

The Case of Sosia Versus Sosia

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IN HIS PROLOGUE to the *Amphitryon* Plautus tells us that this play is a tragicomedy. For it would not be right, he says, for gods and kings to appear in a play which was nothing but comedy; yet neither can it be wholly tragedy since important parts are given to slaves (59-63). Without worrying particularly about Plautus' social attitudes as reflected here, critics have generally agreed with his literary judgment. The *Amphitryon*, although not as obviously a problem play as Menander's *The Arbitration*, for example, or Terence's *The Brothers*, does seem to have a more serious undercurrent than most of Plautus' work. For both proof and explanation, critics have been fond of pointing to Alcmena, whose situation and character are portrayed with almost tender understanding and sympathy.¹

I should like to propose two further theses. First, I believe that the real reason for the ambivalent nature of the *Amphitryon* is that the underlying theme of the play is such that its deeper meaning cannot be entirely disregarded, no matter how much it may be subjected to comic treatment. This theme is, of course, the problem of self-identity. Second, I maintain that the truly tragicomic figure is the slave Sosia.

Certain serious questions suggest themselves (whether or not Plautus specifically formulated them to himself) even without Sosia. If, for example, Alcmena was perfectly content with the appearance and outward manners of Jupiter, then was it really Amphitryon whom she loved, or not? Or as Alcmena despairingly asks, is there any point in knowing the truth if one cannot communicate it to anyone? If

Plautus had chosen to develop all the implications of his plot in the persons of Alcmena and Amphitryon, he would have risked finding himself with a pure tragedy on his hands. As it is, the difficulties of the hero and heroine are in a sense externalized. Even Amphitryon, at least in the mutilated form of the play which has come down to us, never has any self-doubts. He resents the imposter; he suspects that witchcraft may have been used against Alcmena. But he knows always that he is the true Amphitryon and that Jupiter is not. It is Sosia who really confronts the psychological dilemma, who knows that he is himself and yet faces evidence proving that he is not. It is Sosia, in short, who bumps up against himself, who sees himself coming, who discovers that he is his own worst enemy!

It is important to remember that when the disguised Mercury is about to accost Sosia, he assumes not only Sosia's appearance but his character. This means that even within the comic framework it is actually a confrontation of Sosia by Sosia. What Plautus is doing is presenting to us literally the picture of the human personality which we (and Plautus too) have long been accustomed to accept in metaphor. Thus we see that Sosia is in conflict with himself, he has difficulty in understanding himself, he tries—but in vain—to lie to himself. In words of the twentieth century we may say that his is the problem of every man; that is, ultimately he is a stranger to himself. Now the trick of taking literally that which is meant metaphorically is one of Plautus' favorite comic techniques, and I have no doubt that the laughter of the audience is his goal in the Sosia scenes as everywhere else. Yet the interesting fact remains that Sosia's progressive bewilderment and his con-

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tinually frustrated attempts to get out of his dilemma parallel step by step the argumentation of philosophers concerned with the problem of self-identity.

Like any good philosopher Plautus follows a logical development. Sosia's first problem is the realization of himself in the third person. Mercury has just said that he hears somebody (*nescio quis*) talking. And Sosia exclaims, "I'm saved! He doesn't see me. He says *Somebody* is talking, but *my* name is certainly Sosia." (331-32)² Without dwelling on the point we may note that the first perception that one is or has a self, and a self that is limited, must logically occur at that moment when one recognizes that one is external and an object to another self. Ordinarily there is something in us which resists this object-status, but here Sosia comically takes refuge in the idea that the neutral designation "somebody" can not possibly apply to his own highly personal self. He is not just "somebody"; he is Sosia. Of course still worse is in store for him. He is not merely an object to the personal reflections of another "somebody"; he is an object to Sosia.

Sosia never loses the inner conviction that he is still the same person he had always thought himself to be; and he comes very close to asserting the Cartesian "Cogito, ergo sum." "But when I think, then I am certainly the same as I have always been" (447). What he lacks is any rational proof, and he recognizes rightly that Descartes' conclusion is conviction and not proof. The tests he applies are those which any philosopher, or even any human being, would naturally think of.

First of all, Sosia associates his sense of identity with his physical body. Mercury has just called him mad, and Sosia tries to prove his sanity to himself by carefully recalling recent events, concluding with his vivid awareness of the sensations of the moment.

