



## HORSEPLAY IN PLAUTUS' *ASINARIA*

### ABSTRACT

This article argues that the game presented in the third scene of the third act of Plautus' *Asinaria* involves a horseplay rather than an assplay (Asin. 697–710). This is suggested by the young master's name, Argyrippus, and by a list of equine terms occurring in the text: uehere, inscendere, descendere, subdomari, tolutim, quadrupedo, aduorsom cliuom, in procliui.

**Keywords:** Plautus; *Asinaria*; Argyrippus; horseplay; horse-riding; equine terms

The *Asinaria* is a comedy about a young man's efforts to obtain the necessary money to buy a year of service from his beloved girl Philaenium. The servants of this *adulescens* are plotting to collect money from a buyer who has just acquired some asses (*asini*) from the young man's mother. When they succeed in executing this plan, they torment the lovers (the *adulescens* Argyrippus and Philaenium) and force them to beg for the money (through terms of endearment, the riding scene and the facetious deification of the servants). Only after this do they hand over the twenty *minae* to their young master. However, the boy's father also wants to share in the girl's services and goes to the brothel with his son. The young man's mother finds out about this and, outraged, removes her husband from this house.

The eponymous asses are an essential element of the play—they are an object of the theme of deception which allows the theme of love to evolve and the play to end happily. The asses are sold by Artemona, the young man's mother. However, some scholars have associated the asses with several characters in the play. Henderson<sup>1</sup> suggests that Artemona should be seen as the ὄναγός—an ass-driver from the Greek title of the original (10). This is because she sold the asses, allowing the comedy plot to start and all the characters to appear on stage. Schwarz<sup>2</sup> proposes that Libanus should be perceived as the ass-driver. Gellar-Goad develops this idea by implying that, during the third scene of the third act, Argyrippus 'is ridden like an ass'<sup>3</sup> by this servant; he also suggests that the title perhaps refers to a merchant Pelleus who buys the donkeys from Artemona. Gellar-Goad writes that 'several elements contribute to the assiness of this scene'<sup>4</sup>—for example, the *minae* are metonymically called asses and Argyrippus is forced to act as an ass. He even calls the wallet containing the money for the asses an 'assload',<sup>5</sup> because the young man, depicted as an ass, wants to carry it as his load (*onus*). Gellar-Goad argues that the word *onus* hides a paronomastic pun alluding to the Greek ὄνος—an ass. Undoubtedly, the money in the *Asinaria* is referred to through the metaphor of 'the asses'. This seems clear from the servants' joke about taking the

<sup>1</sup> J. Henderson (ed.), *Asinaria: The One about the Asses*. Plautus (Madison, WI, 2006), 210–11.

<sup>2</sup> A. Schwarz, 'Das Rätsel der Komödientitel *Asinaria* und *Rudens*', *Philologische Wochenschrift* 56 (1936), 876–80, at 877.

<sup>3</sup> T.H.M. Gellar-Goad, 'Assplay in *Asinaria*', *CQ* 72 (2022), 217–21, at 217.

<sup>4</sup> Gellar-Goad (n. 3), 217.

<sup>5</sup> Gellar-Goad (n. 3), 220.

pole to prevent the asses from the wallet to bray (588–90).<sup>6</sup> This metonymy animates and zoomorphizes the money which begins behaving in the same way as the sold animals. This metaphor is also used in other comedies: in *Persa* 316–17,<sup>7</sup> money in a wallet is associated with oxen; in *Truc.* 654–5,<sup>8</sup> money is referred to as sheep desired by she-wolves, that is, sex-workers. The joke depends on the double meaning of the word *lupae* and *minae*: ‘the coins’ and ‘the bare-bellied sheep’.<sup>9</sup> All quoted passages mention *crumina*, ‘a small moneybag’ (Festus 53 Lindsay *sacculi genus*). However, none of these wallets could contain the aforementioned animals. As discussed by Gellar-Goad,<sup>10</sup> the words that refer to carrying the moneybag’s load in the *Asinaria* (for example *sustinere*, 658; *labor*, 659; *imponere*, 659; *baiiolare*, 660; *inanis*, 660; *pressatum umerum*, 661) are deliberately chosen to contrast the small size of the moneybag and the supposed weight and size of the animals in the bag or the weight of the money inside. The terms referring to a burden are used to build an absurd joke and not to show a real, heavy load. Therefore, when Argyrippus asks the servant to put the wallet around his neck (657 *hic pone, hic istam colloca cruminam in collo plane*) and on his shoulders (661 *ARG. quin tradis huc cruminam pressatum umerum*), this does not mean that the young man is being treated as an ass carrying the burden. A *crumina* was usually hung around the human neck or worn over the shoulders.<sup>11</sup> These conclusions are corroborated by the money-loading scene in the *Pseudolus*, where the old man Simo puts a *crumina* on his servant’s shoulders<sup>12</sup> (1315–18 PSEUD. *onera hunc hominem ac me consequere hac. | SIMO egone istum onerem? PSEUD. onerabi’, scio. | SIMO quid ego huic homini faciam? satin ultro et argentum aufert et me inridet? | PSEUD. uae uictis! SIMO uorte ergo umerum*). This action is called *onerare* and the joke seems analogous to the joke about *onus* in the *Asinaria*. Therefore, the argument about load-carrying evidencing Argyrippus’ transformation into an ass is unconvincing. Consequently, it is important to consider whether the riding sequence in the third act of the *Asinaria*, when the servant mounts the young man, is really an ass ride (a donkey ride), as Gellar-Goad suggests (although he also frequently means an erotic game) or a horse ride, as other scholars indicate (for example Gray, Sergi, Slater, Henderson, Hurka, Porter).<sup>13</sup>

