QUACKS THEN AS NOW?
AN EXAMINATION OF MEDICAL PRACTICE, THEORY
AND SUPERSTITION IN PLAUTUS' MENAECCHMI

Plautus' Menæchmi is a play of mistaken identity in which twin brothers, who had been separated as children, meet again after many years. Menæchmus, one of the twins, had been kidnapped as a boy, and the grandfather of the boys had changed the name of the other twin Sosicles, who had remained in Syracuse, to Menæchmus. When grown to manhood, the Syracusan Menæchmus set out to find his twin brother who, unknown to him, was living at Epidamnus. When the Syracusan Menæchmus arrived at Epidamnus, a "comedy of errors" arose in which the Syracusan was mistaken for the Epidamnian, with hilarious results — but often uncomfortable for both twins. The play has had considerable influence
on subsequent comedy from Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* to the modern Afrikaans *Kinkels in die Kabel*. However, it is not with this aspect of the play that I want to deal in this paper, but with the scene in which the Syracusan Menaechmus, to extricate himself from an uncomfortable position in which he finds himself, feigns madness (ll. 753–881) and the following scene (ll. 882–965) where the doctor comes to examine his patient. In these scenes we learn quite a bit about what the ancients thought about madness: its symptoms, causes and possible cures.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish which of the medical theories and beliefs reflected in the *Menaechmi* belong to the Greek original of the play and which are typically Roman. We do not, in fact, know on which Greek play Plautus based his *Menaechmi*. One writer, W. Steidle (Steidle, 1971, 247–261), in writing on the composition of Plautus' *Menaechmi*, suggests that the scene in which Plautus ridicules the doctor is not in the Greek play, but was added by Plautus to reflect the influx of Greek doctors into Rome after the second Punic war. Line 951 at least seems to be an addition by Plautus, for the punishment with which Menaechmus threatens the doctor (at ego te pendentem fodiam stimulis) shows clearly that the doctor was a slave, as Greek doctors at Rome were. But I shall not consider this point further; what interests me here is what we learn about the ideas of the time on medicine and particularly madness. We know that Hellenistic medicine had a profound influence on Roman theories of medicine and that in Plautus' own day many Greek doctors came to Rome, so that Plautus and his audience would have been familiar with their theory and practice. Much of what we find in Plautus' *Menaechmi* could have been derived from current medical practice in Rome in the 2nd century B.C. — a fusion of early Roman practical medicine and Hellenistic theory and practice (Scarborough, 1969, chapters 2 and 3).

Let us look first at the symptoms and causes of madness as seen in the scene where Menaechmus of Syracuse feigns insanity. Both what the other characters say about him, and his own behaviour, reflect what seem to be the accepted ideas about insanity. First, Menaechmus of Epidamnus' wife says that the man's eyes are going green and that a green colour is spreading from his temples and forehead; also that his eyes are glittering. I think that it is true of most cases of madness that the eyes are particularly quick to show abnormality; but what is the significance of the green colour? As Thoresby Jones points out in his edition of the *Menaechmi*, a greenish hue would indicate excess of bile, which the ancients regarded as a cause or concomitant of madness (Thoresby Jones, 1918, 179). We can compare Plautus' *Captivi* (594–6) where a man suspected of madness is described: "ardent oculi . . . viden tu illi maculari corpus totum maculis luridis? atra bilis agitat hominem". Thoresby Jones further quotes Ben Jonson, *The Silent Woman* (iv.2) "Lord, how idly he talks, and how his eyes sparkle! He looks green about the temples; do you see what blue spots he has?" (I'm sure Jonson must have known his Plautus). The wife also comments on Menaechmus' gesticulations and gaping — gestures and expressions commonly associated with madness.
Menaechmus himself, in feigning madness, pretends to be under the influence of the gods — first Bacchus, then Apollo. That medicine in early Roman times was firmly rooted in religion and magic is an accepted fact, but we note that here the gods invoked are Greek. The introduction of Bacchus, who is commonly associated with the frenzy his followers experience in communion with him, is easy to understand. We can compare *Amphitryon* 703 ff. where Amphitryon and Sosia accuse Alcmena of madness, and compare her to a raving Bacchante whose black bile has been stirred up. Apollo as a god who inspires madness I find harder to grasp; he is usually connected with healing and contrasted with Dionysus as the rational element opposed to the irrational. But the answer may lie in the two opposite facets which Greek deities often represent. Artemis, e.g., is both huntress and protectress of wild animals. So Apollo is seen (e.g. in the first book of the *Iliad*) as both the bringer of plague (the Far Shooter) and the healer. Here Apollo may be seen as the bringer of madness, but also as the one who restrains Menaechmus from attacking the old man (ll.870–871). Again we think of the *Iliad*, where in book I, 199 ff. Athena pulls back Achilles by his hair from attacking Agamemnon. A point to note here is the way Plautus is in this passage parodying epic and tragedy. Another point is that it is likely that this passage with the Greek gods brought in, is taken from, or suggested by, a Greek original. The scene also shows that in Hellenistic and Roman times madness was seen as the result of divine possession.

