphitruo (*Amph.* 551-564) in the eponymous comedy. Cfr. also Demenaetus in Plautus' *Asinaria*, who enjoys a party of wine and sex with the beautiful Philaenium, as long as his wife is absent (*Asin.* 900 *nunc amo, quia non adest*), and the analogous situation prospected in *Menaechmi* (cfr. *Men.* 318 *quam uis ridiculus est, ubi uxor non adest*); Phronesium in *Truculentus*, taking advantage of Diniarchus' absence to find a new, wealthier lover (cfr. Pl. *Truc.* 382-383), and of Stratophanes' absence to pretend to be pregnant (cfr. *Truc.* 499-514).

abi sane istac, istorsum, quovis. CHREMES *recte dicit, censeo.*
CL. *di te eradicent, Syre, qui me hinc extrudis!*

 "SY. Tell him to go away somewhere. CL. Go where? SYR. Where you like. Give them some space to breathe. Go for a stroll. CL. Go for a stroll? Where? SY. Huh! As if there was a shortage of places! Go this way, that way, any way. CHR. He's right. It's a good idea. CL. May the gods utterly destroy you, Syrus, for pushing me out of here." [19]

d) In another, related variant, a character's absence is necessary to create the conditions for his own deception or downfall. For instance, in the middle of *Casina* the old man Lysidamus leaves the stage for a moment and goes to the forum: in his absence his wife Cleostrata meets with the old man Alcesimarchus and sways him from his decision to help her husband in his affairs (*Cas.* 531-562). Upon his return onstage, while Cleostrata is musing on her victory, Lysidamus comments on his bad decision to be absent at such a crucial moment (563-566).

stultitia magna est, mea quidem sententia,
hominem amatorem ullum ad forum procedere,
in eum diem quoi quod amet in mundo siet;
sicut ego feci stultus: contriui diem,
dum asto aduocatus quoidam cognato meo.

"It's great stupidity, in my opinion at least, for any lover who has something to love available for that day, to go to the forum. That's what I did, idiot that I am. I wasted the day while I was standing there as an advocate for a certain relation of mine."

Of course characters cannot always be onstage at the same time, and intermittent absences is inevitable, but what is relevant for my analysis is the fact that their absence is highlighted, as in the above case[20].

d) Absent characters pave the way to comic conditions, but not all of these are necessarily 'humorous' in nature: in a more 'serious' variant absence introduces a separation, alienation or lack of communication between characters, which is of course

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[19] Cfr. also Sceledrus' exit in *Miles* (*Mil.* 582-585), once his potential non-comical role has been neutralised by Palaestrio's scheming; in *Most.* Tranio' insistent request that hindering characters Mysagirides leaves the stage as soon as possible (*Most.* 578-590). In some cases a character is supposed to have been sent away before the play even begins, as Charinus in Plautus' *Mercator* (cfr. Pl. *Merc.* 40-92). In other cases the reveling characters wish that the non-comical character could become absent again, but this will not happen (cfr. *Most.* 376-377 *tuos uenit pater?* | *iube abire rursum*, 389-390).

[20] Another absence that will result in a character's downfall is for instance that of Euclio in *Aulularia*: his pot of gold is indeed stolen in his absence (Pl. *Aul.* 702-711), despite his precautions (cfr. *Aul.* 449, 577-585, 609-613) and forebodings (cfr. *Aul.* 464, 625-627), as well as his general anxiety about being absent (cfr. *Aul.* 98-99 *profecto **in aedis meas me apsente neminem** | uolo intro mitti*, 105 **discrucior animi, quia ab domo abeundum est mihi**, 118-119 *postidea domum |me rursum quantum potero tantum recipiam*, 183, 427-428 *sed in aedibus quid tibi meis nam erat negoti* | **me apsente**?). Similarly, most of the action in Plautus' *Miles* takes advantage of the absence of the eponymous character (offstage from line 78 to 948).

another prototypical element of (Roman) comedy[21]. The aforementioned absence of Casina's old slave can be construed as an example of this pattern, since his presence would facilitate the reunion of Casina with her rightful lover Euthynicus and probably also her freeborn parents. Another example is in Plautus' *Stichus*: this comedy revolves around Antipho's attempt to convince his daughters to leave their absent husbands, i.e. around a potential separation between characters[22]. At the same time, the absent husbands are themselves the object of their wives' desire, which is another thematised plot-element; the 'prototypical' nature of this situation is also suggested by the topical comparison between the two loyal wives and the Homeric Penelope, longing for her husband but pushed by 'baddies' to betray him in his absence[23]. Similarly, in Terence's *Hecyra* Philumena takes advantage of the absence of her husband Pamphilus to leave their home, in order to complete her hidden pregnancy in her mother's house. Her decision, and resulting absence, causes an estrangement between Philumena and Pamphilus, which is the main plot-propellant of the play[24].

