

# ASINARIA

The One about the Asses

PLAUTUS

Translated and with commentary by John Henderson



Complete Latin and English texts on facing pages

✦ *Asinaria* ✦

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❖ *Asinaria* ❖

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*The One about the Asses*

Plautus

TRANSLATED WITH COMMENTARY  
BY JOHN HENDERSON

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# Contents

Preface / vii

Prologue / xi

**1–15** The Prologue tells all | there's nothing to tell, so listen

*Asinaria*: Text and Translation / 2

Language, Metre, and Text

Plautin Language and Latin Vocabulary / 105

Outline of the Metres of *Asinaria* / 117

Differences That Make a Difference / 121

Commentary and Analysis

1. Killing the Plot / 125

**16–126** Somewhere in theatre Greece . . . Father enlists Slave One  
to swindle Mother and fund Loverboy Son

2. Drive a Hard Bargain / 136

**127–152** Loverboy's lament

**153–248** Loverboy spars with Madame: a deal is cut

3. Funny Money / 143

**249–266** Slave One's wake up call

**267–380** Slave Two's . . . brainwave

	381–406	The Courier arrives
	407–503	The con's too convincing: Saurea's world
	4.	American Beauty / 155
	504–544	The Sex Slave holds out on Momma
	5.	Beating the System / 158
545–590		We're in the money . . . <i>and</i> We're so pretty, o so pretty . . .
	591–745	Lovers' last gasp lament <i>and</i> Slaves riding high: Loverboy pays his dues
	6.	Stick to the Script / 166
	746–809	Pal writes a contract for rival Loverboy
810–827		Loverboy's Pal will snitch to Mother on his new rival: Father
	7.	Rotten Rhetorics / 169
	828–850	Dad's party swings
	851–941	Mum fetches him home
	8.	"It's a gas": Space, Movement, Verse / 183
	9.	Beastly Lives / 191
591–745		(reprise) Have the whip hand, get your own back
	10.	A Right Earful: Audience as <i>Asinaria</i> / 207
		Epilogue / 213
942–947		Some curtain call: your applautus is appreciated
		Notes / 219
		Bibliography / 241
		Indexes / 247

# Preface

She has her husband back, but he is no great prize.

Niall Slater

The tattered outlaw of the earth, | of ancient crooked will:

Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb, | I keep my secret still.

G. K. Chesterton, “The Donkey” (1920)

*Res ridicula est.* This play endured much comical misrepresentation and suffered farcical underappreciation in twentieth-century reception (p. 224 n.5). I should like to recommend its “wit and fun”; and proclaim to one and all: “it’s a gas” (13–14). *The One about the Asses* is full of Rome: slavery and sex slavery; money and family structure; masculinity and social standing; senility and partying; jokes, lies, and idiocy. This is Latin behaving badly, and Plautus isn’t a pushover to read (pp. 105–16). But—especially if you have the sort of mind that will let you hear a donkey hee-haw as in *Don Quixote*—you’ll go a bundle on the nonstop silliness. So, as the prologue yells, LISTEN, as naughty Rome gets its kicks—and gives itself a kick in the *Asinaria*.

We don’t know the date of first production, but it must have been shown, in a temporary auditorium, to the people of Rome at some state festival provided by elected magistrates of the Republic at its zenith in the late third or early second centuries BCE (p. 127). It then became classic theatre, revived and eventually edited for reading in and after school from the mid-first century BCE onwards. Like all Plautus’ surviving score of verse comedies, it is written in a colourful splash of colloquial mixed with parodic Latin, from a couple of centuries before the rest of the Roman verse we read today was first composed (pp. 117–20). A *special* language, then, and special play of language, but “Plautin” doesn’t have to be daunting,

particularly if you don't mind me supplying a guide to rare vocabulary and unfamiliar language (pp. 105–16)—and “normalizing” the spelling.