At the end of this scene, the Syracusan Menaechmus gets rid of the woman and the old man by pretending to fall down in a coma, the culmination of an attack of insanity; the woman goes into the house, and the old man goes off to fetch a doctor. Menaechmus makes his escape, and the other Menaechmus comes on stage and becomes the recipient of the doctor’s attention when at last he comes. In the scene that follows, we get further indications of what the ancients thought were symptoms and causes of madness. When the doctor enters, in true doctor fashion he asks the father-in-law what he thinks the trouble is. The Latin words used to describe the possible disease are *laruatus*, *cerritus*, *veternus* and *aqua intercus* (ll.890, 891). *Laruatus* is derived from *larua*, a ghost or spectre, and it is used here and elsewhere in the sense of ‘bewitched’, ‘enchanted’ — again we are in the realm of demon possession. *Cerritus* is an interesting word, an adjective meaning something like ‘crazy’, quoted by Festus in the sense of *furius*. It is found in other plays of Plautus; e.g. in *Amphitryon* 775–7 we read: “Quin tu istanc iubes Pro cerria circumferri? . . . laruarum plenast.” (We note that here too the two concepts of *laruatus* and *cerritus* are connected). Further, in *Rudens* 1006 it is used in conjunction with *elleborosus*, another word for mad derived from *elleborus*, a plant used by the Greeks and Romans to cure madness. The etymology of *cerritus* is quite uncertain. Lewis and Short explain the word as a contraction from *cerebritus* in the sense of *cerebrus*, but this is a mere conjecture. Émouet and Meillet mention the idea of the Romans that the word is a derivative of Ceres, and quote the scholiast on Horace, *Satires* 2.3.278: “cerriti dicuntur quasi a Cerere icti, qui Cereris ictu percutiuntur”. Some support for this can be found in
the Greek word Δημητρόληπτος. Ernout and Meillet further suggest that it may be a dialectal word and compare Oscan Kerri = Cereri; they also quote anitus, maritus from anus and mar respectively as parallel formations. Further support for the connection with Ceres can be found if one considers that the disease ergotism, which is caused by eating diseased grain, specifically rye, has as one of its symptoms nervous spasms and a frenzied state, possibly resulting in the dancing madness which on occasion swept across Europe in the Middle Ages.¹

Grain is Ceres' province, and psychotic disorders induced by eating diseased grain could therefore be ascribed to her influence. Veternus is originally an adjective derived from vetus; here it is used in the sense of 'lethargy', 'somnolence', an affliction of old age. It is not necessarily connected with madness, but is perhaps here used in the sense of weak-mindedness. Aqua intercus is dropsy, water under the skin. Lucilius is quoted by Nonus (37.2) as using it in the sense of weak-mindedness: "aquam te habere in animo intercutem". We can compare here the disease hydrocephalus, water on the brain. So all these words could have something to do with mental disorders.

We now look at the questions the doctor asks Menaechmus. The first question is: 'Why do you uncover your fore-arm?' (l.910 ff). Probably Menaechmus had been shaking his first at the thought of what his parasite had done to him, and his cloak had slipped back onto his shoulder; his gesture could have been interpreted as that of a madman. The doctor's further question is puzzling: "Don't you know how bad it is for your condition?" Does this reflect the idea that an uncovered fore-arm was bad for someone in a state of madness? I can find nothing to support this elsewhere; it could be what the Romans believed, but it could also be a way of poking fun at the doctor by making him ask a silly question. Menaechmus' answer suggests this: "Go and be hanged".

His next question (l.915) could have some foundation in medical theory. He asks: "Album an atrum uinum potas?" As Fitton-Brown (1967, 192–195) points out, it is not just a polite inquiry, such as we should use at a party: 'Red or white?' but a real attempt at establishing symptoms. He states that red wine acts as a laxative, whereas white wine has the opposite effect. Menaechmus' answer "Why don't you ask me whether I eat dark red or light red or yellow bread, or scaly birds or feathered fish" either shows that he does not take the question seriously or it reflects his annoyance at what he interprets as the doctor's prying into the state of his bowels.

The questioning continues, and the next question (l.923) is again concerned with the eyes: "Do your eyes ever become fixed and staring?" (the Latin word is duri). As we have seen, the eyes are perhaps the first thing to betray madness, and this question is obviously directed at establishing this. Menaechmus' answer: "Do you take me for a lobster?" shows what he thinks of this. The further inquiries of the doctor, about rumblings abdominal and sound sleep, are answered quite rationally by Menaechmus, and the doctor is puzzled, but when Menaechmus becomes angry and curses him, the doctor takes this as a sign of madness and is then told about what had happened in the earlier scene. As a
result, the doctor decides to treat Menaechmus for madness.