Am I not right now standing in front of our house? Isn't this a lantern in my hand? Didn't this man just now beat me up? By

Heaven, he did! For my jaw still hurts from it! So what am I worrying about? Why don't I go straight inside? (445-48)

In a sense this approach produces Sosia's strongest evidence: present sensations, especially those stemming from remembered events. His awareness of himself as tied to a body which has never ceased to provide a continuing stream of feeling, a body whose presence is felt as a part of every reaction, no matter what—this is the one thing which nobody can take away from him. Consequently he never ceases to *feel* that he is and has been one Sosia. Unfortunately, however, a feeling is untransferable, and Sosia's inability to *prove* the reality of what so strongly he *feels* adds to his sense of frustration.

Sosia's second test is the appeal to objects in the outside world. He demands that Mercury describe for him the Teleboans' gift to Amphitryon and the appearance of Amphitryon's seal. Here of course Sosia fails since Mercury's description is accurate even in the smallest details. There is still more spectacular failure when the cup in question is found to be already in Alcmena's possession although the seal on its former container is intact. This attempt on Sosia's part is less convincing for him than the inner assurance of his own sensations. But it has the advantage of offering a common point of reference for himself and for his audience. Sosia searches for confirmation in his surroundings just as one who has fainted seeks to orient himself by means of the familiar "Where am I?" He appeals to things as guarantees in the way that we all do dozens of times a day. For example, "Of course, I locked the door. See, it's bolted." Or, "Yes, I've finished my paper. Read it!" Unfortunately Plautus tricks poor Sosia by bringing in the supernatural. Otherwise his scientific reliance on matter to behave consistently would have worked. But there is always some slight element of uncertainty in an appeal to objects.

One's memory may have failed. Or someone may have intervened secretly. Or nature itself may not be quite as we have pronounced it to be.

For a third try Sosia takes refuge in the belief that only he can know what he has done in secret. But, as it turns out, this other Sosia knows that during the battle Sosia hid in his tent and drank a whole jug of wine straight! Such an assertion might well drive anyone mad and should excuse completely the apparently incoherent babbling with which Sosia so irritates Amphitryon later in the play. If Mercury were conceived as another mortal, then of course the situation would be impossible. Without the gods, one would never be forced to face the problem of identity in quite this way. If, however, we look at the conflict as being carried on between two aspects of Sosia's own self, then we see that Plautus is giving us a sharply drawn picture of a man's attempt and failure to hide from himself the memory of his ignoble behavior at a time of crisis.

Sosia's final summing-up of the situation is again significant in terms of a man's struggle within himself rather than as an effort to prove his identity to someone else. By now he realizes that the stranger is "as much like me as I am" (*tam consimilest atque ego*). He looks and acts like Sosia, has all of Sosia's knowledge and memories. The reaction of the original Sosia at this point is a curious one. All three of his tests having failed to some extent at least, he is forced by his own reasoning to admit that the man before the house is Sosia. But his inward emotional conviction is so strong that he never admits (save for an instant at the very moment of being beaten) that he himself is not Sosia. As a result he holds on to both ideas and almost drives his master mad by referring to both Sosias in the first person singular and yet speaking of them as being two separate people.

So far we have been concerned only

with Sosia's efforts to find a way out of his difficulty. I should like now to point out several broader implications of the story, stemming partly from the myth itself and partly from Plautus' peculiar treatment of it. At this point it does not really matter whether or not Plautus was consciously aware of these interpretations, for the point which I am trying to make is that there is in the tale so true an insight into the human condition that even if Plautus had been incapable of seeing more than the comic possibilities, the play would have had a serious undertone in spite of him.

In the broadest sense, of course, the *Amphitryon* poses the unanswerable question: just what is it which makes the Self? If another has my appearance, my personality, my memories, is there anything which prevents my saying that he is Me? And if I can reply to this question only by pointing to my own lively sense that I and I alone am Me, then what if the other should reply in similar fashion? Granted that the dilemma is couched in impossible terms, the fact is that if I cannot resolve it, I am forced to acknowledge that the self, my own self, remains a mystery.

