

Dating the *Epidicus* of Plautus

Erich Gruen has claimed that nowhere in his comedies does Plautus make a single “explicit and unambiguous reference to a contemporary event” (124). While Gruen is correct in noting that Plautus does not directly refer to known individuals or historical events by name, this need not preclude the possibility that he intends allusions to specific events. In some cases, references to contemporary events considerably enhance the comedic value of individual scenes. Following this line of reasoning I will suggest a performance date of approximately 194 BCE for the *Epidicus*. Such a date will be supported by discussion of various allusions to contemporary events scattered throughout the play, including: the repeal of the *Lex Oppia* in 195, the Roman colonization program in the early 2nd century, and the influx of Greek art into Rome following Flaminius’ victory over Philip V in 197 and his triumph at Rome in the fall of 194.

An allusion to the repeal of the *Lex Oppia* at lines 225-235 has been noted by various scholars and is often cited as evidence for the date of the play (see Duckworth 239-240). The tirade launched by Epidicus against the exorbitant amount of money spent on fashion and the ludicrous names and styles that pass in and out of favor is filled with specialized vocabulary (or possibly even words simply invented by Plautus; see Duckworth 244) and comic exuberance as Epidicus veers more and more off topic. The list of fashion styles (230-33) would surely have caught the attention of Plautus’ audience, especially if understood in light of the recent struggle in 195 BCE between Cato the Elder and certain tribunes against opponents of the law, which included crowds of *matronae* who turned out in force to demand its repeal (Livy 34.1-8).

The proposed date finds additional support in a reference at line 343, where Epidicus mentions a colony (see Sedgwick 1949 for more discussion). No new colonies were founded by the Romans while Hannibal rampaged through Italy, but two waves in 197 and 194 BCE saw the

establishment of at least 10 new colonies (Vell. Pat. 1.15; Livy 32.29, 34.45). A reference to the colonies of 194 is consistent with the date of the repeal of the *Lex Oppia*, though Plautus could simply be referring to the entire colonization program in the years immediately prior to the performance of the *Epidicus*.

One final piece of evidence is found at line 626 when Epidicus, bemoaning the whipping he expects to receive from his master, uses the names of two famous Greek artists, Apelles and Zeuxis. The complexity of this reference increases if understood to refer to the triumph of Flaminius in the fall of 194 BCE after defeating the Macedonians under Philip V, or more particularly, to the Greek art that flooded Rome after the general's return (Livy 34.52). It is likely that works of Apelles and Zeuxis would have been among the spoils, as both artists had strong connections to Macedonia. Zeuxis was invited to Pella by Archelaus I where he enjoyed the king's patronship and was tasked with decorating the palace (Ael. *VH* 14.17, Plin. *HN* 35.36). Apelles, too, had a strong connection with Macedonia as the portrait painter of both Alexander the Great and Philip II (Plin. *HN* 35.36). Pliny the Elder provides evidence that some of his works, including several paintings featuring Alexander, definitely reached Rome (*HN* 35.36). A reference to Apelles and Zeuxis could only have been understood by Plautus' audience if they had seen or heard of these works. The triumph of Flaminius in 194 BCE and the subsequent public dedication of the loot would have provided a perfect opportunity for the people of Rome to become familiar with the works of these Greek artists, making it possible for them to appreciate Epidicus' reference.

Looking at the dates of the events referred to in the play one is struck by the remarkable consistency between them. The *Lex Oppia* was repealed in 195, many new colonies were planted in 197 and 194, and the splendid triumph of Flaminius was celebrated in fall of 194. The

allusions to these particular events found in the *Epidicus* suggest an original performance date of 194 BCE or slightly later.

Works Cited

Duckworth, George. *T. Macci Plauti Epidicus*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1940.

Gruen, Erich. *Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy*. New York: Brill, 1990.

Sedgwick, W.B. "Plautine Chronology." *The American Journal of Philology* 70.4 (1949): 376-383.