

When the action of the play begins, Menaechmus of Epidamnus and a friend, the hanger-on known as "Sponge," have a conversation in which they establish a number of plot threads. For example, under his outer clothes Menaechmus is wearing one of his wife's prettiest dresses, which he is going to give to his mistress, Erotium. Later, Erotium sends the dress out to be altered, and when Menaechmus's wife looks for the dress and cannot find it, all kinds of complications develop. A bit later Menaechmus's twin from Syracuse comes on the scene and is mistaken for his brother by both the wife and the mistress, at which point Menaechmus of Syracuse becomes hopelessly confused. The play continues with numerous plot complications until all is resolved at the end.

## TERENCE (PUBLIUS TARENTIUS AFER)

After Plautus, the most important Roman comic writer was Terence (c. 185-159 B.C.E.). Whereas Plautus's plays were robust and broadly entertaining, Terence stressed characterization, subtlety of expression, and elegant language.

Like Plautus, Terence based most of his work on Greek models. Accused of plagiarizing materials from Greek comedies, Terence wrote that he did "not deny having done so" and added that he "meant to do it again." Actually, reworking Greek comedies was a common practice among other Roman authors (including Plautus, as we have seen), so it is likely that this criticism of Terence was motivated by other reasons—perhaps by envy of his talent and his rapid rise in social status.

It was Terence's practice to combine plot elements from two Greek plays to create one new work. Terence provided his defense of his work in his spoken prologues. In this regard, he broke with the tradition of using the prologue to provide background information or to summarize the plot.

Terence's life was itself dramatic. He was born in Carthage to Libyan parents and brought to Rome as a slave. The *Afer* in his name may indicate that he was an African, and therefore he may have been the first major black playwright in western theatre. His owner, a senator, educated the young playwright, freed him, and may have introduced him to a literary circle that included a group of prominent writers and philosophers.

Terence's association with high society is reflected in his comedies, which are noted for their subtle humor and cultivated Latin. His plots are more carefully constructed than those of Plautus; and he often used a double plot, placing two characters in similar romantic situations and examining their differing reactions. Though his plays were admired by his learned friends, the populace preferred more lively entertainments. Terence had to present his play *The Mother-in-Law* three times before he could get an audience to sit through the whole performance. On the first two tries, audience members were distracted by nearby circus-type entertainments, which they left the theatre to attend. It is believed that only his comedy *The Eunuch* was popular during his entire career.