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Comic Spaces and Plautus' *Rudens*

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Abstract: *While there has been a resurgence in the study of the much maligned genre of Roman Comedy, the majority of work has focused on points philological, socio-political, and on comic word-play. Among Plautus' work, the* Rudens *stands alone as a play set outside a city, as the most prolific Roman comedic playwright takes us to the seaside for a classic whirlwind farce revolving around a lost daughter, a besotted lover, mistaken identities, and prostitutes. The unique setting of this play allows the modern audience an insight into the spatial tensions within the Roman mind, as we explore what happens where sea and land meet.*

> *Miris modis di ludos faciunt hominibus:*
> *ne dormientis quidem sinunt quiescere.*
> In wonderful ways do the gods produce plays for men:
> They don't even allow them to sleep in peace.   (Daemones, 594-5)

As one of Plautus' more metatheatrical plays, the *Rudens* constantly invites us to think about what is really going on onstage, and to question the choices made by the actors/director/playwright. We should wonder why she went over there, or he over here, examine the minimal props used for clues and references, and, as modern readers, try to understand the symbolism of the various spaces: the sea, the shore, the city, the shrine. In particular, metatheatre makes demands on us to examine the use of space in the physical world of the audience, to try to piece together what visual and emotional cues the actors were using to create their stage-world, and thus to understand the points of reference between them. For the *Rudens*, there is the added frisson of being forced to imagine a most uncity-like place, the liminal sea-shore, which yet further draws the attention to the study of space. To aid the less well-acquainted reader, here follows the *argumentum* of the play:

Reti piscator de mari extraxit vidulum	A fisherman with his net dragged from the sea a trunk, in which there were the toys of his master's daughter, who had been stolen and become the slave of a pimp. When shipwrecked and washed ashore, she was unwittingly protected by her own father. Once recognised, she is married to her lover, Plesidippus.
Ubi erant erilis filiae crepundia	
Dominum ad lenonem quae surrepta venerat.	
Ea in clientelam suipte inprudens patris	
Naufragio eiecta devenit: cognoscitur	
Suoque amico Plesidippo iungitur.	

A strong theme that runs through the play includes discovery and redefinition – of birth, status, and wealth. Slaves are freed, a daughter/father found, and freeborn rights established. The *Rudens* itself is the rope tied to the *vidulum*, over which Gripus and Trachalio fight in what must have been a highly theatricalized tug-of-war. It is therefore the tensions of ownership, or the disputes about rights and property, that cut right through

the play. Indeed, it is highly likely that Plautus' Greek source was *Epitrope* ('The Arbitration'), by Diphilus of Sinope (cf. 32), or perhaps Menander's *Epitrepontes*,[1] and we can see the legacy of this in the scenes that call upon Daemones, the agèd exile and long-lost father, to adjudicate, first in the case of Labrax's sanctuary-breaking, and then in the row over the box. Key to both of these disputes is location: Labrax must break through Venus's protection of the girls, and Gripus asserts that what he finds in the sea is his to keep.

The actors' demands on the audience's imagination are great. We must hold in our minds the power of the city, ever threatened, even though it is (uniquely) far off, and we are explicitly made to think of the shipwreck off-stage (probably collocated with the audience) as Sceparnio describes the victims of the storms jumping off their beleaguered vessel. For where we actually find ourselves is a barren Cyrenian shore, with a simple *fanum Veneris* (shrine to Venus) and solitary house belonging to an Athenian exile. The only visitors Daemones usually gets, he tells us, are pilgrims coming to borrow water for their rites in the temple (131ff.). It is a peculiar twist of fate, therefore, that so many strangers happen to descend on him in one day, and even more bizarre that they are so closely related. Indeed, so great is the preponderance of figures foreign to this shore that it itself, already an inherently liminal location, becomes even more a place of tension and transition.