In this scene (*Asin.* 697–710), there are many equine terms which suggest that we are dealing with a horseplay as opposed to an assplay.<sup>14</sup> First, Libanus demands to be

<sup>6</sup> *Asin.* 588–90 LE. *attatae, modo hercle in mentem uenit, | nimi’ uellem habere perticam. LI. quoi rei? LE. qui uerberarem | asinos, si forte occiperint clamare hinc ex crumina*. The text of Plautus cited throughout this article is taken from the edition of W.M. Lindsay, *T. Macci Plauti comoediae*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1910).

<sup>7</sup> *Persa* 316–17 SAG. *ah ah! abi atque caue sis | a cornu. TO. quid iam? SAG. quia boues bini hic sunt in crumina*.

<sup>8</sup> *Truc.* 654–5 *ego tperperat minas | ouis in crumina hac <huc> in urbem detuli*.

<sup>9</sup> W.D.C. de Melo, *Plautus: Stichus, Three-Dollar Day, Truculentus, The Tale of a Travelling-Bag, Fragments* (Cambridge, MA, 2013), 341.

<sup>10</sup> Gellar-Goad (n. 3), 220. Earlier explained by J.H. Gray, *T. Macci Plauti Asinaria* (Cambridge, 1894), 85.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Epid.* 360 *ipse in meo collo tuo’ pater cruminam collocauit; Truc.* 652 *homo cruminam sibi de collo detrahit*.

<sup>12</sup> D. Christenson, *Plautus Pseudolus* (Cambridge, 2020), 353.

<sup>13</sup> Gray (n. 10), 91; E. Sergi, *Patrimonio e scambi commerciali: metafore e teatro in Plauto* (Messina, 1997), 39; N.W. Slater, *Plautus in Performance. The Theatre of the Mind* (Amsterdam, 2000), 51; Henderson (n. 1), 206, 248; F. Hurka, *Die Asinaria des Plautus. Einleitung und Kommentar* (Munich, 2010), 234–5; J.R. Porter, ‘Plautus’ *Asinaria*: a grammatical commentary for students’ (Diss., University of Saskatchewan, 2019), 144.

<sup>14</sup> The verb *subdomari* (a hapax legomenon) in *Asin.* 702 refers to the humbling of a young man before the servants (cf. *OLD* s.v. *subdomo*) and also to the taming of animals (cf. *OLD* s.v. *domo* 1).

carried on the back of Argyrippus (699 *uehes pól hodie me*). The young man, who is surprised by this bold request, repeats the verb *uehere* twice (700–1) to ensure that he understood the servant correctly. As he is subsequently blackmailed by his servant, who threatens that he will not receive the promised money, he invites Libanus to mount him (702 and 705 *inscende*, mirrored in the later expression *descendam* in line 710). The servant then admits proudly that he has subdued his master as he would tame an animal (702 *sic istic solent superbi subdomari*) and lectures Argyrippus about how to behave like a horse (704 *nec te equo magis est equos nullus sapiens*).<sup>15</sup> This is the line where the horse is mentioned explicitly, allowing us to associate all the above-quoted expressions (*uehere*, *inscendere*, *descendere*, *subdomari*) with equine terminology.

