

ASSPLAY IN *ASINARIA**

ABSTRACT

This note argues that repeated uses of onus ‘burden’ in Plaut. Asin. 591–745 pun on Greek ὄνος ‘ass’ and, in so doing, activate a network of other puns and hints at the play’s title, asses (the animal), and both homoerotic and anal sex.

Keywords: Plautus; *Asinaria*; puns; sex; enslavement; Roman comedy; bilingual wordplay

Leonida and Libanus, the double *serui callidi* of Plautus’ *Asinaria*, have obtained the twenty minae that Argyrippus, the young man they are enslaved to, needs in order to purchase a yearlong contract with the sex-labourer he is obsessed with, Philaenium.¹ Before they hand the cash over to Argyrippus, though, they decide to use it as leverage over him. First, they coerce Philaenium into some sexual favours for each of them, a sexual violation foreshadowing the other sexual violation she will endure later in the play (828–49/50) at the hands of Argyrippus’ father Demaenetus. Then, Leonida and Libanus make Argyrippus carry Libanus around on his back, with plenty of homoerotic jokes and innuendo, a sexual humiliation foreshadowing the other sexual humiliation he will endure later in the play at the hands of his father Demaenetus (828–49/50).

This scene (591–745) is the play’s longest, its climax, and near to the play’s structural centre. Naturally, given the title of the play, it becomes a site for much ass-related funny business. In this note, I draw attention to previously unnoticed ass puns that further enrich the play’s titularity and play up the scene’s sexual suggestiveness.

Several elements contribute to the assiness of this scene. In the lead-in to the scene, Leonida refers to the twenty minae as asses (*asini*, 588–90).² He refers metonymically to the source of the minae, Demaenetus’ sale of Arcadian *asini* to a certain merchant Pelleus (333–7), who himself, as an assmonger (businassman?), is candidate for the play’s title non-character.³ During the scene in question, Argyrippus is ridden like an ass (705–10).

Readers picking up on a homoerotic subtext to the riding—that it is not just assplay but arseplay Argyrippus will have to endure—have their suspicions confirmed

* I owe thanks to Will Lewis, Amy Kevin Lather and the anonymous reader for *CQ*. The following work is cited below by author’s surname and year alone: J. Henderson (transl.), *Asinaria: The One about the Asses* (Madison, 2006).

¹ For the text of *Asinaria*, I use R.M. Danese (ed.), *Titus Maccius Plautus Asinaria* (Urbino, 2004). All translations are my own. For the term ‘sex-labourer’ as the most accurate translation of Latin *meretrix*, see S.S. Witzke, ‘Harlots, tarts, and hussies? A problem of terminology for sex labor in Roman comedy’, *Helios* 42 (2015), 7–21.

² On the equation of asses with cashbag, see Henderson (2006), 176–7, 192–4.

³ A. Schwarz, ‘Das Rätsel der Komödientitel „*Asinaria*“ und „*Rudens*“’, *Philologische Wochenschrift* 56 (1936), 876–80, at 877 suggests that Libanus, as Argyrippus-rider, is the play’s eponymous *onagos*; Henderson (2006), 210–11 hypothesizes that, by the play’s end, it is Demaenetus’ wife Artemona who should be seen as the ass person of the title.

repeatedly. Most prominent is Libanus' snipe when he's mounting Argyrippus: *sic isti solent superbi subdomari. | asta igitur, ut consuetus es puer olim. scin ut dicam? | em sic* ('this is how uppity ones are brought to heel. Bend over now, just like you used to as a kid, know what I mean? Yeah, that's it', 702–4). Libanus plays on the dual association of *puer* ('boy' and 'enslaved man') with someone who takes the receptive role in homoerotic anal intercourse.⁴ The direct homoerotic joke here casts sexual light on the meaning of Argyrippus' *inscende* ('mount me', 702, 705).⁵ Viewers are primed for anal innuendo by Leonida's insult against Libanus early in the scene (*cinaede calamistrate* 'you pervert with a perm!', 627),⁶ and for homoerotic humour by a subsequent exchange in which Argyrippus tells Leonida and Libanus to get in a clinch as long as they are whispering together (*suavius complexos fabulari*, 640), but Libanus responds that neither of them finds the other attractive (641–4). Given this context, it is possible also that Argyrippus' repeated references to Argyrippus' being 'played' (forms of *deludere*: 646, 677, 679, 711, 731) draw on a connotation of the verb *ludo* as being sexually deceived.⁷