What physical aids, then, could a Roman acting troupe of the Second Century B.C. employ? Where might they look to create this liminal shore? The layout of the theatre is uncertain, and is unlikely to have resembled the later, stone structures for which there is archaeological evidence, such as the Theatre of Pompey (55 B.C.)[2]. Some, such as Beare,[3] fall into the trap of reading with Vitruvius (First Century B.C.) and Julius Pollux (Second C. *A.D.*) that the theatres had *periaktoi*, 'triangular pieces of machinery which revolve, each having three decorated faces' (Vitr. V.vi.8) and 'projecting wings'. Marshall and Fay[4] take much more sensible lines of argument by comparing external sources with the needs of the texts themselves. The starting point must have been the Greek theatres of the New Comedy era. There is, of course, no need for an *orchestra* (the chorus of fishermen in *Rudens* should logically just cross the stage on their way to the sea). The depiction of steps leading down to an orchestra on some Southern Italian red-figure vases warn us not to accept such pictorial evidence at face-value, as they may have been influenced by ideas of Fifth Century Attic Comedy.[5] However, the structures in these are wooden, and reasonably simple. As one final piece of external evidence, Marshall notes Tacitus, *Annals* 14.20, in which he records an early form of the theatre in which there were no seats, as they 'might tempt [the audience] to pass whole days in indolence.'[6]

It seems most likely that a rough screen was erected, perhaps with a raised stage, into which 3 doors were set. As the *Rudens* (and many other plays) only use 2 doors, the central door may have been curtained off on occasion. *Bacchides* 832 states that the

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[1] Fay, H.C., *T. Macci Plauti*: Rudens (London, 1969), *ad loc.* and p.40

[2] Marshall, C.W., *The Stagecraft and Performance of Roman Comedy* (Cambridge, 2006), p.31. He notes that there were several earlier attempts, but all were unsuccessful, and post-Plautine in any case.

[3] Beare, W., *The Roman Stage* (London, 1964), pp.248-55

[4] Fay (1969); Marshall (2006)

[5] Marshall (2006), pp.32-3

[6] *ibid*., p.35

distance between each door (and between the end doors and the stage-ends) was *tris unos passus*. If symmetry is to be assumed, that allows 12 *passus* for the length of the stage, which is approximately 60ft. As Fay realises, this is hardly sufficient for Labrax's speech at 485-92, delivered as he walks briskly onto stage.[7] It is true that the actor could have paced to and fro on the stage, but this is hardly a satisfactory solution, as it would be much preferable to have him heading straight for the *locus* of the play from the sea, not strolling about, especially as he then makes a dry remark on Charmides' sluggishness. Fay reasons that the absence of the wings (for which in later theatres Virtuvius and Pollux gave evidence) may have allowed for a longer visible entrance-path in Plautus' day, and that the actor could have started his speech some way from the stage itself, so that he delivers only the last two lines on the stage itself. This longer approach would be possible in the more rudimentary and (somewhat ironically) more suitable theatres than in their great stone descendants.

Indeed, the somewhat *ad hoc* arrangements for these festivals (the context of Roman comedy productions)[8] meant that the plays were sometimes put on in front of temples, using the steps as seats (if such indolence were borne!), as Cicero records about the *Ludi Megalenses* in *De Haruspicum Responso* 24: the audience watched the play from the temple of the *Magna Mater*, the goddess herself watching from within[9] (the continuity from Greek practice is striking).[10] We might speculate a similar setting for the *ludi Apollinares*, in the space that was to become the Theatre of Marcellus. Perhaps this is the reference of *vicine Apollo* (cf. *Bacchides* 170-3). Marhsall also notes the Choragus' speech in *Curculio*, which isolates almost a dozen individual locations in the Forum, and remarks that the stage for this might well have been on the East side of the Forum, with these structures behind. Thus the city itself becomes the backdrop for the plays, and this may well have an important role in our evaluation of references to "near" and "far", temples/gods, and political institutions. This was not the later theatre of scene-painting and removal from the urban setting, but rather an immersive and involving experience whose rudimentary nature was pointed out unashamedly in the metatheatrical jokes of Plautus' plays.

> *Spectatores, vos quoque ad cenam vocem,*
> *ni daturus nil sim nec sit quicquam pollucti domi,*
> *nive adeo vocatos credam vos esse ad cenam foras.*
> Spectators, I should invite you also to dinner, except that I'll give none and have
> nothing at home worth serving, and also I assume that you've already got invites.
>
> (Daemones, 1418-20)

There is no dinner back-stage, an actor tells us in the epilogue. It's all been a sham, a play, and really there's nothing there, just a couple of props – the urn and Gripus' spit, perhaps – hidden away from the audience's sight. Leach observes that the fourth

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[7] Fay (1969), p.11

[8] Cf. Segal, E., *Roman Laughter* (Oxford, 1987), pp.7-9, in which he discusses the Saturnalian, topsy-turvy nature of Plautine comedy.