As far as the treatment is concerned, we note that the doctor has facilities at home for treating patients — a kind of clinic. He suggests that Menaechmus be brought to his house so that he can look after him there. As far as the remedies for insanity are concerned, in an earlier scene (ll.310 ff) the sacrifice of an unblemished pig is suggested as a cure for madness: this could tie in with Ceres, as pigs were offered to Demeter at the Eleusinian Mysteries.

The most common remedy for madness seems to be hellebore. The Romans used both the Greek loan word *elleborus* and the true Latin word *veratrum*. Pliny the Elder (*Nat. Hist. 25.21*) distinguishes two kinds, black and white. He tells the story of how its remedial qualities were discovered; some shepherds noticed that goats, which ate it, were cured of illness, and people who drank their milk, were cured of insanity. Celsus (II.13) speaks of the white variety as a cure for epilepsy and insanity, while Pliny tells us that black hellebore is a cure for paralysis, madness, dropsy without fever, chronic gout, diseases of the joints, giddiness, melancholia, leprosy, tetanus, palsy and a variety of other things. Horace (*Epp. II ii 137*) tells the story of a man who used to sit applauding in an empty theatre. When he was treated with hellebore (expulit elleboro billemque meraco) he was most unhappy because he had been deprived of his greatest pleasure. Pliny is not very clear on how to use it. If I had to administer hellebore according to Pliny’s instructions, I should certainly not know how to set about it; one thing is certain; I should be very careful what I did, as too much hellebore could cause death. From *l.950* it would appear that it was administered orally — “You’ll drink hellebore for 20 days”.

Finally, I want to look at the way Plautus depicts the doctor. He certainly pokes fun at him, and seems to share the prejudice which many Romans felt about Greek doctors (cf. Cato’s advice to his son Marcus). What also strikes me from the scene where the doctor is depicted is that many of the gibes against the doctor sound as modern as Punch. The old man comes back from summoning the doctor and complains at the long time he has had to wait in the “waiting room” — a common experience even today. When the doctor returns from his rounds, he says he has been binding up a broken leg for Aesculapius, a broken arm for Apollo, and the old man’s wry comment is to wonder whether he has hired a doctor or a joiner. Could this be the doctor boasting about his clientèle?

The first words the doctor says are to ask the old man what he thinks the disease is, and the answer shows what the old man thinks of this: “That’s just what I’ve brought you here for, to tell me that and to heal the man” (ll.889–893). The doctor seems very confident that he will be able to effect a cure easily. The old man does not share his confidence and impresses it upon the doctor that he wants great care taken of the patient. The doctor then promises to sigh more than 600 times a day over him (ll.893–897); does this reflect a good bedside manner or has it some deeper medical significance? The questions the doctor asks do not all seem entirely to the point, as Menaechmus’ answers suggest, but he does do his best, as the suggestion to take Menaechmus to his clinic shows; one wonders,
however, how serious he is, for when the old man has been sent to summon four men to carry Menaechmus away, and asks the doctor to keep an eye on Menaechmus, he refuses, leaves the patient unattended and goes off home to prepare things there (l.954 ff); he is guilty of either negligence or foolishness here—or both. The scene with the doctor is, to my mind, one of the most interesting and amusing in the play, not only because of what we learn about the ideas and practice of medicine in the time of Plautus, but also because this scene shows us that human beings have not changed much since Plautus' day.

NOTES

1. I owe this suggestion to Professor W.H. Hewitt of Rhodes University, Grahamstown, who raised the point in discussion at the CASA Conference in January, 1983, where this paper was presented.

2. quandoque ista gens suas litteras dabit, omnia corrumpent, tum etiam magis si medicos suos hue mittet. iurarunt inter se barbaros necare omnes medicina (apud Plin. Nat. Hist. 29.i.14).

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TOWARDS AN INTERPRETATION OF JUVENAL SATIRE 11

1

Juvenal's eleventh satire takes the form of 'a disquisition about an invitation to dinner' addressed to Persicus, who is already in receipt of the invitation. Ostensibly Persicus is a friend of the poet and the meal is a simple one. But doubts have been expressed about the degree of friendship between the two personae of the poem, the speaker and the addressee, which is revealed by the poet, and it is suggested that Persicus' tastes are rather more luxurious than is in keeping with such a simple meal. A poem of stolid ad hominem irony results from the bare opposition of two ways of life. But this impression is misleading. I propose here to consider two passages in order to throw a new light on the tone and direction of
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