For the *text*, I list divergences from the long standard old stand-by, W. M. Lindsay's *Oxford Classical Text* (1904), where more than orthography is involved: pp. 121–2. Of course I'm dissing the paradosis, but we could never come anywhere close to *just* what Plautus may have written, and in practice this play is virtually unaffected by which, by whose, edition. For *all* matters of transmission, including spelling, I am fortunate to be able to refer you to R. M. Danese's *Sarsina/Urbino Text* (2004), which appeared after my work was completed. This amply conservative text is based on fresh, and definitive, collation of all the MSS, and will provide the *bedrock* for all future editions of the play (see the exact, and perfectly simultaneous, twin reviews, carefully noting all the misprints and slips, by Fontaine [2005] and Walker [2005], and the list of my divergences from Danese—again suppressing minimalia: p. 122). But here and now accessibility just *has* to take precedence.

The *metrical* scheme is mostly regular, and easy to grasp: I give a brief run down, in the modern—“syllabic”—style (pp. 117–19), and key the text so that the notation provided will keep the verse rhythm running “for you” (p. 2). Plautus *does* write in a brash poetic/unpoetic (“poetic”) mode, which charges along noisily and heftily, taking charge of raw topics and risible relationships with a swagger in its step, and a lurching bravura all its own: well worth the rude ride.

Let me finally confirm, this playtime is, it boasts at once, “on the short side,” as well (*breue est*, 8: under 1,000 lines). I.e., worth all the time you got.

In fact, I'm convinced there is nothing at all to stop us playing *Asinaria* for all it's worth: the “family plot” allows for every register of comedy, from crude farce to complex play within the leading roles (p. 221 n.20). The stand-out central scenes starring the pair of thinking and motoring slaves give us plenty to think about human relations in the intimacy of the classical household (chapters 3, 5, 9). Above all, they dish out humour. Cruel, brave, acute, stupid, basic, tantalizing, relentless, improvisational, knockabout, punning . . . humour. The verbal repartee supports a series of energetic bodily figures that lay bare the axioms of social status for all to beware. Sure, the play's Father makes a complete mug of himself by getting *far* too involved with his son's adventures in love, in the sex trade; until Mother has to shoo him back home (chapter 7). But all through, to right and to left, on stage and off it, where you most expect and least suspect,

this play guarantees, you will keep finding yourself running into asses, asses, and (yes) more asses (pp. xiv, 194, 236 n.12).

If you'll let me be your "Donkey-Driver" (*asinarius*: p. 211), I recommend that you read the play first time *in chunks* (see contents, pp. v–vi). Let my Prologue introduce you to Plautus' Prologue (pp. xi–xiv). Use and abuse my text and translation, and the help with Plautus' Latin (language and vocabulary) I supply for each scene (pp. 105–16). Then see what you think about *my* thoughts on each major episode (chapters 1 through 7). Once you've read through the play, it will be time to reprise and reflect on the whole show, and I provide three further discussions for that stage (chapters 8 through 10). The first sets out *Asinaria's* dramaturgy of "Space, movement, verse." The second returns to the play's classic highpoint, focusing on the play's dominant imagery: "Beastly lives." In the third, I tune in to how this comedy tells us we should *listen*: "A right earful." To bring down the curtain, a minimal Epilogue sees off Plautus' (pp. 213–15).

I'm presuming that it's a good idea to get *into* comedy when writing about it, otherwise how will anyone know it *is* comic? I think it best to stick to the play before us, in order to find out if it's worth booking tickets for any others: naturally, plenty of formulae, routines, conventions, and their deviation, inversion, mutation, and hybridization, are at work in generating *this* particular entertainment; but the general structures shuffled to make this theatre are familiar enough to all of us through their re-cycling in modern adaptation, re-cycling, and revival—the question that matters here is whether *this* play holds up, deserves your attention, trounces the competition.