[9] Marshall (2006), pp.36-7

[10] The statues of the gods associated with certain theatres are sometimes held to have been seen as taking part in the festival, watching the plays as they took place. Cf. D. Wiles, *Tragedy in Athens: Performance space and theatrical meaning* (Cambridge, 2011), pp.54-6.

wall breaks down entirely here,[11] whereas it had previously simply tottered. It is a part of the "sending up" of theatre of all kinds that we see at 268-9 with the mock-tragic/Homeric description of ships as horses of the sea (cf. *Od.* 4.707-10, 13.81-6) and Ampelisca's winged words (332-3). We should return to the ending of the play later, but first let us examine our initial quotation (and its context) again. Daemones' observations about the gods' plays for men (593ff.) are a trope of Plautine comedy, as discussed by Slater.[12] We must beware of using such a quotation too generically, of not looking at the peculiarly Plautine use of dream spaces. As Slater aptly says, 'the "life is a dream" analogy [of Abel] seems not to have greatly preoccupied Plautus'. Such a Renaissance reading would allege that, just as the playwright has arranged the actors' movements, so do the gods direct human actions. The only possible way that this could be argued for in Plautine comedy is by a method of visionary direction (a term I use advisedly), the playwright setting out what he wants to see from his cast. Were this true in the *Rudens*, we would surely expect Daemones' dream to be of a different sort: not a vision of what is to come, a bit of monkey business hidden in animal imagery, but an exhortatory and clear sign that he should act. Crucially, it is only once he is clearly taking against Labrax that he actually realises that the pimp is the monkey whom he managed to throw in chains in his dream, at 771-3. To understand the role of the gods in Daemones' dream, therefore, we should not look to the over-used and unsuitable motivational arguments that are so often trotted out.

Rather, a comparison with other dreams from Plautus would be of some service. In *Miles Gloriosus*, Philocomasium uses a false dream to avert suspicion of her own infidelities (Act II, Scene 4). She has seen her identical twin sister arriving in Ephesus (the play's *locus*) with her boyfriend, and explains to the dull-witted Sceledrus that he must have seen these two kissing, not her and a lover. Though this dream from *Mil. Glor.* is invented as part of a plot, it casts light on the way in which we are expected to receive Daemones'. For if we think of Philocomasium's dream as true for a moment, its role is to foretell events (that these "events" happened after the concoction of the "dream" obscures the relevant point), which is clearly the case in the *Rudens* too. The difference lies in the direction of the dreams: in *Rudens*, the gods set the scene, but in *Mil. Glor.*, the instructions are given by Palaestrio (*praecepta facito ut memineris*, he warns her at 354). However, there is a difficulty in the analogy that we must resolve. Palaestrio is both the director of the dream and the driver of the play's action. He is a playwright, a 'fully awake' 'comic trickster' as Slater would have it, both the director of the dream and the driver of the play's action; the gods in *Rudens* do not seem to be involved to such a micromanaging scale.

But what is "the action" in *Rudens*? Is it not the arbitrations, the central tugs-of-war, that underpin the movement towards Palaestra's self-rediscovery? Arcturus' prologue will be revealing: Jupiter is the ultimate arbiter, he says; Jupiter *iterum ille eam rem iudicatam iudicat* (judges again the case adjudged; 19). It is by Jupiter's laws that the cases are decided in the play, as *gentes omnes mariaque et terras* (all peoples, seas, and lands; 1) are within the power of the *civitas caelitum* (city of the gods; cf.2). I shall discuss Konstan's theory that the play incorporates 'heaven and nature into the urban

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[11] Leach, E.W., 'Plautus' Rudens: Venus Born from a Shell', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 15 (1974), p.931