Lurking behind the jocularity of this scene is the very real peril that enslaved persons such as Leonida and Libanus could face: physical and sexual abuse by enslavers such as Argyrippus, for whom both of the enslaved men were (regardless of their actual age) *pueri* and thus potential sexual objects, with no more rights or security than his father's Arcadian asses. Indeed, while riding Argyrippus, Libanus threatens: 'I'll give you to the mill-workers, so you can be tortured to death there by running' (*ad pistores dabo, ut ibi cruciere currens*, 708–9). Such could be the ultimate doom for an ass—but, at the same time, the mill and its horrible working conditions were the severest punishment for a person enslaved to an elite Roman landholder, a fate to which Libanus euphemistically alludes earlier in the play (30–40).⁸

⁴ Argyrippus finds himself in a veritable predicament.

⁵ Cf. *OLD*² s.v. *inscendō* 3, although said entry classifies this line of *Asinaria* under 2, equitational mounting; compare *inscendo* used unambiguously of sexual mounting (the 'donkey show') at *Apul. Met.* 7.21, 10.22.

⁶ *OLD*² euphemistically defines *cinaedus* as 'catamite' (s.v. *cinaedus*¹); the word, from Greek κίναϊδός ('guy who twerks'), for Romans properly denotes a man so given over to lust and luxury that he has become effeminate, often with the expectation that he will be an eager bottom in anal sex. Compare the gloss of T. Sapsford, 'The wages of effeminacy? *Kinaidoi* in Greek documents from Egypt', *EuGeStA* 5 (2015), 103–23, at 103: 'a term used both in Greek and in Latin sources for a figure most commonly noted for his effeminate gender display and sexual degeneracy whether expressed through a willingness to be anally penetrated or as a more general insatiability'; and see further T. Gazzarri, '*Cinaedus galbinatus*: cultural perception of the color "green" and its gender association with *pathici* in Rome', *EuGeStA* 9 (2019), 79–107. The term does *not* designate 'homosexual' (as it is frequently and incorrectly rendered by, for example, K. Mitchell, 'Catullus 25.5: a gaping target', *Hermes* 141 [2013], 105–7, at 105), a total category error for ancient Rome, in which sexuality was not oriented around the match or mismatch of one's gender identity to the gender identity to which one was attracted. For discussions of the *cinaedus* as a subjectivity that decentres and destabilizes Graeco-Roman hegemonic masculinity, see A. Deagon, 'The "effeminate dancer" in Greco-Roman Egypt: the intimate performance of ambiguity', *Congress on Research in Dance Proceedings* 40 Suppl. 51 (2008), 69–77; E.M. Young, 'The touch of the *cinaedus*: unmanly sensations in the *Carmina Priapea*', *CA* 34 (2015), 183–208.

⁷ See especially Ter. *Eun.* 385 with S.L. James, '*Fallite fallentes*: rape and intertextuality in Terence's *Eunuchus* and Ovid's *Ars amatoria*', *EuGeStA* 6 (2016), 86–111; cf. Ov. *Her.* 17.17, 25, 142, 153, 193–4, 21.116, with T.H.M. Gellar-Goad, 'The lexicon of profit and commerce in Ovid's *Ars amatoria* and other works', *AJPh* 142 (2021), 287–318, at 308 n. 44. Cf. also Hor. *Carm.* 3.4.5–6; the verb can also simply denote sexual play, as per *OLD*² s.v. *lūdō* 4.

⁸ On *Asin.* 30–40, see R. Stewart, *Plautus and Roman Slavery* (Malden, MA, 2012), 105–6. On the

