1. The term as it appears and is defined in Plautus:

A) The term *tragicomoedia* itself is used by the play's *prologus*,

Mercury:


Now I will first speak forth what thing I came here to ask: afterwards I will speak forth the argument of this tragedy. What? You've all crinkled your brow because I said this was going to be a tragedy? I'm a god; I'll change it. This same play, if you all wish, **I will now make from a tragedy to be a comedy with all the same verses.** Do you want it to be one or not? But I am too foolish, as if I didn't know you all wished it so, I who am a god.
I hold something of what your mind is on this subject:
I will make it so that it is mixed: let it be a tragicomedy;
I don't think it fitting for me to make it completely a comedy,
where kings come and gods. What then? Since a slave too
has a place here, I shall make it, as I said before, a tragicomedy.

B) For Mercury, the defining point of tragedy is its weighty matter: kings
and gods (reges quo ueniant et di) are the main actors. The presence of
slaves is the defining trope of comedy. "This distinction, besides being an
interesting glimpse into Roman notions about comedy and tragedy, will be
important throughout the play in two ways. First, there is a continual
fascination with the fact that the gods, who belong in tragedy, are the
play's most comic figures. Second, it is the slave characters, Sosia, the
real slave, and Mercury, who is pretending he is a slave, who
accomplish much of the disruption of others' and their own attempts to
produce tragedy" (Moore in Didaskalia).

C) "Mercury echoes the Aristotelian distinction between comedy and
tragedy as mimesis 'of thouse worse and those better than people are today'
(Poet. 1448a), respectively, but we need not assume that P. had read
Aristotle." (Christenson, 149).

2. Was there a defined genre of tragicomoedia prior to the Amphitiruo?

A) "Mercury coins a new term to denote what is probably an unfamiliar
genre for his audience." (Christenson, 149)

B) But, as Christenson goes on to point out, Greek Middle Comedy
contained a few plays denoted as Κωμωδοτραγωδίαι or as
Ιλαροτραγωδίαι (ibid.), and the writer of this second genre, Rhinthon (c.
323-285 BC), is described in these terms by the author of the 10th century
AD Suda, s.v. 'Ρίνθων:

Ταραντίνος, τραγικός, ἀρχηγός τῆς καλομένης
ιλαροτραγωδίας, ὃ ἐστι φλυακογραφία, υἱὸς δὲ ἔν
κεραμέως καὶ γέγονεν ἐπὶ τοῦ πρῶτου Πτολεμαίου. δράματα δὲ
αὐτοῦ κωμικὰ τραγικὰ λη.

"A Tarentine and writer of tragedies, first to write the so-called
funny tragedy, that is, jester writing; he was the son of a potter and
was born in the time of the first Ptolemy. There are thirty-eight tragic-comic plays by him."

And Stephanus Byzantinus (6th century AD), s.v. Τάρας (=Tarentum):

καὶ Ῥίνθων Ταραντῖνος, φλύαξ, τὰ τραγικὰ μεταρρυθμίζων ἐς τὸ γελοῖον: φέρονται δ’ αὐτοῦ δράματα λη.

"And Rhinthon the Tarentine, a jester, a transformer of tragic things into something laughable. Thirty eight plays of his are extant."

C) While these are obviously Byzantine sources from much later than the time of Rhinthon, it is not unheard of for sources from a much earlier time to be preserved in compendia such as the Suda, and the exact verbal parallel of τὰ τραγικὰ μεταρρυθμίζων ἐς τὸ γελοῖον with Mercury's deu' sum; commutauero can hardly escape our notice (vide Stewart, 367).

D) Amongst ancient accounts of Rhinthon, his contemporary Nossis wrote an epigram preserved for us in the Greek Anthology which boasts of his talent at writing φλυακες and defines its relation to tragedy:

καὶ κατ’ οὐρὰν γελάσας παραμείβει καὶ φίλον εἰ πῶν ῥῆμ’ εἰ πὰ ἐμοί. Ῥίνθων εἰμ’ ὁ Συρακόσιος, Μουσάων ὀλίγη τις ἀνθοῦνες, ἀλλὰ φλυά κων ἐκ τραγικῶν ἱδιον κισσὸν ἐδρέψαμεθα. (7.414. 2-3)

"And laughing heartily pass by me, saying a good word. I am Rhinthon the Syracusan, a certain little nightingale of the Muses, but from my jesters made from tragedies we plucked our very own ivy."

3. What were these φλυακες and how did they influence the Amphitruo?

A) "The so-called phlyax plays of southern Italy are known to us primarily through pictorial evidence belonging to the fourth century BC. Most of the vases assigned to this obviously farcical genre depict scenes of
mythological burlesque, with Herakles being the most popular subject."
(Christenson, 10)

4) Conclusion: Plautine tragicomoedia:

A) For Plautus, tragicomoedia is brought about by undercutting potentially tragic themes (e.g., Amphitryon accusing Alcmena of adultery) in a comic manner. A case in point will be the echo of Capaneus from the traditional tragic story of the Seven Against Thebes (vide Euripides, Suppliants 496-499) in Amphitryon's determination to burst into the house at 1048-52:

certumst, intro rumpam in aedis: ubi quemque hominem aspexero
si ancillam seu servom sive uxorem sive adulterum
seu patrem sive avom videbo, obturuncabo in aedibus.
neque me Iuppiter neque di omnes id prohibebunt, si volent,
quin sic faciam uti constitui. pergam in aedibus nunciam.

"It's decided: I will break in into the house: wherever I see any man
or handmaiden or slave or wife or adulterer or father or grandfather,
I'll chop him up within the house! Neither will Jupiter nor all the gods
prohibit me, should they wish to, from doing as I have decided.
I'm going into the house now!"

The thunderbolt which follows and the comic resolution of the plot with the appearance of Bromia brings Plautus's masterpiece of mythological burlesque to its conclusion, with tragedy undercut by comedy at every turn.

BIBLIOGRAPHY