[12] Slater, N.W., *Plautus in performance: the theatre of the mind* (Princeton, 1985), pp.170-2

contract'[13] below, but suffice it here to quote Leach on a similar matter: after Arcturus' prologue, 'the benevolent influence of the gods is manifested only indirectly through symbolic illuminations of the interaction of nature and man.'[14] In other words, the means by which the gods have influence are kept obscure in the play, and the decisions made by Daemones are based on an understanding of divinely shaped citizenship and piety (based in the real world) rather than any specific guidance given in dream spaces. The important point for this study, however, at this stage, is the metatheatrical one: we are invited to question the authors/playwrights of the dreams, and their intents. When Daemones says *nunc quam ad rem dicam hoc attinere somnium, | numquam hodie quivi ad coniecturam evadere* ('Now what I'm to take this dream to mean, I haven't been able to divine all day'; 611-2), surely we are expected ourselves to try and fill in the gap: we must question not only what the dream symbolises, but also why the gods have sent it.

Seeking intent is a constant theme in Plautine scholarship too, and some would argue that such metatheatrical devices are invitations to ascribe an authorial voice to some of the characters. Dangerous with any artwork, this practice is positively foolhardy with Plautus. We may well examine general socio-political situations, but only when rooted in external evidence to make sure that we do not stray too far from the path. For in the world of Plautine farce, the world is often turned on its head, and characters act against their socio-normative roles: we must beware of taking too seriously what may well have provided a good laugh for the Roman audience. *Rudens* is stuffed full of themes of poverty, and Ketterer claims that the struggle over possession of the trunk (highly visualised with the "tug-of-war") makes 'the play's "moral" about wealth.'[15] The chorus of fishermen walk across the stage on their way to work, bemoaning their poverty and in need of Venus' help to catch a good haul of fish, and this scene is counterbalanced by Gripus' entry with the trunk. He is a poor but now successful fisherman, in the lowest of social statuses (a slave), who dreams of what he will be able to do with his newfound wealth. At last it seems as though Arcturus' moralizing tone (*facilius si qui pius est a dis supplicans, | quam qui scelestust, inveniet veniam sibi*; 'The righteous man will find the gods' grace by prayer more easily than will the knave'; 26-7) will be actualized,[16] and a hard-working slave will gain his freedom. Though there are concerns over the manner in which he gains his wealth, which will be discussed later, the main point here is that we *can* sympathise with him, and feel somewhat happy about his prospects for elevation. The shore becomes a place where poverty gathers, but also from where it can move on and be alleviated.

However, there is something haunting in his celebratory monologue. Constantly he refers to himself in the future as a *rex*, or rather, in fact, *apud reges rex* ('king of kings'; 931). *Rex* was an extremely touchy word in strongly pro-Republican Second Century Rome, and although there were no real threats to the Republic in the early part of the century (Plautus' era), kingship was still very much 'un-Roman'. Are we to see Gripus in the same light as the pimp Ballio in *Pseudolus*, who says that he'll be so rich *ut civitas nomen mihi commutet meque ut praedicet | lenone ex Ballione regem Iasonem* ('that the city'll change my name, and instead of Ballio the Pimp, proclaim me Jason the

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[13] Konstan, D., *Roman Comedy,* Chapter on *Rudens* (1983), p.94; cf. pp.73-94
[14] Leach (1974), p.916
[15] Ketterer, R.C., 'Stage properties in Plautine comedy III', *Semiotica* LX (1986), p.44
[16] cf. Moore, T. J., *The Theater of Plautus: Playing to the Audience* (Austin, 1988), p.77-80

