I. Why was prostitution such a popular topic for Roman comic playwrights?

a. First, and perhaps rather obviously, prostitution was extremely common in Roman society. And since Roman comedy deals with “everyday life,” the fact that prostitution makes an appearance is only natural.

i. Map of Pompeii with overlay of brothels

ii. The price point of the common prostitute (cheap and available to nearly every man).

In the late republic, the price for a common prostitute cost 1/6th the income of the daily wages of low-class male laborers. Plautus’ play *Trinummus* could be loosely translated as “Three Obols,” the typical price of a prostitute in 5th century Athens. This happens to also be the cost of a loaf of bread in Rome during the late republic.
b. The prostitute as metaphor for actor.

i. Both are dissimulators, cross-dressers, and low-class members of society. According to Anne Duncan, prostitutes in Plautus (and Terence) “… all display a knack for acting, and all are accused, to some extent rightly, of being insincere performers. … the _adulescens_ frets about the prostitute’s trustworthiness and is anxious about her despised status, in the same way that the Roman intellectuals fret about theater’s value (237-4).” In sum, the prostitute symbolizes Roman theater, while the _adulescens_ symbolizes the Roman audience.

ii. Prostitutes, like actors, were also cross dressers. While female prostitutes wore a variety of clothing, she even donned the toga. Anne Duncan suggests that the toga was a symbol of the prostitute’s masculine levels of lust and that she was a public figure working public places - _it was her costume._

II. Who were prostitutes in the ancient world?

a. Greek

i. _Pornai_ - brothel workers, slaves. “Didrachmon” “obole” (low status as objects.

iii. _Hetairai_ - were generally free, confident, assertive, independent, non-citizen, educated women who contracted her services to a man. Unlike _pornai_, able to choose own clients.

b. Roman

i. Such a clear binary distinction between types of prostitutes does not exist for the Romans. Prostitutes, however, do appear to have been overwhelming slaves.

1. There does seem to be a distinction made between a _scortum_ (“piece of flesh”) and a _meretrix_ (“one who works for her money”). In Plautus, a _scortum_ refers to mute prostitutes, whereas a _meretrix_ refers to named prostitutes who might serve as the love interest of an _adulescens_.

2. Conditions for prostitutes likely varied a great deal. McGinn has a difficult time imagining pleasant conditions for any prostitute, even the brothel worker. McGinn suggests that based on Roman literature, rape may have been an omnipresent threat for a prostitute. In addition, forced entry to
a brothel is a theme with a long history in Roman literature, even in Plautus. Persa 569:

At enim illi noctu occentabunt ostium, exurent fores: Those men in the night will serenade the gate, they will burn the doors.

ii. Unlike in Greece, no evidence for freedwomen as prostitutes.

1. Though the elegiac love interest (puella docta) may have modeled herself on the Greek hetaira.

III. Who were prostitutes in Plautus?

• Socially speaking, she will be a meretrix, very well cared for, and sometimes even have her own slaves (cf. Truculentus).

• Literally speaking, when a prostitute is given a significant speaking role, she will fall into one of the following categories:

a. The good faith prostitute: prostitutes who are sincere and truly love the adulescens. “Hookers with a heart of gold.” These are rare in Plautus.

Philocomasium in Miles Gloriosus uses deceit to escape becoming the possession of the miles and so is able to stay with the adulescens.

b. The pseudo-hetairai: prostitutes revealed to be citizens and thus able to be wed. Always good faith (high class = good person).

Plautus’ Cistellaria has a Pseudo-hetaira who has only ever had sex with the adulescens.

c. The bad faith prostitute: lies about her feelings and intention to everyone in order to get what she wants. “Hooker whose heart is set on gold.” Plautus known for creating this type.

Baddest of the bad is Phronesium in the Truculentus. In this play Phronesium has three lovers, an adulescens, a miles, and a rusticus. Diniarchus, the adulescens, reveals that Phronesium has borrowed a baby to pass off as her own in order to extort child support from the miles.

peperisse simulat sese, ut me extrudat
foras
atque ut cum solo pergraecetur milite;
(86-88)

vosmet iam videtis, ut ornata incedo:
puerperio ego nunc med esse agram
adsimulo.
(463-64)
She pretends that she’s the one who gave birth, so that she can push me out her house and so that she can act-a-Greek with just her soldier.

Y’all see me now, how I’m decked out: Now I’m pretending that I’m sick from my delivery.

Lepide ecastor aucupavi atque ex mea sententia, meamque ut rem video bene gestam, vostram rursum bene geram: fromabo si quis animatust facere, faciat ut sciam. Veneris causa adplaudite: eius haec in tutelast fabula. spectatores, bene valete, plaudite atque exurgite. (964-68)

In my opinion, by god, I’ve played (them) well, and as I see that my affairs are well taken care off, I will well take care of yours, too: If anyone wants me to do him, let him act so that I might know. Clap for Sex! This play is under Venus’ care. Goodbye, spectators, be aroused and clap!

This is an interesting ending in that the actor playing Phronesium addresses the audience, but the actor stays in character as a prostitute in doing so, promising to stay in character even after the play is complete. Her “bad faithness” is that strong.

(If time to discuss) Based on the evidence found outside of Roman comedy of the poor conditions for prostitutes, Plautus seems to be conflating Greek ideals of prostitution with the Roman reality.
Bibliography