The erudiated mix of slang and jive in my translation is meant to trip the "Plautus effect," which hits on out-and-out abuse of norms and normality with full-on assault from stuff and nonsense. In particular, a scattering of mid-Atlantic misfit between my worst samples of staged Anglo- and my best bites of media-American English stands (in) for the defamiliarizing turn in Plautin that sets out to resist appropriation from any naturalizing critique, no matter how plebeian, vulgarian, or populist: these items are explained in with the line-by-line notes on "Plautin": (pp. 105–16). What farce can contrive to tell society about itself this way can be priceless—or so the thought-bubble will be saying in *my* cartoon.

I am, as ever, grateful to all the characters in and out of Cambridge with whom I (should) have studied Plautus over the years. This is, in my view,

the most poorly served oeuvre in all Roman poetry. Let me acknowledge, however, that my ears were re-opened by Kathy McCarthy, *Slaves, Masters and the Art of Plautine Comedy* (2000), whose powerful construal happens to underplay *Asinaria*. Same goes for the supple and mature enquiry of William Fitzgerald, *Slavery and the Roman Literary Imagination* (2000). I found indispensable comments in Ussing (1875), 1:347–435 and notes in Gray (1894), and the tradition is faithfully decocted in Bertini (1968). Adrian Gratwick (1993) has revolutionized both the understanding and the presentation of Plautine verse. Without Malcolm Willcock, I'd be plain lost. Audiences at Duke University and at Harvard heard draft papers (my thanks to Micaela Janan and Peter and Maura Burian, and to Richard Thomas, for taking such good care of me, as superpower plunged us to war); more friends, but especially William Fitzgerald, Emily Gowers, Sharon James, Kathy McCarthy, Carole Newlands, Vicky Rimell, Patricia Rosenmeyer, Alison Sharrock, the press's ebullient referees, Sheila Moermond, copyeditor John Tiedemann, and my editor, Adam Mehring, all helped to make this book as well; other important contributions to the enjoyment and understanding of the play are recorded in the notes, usually with a leg-pull thrown in. All blunders are down to *this asinigo*.

The jacket shows us the actress “Mlle Lange (as Danae)” in all her glory. Before her turkey-cock lover, and firebrand lust, lurks the telltale roll emblazoned *ASINARIA*. She had played Élise in Molière's Plautine *l'Avare* in Paris in 1790, and this Vanitas is Girodet's comic revenge for spurning his previous portrayal of her as Venus: Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson (1799), oil on canvas, 65 by 54 cm, reproduced by kind permission of the Minnesota Institute of Arts. My thanks to DeAnn M. Dankowski for her generous help.

# Prologue

1–15 The Prologue tells all | there's nothing to tell, so listen

“I’m a person as much as you,” so the actor playing the slave playing the slave overseer tells the actor playing the straight-up role of free trader stranger-in-town.<sup>1</sup> “P’raps, and yet—,” comes the rebuff, polite prudence to the end, “—A man’s a wolf, not a man, to a man who don’t know what he’s like” (= humanity estranged: *homo*, 490 ~ 493, *homo homini, non homo*, 495).<sup>2</sup> The horseplay ends with wife-and-mother scolding naughty paterfamilias back home, for revenge with kisses (= bilge-water stench) and dinner on the table (= trouble, and so to bed: 893–940). The cast invite us to beg off the (castratory) husband-beating with a rousing score on the clapometer; and, curtains (= cut-off: 942–7). The stand-out moment of donkey business came a good deal earlier, in the cameo, one of Plautus’ greatest, which had young master-lover-son stop and pick up a piggy-back passenger: the ringmaster Cunning Slave wants a ride, and gets one (= one of Plautus’ daftest: 699–710).<sup>3</sup>

The businesslike Prologue gave spectators due notice, loud and clear, that today’s *plot* “takes no time at all,” it won’t take a moment, and in fact—it doesn’t (8, *sane breuest*)! Instead, in less time than it takes to say “**plot**,” attention fastens on the *name* of the play, backed with a promise of “wit-n-fun—this one is a gas” (6–12; 13–14).