King'; *Ps.* 192-3)? Ballio is a classic pantomime "baddy", who beats his slaves till they're purple (*Ps.* 145-7), and quite plainly not the sort to be a good king, if such a thing could be conceived by the Romans in this era. Gripus is not quite in this league – he enters praising Neptune for his luck (906-11) – but clearly has pretensions above his station. He wants to be a second Stratonicus (932), he says, and Anderson argues convincingly that the following dream of a monumental city named after Gripus is a Plautine insertion, as Plautus has mistaken the reference in the Diphilus original (about Stratonicus the errant musician, cf. Athenaeus 347f-352d) for a soldier's name (on the paradigm of Stratophanes in *Truculentus*, Stratippocles in *Epidicus*, and Aristophanes' Stratonides in *Acharnians*). Perhaps he thought of the cities of Stratonikea in Caria and Lydia, founded to honour Stratonike, wife both of Seleucus I and of his son Antiochus I.[17] That this is a Plautine insertion is interesting, as we then get the impression that it is a peculiarly Roman fear that this slave will rise to excessive power through excessive wealth. This plays along with a topos of Roman fears about wealth: Polybius fears an increasingly powerful underclass and the start of mob rule at *Histories* 6.57, and Gruen discusses worries about the increasing opulence of triumphs, noting in particular sumptuary legislation such as the *lex Oppia* (215 B.C.).[18] To reiterate, we are not here talking of specific reference to a wealthy ruler, but rather 'Plautus' topicality has to be assessed on a broader level',[19] and falls into a well-defined pattern of Roman attitudes to Hellenistic kingship. The transitional nature of the shore, with its hope for the poor, becomes in places, then, threatening, whilst still remaining within the comic genre.

However, the *slave* discourse in Roman Comedy might be thought particularly unnerving, as the casts of the plays would have been low-class, or even perhaps slaves,[20] and so the threat of revolution seems even more acute: we have in Gripus' speech 'the experience of hearing the typically silent, subjective thoughts of a slave'[21] delivered by an actor of similarly mean calibre. When Plesidippus addresses Trachalio as *mi patrone* (1280), do we fear the spread of such upturning of Roman social norms? Moreover, did Plautus, of low class himself, support such change? Quite simply, we cannot tell from the plays because of their essentially farcical nature. Although 'even comedy that provides its audience with the most topsy-turvy escape from everyday reality nevertheless participates in social discourse',[22] it should not be taken too seriously. For in the *Trinummus* we see a demonstration of the transitory nature of the "revolution". During the play, we have the usual farcical upheaval, with social customs circumvented or overturned, but at 1181-2, Charmides (the father) returns, and says emphatically: *nihil evenit, ne time: | bene re gesta salvos redeo* ('No trouble at all; set your minds at rest. Everything has turned out splendidly; now I'm home and all's well'). Immediately, the father-figure, the state perhaps, steps in and ends the Saturnalian chaos of the play. For these plays were part of a release-valve from the rigid rules of Roman society, as Segal has argued,[23] which was

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[17] Anderson, W.S., 'Gripus and Stratonicus: Plautus, *Rudens* 930-936', *The American Journal of Philology* 107 (1986): 560-563

[18] Gruen, E. S.. "Plautus and the Public Stage", pp.124-57 in: *Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy* (Leiden, 1990), pp.133-7

[19] *ibid.*, p.125

[20] Fay (1969), p.12; cf. *Cist.* 785, *Curc.* 464, *Trin.* 858-60

[21] Stewart, R., *Plautus and Roman Slavery* (2012), p.133

[22] Moore (1988), p.199

[23] Segal (1987), pp.7-9

open only so long as the festivals lasted. The theatrical space therefore becomes intrinsically linked with a festival and farcical atmosphere in which the audience are taken into a world of contradiction and imagination, but sharply brought to their senses at the end.

One might well class the ending to *Rudens* in the same category as that of *Trin.*: the fourth wall is broken, and the stage is revealed for just that – a pretence, a farce, a joke. As Gripus remarks somewhat bitterly at 1249ff., people are happy to applaud in the theatre, but when they get home they'll act quite differently.[24] It is my contention that these words, which apply specifically to Daemones' moralizing, are also relevant to the reception of comedy as a whole: it was not seen, and should not have been, as a serious representation of the *status quo*, but rather as a light-hearted exploration of problems that otherwise would have been dangerously repressed and are in comedy allowed expression within bounds set by the state. The theatre is a clearly defined comic space within the city of Rome; it does not (in this era) cross the boundary, except to draw in the buildings of its setting. In other words, it plays off the back of Roman institutions and society, but it would be hard to say that there was any tangible effect of this comedy on the political discourse of the Roman state. The bounds of the festival are as tight as the walls of a stone theatre: (largely) free expression is balanced with containment.