Plautus' most pun-focussed pundits have, to date, found plenty of puns involving the play's title and topic, as well as doubles entendres about man-on-man buttsex. Traina finds the latter right at the beginning of the play, in the Prologus' *reside* (5), which he argues is a homoerotic jab at the *praeco* of line 4.⁹ Henderson, meanwhile, notices an assy reference in the very same line's *auritus*, in context meaning 'attentive' but implying 'long-eared'.¹⁰ Henderson builds out from that reference to asses as proverbially burden-bearing (*onus* is collocated with a certain Vinnius Asina in Hor. *Epist.* 1.13) and braying (citing ὄγκήσαιτο at Callim. *Aet.* fr. 1.31 and ὄγκωδέστατος said of Horace by Augustus in Suet. *Vita Hor.*). He also sees *Asinaria* wordplay latent in Plautus' deployment of the term *argentarius* at lines 116 and 126¹¹ and *uel patinarium uel assum* at line 180;¹² and he notes that, in this play, the verb *fero* almost always denotes bearing the burden of cash.¹³ Henderson and Fontaine both handle the homoerotic sex jokes in our scene, including Libanus' 'mounting' of Argyrippus.¹⁴

What has not yet been identified in the scholarly record on *Asinaria* is a brace of ass-related puns, one bilingual and one anal. First off, Argyrippus must twice beg the *serui* to hand over the cash, first Leonida and then Libanus. And he twice describes the cash as a burden, an *onus*:

nolo ego te, qui erus sis mihi onus istuc sustinere. (658)

...

o Libane, mi patrone, mi trade istuc: magis decorumst
libertum potius quam patronum onus in uia portare. (689–90)

I don't want you, my master, to bear this burden.... Libanus, my patron, give this to me—it's more appropriate for a freedman than a patron to carry the burden in the street.

I argue that *onus* in these lines puns on Greek ὄνος 'ass'. The two words are not etymologically related, but their pronunciation would be, to a Roman ear, functionally identical.¹⁵ Spectators might have the Greek word in the back of their minds thanks to the play's prologue, which states that 'the name of this play in Greek is "Ass-Driver"' (*huic nomen graece Onagost fabulae*, 10).¹⁶ Both *onus* and ὄνος are metonyms for the

mill, see further Henderson (2006), 132, 200, 237; A. Richlin, *Slave Theater in the Roman Republic: Plautus and Popular Comedy* (Cambridge, 2017), 6, 120 and, on this scene, 217–18.

⁹ A. Traina, 'L'ambiguo invito (*As.* 5, *Poen.* 15)', *Poeti latini (e neolatini)* 3 (1989), 71–4; cf. M. Fontaine, *Funny Words in Plautine Comedy* (Oxford, 2010), 206.

¹⁰ Henderson (2006), xiv, 220 n. 7.

¹¹ Henderson (2006), 136–7.

¹² Henderson (2006), 172.

¹³ Henderson (2006), 236–7 n. 19.

¹⁴ Henderson (2006), 202, 237 n. 21; Fontaine (n. 9), 221.

¹⁵ Romans habitually transliterate Greek nouns and adjectives in *-os* with *-us* (e.g. our play's Argyrippus from *Ἀργύριππος), and in Plautus' day second-declension masculine nouns vacillated between endings in *-us* and *-os* (e.g. *seruos* and *seruus* used interchangeably throughout Plautine comedy).

¹⁶ Plautus' *Onagost* (for ὄναγος) is evidently a *hapax*, appearing only here in Latin (so *OLD*² s.v. *onagos*; *TLL* 9.2.628) and never in actual Greek (so *TLL* 9.2.628; *LSJ* s.v. ὄναγος). But, so as not to make assumptions out of our asses, we should note that the apparatus criticus of Danese (n. 1), ad loc. indicates that the Plautine codices *B* and *D* (both tenth-century manuscripts held in the Vatican) read *Onagrost* rather than *Onagost*. In that case, the line would refer to a word for 'wild ass' common in both Latin (*onager*, especially in reference to the Roman siege weapon) and Greek (ὄναγρος, a contraction of ὄνος ἄγριος). For an overview of the debate over the two alternatives, see D. Fogazza, 'Plauto 1935–1975', *Lustrum* 19 (1976), 79–295, at 226–7.

money, the latter additionally being the mechanism by which the money has been obtained, the former additionally being a standard task for which you would own the latter. In effect, the repeated bilingual pun calls back to the scene's setup, when Leonida tells us that the moneybag contains some fine pieces of ass (588–90). The scene as<s> a {w}hole, particularly the ass-riding sequence, is freighted with weighty words—*sustinere* (658), *labor* (659), *imponere* (659), *baiulare* (660),¹⁷ *inanis* (660), *pressatum umerum* (661), *affferre* (672, 699, 700, 732, 733), *uehere* (699, 700, 701), *patior* (739)—so the audience would be able to take a load on their mind when thinking about the *onus* of the cash and Argyrippus as ass. Perhaps *onus* at lines 658 and 690 would best be translated 'assload'.¹⁸