e) There are also some fictional places which are associated with the category of licensing absence. Going back to *Casina*, one of the play's symbolic places, repeatedly highlighted, is the 'empty house' which the old man Lysidamus obsessively seeks as a location for the satisfaction of his illicit desire[25]. In order to prevent her husband's misbehaviour, and thereby interfere with the comic action, the *matrona* Cleostrata asks her neighbour's wife to preside over the house, and so to prevent absence and its resulting comic misbehaviour. Filling an absence with an act of impersonation is a very comic trope, as discussed above; but filling an absence with a real, hindering presence (i.e. the opposite of a 'licensing absence') is not comical at all, and indeed often results in the end of a comedy. Another important location associated with licensing absences is the countryside. The country is where the (stern) *senes* reside (as e.g. in Terence's *Hecyra* and *Adelphoe* or Plautus' *Mostellaria*), while the town is associated with the (comic) revelling of the *adulescentes*[26]. The countryside is in fact a prototypically 'non-comic' location, which represents the 'antithesis of normal comic life'[27], in contrast with the comically-charged city. In Roman comedy characters often travel (or are sent) to the country when their presence can be detrimental to the comic action. For instance, at the beginning of *Eunuchus* the prostitute Thais' behaviour persuades her lover Phaedria to go the countryside; Phaedria is at that mo-

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[21] Cfr. e.g. D. Konstan, *Greek Comedy and Ideology*, Oxford 1995; Moore, *Theater of Plautus*, cit., pp. 43-47. For the same theme in Menander, see e.g. G. Bodei Giglioni, *Menandro o la politica della convivenza*, Como 1984.

[22] Cfr. Pl. *St.* 15-18, *St.* 99-100; 525-526 (on the husbands' return).

[23] Cfr. Pl. *St.* 1-6.

[24] Another prototypical lack of communication is that between a father and a son, which normally originates in the son's misbehaviour in a period of absence of the father, and results in his consequent unwillingness to see or talk to his father throughout the play (cfr. e.g. Stratippocles with Periphanes in *Epidicus*). See also above, section 2.

[25] Cfr. Pl. *Cas.* 520-522, 527, 531-537. Cfr. also *Merc.* 542-543, where the old Lysidamus has been given a place for his love affair, just for the 'single day' of the comic action; *Poen.* 657-658.

[26] See in particular Pl. *Most.* 1-83 and cfr. Pl. *Cist.* 225-228, *Merc.* 64-68, Ter. *Ad.* 94-95, 840-842.

[27] Cfr. R. Hunter, *The New Comedy of Greece and Rome*, Cambridge 1985, p. 110.

ment an impediment to her turbulent relationship with the soldier Thraso, which provides one the main subplots of the play (cfr. *Eun.* 181-187)[28].

Despite their diversity, all the absent characters discussed above can be described as 'licensing absentees' because they create the conditions necessary for licentious behaviour, deception, alienation or sim., which are all key ingredients of comedy. Indeed, also this third, more general category of 'licensing absentees' is related to one of the archetypal elements of Roman comedy, which can be designated in general terms by the term 'misbehaviour', that is a behaviour that, in a broad sense, goes against social, moral or relational expectations, such as e.g. a young man having an affair behind his father's back, a slave cheating or mistreating his master, but also a wife abandoning her husband or an orphan deprived of his/her family. Comedy could be described as the performance of (comic) misbehaviour, which, often originates in absence and is exposed by its cessation, i.e. by the return onstage of a previously absent character.

5. Cleostrata's mediation and the fourth prototype: 'proxied absentees'.[29]

I discussed in the previous section the 'licensing absence' of Euthynicus, which is provoked by his father and continues for the whole duration of the play. At the same time Euthynicus is not completely absent from *Casina*, that is to say his absence is somehow 'filled' in Plautus' *Casina*, through the mediation of his mother Cleostrata. As the prologue explicitly reveals (Pl. *Cas.* 62-65):

> *hinc adulescentem peregre ablegauit pater;*
> **sciens ei mater dat operam apsenti tamen.**
> *is, ne exspectetis, hodie in hac comoedia*
> *in urbem non redibit.*

> "The father sent off his lad abroad. Even so, his mother knowingly supports him in his absence. In case you're waiting for him, he isn't returning to the city in this comedy today."

Cleostrata thus supports her absent son, acting as a sort of 'proxy' for him. Cleostrata is not the only proxy-character in *Casina*: the slave Chalinus also serves as an agent of his master. Chalinus has indeed offered to act as a 'proxy-husband' to secure Casina's possession, and eventually impersonates her in the fake marriage, groomed and dressed by Cleostrata herself. This helps to introduce the fourth, and final, prototypical category of absent characters in Roman comedy, the 'substituted' or, to use a neologism, the '**proxied absentee**', i.e. the absent character who is represented on stage by other characters acting on his behalf.

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[28] For a similar situation cfr. e.g. Pl. *Bacc.* 899.
[29] An expanded version of this section can be found as a chapter in the volume *Unspoken Rome*, edited by T. Geue and E. Giusti (forthcoming with Cambridge University Press).