Once our putative Roman has entered the theatre, then, he is expecting a farcical and festival atmosphere. This he does receive, as discussed above, but the *Rudens* itself makes use of space to visually engage him in its action and key points. Perhaps the most obvious of these is the *locus* of the play, the shore, where sea and land meet. Plautus is bound to exploit this for comic and theatrical potential, and indeed he does. Several critics have struggled to derive the configuration of the stage (on which sides of the stage the sea and city were), and although this is not important in detail, I very much favour Rosivach's solution.[25] Despite mixing up his left and right at a rather crucial point, Rosivach favours the sea being on the (stage) Right (which he calls 'left', looking at the stage from the auditorium), with the city on the Left. This contradicts earlier plans by Beare and others, which allege that 'the side-entrance on the right of the spectators [Left] was supposed to lead to the near distance, that on the left [Right] to the more remote distance.'[26] Rosivach's theory is not flawless, and seems to rely on Plesidippus going off-stage to the Right at 158, but he does demonstrate, at least, that the play is consistent with the theory that the sea exit/entrance is on one side only. His argument that Daemones looks out to sea, pointing *dexteram* (Right), at 156-7, occasionally wanders, but the general conclusion is correct: the most natural interpretation of the line is that the sea is either in the audience (as it were), or off to the Right. Certainly all entrances from the sea are from the Right (there were no entrances from the audience, as far as we can tell). Rosivach puts forward a revised version of Beare's theory, which applies both to the urban plays (for which Beare's is sufficient) and for the *Rudens*: the forum and all in that direction is off to the Left, things in the other direction from the *locus* are off to the Right.[27] This is the main point worth consideration, and even if one does not agree with it

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[24] Cf. Moore (1988), pp.67ff.: 'audiences shkould expect from it not edification but pleasure.'
[25] Rosivach, V.J., 'The Stage settings of the *Rudens* and the *Heauton Timorumenos*', *Rivista di studi classici* 26 (1978): 388-402
[26] Beare (1964), p.181
[27] Rosivach (1978), p.389

specifically, it would make most theatrical sense for the two sides to be used for opposite directions, in order to make things clear for the audience. Rosivach demonstrates that this is possible. He then also places Daemones' house on the Right, with the *fanum Veneris* on the Left (arguing from Plesidippus' obscured entrance in I.2).[28]

In essence, then, we have the meeting of the city (though remote) and its laws with the sea, a turbulent, stormy domain firmly set in the unruly and unruled natural world. Or so we might think. Recall Arcturus' opening words (quoted above): '…Him [Jupiter] who sways all peoples and the seas and lands…': there is from the very start of the play a statement that the laws of the city (here not Cyrene but the *civitas caelitum*, cf. 2) extend over the sea too. This is certainly Konstan's theory, and he ties the question of ownership to similar rules that seem to be expressed in Melville's *Moby Dick* (Ch. 89): 'I. A Fast-fish [Gripus contends that the trunk is a fish, cf. 993 *inter alia*] belongs to the party fast to it. II. A Loose-fish is fair game for anybody who can soonest catch it.'[29] In other words, Gripus does not challenge Labrax's original ownership: the question is whether the trunk has ever left Labrax's ownership. The sea is the ultimate natural place for things to be lost, and Gripus argues that *mare commune est* (975), i.e. that everything there is up for grabs. Konstan argues that the reason the trunk does not leave Labrax's possession is that it 'is not a natural product, but bears the stamp of civilization, that is, ownership.'[30] At first sight a glib argument, this comment finds force in the world of the play because of the precedent set by Sceparnio's return of the priestess' urn. It is clearly marked as belonging to Venus, and he does not want to be caught stealing. Even if the circumstances are different, the audience is now unused to slaves holding onto property that they have (essentially) chanced upon. Daemones (an appropriate name one might think) represents the divine justice that incorporates 'heaven and nature into the urban contract.'[31]