Second, I argue that *onus* and *patronus* at lines 652 and 658 (plus *patronus* earlier in the scene, at line 621), and especially at lines 689–90, work together to activate a nexus of status- and sex-related wordplay.¹⁹ The *onus*, the cash, will buy Argyrippus a year's access to Philaenium, and so its delivery by Leonida and Libanus may make Argyrippus inclined to free them, and thus become their *patronus* rather than their *dominus*.²⁰ At the same time, their possession of the cash and his need for it puts *him* in the position of *cliens* to their *patroni*. The scene displays, as Konstan notes, Saturnalian inversion to an extreme.²¹ *onus* jingles on *honus*, as well, given the questions of status hovering over the exchange.²²

And when punning on *onus* and *patronus* in a scene rife with anal innuendo, there is another sexual *jeu de mots* in play: *patro* 'to orgasm'. A sexual usage of the verb ('reach a sexual climax', per *OLD*² s.v. *patrō* b) in *Asinaria* would have Plautus anticipating the much later satirist Persius, who offers the only other extant such usage (*patranti* ... *ocello*, 1.18).²³ Here in *Asinaria*, the equation of *patro* + *onus* = *patronus* is a rich one. Argyrippus must bear the *onus* of Libanus in order to get the *onus* of the cash; Argyrippus beseeches Leonida and Libanus as *onus*-bearing *patroni*; Libanus' Argyrippus-ride hints at sex in which Libanus the *patronus* will get to do the verb *patro*; the ultimate aim of the *onus* of the cash is for Argyrippus to get his rocks off—that is, *patro*—with Philaenium; and by helping Argyrippus get the *onus* he needs to access the girl with whom he wants to *patro*, Leonida and Libanus put themselves

¹⁷ The only other instance of this verb in Plautus (*TLL* 2.1685)—spoken at *Merc.* 508 by Pasicompsa the enslaved sex-labourer, about a task that she never learned to do that might be asked of her by her new enslaver—may also bear sexual undertones.

¹⁸ With ass on the mind thanks to the *onus*/ὄνος pun at line 658, we may hear hee-hawing also when Leonida hits on Philaenium, first listing other livestock he wants her to call him as terms of endearment (666–7) and then telling her to grab him by the ears (*prehende auriculis*, 668)—asses are, as we have seen, famous for their ears.

¹⁹ Compare the summary of the scene in question by Henderson (2006), 202: 'Sir Slave Knight's crossing of sexual with status subjugation knots together Plautus' nadir and zenith of carnival subversion through extraordinary comedic hyperventilation.'

²⁰ Henderson (2006), 197, notes a series of puns on Libanus' name and *libertus*.

²¹ D. Konstan, *Roman Comedy* (Ithaca, 1983), 55.

²² See R. Maltby, *A Lexicon of Ancient Latin Etymologies* (Melksham, 1991), 282, s.v. *honestus*, who adduces Varro, *Ling.* 5.73: *honus ab onere: itaque honestum dicitur quod oneratum, et dictum: 'onus est honos qui sustinet rempublicam'*. I owe this citation to the anonymous reader for *CQ*.

²³ Satire scholars have settled on 'orgasmic eye' to render Persius' *patranti* ... *ocello*: so P.A. Miller, 'The bodily grotesque in Roman satire: images of sterility', *Arethusa* 31 (1998), 257–83, at 267; S.M. Braund, *Juvenal and Persius* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 51; E.J. Kenney, 'Satiric textures: style, meter, and rhetoric', in S. Braund and J. Osgood (edd.), *A Companion to Persius and Juvenal* (Malden, MA, 2012), 113–36, at 117; D. Hooley, 'Imperial satire reiterated: Late Antiquity through the twentieth century', in S. Braund and J. Osgood (edd.), *A Companion to Persius and Juvenal* (Malden, MA, 2012), 337–62, at 361; S. Bartsch, *Persius: A Study in Food, Philosophy, and the Figural* (Chicago, 2015), 165.