Line 706 adds additional lexemes to this category. Although the barley (*hordeum*) that is taken away from Argyrippus as a punishment for his lazy walk may have been the feed of asses and horses,<sup>16</sup> the expression *tolutum badizas* can only refer to a horse.<sup>17</sup> In particular, the adverb *tolutum* denotes the equine motion; however, the exact meaning of this word is controversial (Gray: 'at a gallop'; Hurka: 'im Trab').<sup>18</sup> Even de Melo translates it in two distinct ways: 'into a trot'<sup>19</sup> (as in the *OLD*) or 'with a high-stepping gait'.<sup>20</sup> The second translation follows the opinion of Adams who recognizes this kind of gait as 'artificial and only acquired by training'.<sup>21</sup> The latter explanation seems more probable, as we may infer from Varro (*Sat. Men.* fr. 559.1–2 Astbury<sup>2</sup> *sed et ecus, qui ad uehendum est natus, tamen hic traditur magistro ut, | equiso doceat tolutim*) and Pliny the Elder (*HN* 8.166 *unde equis tolutim carpere incursum traditur arte*). Nevertheless, according to all of these translations, the word in question undoubtedly refers to horses. On the other hand, the verb *badizo*, *-are*, which follows *tolutum*, is a calque of the Greek βαδίζω,<sup>22</sup> 'to walk'. In the comedies of Menander, it describes the stage motion of the characters in the play, especially their entrance and exit from the stage (*Sam.* 159, 258, 421, 661, 663, 680, 693; *Dys.* 147, 361, 589, 638, 925; *Epit.* 283, 376 Kassel–Schröder).<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the phrase *tolutum badizas* excellently expresses two sides of the situation<sup>24</sup>—it refers to the gait of

The humour in the phrase *sic istic solent superbi subdomari* (*Asin.* 702) lies in the ambiguity of the verb and in the mock tragic style: Porter (n. 13), 143.

<sup>15</sup> A. Otto, *Die Sprichwörter und Sprichwörtlichen Redensarten der Römer* (Leipzig, 1890), 125 recognizes a proverbial sentence in this ironical phrase, which means that we treat someone as a stupid man ('du bist nicht klüger als ein Pferd').

<sup>16</sup> M. Kokoszko, K. Jagusiak, Z. Rzeźnicka, *Cereals of Antiquity and Early Byzantine Times: Wheat and Barley in Medical Sources (Second to Seventh Centuries AD)* (Łódź, 1997), 322.

<sup>17</sup> V. Ortoleva, 'La terminologia greco-latina per designare le andature del cavallo (con un'appendice sull'etimologia dell'italiano danzare)', *IF* 106 (2001), 126–63, at 137–42.

<sup>18</sup> Gray (n. 10), 91; Hurka (n. 13), 234.

<sup>19</sup> W.D.C. de Melo, *Plautus: Amphitryon, The Comedy of Asses, The Pot of Gold, The Two Bacchises, The Captives* (Cambridge, 2011), 219.

<sup>20</sup> W.D.C. de Melo, 'The language of Atellan farce', in R. Raffaelli and A. Tontini (edd.), *L'Atellana letteraria. Atti della Prima Giornata di Studi sull'Atellana* (Urbino, 2010), 121–55, at 137.

<sup>21</sup> J.N. Adams, *Pelagonius and Latin Veterinary Terminology in the Roman Empire* (Leiden, 1995), 593–4; cf. Ortoleva (n. 17), 141.

<sup>22</sup> L.L. Ussing, *T. Maccii Plauti comoediae*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen, 1875), 1.415 gives examples of other such calques in Plautine comedies: *malacisso* (*Bacch.* 73), *moechisso* (*Cas.* 976), *patrisso* (*Mostell.* 639, *Pseud.* 442), *cyathisso* (*Men.* 303) and *apolactizo* (*Epid.* 678). The verb *gracisso* (*Men.* 11) could also be included in this list.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. also a pun in Aristophanes' *Birds*: 42 τὸν βάδον βαδίζομεν.

<sup>24</sup> Hurka (n. 13), 234 identifies the contrast between the sounds of *tolutum* and *badizas*. *tolutum* is Latin and therefore familiar to the audience; *badizas* is Greek and therefore foreign. However, the whole phrase may have been modelled on the expression from the Greek original: τρέχων βαδίζεις.

the horse, that is, the current role of Argyrippus, and the movement of the man, that is, the real human nature of the *adulescens*.