Cleostrata and Chalinus are not the only 'proxy' characters in Roman comedy who deputise for other absent characters, and somehow 'presentify' them onstage. The aforementioned Harpax in *Pseudolus* also does so, as he proudly claims (Pl. *Pseud.* 1113):

> *ego, ut mi imperatumst, etsi abest, hic adesse erum arbitror.*

> "When I'm given an order, I consider my master to be present, even if he's away."

In fact, most Roman comedies feature at least one absent character who is 'proxied' by another, in one or several scenes, or indeed for the whole duration of the play. To quote from the comedies I have mentioned so far: in *Amphitruo* the absent Jupiter and Amphitruo are respectively represented on stage by Mercurius and Sosia[30]; in *Pseudolus* Harpax deputises for the *miles gloriosus* abroad, Pseudolus deputises for the young Calidorus, but pretends to deputise for the pimp Ballio. In *Heautontimorumenos*, the old man Chremes acts on behalf of his fellow-*senex* Menedemus, and the slave Syrus on behalf of the young man Clitipho, but pretends to be an agent of Dromo and Clinia. I could go on, as the list of proxy characters, and 'proxied absentees', is long.

A key feature of 'proxied' absences is that they are not direct, immediate presences, but are somewhat less straightforward and more prone to engender the sort of archetypical problems at the core of Roman comedy. In fact, comic proxies are only rarely performing their duty in a frictionless manner; whether because of inability, bad luck or (more often) bad intentions, 'proxiness' is never trouble-free in Roman comedy. An important factor explaining the frequency of 'proxiness' in Roman comedy is indeed related to its inherent 'cognitive' dangers. 'Proxiness' introduces a gap between the 'proxied' absent character and the intended receiver of the communication, a gap that can be intentionally exploited for deception, or (accidentally) result in misapprehension (the personified *agnoia* of Menander's *Perikeiromene*).

A good example of this is the deception of Harpax and his master by Pseudolus, which involves two layers of 'proxiness', namely Harpax acting as an agent of his master Polymachaeroplagides, and Pseudolus pretending to deputise for Ballio. This double 'proxiness' is exploited by the iconic Pseudolus ('the liar'), who disrupts the communication between Ballio and the soldier, i.e. the completion of the transaction of Phoenicium. The 'bug' which allows Pseudolus' 'hacking' is generated by the inherent danger of 'proxiness', of which characters are well aware. In fact, Harpax is instructed to mistrust 'proxiness', and claims that he will give his money only to Ballio in person (Pl. *Pseud.* 642, 644):

> HAR. *Reddere hoc, non perdere erus me misit. (...)*
> *ego nisi ipsi Ballioni nummum credam nemini.*

> My master sent me to pay this, not to lose it. (...)
> I won't entrust a single coin to anyone other than Ballio himself.

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[30] Cfr. Pl. *Amph.* 19 [and the whole prologue in general], 291.

Despite his intentions and precautions, however, Harpax eventually falls into the cognitive trap of 'proxiness', and hands over to Pseudolus (the fake proxy) something even more important than the money; this is the soldier's letter (itself a sort of inanimate proxy), which Harpax has been ordered to hand over to Ballio together with the money and the seal (*symbolus*) imprinted on it, which bears the effigy of the soldier (another inanimate, mimetic proxy) and serves as the token of the transaction (Pl. *Pseud.* 647-648). By handing over the soldier's effigy to Pseudolus Harpax is compromising the whole enterprise, exposing the vulnerability of 'proxiness' and paving the way to the play's deception, as Pseudolus immediately acknowledges (Pl. *Pseud.* 671-672):

> PSEUD. *Nam haec allata cornu copiae est, ubi inest quicquid volo:*
> *hic doli, hic fallaciae omnes, hic sunt sycophantiae* (...)
>
> Yes, it was brought to me as a cornucopia which has everything I want inside.
> Here there are tricks, here there are all devices, here there are deceptions. (...)

Crucially, the key to dismantle the 'firewall' put up by the soldier and pimp to secure their 'proxied' communication is itself an instance of (fake) 'proxiness', that is Pseudolus' sudden decision to pretend to be Ballio's proxy, a '*Subballio*' (607).

The deception in *Pseudolus* is a good illustration of the inherent vulnerability and deceiving potential of 'proxiness' in Roman comedy: despite all possible precautions and 'firewalls', proxies (human or inanimate) do not fully 'presentify' their masters' absence – that is, they do not provide flawless channels of frictionless communication, as expected by their masters. For this reason, proxies can be exploited as vehicles of deception, as cognitive interstices where the comic lie can be implanted and develop; this can happen either passively, as in the case of Harpax or the soldier's effigy, or actively, as with Pseudolus' fake *Subballio*, and many other equivalents in both Plautine and Terentian comedy.