What Konstan misses is that this adjudication is a parallel to the previous adjudication against Labrax. The pimp happens upon (his own, admittedly) slave girls and wants to pick them up. However, they have transferred into the protection of the goddess, taking sanctuary at her altar, and this divine ownership is perhaps the only thing that can trump the 'fast-fish' rule. He is described as *legerupa* (652), and Fay speculates that this has a narrower meaning than just 'law-breaker', pointing to *legeruptionem* at 709, which clearly indicates the breaking of sanctuary.[32] We might also note *Pseudolus* 364, where the precise meaning is unclear (as this appears in a list), but the word should in theory be quite specific (if it followed the pattern of the list), and a stronger term of abuse than *periure* or *sacrilege* (unless Calidorus is utterly pathetic and Ballio's response ironic). Given the vein of these two preceding words, the meaning 'sanctuary-breaker' is tenable. The slave girls are not given over to Labrax, and he is sent away to the city to face trial. The fact that Palaestra is born free (though this is not known at the time) perhaps also counteracts the fact that he has bought her. However, we must beware of saying that Labrax's ownership of the girls lapses, as in the final judgement scene, Daemones concludes a deal with him, 'a willing exchange of goods which simultaneously

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[28] *ibid.*, pp.394-5
[29] Konstan (1983), p.78
[30] *ibid.*, pp.84-5
[31] *ibid.*, p.94
[32] Fay (1969), *ad loc.*

symbolizes his [Labrax's] restored status and brings about the fair and natural return for all.'[33] The parallels between the Labrax-Trachalio and Gripus-Trachalio scenes allow us to see that the property rights of the finder (Gripus' name even means 'fishnet') do not trump other rights, such as the original owner's, a god's, or the identity of the person (if a person) involved. In both scenes, space is integral to the audience's understanding of the ownership of the objects. The sea is a natural chaos, but it may contain objects of property; an altar can redefine the ownership of objects/people through the goddess' protection.

So we come, therefore, to a discussion of religious spaces in the play. Again, there seems to be a main pair in spatial terms: Venus and Neptune. The one has a visible *fanum* and altar in front, the other rules over *templis* (at this early stage often simply a sacred space dedicated to a god)[34] at sea. We have seen how Labrax's invasion of the divine space around the altar of Venus has resulted in his demise (at first), but it is also significant that the temple of Venus is located on the sea-shore, given her birth. It is at this liminal point that arbitrations are made, ownership established, and identity re-identified. Leach makes much of one version of the Venus birth myth, in which the goddess is born in a *concha*, and quite rightly, given the invocation *tu natam ex concha* (704; in fact the first surviving mention of this version).[35] She notes that this image of the *concha* is used to connect Venus with the girls, who are a pair of *conchae* (704 again), and creates a foundation for the entreaty. Leach picks out a link between this sexualised imagery – which must make us think of fertility – and the fishermen's entreaty (290ff.) to Venus to make their voyages fruitful.

The goddess' power extends over both land and sea, due to her unusual birth. Her power is in many ways a uniting and yet altering one, and we should not see her as being opposed to the sea: rather the two gods (Venus with Neptune) act in concert to disrupt a stabilised contortion of identity (the freeborn Palaestra's imprisonment as a courtesan) and then help rediscover that underlying self. There is a sense in which Venus gathers the girls unto herself when they arrive. They are washed in the sea, just as the Roman matrons at the temple of Venus Verticordia (built in 204 B.C.) celebrated their April festival with ritual bathing (Ovid, *Fasti* 4.133-64; Val. Max. 8.15.12).[36] They are met by the priestess, who cares for them as a mother would, just as the goddess comes ashore to be tended by the graces in the Homeric Hymns.[37] Thus Palaestra, the wrestling (!) courtesan by profession, who has wrestled with the waves,[38] comes ashore from her trials and is taken into the care of a goddess who holds her, protected, on the shore, that transient place of re-identification and rebirth, until she is reunited with her father.

And so, returning our focus to the shore itself, we note a pattern in the list of *dramatis personae:* few of these characters are local. We have an exile, victims of shipwreck, slaves brought in from afar, an earnest lover; all are caught up in the readjustment that this play encapsulates. The shore is a place where people arrive and

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[33] Konstan (1983), p.83

[34] Fay (1969), *ad* 909

[35] Leach (1974), pp.920-2

[36] *ibid.*, pp.925-6

[37] *ibid.*, p.923

[38] On the meaning of Palaestra as 'wrestler', used for courtesans since the 6th Century B.C., cf. Ehrman, R.K., 'The Double Significance of Two Plautine Names', *The American Journal of Philology* 105 (1984): 330-332

change positions. The slaves are elevated (Charmides marries!), lost daughters found, and old men made the heads of household once again. However, it is not just transition in character that occurs, as figures move towards the sea and back; the fishermen, whose purpose is rather obscure, seem to point to a wider dialogue about poverty and reliance on the natural fertility of the sea. Theirs is an unstable existence, as they have no food at all if they do not catch it (300ff.), and it is this living on the edge that adds to the idea that the shore is a place where people can be stranded, a place for negotiation of the changes in weather in order to eke out survival. The fishermen readjust, look for shell-fish, pray to Venus, and, just like Daemones and Sceparnio, look to the sea.

