

and subjects. The changes Roman comic writers made in the plays of their predecessors included: (1) elimination of the chorus (which Greek writers had used to divide the action into episodes); (2) addition of musical accompaniment to much of the dialogue (quite possibly an Etruscan influence); (3) an emphasis on eavesdropping, which led to frequent misunderstandings and complications; and (4) the setting of the action, which takes place on a street.

Plautus and Terence—two of the three Roman playwrights whose works have survived—are both noted for comedy and are significant figures in its history.

PLAUTUS (TITUS MACCIUS PLAUTUS)

Plautus (c. 254–184 B.C.E.), who worked in the last part of the third century and the first part of the second century B.C.E., was the most popular of all Roman comic writers. According to the Roman critic Cicero, Plautus was “choice, urbane, talented, and witty.” His plays were written to entertain, and they delighted Romans for a long time. During the empire, mime became the favorite form of entertainment; but even when Plautus’s plays were no longer being produced, they were still read and admired for their farcical situations and their mastery of colloquial Latin. In modern times, adaptations of plays by Plautus have continued to be extremely popular.

Plautus was born in Umbria but went to Rome at an early age and became an actor. When he began writing his own plays, Plautus took song, dance, and native Italian farce—with which he was very familiar—and combined these elements with characters and plots from the New Comedy of Hellenistic Greece. His comedies, like Greek New Comedy, did not have a chorus and did not deal with contemporary political or social issues. Instead, they depict the trials and tribulations of romance. In performance, Plautus’s plays may have resembled modern musical comedies, because it is believed that a good portion of the dialogue was accompanied by music.

Because of his reputation as the master of comedy, over 100 plays were attributed to Plautus, but no more than 45 are now considered to have been written by him. Twenty of his plays and fragments of one more have survived and have been used as models by playwrights from the Renaissance to the present day, including Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and Molière. Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors* and Rodgers and Hart’s musical *The Boys from Syracuse* are based on *The Menaechmi*. In his *Miles Gloriosus*, Plautus established the braggart soldier as a type—a blustering, pompous man who is secretly a coward. Material from *Miles Gloriosus* and another of Plautus’s plays, *Pseudolus*, is included in the musical comedy *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.

Plautus’s *Amphitryon* was the basis of comic versions of that myth by numerous later writers, including Molière and Jean Giraudoux. Plautus’s other best-known plays are *The Merchant*, *The Carthaginians*, *The Rope*, *Casina*, *The Pot of Gold*, *The Captives*, *The Haunted House*, *The Churl*, and *The Girl from Persia*. (The dates of individual plays by Plautus are unknown, but they are all presumed to have been written between 205 and 184 B.C.E.) However, his best-known work is *The Menaechmi*.