Deception and misapprehension are not the only factors at play relating to comic 'proxiness' is concerned. Another important element is the close connection between 'proxiness' and 'slavery' Most of comic proxy-characters are slaves acting as agents for their (absent) masters (Sosia, Harpax, Pseudolus, Olympio, Chalinus etc.). This is not surprising: the slave is by nature the 'proxy' *par excellence*, since, to quote Aristotle's words (*Politics* 1255b), s/he is 'a part of the body of the master, alive yet separated from it'. By virtue of this 'separation' slaves can be present when and where their masters are absent, but by virtue of their 'belonging' to them the slaves' presence is supposed to be a mere proxy for that of their masters. That is to say, the main function of slaves is to obviate absence for the sake of their masters. This kind of 'proxy' relationship between absent master and present slave is prototypical in Roman comedy, and is epitomised in the scene of the slave hurrying about on behalf of his young master (*seruos currens*; see Ter. *HT* 37, *Eun.* 36), as well as its related conventional plot, featuring a cunning slave tricking out the money to fund his (young) master's revelries.

The 'proxy' relationship between slave and master, and the comic problems associated with it (whether self-inflicted or not), are also iconic of the Roman palliata

as such: internal evidence suggests that Roman comedies were performed by slaves[31] and that already in Plautus' time they were characterised by the prominent role slaves play in them (cfr. e.g. Pl. *Most.* 1149-1151)[32]. If we add the fact that ancient traditions report that Roman playwrights were or had been slaves (Livius Andronicus, Plautus, Caecilius Statius, Terence[33]), and in at least one case (Terence) that they (allegedly) were mere proxy pennames for the Roman elite[34], we can conclude that the link between 'proxiness' and Roman comedy is very tight indeed. This also helps to introduce the (meta)theatrical potential of 'proxiness', and of comic absence in general.

6. The metatheatricality of absence

There is something inherently theatrical about absence, in all of the four typologies discussed above, which at times appears to be openly acknowledged in Roman comedy, through metatheatrical allusions.

First of all, the prototype of the 'proxied absentee' has an inherent metatheatrical potential, since the theatrical act can itself be described as an act of proxyness. For instance, in the prologue of *Heautontimorumenos* an actor introduces himself as an *orator*, in both its senses of advocate and speaker, who is sent to deliver a memorised speech on behalf of the playwright (Ter. *HT* 11-15):

> *oratorem esse uoluit me, non prologum:*
> *uostrum iudicium fecit; me actorem dedit.*
> *sed hic actor tantum poterit a facundia*
> *quantum ille potuit cogitare commode*
> *qui orationem hanc scripsit quam dicturu' sum?*

> "The playwright wanted me as an advocate, not as a prologue speaker. He has turned this into a court, with me to act on his behalf. I only hope that the eloquence of the actor can do justice to the aptness of the arguments which the writer of this speech has contrived to put together." (Barsby)

This situation might be construed as an embodiment of that prototypical model of 'proxied absentee' which I discussed in the previous section, with the comic actor acting as a proxy for the author/playwright. The absent character *par excellence* in Roman comedy is indeed the author-playwright, who is 'proxied' onstage by the actors, but also all by the

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[31] See P.G.M. Brown, *Actors and actor-managers at Rome*, in P.E. Easterling, E.Hall, (eds.), *Greek and Roman Actors: Aspects of an Ancient Profession*, Cambridge 2002, pp. 225-237; C.W. Marshall, *The Stagecraft and Performance of Roman Comedy*, Cambridge 2006, pp. 83-125.
[32] I prefer not to address here the *uexata quaestio* about whether Roman comedy conveyed the slave's point of view (cfr. A. Richlin, *Slave Theater in the Roman Republic*, Cambridge 2017), that of the citizen slave-owner (cfr. K.McCarthy, *Slaves, Masters, and the Art of Authority in Plautine Comedy*, Princeton 2000) or a combination of both (R. Stewart, *Plautus and Roman Slavery*, Malden, MA and Oxford 2012).
[33] Cfr. A. Richlin, *Talking to Slaves in the Plautine Audience*, *ClAnt* 33, 2014, pp. 174-226: pp. 211-212.
[34] Cfr. Ter. *HT* 22-26, *Ad.* 15-21, and see e.g. A. Umbrico, *Terenzio e i suoi nobiles: invenzione e realtà di un controverso legame*, Pisa 2010, with bibliography.

comedy they perform. The latter can be illustrated by what is probably the most explicit allusion to the (meta)theatricality of 'proxiness', which is appropriately found in *Casina*'s interpolated prologue. I say 'interpolated' because it is patent that the prologue, or at least great part of it, does not belong to the original play, but is a later addition, presumably produced on the occasion of a later re-performance[35]. In a passage which closely echoes the reference to Cleostrata's proxy role in the play (63 *sciens ei mater dat operam* **apsenti tamen**, see above), the prologue states that Plautus, by now a forever-absent character, can still be beneficial after his death, indeed by means of his plays (Pl. *Cas.* 18-20):

> *ea tempestate flos poetarum fuit,*
> *qui nunc abierunt hinc in communem locum.*
> *sed **tamen apsentes** prosunt pro praesentibus.*

> "In that era the cream of poets lived, who've now gone away to the place to which all men go. But even so they benefit us in their absence as if they were present."