The shore is a place too for watching the sea, for turning back to the city, and, having discussed the real and present spaces in the play, I wish to turn to the narrated, imagined places that still have an active role in the drama. The city, whose 'urban contract' has established itself so firmly, is a constant threat to him who breaks the law. It will maintain the power of sanctuary, supported by Daemones and his *lorarii*, and deals with the errant Labrax. The sea itself is a constantly narrated spectacle. Perhaps we see characters coming up the long entrances (postulated by Fay), but they are always already on the long shore, and nowhere do we actually see characters immersed in the waves. Instead, we rely on characters' descriptions (such as that of the fishermen) or narration. Sceparnio's narration of the shipwreck is particularly noteworthy, as it resembles in parts the commentary on a wrestling match: *euge euge, perbene…nunc, nunc periclumst* ('Good, good! Grand! …Now! Now's the time'; 162-78). Ehrman notes the use of *eicere*, which reminds us of *abicere* (often used for wrestling; cf. Seneca *De Ben.* 5.3.1).[39] Of course, wrestling imagery was common in later Latin literature for weather scenes. The sea almost takes on a personal form, therefore, and is only held back by the strength of the theatrical setup itself: the sea cannot wash onto the stage/shore because it is imaginary; it is part of our collaborative agreement with the playwright to shut out such mixing from the world shown on-stage, so that the separated elements can be combined by the power of goddess Venus, the goddess of loving harmony born of the sea.

It is thus that we have examined both the physical and performance elements of the *Rudens* and its host theatres in order to establish what were Romans' perceptions of the spaces used. I contend that the theatre itself became, during a festival, a comic container for the emotions of the city. The oft-asked question – how seriously should we take (Roman) comedy? – should briefly be side-stepped here, as the action may well be comic, yet separate from the spaces in which it is performed, which retain their "serious" character. These spaces can act as reference points, often comically reinterpreted (as in the *Curculio*). Similarly, comedy used social reference points – themes and characters – but these are protected, not by remaining aloof, but by being whisked away fully into the plot, so that they become non-specific and unrecognisable. Low-class performers played characters of all origins, characters moreover that change within the plays. The *Rudens* is unique because it not only suspends Roman characters in a haze of redefinition, but also the setting, a liminal sea-shore, separate from the city and the reaches of the sea. Central themes of ownership, identity (self-ownership, if one prefers), and protection (temporary/divine ownership) are played out by vaguely defining religious and natural areas that complement the layout of the stage, itself a boundary for comedy within a festival that has clear ends. The audience imagine a sea, and a city set afar from the stage,

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[39] *ibid.*, p.331

and reflect on the relationship between themselves and nature, themselves and slaves, themselves and each other. However, Roman comedies – and this play in particular – are fully visualised not on the stage, but in the minds of the audience, who are prompted to do so by physical cues. The comedies are removed from real life, and this comic removal is brought out by Plautus splendidly in the *Rudens* more than in most. The metatheatrical elements that reach their climax at the end of the play remind the audience of the barriers of the stage, both the ones they have entered (the boundaries of the theatrical space) and those from which they are still barred (the stage). They can only indulge in the revolutionary world of the comedy so far, and this itself is a sham, a mockery of Roman political debate. The actors eat and drink just like the audience (as we are told at the end), and while their low status can be used to terrifying effect by the playwright in places, the general effect of this apparently gritty reality is to bring the audience back to their own lives; their fears are played out, but thus they are alleviated, shown to work in a sham world, and interspersed with jokes that "send up" these worries, not antagonistically, but as a kathartic and expurgatory mechanism for emotional release in Roman society.

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