Moreover, the expression *quadrupedo* in line 708 also refers to the motion of a horse. Ussing<sup>25</sup> claims that it also has an adverbial function, but this differs from *tolutim*, which he understands as ‘at gallop’, and in his opinion *quadrupedo* should be understood as ‘at trot’. Ortoleva, Hurka and Porter<sup>26</sup> interpret *quadrupedo* in the opposite way, as ‘at gallop’. This is corroborated by the *OLD* (*quadrupedus*, ‘of or involving galloping’). Strikingly, both expressions are repeated by Fronto in opposition to each other when he discusses the features of the literary style (Fronto, *Ep.* 19.13–14 van den Hout *siue quadrupedo < cursu > acurrant atque exerceantur seu tolutim*)<sup>27</sup> and the artificial and ‘slow pace of Seneca’s [the Younger] phrases’<sup>28</sup> (Fronto, *Ep.* 153.15 van den Hout *sententias eius tolutares uideo nusquam quadrupedo concitas cursu tendere*). Therefore, in Fronto’s letters, *tolutim* and *tolutaris* metaphorically refer to the slower gait of a horse and *quadrupedo* refers to a faster one. It is therefore evident that, in the *Asinaria*, the servant wants to take Argyrippus in gallop and consequently threatens to stir him (*agitabo*) with a spur (*calcari*). The vocabulary used in this passage belongs to horse riding. Sergi<sup>29</sup> notes that the expression *aduorsom cliuom*, ‘uphill’, at the end of line 708, is an equine term<sup>30</sup> (cf. Lucil. fr. 318 Krenkel *si omne iter euadit stadiumque accliuē tolutim*). This is mirrored in the later phrase *in procliuī*, meaning ‘downhill’ (710).

The final expression in this scene that is worthy of examination is *postidea ad pistores dabó, ut ibi cruciere currens* (709). Gellar-Goad<sup>31</sup> reads this sentence as presenting the horrible fate of an ass or an enslaved person working in the mill and being tortured. His opinion of treating Argyrippus as an enslaved person evidently has value, as the young man agreed to call Libanus and Leonidas his patrons (652–3, 689–90). The comic inversion in this scene of Saturnalian spirit and the role reversal between a young master and his servants has been emphasized by Segal.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the threat of sending the enslaved person to the mill as a punishment is well known from the comedies of Plautus, Naevius, Caecilius Statius and Ennius.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Ussing (n. 22), 1.415: ‘quadrupedo ... cursus significans, non saltui similem, quod tolutim dicebant ... , sed eam, qua quattuor equi pedes aequis interuallis solum pulsant’. Similarly, Gray (n. 10), 91.

<sup>26</sup> Ortoleva (n. 17), 142; Hurka (n. 13), 234; Porter (n. 13), 144.

<sup>27</sup> M.P.J. van den Hout, *A Commentary on the Letters of M. Cornelius Fronto* (Leiden, 1999), 50.

<sup>28</sup> C. Panayotakis, *Decimus Laberius: The Fragments* (Cambridge, 2010), 410. Cf. the humorous nonce word *toluiloquentia*, ‘a monotonous or jogging flow of speech’ (*OLD*; a hapax legomenon used by Novius, *Gallinaria* fr. II Frasinetti *o pestifera, Ponticum fera, trux toluiloquentia*) derived from the adjective *toluilis* = *tolutaris*, ‘moving at a trot’ or ‘jogging’; see M. De Nonno, ‘I grammatici e la tradizione dell’Atellana letteraria’, in R. Raffaelli and A. Tontini (edd.), *L’Atellana letteraria. Atti della Prima Giornata di Studi sull’Atellana* (Urbino, 2010), 37–67, at 40 n. 8; de Melo (n. 20), 140.

<sup>29</sup> Sergi (n. 13), 40 n. 15.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Otto (n. 15), 86, who considers the expression *equus/caballus in cliuo* a proverbial phrase meaning ‘encountering obstacles’.

<sup>31</sup> Gellar-Goad (n. 3), 218. Similarly, A. Traina, ‘Uomini e asini (per una rilettura dell’*Asinaria*)’, *BStudLat* 44 (2014), 1–6, at 4 n. 19 claims that Argyrippus is first demoted in his social status and then transitions from a human to an animal—a horse—and finally changes from a horse to an ass. Cf. Hurka (n. 13), 233.

<sup>32</sup> E. Segal, *Roman Laughter: The Comedy of Plautus* (New York, 1987), 103–9. See also G. Vogt-Spira, ‘*Asinaria* oder Maccus vortit Attice’, in E. Lefèvre, E. Stärk and G. Vogt-Spira (edd.), *Plautus barbarus. Sechs Kapitel zur Originalität des Plautus* (Tübingen, 1991), 11–69, at 52–8.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. e.g. J. Wright, *Dancing in Chains. The Stylistic Unity of the Comoedia Palliata* (Rome, 1974), 50, 63–4.