Such preliminaries need kid us not. They generally put in play tasters of what’s to come, if only we knew it. On this occasion, as often, the tightly structured composition tips us the wink for the direction we should be

looking—or rather, *listening*. A cruel gag (from the anarchic satirist Peter Cook) once ran:

And now, for those who are hard of hearing—LISTEN!

But Plautus' prologue beams up ears to hear for one and all. First off, the hope is—"Do it, if you will"—that the production will "turn out well, for me and for all you." Last up, farce does its will, telling that the writer "turned the play," out of Greek, for "such is his will, if you allow it. . . . Give it up real good for me, so for you"—the hope is—"Mars [Roman god of war, and *father* of Romulus, founder of Rome] will give his backing, *on a par* with his past record" (12–15).<sup>4</sup>

Prologue's "entrée, his will," was to "say," it is to "say" (and, as he says, he "says" he "said so," too), that "the play's changed its name from the Greek name of the play," ΟΝΑΓΟΣ, *The Donkey-driver*, to *ASINARIA—The One about Donkey-driver* or *The One about Donkey[s]* (6–12). Now this is fun. But is it fun and dandy because it's fussy fuss about nothing? Of course it is. Minutiae *are* fun, especially when they take over the whole of this amplified programme and yet *seem* to make such infinitesimal difference, any which way you look at it (see n. and p. 211).<sup>5</sup>

But (I said) our ears are meant to be flapping. Prologue already made a crier do his thing,

[SHHH! BRAY SILENCE!],

before sitting him down, with a reminder to claim a double fee: for noise *and* for silence. In a flash, the human otophone's rude proclamation made the whole of Rome into one acoustically amplified auditorium. From this moment on, who is there at the *Asinaria* that does not have ass's ears? "Me and you," Prologue began, "me so you," he bowed out, ". . . backing . . . on a par" (2 ~ 14–15). Point is, the tale is well and truly pinned to the donkey before the start, and just as the entire "troupe" on this stage will take some beating, so we otosclerotic spectators must pin back our ears and take what we have coming, to a man. No troop of monkeys, but a herd (this *should* be a "pace")—of donkeys (*grex*, 3).<sup>6</sup>

So much for the public address system. Brought to us in a neat, over-neat, rhetorical ring that gives nothing away and enjoys itself telling us

so. The presenter, uptightass Prologue, stuffs in the deictic “shifters” (here-now-this-I/we/you):

*hoc*, 1; *huic*, 3; *huc*, 6

*nunciam*, 1; | *face nunciam* . . . , | *age nunc*, 3–4; | *nunc* . . . , | *nunc*, 6, 9;  
*nunc*, 15

*nomen huius fabulae* |, . . . *huic nomen* . . . *fabulae* |, 7, 10; *hac comoedia* |,  
13

*mihi atque uobis*, 2; *mihi* . . . , *uobis*, 6, 9; *uos*, 12; *mihi* | *ut uos*, 14–15.

In calling for his “turn” by insisting on presencing the act of utterance, he’s doing his own heralding:

*quid processerim* . . . *et quid uoluerim*, | *dicam*, 6–7

*quod me dixi uelle uobis dicere*, | *dicam*, 9–10.

So here he is, now, in our face—and busy: the rhetorical thread runs bright and taut through the crier’s inset and the writer’s shift of title, between the ring of opening and closing “hopes”:

*agite* ~ *face* . . . , *age* ~ *date*, 1, 4–5, 14

*si-uultis* ~ *uolt* . . . *si per uos licet*, 1, 12

*uultis* ~ *uoluerim* ~ *uelle* ~ *uolt*, 1, 6, 9, 12

*mihi atque uobis res uortat bene* ~ *uortit* ~ *res* . . . , *benigne* . . . *mihi* | *ut uos*,  
2, 11, 14–15.

Busily refusing to tell us, but busy filling us in.