Proxied absences are not the only absences with a metatheatrical potential. Also the third category of absence ('the licensing absentee'), which I have identified in my taxonomy, is somehow related to what one might call 'the heart' of (Roman) comic theatre, and therefore has a metatheatrical potential. The aforementioned case of *Persa*, whose *uis comica* explicitly relies on the licensing absence of a master (see above, section 4a), is iconic in this respect: the festive world of Roman comedy, performed by and centring around slaves, is predicated on a licensing absence. Without this there would be no room for misbehaviour, no disturbance, no freedom even[36]: that is to say, there would not be that kind of Saturnalian inversion, which, however one interprets it, is certainly an important feature of the Roman comic world[37].

Finally, the 'impersonated absentee' (the second category) also has an obvious metatheatrical affiliation, since (comic) theatre itself obviously consists of acts of impersonation. There are plenty of passages where this is openly acknowledged in Roman comedy. For instance, in the trick of *Pseudolus*, the character impersonating the absent Harpax is allegorically called Simia 'the monkey', and speaks as an actor who has learnt his part (941 *teneo, omnia in pectore condita sunt, meditati sunt mihi doli docte*)[38]. Even more openly, Pseudolus, his 'director'[39], consistently compares himself to a comic playwright. As he declares in a famous passage (Pl. *Pseud.* 401-404):

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[35] Cfr. the still useful E. Paratore, *Casina*, Florence 1959, pp. 5-12. For a bibliography see W.G. Arnott, *Diphilus' Κληρούμενοι and Plautus' Casina*, in Raffaelli, Tontini, *Lecturae Plautinae*, cit., pp. 23-44: 25 n. 4.

[36] In Roman comedy also verbal *parrhesia* is also often explicitly linked to absence: cfr. e.g. *Truc.* 209-212, 884, *Trin.* 998-999.

[37] See e.g. the classic E. Segal, *Roman Laughter: The Comedy of Plautus*, 2nd ed., Oxford 1987; also Moore, *Theater of Plautus*, cit., pp. 181-196.

[38] Cfr. also Pl. *Pseud.* 923a-5a and in general the whole self-characterization of Simia in the scene (905-955), with C. Connors, *Monkey Business: Imitation, Authenticity, and Identity from Pithekoussai to Plautus*, in *ClAnt* 23, 2004, pp. 179-207. On the metatheatricality of Simia's character and of the act of disguise in general, see also e.g. Muecke, *Plautus and the Theatre*, cit., p. 15.

[39] Cfr. Pl. *Pseud.* 764-765; 1192-1193 [*Pseudolus*] **praeceptor** *tuos, qui te hanc fallaciam | docuit, ut fallaciis hinc mulierem a me abduceres*. On Pseudolus' role as a director see in particular, among many, the still useful J. Wright, *The Transformations of Pseudolus*, in *TAPhA* 105, 1975, pp. 403-416.

> PSEUDOLUS *sed quasi poeta, tabulas cum cepit sibi,*
> **quaerit quod nusquamst gentium, reperit tamen,**
> *facit illud ueri simile, quod mendacium est,*
> *nunc ego poeta fiam.*
>
> "PS. Yet just as a poet, when he takes writing-tablets, looks for something that doesn't exist anywhere, but finds it nonetheless and makes likely what is a lie, I shall now become a poet."

Going by the metaphor, what Pseudolus is looking for is the money to give to the greedy pimp Ballio, which could itself be construed a non-human embodiment of the 'desired absentee' prototype. There is indeed a metatheatrical component also about the first of my prototypes: as shown by the above passage, the job of the playwright consists of the invention of something (or someone) which does not exist, in order to tease and please the greedy desire of the audience.

The impersonation of an absence, for the satisfaction of the audience's desire, is therefore at the core of the art of the comic playwright[40]; Plautus was conscious of this, as shown by several metatheatrical passages[41], and also, one might argue, by the fact that many comedies are named after eponymous absentees. This includes *Amphitruo*, for instance, in which the impersonation of the eponymous character by the god Jupiter is crucial for the plot and the humour of the play. *Casina* itself is significantly named after a character who remains absent for the whole play: although it is possible that the original Plautine title of the comedy was different (cfr. 32 *latine Sortientes*, see below n. 43), the eponymous title was established by the time of Varro (cfr. *LL* 7.104, 106), suggesting that ancient reception already appreciated the dramatic significance of what is arguably the most remarkable absentee of Roman comedy.

7. Casina's absence: an exercise in theatrical technique?

Plautus' *Casina* is indeed a remarkable play with regard to absence, and not just because it offers a good repertoire of all the four categories I have identified in this article.

Casina's absence in particular is noteworthy, because it incorporates these four categories discussed above: the absent Casina provides both the object of Lysidamus' farcical desire (1), and that of Chalinus' impersonation (2), and also allows for the whole plot-development in general (3), since if she were fully present there would be less scope for Lysidamus' misbehaviour as well as Cleostrata's scheming. Moreover, Casina represents the 'flag' of the side which Cleostrata is acting for throughout the play (4); although strictly speaking Cleoastrata is proxying for Euthynicus, she is also indirectly acting on behalf of Casina herself, whose freedom and marriage with the young boy are the ultimate goal of the play.