Additionally, asses were commonly employed in ancient mills. However, these arguments do not exclude horses as animals working in animal mills. In fact, horses were often used there,<sup>34</sup> particularly horses that had no value and were useless in other kinds of work. Argyrippus is judged by Libanus as such a worthless animal (710 *nequam es*) after his attempts at trotting and galloping; consequently, his future as a horse working in the mill is very likely.<sup>35</sup>

Alongside the equine terms indicated above, the comedy offers another clue to suggest that the riding scene requires the participation of a horse rather than an ass. The hint lies within the young man's name, Argyrippus, coined on the model of Greek Ἀργύριππος. However, the name seems a humorous Plautine invention,<sup>36</sup> because it has not been attested in Greek ancient sources.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, the meaning of this name is clear: it should be understood as 'Silverhorse'<sup>38</sup> or 'Horse for silver'.<sup>39</sup> The name is undoubtedly one of a number of *nomina loquentia*, which point to the plot of the play: the efforts to acquire silver to buy a year of sex services. The connotations of this name with silver are underlined several times throughout the passages that allude to its etymology (74–5 *nam me hodie orauit Argyrippus filius | uti sibi amanti facerem argenti copiam*; 364 *ni hodie Argyrippus argenti essent uiginti minae*; 732–3 *animum, Argyrippe, aduerte sis. pater nos ferre hoc iussit | argentum ad tē*). One of the ways to obtain the money from the servants is for Argyrippus to perform horseplay for them.<sup>40</sup> This is how the *adulescens* becomes a horse for the twenty silver *minae*.

To conclude: the equine terms used in the scene in question suggest a transformation of Argyrippus into a horse rather than into a donkey, and his name confirms this hypothesis. The young man is treated by Libanus as a quadruped and is even threatened to be sent to the mill, the place of punishment for the lowest enslaved servants and beasts of burden. Turning a mill was in ancient times normal work for asses, but was 'the lowest fate to which a horse could descend'.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, the servant's threat seems far stronger if we assume that Argyrippus acts as a horse. Thus the threat reduces the young citizen, enslaved and humiliated by his own servant, to the lowest possible status. This inversion of power dynamics between the enslaver and the enslaved person agrees with the Saturnalian spirit of the whole scene, which reverses the conventional roles of the characters multiple times.

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<sup>34</sup> L.A. Moritz, *Grain-Mills and Flour in Classical Antiquity* (Oxford, 1958), 100.

<sup>35</sup> Segal (n. 32), 108; Hurka (n. 13), 235.

<sup>36</sup> A.S. Gratwick, 'Paternal "obsequelia": some passages of Plautus, Nonius, and Terence', *Hermes* 129 (2001), 45–62, at 47 n. 8.

<sup>37</sup> K. Schmidt, 'Die griechischen Personennamen bei Plautus II', *Hermes* 37 (1902), 353–90, at 356. Schmidt also notices that the name Ἀργύριππος is a parallel to Χρύσιππος. G. Chiarini, *Introduzione a Plauto* (Rome and Bari, 1991), 29 claims that the name Argyrippus indicates an inferior horse to the one indicated by the name Chrysippus.

<sup>38</sup> Henderson (n. 1), 161; Porter (n. 13), 144. D. Fogazza, 'Plauto 1935–1975', *Lustrum* 19 (1976), 79–296, at 226, following Schwarz (n. 2), 877—'silbergraues Pferdchen', 'Grauschimmel', 'Esel'—translates the name 'il piccolo cavallo grigio, l'asino cioè'. However, the name does not suggest that the horse is small; therefore, it does not refer to an ass.

<sup>39</sup> E. Sergi, 'Giovani e cavalli nell'immaginario antico. Plauto e il tipo dell'efebo in "ippo"', in G. Petrone (ed.), *Lo sperimentalismo di Plauto. Scritti a margine di letteratura e teatro antichi* (Palermo, 1999), 9–27, at 25. Some scholars (Sergi [n. 13], 39; Traina [n. 31], 1 n. 2) see a stylistic figure of antiphrasis in this name, as an *adulescens* ironically does not possess any silver.

<sup>40</sup> Gray (n. 10), 90; Henderson (n. 1), 161.

<sup>41</sup> Moritz (n. 34), 100.