If we only knew the upshot . . . —but that would stop us wondering, seeing if we can figure out *Asinaria* as we go. (Retrospect and re-run will feature, all in good time: chapters 8–10. Just before the Epilogue signs off: pp. 213–15.) A decent playwright knows that teasing hints are what you *really* want from a preface. A good bet for now will be *not* to invest *too* much in the storyline, let alone the characters. Rather, cue “downgrading of plot” (= Prologue and Epilogue, chapter 1), and “insisting on payment—take the money,” “parity,” and “terms and conditions”—you can’t say fairer than that (= chapters 2 and 3). “Fun” is promised—and, trust me, promises will make the fun fun (= esp. chapters 3, 5, 9). We will be “over-hearing” everything

there is to hear, if you can bear it (= chapter 10). Most of all—and to pull this off, the play will *need* to level “actor, audience, troupe, producer impresarios, and booking agents” (2–3)—*The One about the Donkeys* will kill off claims to special status among specimens of humanity up and down the town: OYEZ, ass-ass-inate the lot of them, and us. All just as bad (jokes) as the rest (4):

face . . . omnem auritum poplum.

~

All ears, mind (= chapter 10).<sup>7</sup>

Ears will be an asset in Plautus’ word-famous circus.  
Expect a histrionic thrash of hybrid, mutant, rhetorics.

# Asinaria

Text and Translation

## Key to Text

→	in left margin: entrance of a character
→	in right margin: exit of a character
SERVVS	role
LIBANVS	name of character, with its <b>abbreviation in bold</b>
LIB	name of character abbreviated
{LIB}	character speaks aside to another character or to us
>	in left margin: addressed to another character
1–126 <i>senarii</i>	in right margin: name of metre
hoç agite ş <sup>i</sup> ultis	i.e., sublinear dots = start of <i>invariably</i> long (˘) or resolved (˘˘) syllable of each metrical unit
-tis spect-	i.e., gap in text: = “main caesura” (i.e. word-break within the 3rd foot) in <i>senarii</i> ; = midline break in longer verses
ăgītě	i.e., supralinear ˘ = the marked syllable is “short”
quaëquidem	i.e., supralinear ˘ <b>in bold</b> = the metre counts the marked syllable as “short”
dicám	i.e., supralinear accent = the metre counts the marked syllable as “long”
Leōnida	i.e., supralinear makron = the marked vowel is a separate long syllable
prōinde	i.e., supralinear arc = synizesis and the like (i.e., the marked vowels are a diphthong or slur together metrically)
s <sup>i</sup> ultis, mih <sup>i</sup> atque	elision or syncope (i.e., the words slur together so that the raised syllables do not count metrically)
dicam   huic	hiatus and the like (i.e., adjacent words do <i>not</i> slur together metrically)
?obsequellam?	the text is damaged beyond rescue

## Key to Translation

→	in left margin: entrance of a character
→	in right margin: exit of a character
SLAVE	role
LIBANUS	name of character
LIB	name of character abbreviated
{ }	spoken aside to another character or us
>	addressed to another character
spoken verse	in right margin: type of verse

→

## PROLOGVS

hoç ăgîte ş<sup>iu</sup>ultis, şpectatores, nunciām,  
 quaēquīdem mīh<sup>i</sup> atquē ūobis res uertat bēne  
 grēgīqu<sup>e</sup> huic et dōmīnīş atquē conductōriḃus.  
 {fac<sup>e</sup> nunciām tu, praec<sup>o</sup>, om̄<sup>em</sup> auritum pōplum.

1–126 *senarii*

ăgē nunc rēside, căuē mōdo ne gratiis.} 5  
 nunc quid processē<sup>im</sup> huc et quid mīhī ūolūērīm,  
 dic<sup>am</sup>: ut scīretis nomen huius fabūlae.  
 nam quōd ad argument<sup>um</sup> attīnet, sanē brēue est.  
 nunc quod me dixi ūellē ūobis dicēre,  
 dicām: | huic nomen Graec<sup>e</sup> Ōnago est fabūlae. 10  
 Demōphīlus şcriptsit, Maccus uertit barbāre,  
 Āsīnariām uult esse, şi per ūos liçet.  
 īnest lēpos ludusqu<sup>e</sup> in hac comoediā,  
 ridīcūlā res est. dātē bēnign<sup>e</sup> ōpēram mīhī  
 ut ūos, ūt āliās, pāri<sup>ter</sup> nunc Marş adiūuet. →