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[40] On this cfr. in particular Muecke, *Plautus and the Theatre*, cit.

[41] Cfr. also Pl. *Trin.* 857-858, where the sycophant impersonating Charmides declares that his deceitful costume has been lent out by the theatrical *choragus*, as well as Sagaristio's impersonation in *Persa*, again with costumes taken from the *choragus* (*Pers.* 159-160) and a rehearsal better than that of comic and tragic actors (*Pers.* 465-466).

Casina's absence, however, is noteworthy not just because of its multivalence, but also because it is most likely an original product of Plautine craft. Without entering the *uexata quaestio* of the relation with the original Greek play[42], it is very likely that Casina *did* appear in Diphilus' Κληρούμενοι, on which Plautus' *Casina* was modelled, at least at its very end. Apart from structural observations, the main evidence for this assumption is an important passage in the prologue. After the tirade on the superiority of the old masters over contemporary epigones, the prologue speaker declares (Pl. *Cas.* 64-66):

> *is, ne exspectetis, hodie in hac comoedia*
> *in urbem non redibit: Plautus noluit,*
> *pontem interrupit, qui erat ei in itinere.*

> "In case you're waiting for him, he isn't returning to the city in this comedy today. Plautus didn't want him to, he demolished a bridge on his way".

The subject of the first sentence is Euthynicus, the young lover of the play, Casina's rightful lover, and eventual husband-to-be. In the passage above, the phrase *Plautus noluit* is revealing: a few lines before, the prologue-speaker has posited a clear authorial distinction between the Greek author Diphilus and the Latin Plautus[43]. In such a context, a unilateral reference to Plautus (65 *Plautus noluit*) and the deictic marker (64 *hodie in hac comoedia*) suggests that it was the Roman playwright who 'demolished the bridge' (*pontem interrupit*), and thereby prevented the young lover from reuniting with Casina within the play's action, as presumably happened in the denouement of the Greek original[44].

There are further hints, although less explicit, that suggest the presence of Plautus' original hand not just behind Casina's complete absence from the action, but also behind its theatrical exploitation in the play. For instance, the already-discussed scene (see above 3), in which Pardalisca reports the insane behaviour of the absent Casina, begins with what may be construed as a metatheatrical statement of Plautine originality (Pl. *Cas.* 625-626):

> *tanta factu modo mira miris modis*
> *intus uidi, nouam atque integram audaciam*

> "I've seen such strange goings-on in strange ways inside just now, a new, unheard-of audacity."

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[42] See the bibliography quoted in ARNOTT, *Diphilus' Κληρούμενοι*, cit., p. 23 n. 1, to which one can add J.C. LOWE, *The Lot-Drawing Scene of Plautus' Casina*, in *CQ* 53, 2003, pp. 175-183; A. UMBRICO, *"Casinus" sotto il velo nuziale: ancora sul rapporto tra Casina plautina e Κληρούμενοι difilei*, in *GIF* 61, 2009, pp. 15-45; SHARROCK, *Reading Roman Comedy*, cit., pp. 36-39; D. KONSTAN, *Turns and Returns in Plautus' Casina*, in I.N. PERYSINAKIS, E. KARAKASIS (eds.), *Plautine Trends: Studies in Plautine Comedy and its Reception*, Berlin and Boston 2014, pp. 3-11.

[43] Pl. *Cas.* 31-34 *Clerumenoe uocatur haec comoedia | Graece, latine Sortientes. Deiphilus | hanc graece scripsit, postid rursum denuo | Latine Plautus cum latranti nomine*. 'This comedy is called *Kleroumenoi* in Greek, in Latin "Men Casting Lots". Diphilus wrote it in Greek, and after that Plautus with the barking name wrote it again in Latin.'

[44] Cfr. S. O'BRYHIM, *The Originality of Plautus' Casina*, in *AJPh* 110, 1989, pp. 81-103: pp. 82-83, and see also PARATORE, *Casina*, cit., pp. 60-70; ARNOTT, *Diphilus' Κληρούμενοι*, cit., pp. 39-44, UMBRICO, *Terenzio*, cit., p. 39.

In Roman comedy the terms *nouus* and *integrus* are commonly used in prologues in a literary-technical sense, to denote (and often advertise) the originality of a play, scene or sim. (cfr. Pl. *Cas.* 9 *nouae comoediae*, 70 *nouom attulerunt*, *Amph.* 89-90 *quasi uero nouom | nunc proferatur, Iouem facere histrioniam*, Ter. *HT* 4 *ex integra Graeca integram co- moediam*, *Ad.* 9-10 *Plautus locum | reliquit integrum*, 7, 29, 34, 43)[45]. Although this nor- mally applies only to the Roman stage and does not imply alterations from the Greek model, in this context the technical connotation of the terms may suggest a metatheatrical use, to highlight and claim the '*Plautinitas*' of the scene, which requires and capitalises on Casina's absence.