in a position where they might be freed to call him *patronus*. When the two Ls have finished tormenting Argyrippus, and Leonida tells him ‘you’ve got what you want’ (*impetrasti*, 721), there, too, lies the possibility of orgasmic innuendo.²⁴

From there, the potential homoerotic puns multiply. *onus* could rhymingly invoke *anus*.²⁵ Leonida’s insistence that Argyrippus ‘rub his knees’ (*genua confricantur*, 670; also 671, 678), literally in supplication, foreshadows Argyrippus’ stint on his knees with Libanus astride him, mounted for some assplay. When the *onus* is the burden, the bearing can be expressed by *patior*, which can have a sexual sense; at line 739, Argyrippus shows (with *patior*) he will endure *anything* to get Philaenium, even (in that line) giving the *ius primae noctis* to his lecherous father, or (in the scene now coming to a close) letting a man enslaved to him mount him.²⁶ While we are talking asses, burdens and assholes, we cannot overlook the Aristoph-anal routine on πῆζομαι.²⁷ And Philaenium’s plea to Leonida, ‘don’t unyoke us lovers’ (*ne nos deiunge amantis*, 665),²⁸ both draws on ass-related terminology and could connote sexual intercourse (as it does at, for example, *Curc.* 50).

Coming back to the core wordplay on *onus* and ὄνος—a ponderous juncture—asses and *onus* are collocated also with metaphorical force elsewhere in Plautus. In *Aulularia*, we have another use of *onus* with financial connotations, as miserly Euclio frets that marrying his daughter to wealthy Megadorus will have inequitable outcomes: *in mentem uenit | te bouem esse et me esse asellum; ubi tecum coniunctus siem, | ubi onus nequeam ferre pariter, iaceam ego asinus in luto* (‘it comes to mind that you’re an ox and I’m a li’l ass; when I’m yoked to you, when I can’t bear my share of the burden, I’ll end up an ass in the mud’, 229–30). In *Amphitruo*, it is again about physical violation, when Mercury says that Sosia is bringing with him a mule (*iumentum*, 327, 328) that ‘must be burdened with fists’, that is, beaten up (*onerandus est pugnis*, 328); Sosia responds that he is so tired from his travels (329–30) that he cannot bear such a burden (*ne ire posse cum onere existimes*, 330).²⁹

The Plautine association of *asinus* with *onus* weighs heavily on the subsequent tradition, with joint appearances of the words in both Horace and Cicero.³⁰ And the bilingual pun—which could be excellent fodder for a folk etymology of the Latin word (for example *onus, quod ὄνος fert*, akin to the Varronian classic *lucus a non lucendo*)—is simple and straightforward enough that it does not require high-level Greek expertise to appreciate, but rather could land for a broad band of the diverse Plautine audience.³¹

Wake Forest University

T.H.M. GELLAR-GOAD
thmgg@wfu.edu

²⁴ OLD² s.v. *patrō* cites *Asin.* 114 for the basic meaning of the verb, ‘accomplish’.

²⁵ This would not be out of place in this play, since—as Fontaine (n. 9), 34, 230 n. 53 notes—*anulus* at line 778 puns on *anus*.

²⁶ Henderson (2006), 147 discusses *patior* earlier in the play, at line 324, but there is no sexual sense there nor, accordingly, in his discussion.

²⁷ Xanthias at *Ar. Ran.* 3, 30: see, for example, M. Telò, ‘Laughter, or Aristophanes’ joy in the face of death’, in P. Swallow and E. Hall (edd.), *Aristophanic Humour: Theory and Practice* (London, 2020), 53–68, at 56.

²⁸ On this line, see Henderson (2006), 203.

²⁹ Furthermore, *muli* and *onus* are similarly collocated at Plaut. *Mostell.* 780–2.

³⁰ *Hor. Sat.* 1.9.20–1: *asellus, | cum grauius dorso subiit onus* (‘when the little ass picks up a rather heavy burden on its back’); *Cic. Att.* 1.16.12: *asellus onustus auro* (‘an asslet weighed down with gold’); both with J. Pascual-Berea, ‘*Asinus y asellus*: los dos tipos de asno doméstico en latín clásico’, *Pallas* 101 (2016), 279–91.

³¹ *Pace* Fontaine (n. 9), who argues that sophisticated Greek/Latin puns in Plautus necessitate a target audience composed of a bilingual senatorial elite.