→ →

## SERVVS CALLIDVS = LIBANVS

+ SENEX = PATER = DEMAENETVS

LIB sicut tūum uiş unīcum natum tūae 16  
 sūpēressē ūitae şospit<sup>em</sup> et sūperstitem  
 itā ted obtestor per sēnectutem tūam,  
 perqu<sup>e</sup> illam, quam tu mētūis, uxorem tūam,  
 siquid meḃ erga | hōdie falsum dixēris, 20  
 ut tibi sūperstes uxōr aetatem siet  
 atqu<sup>e</sup> illa ūiua ūiuūş ut pest<sup>em</sup> oppētas.  
 DEM per Dīum Fīdium quaeris: iurato mīhī  
 ūidēo nēcēss<sup>e</sup> ess<sup>e</sup> elōqui quidquid rōges 24  
 proīnd<sup>e</sup> actū<sup>um</sup> istuc quid sit quod scir<sup>e</sup> expētis 27  
 elōquēr<sup>e</sup>: ūt ipsē şcibo, te faci<sup>am</sup> ut scias.  
 LIB dic obsēcr<sup>o</sup> herclē şeriō quod te rōgem,  
 căuē mīhī mendaci quidquam.  
 DEM quin t<sup>u</sup> ergo rōgas? 30  
 LIB num m<sup>e</sup> illuc duciş ūbī lāpis lāpidem tērit? 31  
 āpū<sup>d</sup> fustitūdīnas, ferrīcrēpīnas insūlas, 34  
 ūbī ūiuoş hōmīnes mortū<sup>i</sup> incurşant bōues? 35

→

## THE PROLOGUE

Do it, spectators, if you will. Act right here and now. 1–126:  
 Hope this one'll turn out well, for me and for all of you. spoken  
 For the troupe here, their lordship producers, the agents. verse  
 {Now you, Mr. p. a. man, make the whole nation all ears.  
 SHHH! BRAY SILENCE!  
 And now act . . . sitting down. Only, mind it's not for free.} 5  
 Why did I step out here? What was it I was wanting?  
 I shall say. For you to know the *name* of this play.  
 As for the plot, see, it sure takes *no* time at all.  
 Now as for saying I wanna have my say to you,  
 I shall say. The play's name in Greek is *Conducteur des Ânes*. 10  
 Demophilus wrote it. Clown Plautus put it in pidgin;  
 wants it to be *The One About Asses*, if ok by you.  
 In it there is wit, and there is fun, in this comedy.  
 This one is a gas. Do give it up for me. Real fit.  
 Then, hope is, Mars'll back you. On a par with the past. →

SLAVE: "THE BRAINS" = LIBANUS

+ SENIOR CITIZEN = FATHER = DEMAENETUS

LIB So. As you will want for your one and only son 16  
 to outlive your lifetime, out of harm, outlasting,  
 so be my witness, by your status of elder,  
 and by that woman, the one that you fear, the wife,  
 if this day, as regards me, you tell me anything false, 20  
 that said wife of yours shall outlast your span of time,  
 and that in her life—your life shall fall to the plague.

DEM In Gods' Truth, huh? I see that I am under oath  
 and obliged to speak up, whatever your question. 24  
 So right now. What is it you are seeking to know, 27  
 speak up. So far as *I* know, I'll make it so *you* know.

LIB I beg, lordy, don't mock, but answer my question.  
 Watch it, no lying to me.

DEM Why don't you ask your question? 30

LIB You're not taking me off to the land where rock grinds rock, 31  
 away in the Ironbongo-Clubbery Isles, 34  
 the place where dead oxen assault live human beings? 35