A similar, perhaps more explicit claim is found in relation to the other, prototypical treatment of absence in the play, the guileful impersonation of Casina (Pl. *Cas.* 859-861):

> PAR. *lubet Chalinum quid agat scire, nouom nuptum cum nouo marito.*
> MYR. *nec fallaciam astutiorem ullus fecit*
> *poeta atque ut haec est fabre facta ab nobis.*

> "PAR. I'd love to know what Chalinus is doing, the new he-bride with the new husband.
> MYR. No playwright has ever found a trick cleverer than this skilful one of ours."

Here Myrrina presents the impersonation of the absent Casina as an unparalleled theatrical feature: this strongly metatheatrical claim might have been already made by Myrrina's equivalent in Diphilus' play, and yet, as already pointed out by Ladewig[46], it is perhaps more appropriate to take it a Plautine declaration of originality, and add Diphilus himself to the group of *poetae* to whom Myrrina is referring to; this would be a further indication of Plautus' self-conscious introduction and exploitation of Casina's absence, at least at this point of the play.

Whether Casina's fake marriage was an original Plautine addition or not, in Plau- tus' comedy Casina's character is completely removed from the action: in contrast with Bacchis, Clinia, Amphitruo, Hanno and all other equivalents in other comedies, Casina's absence never transforms into a presence. Given its likely *Plautinitas*, one might argue that in Plautus' exceptional play the implications and complications of absence have been given priority over their resolution in the denouement: in her own eponymous play Casina's fate is not important, and in particular it does not matter whether it will be the good Euthynicus or the lewd Lysidamus who manages to satisfy his desire with her. Rather, the focus is only and blatantly on what results from Casina's absence. Taking all of this into account, one might even describe *Casina* as a self-reflective exercise in comic technique.

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[45] Not all boasts of novelty or primacy in Roman comedy should be taken seriously however, since some are clearly ludicrous or paradoxical; on this see M. FONTAINE, *Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Comedy: Menander's Kolax in Three Roman Receptions (Naevius, Plautus, and Terence's Eunuchus)*, in S. D. OLSON (ed.), *Ancient Comedy and Reception*, Berlin and Boston 2014, pp. 180-202.

[46] TH. LADEWIG, *Einleitungen und Anmerkungen zu Plautinischen Lustspielen: Zur* Casina, in *RhM* 3, 1845, pp. 179-205: 192, followed e.g. by E. LEFÈVRE, *Plautus-Studien III: V or der Tyche-Herrschaft in Diphi- los' Kleroumenoi zum Triummatronat der Casina*, in *Hermes* 107, 1979, pp. 311-339: 336.

8. Conclusions

I will now draw a summary of my brief journey into the world of comic absentees in Roman comedy, and also present a few provisional conclusions on absence in Roman comedy.

Using Plautus' *Casina* as a case study, I have identified four different comic 'prototypes', which I have defined, with quite inelegant labels that I hope the reader will forgive, as 'desired', 'impersonated', 'licensing' and 'proxied' absentees. Desired absentees are characters who provide the object of a comedy-propelling desire, which is exacerbated by absence and often thematised in the play as e.g. in Lysidamus' love vignettes in *Casina*. Impersonated absentees are characters whose absence is 'filled' by an act of deceitful impersonation, which often provides a main plot event in a comedy, such as Casina's fake wedding. Licensing absentees are characters whose absence is functional to the *uis comica* of the play, leading to a series of stereotypical comic situations, which are normally resolved in the denouement. This series of situations can be collected under the general concept of 'misbehaviour', and include a large array of comic events, ranging from deception to alienation, from licentiousness to estrangement. Finally, 'proxied' absentees are characters who are represented onstage by proxies or agents; just like Euthynicus in *Casina*, 'proxied' characters usually have key plot-propellant interests in the action, which are however defended and resolved onstage by present intermediaries.

Obviously these categories are not mutually exclusive: both the second ('impersonated absentee') and fourth type ('the 'proxied' absentee) could be construed as subtypes of the third, the 'comically-functional', 'licensing' absentee. Moreover, this fourfold taxonomy does not encompass the totality of absent characters populating Roman comedy: for instance, I have deliberately omitted to discuss offstage action, whether reported or unreported, as well as its agents[47], who might be considered as a particular category of comic absentees[48]. I have not properly explored dead characters, who often play key roles in the comedy (just like Plautus himself in a re-performed *Casina*)[49], nor characters who strive or threaten to become absent, but never do[50].

However, I think that the four prototypes I have identified have a particular significance for Roman comedy, not least because of their association with 'key ingredients' of the Roman comic recipe. These elements are (1) desire, (2) deceitful impersonation, (3) misbehaviour, and (4) 'proxiness'. All these elements are, as it were, 'at the heart of (Roman) comedy'. There is indeed something inherently comic about all these four elements, and the stereotypical situations resulting from them. This is

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[47] An example of this is the consummation of the proxy-marriage in *Casina*, which takes place offstage and is then reported by Olympio (Pl. *Cas.* 875-934).

[48] Mute characters also deserve a separate discussion, especially because they are occasionally given a voice by Roman authors, in contrast with their Greek counterparts. Cfr. e.g. Pl. *Cas.* 963-1011, which features five speaking actors on stage, a state of affairs impossible in a Greek play.

[49] Cfr. e.g. Chrysis' funeral in the background of Terence's *Andria* (105-136), and also Pl. *Cist.* 611-615, *Poen.* 1065-1067; Ter. *HT* 286-287.

[50] Cfr. e.g. in *Mercator* Charinus' repeated announcements of committing suicide (472-474) or going into exile (644-647, 830-841); cfr. also Acroteleutium's fawning words at *Mil.* 1240-1241.

not just because they all provide the conditions for the basic comic plot, that is for the very existence of the comic performance. These elements (desire, impersonation, misbehaviour and 'proxiness') are all comic *per se*, because they are all typical of the comical-theatrical act. Comic acting is itself an act of impersonation (2), performed by 'proxies' on behalf of an absent playwright (4), and can be construed as a form of misbehaviour (3), featuring slaves acting freely in their master's absence, and more generally actors pretending to be someone else. Moreover, as has been argued since ancient times, the main aim of comedy is to satisfy the desires of the audience (1), by staging a happy resolution of the complications of their lives in a controlled environment and above all by providing pleasurable comic inventions. Roman playwrights were quite aware of the comic, and indeed theatrical, potential of absence, as suggested by the probable Plautine origin of Casina's unbroken absence[51].

In conclusion, absent characters play a key dramatic role in Roman comedy, because its key ingredients are all somewhat dependent on absence. Absent characters stimulate desire, create the conditions for deception and misbehaviour, are impersonated by frauds or 'represented' by proxies. Absence is a key force in Roman comedy, as a goal and as a source of *uis comica*: in most comedies this absence is eventually 'filled', and absent characters come onstage at a certain point. In other comedies, such as *Casina*, they never do, as if their presence were less important than their absence, or perhaps as if the poet were content to expose his characters as pure figments of his imagination, as theatrical devices without any claim to actual existence.

Abstract

In the opening of Plautus' *Casina* the interpolated (?) prologue warns the audience: '*in case you're waiting for [Euthynicus], he isn't returning to the city in this comedy today. Plautus didn't want him to, he demolished a bridge on his way*' (64-66). Euthynicus is the young lover of the play, competing with his father for an alluring slave-girl, the eponymous Casina. Casina too, despite (or because of?) her telic role as the craved object of the characters' desire, was never allowed by Plautus to cross into the world of the play. Casina and Euthynicus are not alone: Roman comedy is populated by a crowd of missing characters, which the playwrights keep or move on the other side of the bridge, for parts or indeed the whole of the play. All these missing characters '*benefit us in their absence as if they were present*', as the same prologue of *Casina* proclaims (20), with reference to the most important absence of all, Plautus himself. The aim of the article is to investigate the crowd of absentees in Roman comedy, starting from a close-reading of Plautus' *Casina* and focusing on a number of prototypical roles and functions, as well as discussing their contribution to the dramatic framework of Roman comedy.

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[51] An important *nota bene*: all these above observations do not claim to be exclusively valid for Roman comedy, nor the four-types taxonomy that has been identified to be intrinsically comic. Indeed, it is natural that absence and absent characters play a key role also in other ancient theatrical genres, especially those that are related, directly or indirectly, to Roman comedy, such as in particular Greek New Comedy, Aristophanic Comedy, and New Tragedy. But this, I believe, is a topic that goes well beyond the scope of the present article, which is intended as a limited case-study.

Nell'apertura della *Casina* plautina il prologo (interpolato?) avverte il suo pubblico: "se lo state aspettando, sappiate che non tornerà in città in questa commedia oggi; Plauto non lo ha voluto: ha distrutto un ponte sulla via" (64-66). Il personaggio sottointeso è Eutinico, il giovane innamorato della commedia, in competizione con il suo vecchio padre per l'eponima Casina. Anche a Casina, nonostante (o proprio per) il suo ruolo telico di oggetto del desiderio di tanti personaggi, non è mai concesso da Plauto di entrare nel mondo della commedia. Casina e Eutinico non sono soli: la commedia latina è popolata da una folla di personaggi assenti, che i commediografi tengono o muovono sull'altro lato del 'ponte scenico', a volte per tutta la durata della commedia. Tutti questi personaggi assenti "ci fan del bene", come proclama lo stesso prologo della *Casina*, in riferimento alla più importante assenza della commedia, quella di Plauto stesso. Lo scopo dell'articolo è quello di investigare questa folla di 'assenteisti comici', soffermandosi in particolare su alcuni ruoli e funzioni prototipiche, a partire da una lettura ravvicinata della *Casina* plautina.

Giuseppe Pezzini
University of St Andrews
gp63@st-andrews.ac.uk