A somewhat more specific aspect of human experience is suggested by Sosia's meeting up with his double upon his return home after a prolonged expedition abroad. For anyone who has made an abrupt break in the course of his life, who has gone away and changed as the result of new experiences, who has developed hitherto unsuspected facets of his character—for any such person Sosia's position should be familiar. Let us forget Mercury for a moment and look at what Sosia would have experienced without him. For the slave returning from the great adventure there would certainly be a brief moment when he would not quite be ready to step into the old role, when he might well insist, "I'm not that same old Sosia you used to know." For any

person picking up an old way of life after distance in time or space, it is easy to feel that there is a familiar self waiting to claim one, a self which has been there all the time and which is presently so real as to seem to deny the reality of anything experienced away from it. This sense that an established system of patterned reactions and habits exists almost as a separate self which one must decide whether or not to recognize may appear either as threat or temptation, but I believe that the experience is universal. In Plautus' play this interpretation is suggested by Mercury's answer when Sosia asks who he is if he is not Sosia. "When I don't want to be Sosia, why then you be Sosia if you like. But now when I *am* Sosia, you'll be beaten, you scum, if you don't make off!" (439-40)

I have spoken already of the meeting of the two Sosias as representing a struggle within the self. The conflict here assumes the form of a self-judgment with Mercury on the bench. I have mentioned Sosia's unsuccessful attempt at lying. I refer, of course, to Sosia's intention of giving what purported to be an eye-witness account of a battle and Mercury's forestalling him by reminding him that he was actually in hiding and can speak only from hearsay. In a broader sense he not only pronounces himself guilty but assigns and administers his own punishment. There is a significant passage just before Sosia first perceives Mercury.

Sosia. I'm one slave who should get a beating. I wasn't too anxious, was I, to think about paying my respects to the gods and thanking them as I should for my safe arrival? By God, if they paid me back my deserts, they would commission some man to bash my face in properly since they've got no thanks for all the good they did me.

Mercury. This fellow does what not many people do. He recognizes what he deserves. (180-85)

These lines are important as indicat-

ing that Sosia is not an innocent victim of the brutal stranger. He receives precisely the sentence which he has just passed on himself. Moreover, the one who administers the punishment is doubly Sosia's own self: first, Mercury is physically Sosia's counterpart and claims his very name; second, Mercury decides upon his conduct by asking himself what Sosia would do if their roles were reversed.

Since I have taken on his shape and appearance, I should make my deeds and character like his too. So I must be a sly and clever rascal and drive him away from the house with his own weapon—roguey. (265-69)

I might remark here that it is a well established psychological principle that inwardly one adopts the same basic attitude toward oneself (hostility, anxiety, acceptance) that one is accustomed to direct toward the outside world and other people. Thus it is not inappropriate that Mercury as Sosia should deal with the returning Sosia as the latter would have dealt with anyone else, given the strength and opportunity.

Finally, there is just one more aspect of human experience which I believe lies back of the story of Sosia's encounter with himself. This is that uneasy sense that in some way the Self comprises more than the conscious ego. What this "something more" is, nobody has ever proved, at least not to the satisfaction of everyone else, but I am convinced that the Greeks and Romans were in varying degrees aware of it. There are hints in Plato and the dramatists. Plotinus surely had it in mind in the *All-Soul*. Personally I believe that it is back of the concepts of the Greek *Daimon* and the Roman *Genius*.

If we try to explain why the people of antiquity developed the idea of a sort of guardian *alter ego* or greater self, which lived out one's life with one, our explanation will depend upon our philosophical and psychological affiliations. If we prefer to keep the Greeks and Romans free of any contamination with

later theories, we may say that the individual's constant awareness of the society around him led him to introject the social milieu, as it were, and posit a second self as the ever-present observer. For the Freudians, of course, there are the unconscious Id and Super-ego. In this connection E. R. Dodds has utilized the theory of the unconscious to explain metempsychosis, which he believes to be derived from our dim sense of there being somewhere within us forgotten and repressed materials which influence us without our being aware of when or how.³ In the same way it is possible that the Genius and the Daimon reflect a man's vague knowledge of the unconscious part of himself. The Jungian school of psychology might give a similar explanation but with the difference that the unconscious would be not personal but racial or even the Collective Unconscious of all mankind. Novelists also have suggestions to offer. D. H. Lawrence, for example, presents the idea that there is a basic blood consciousness, far deeper and more extensive than the mental ego, and that here only can a man really find himself. Finally (though the list is not exhaustive) among the French existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre has rejected entirely the concept of the unconscious but insists that the ego of man is secondary to a non-personalized consciousness and that here we find the wellspring of a human freedom so absolute that nothing in the way of heredity or environment can predict its course.⁴

But the problem of what we ourselves are to give as the explanation of the Self is far removed from the study of the *Amphitryon*. Furthermore, Plautus, even among writers of comedy, is one of the least philosophically minded. As I said earlier, I am not trying to prove that he was conscious of all these implications as I have discussed them. Possibly he was simply adapting a Greek source and copied without full understanding. Or perhaps

his observation of human behavior has been so accurate that his characters seem real to us and hence challenge us to look for more than Plautus himself realized. Any great comedian must be in some sense a psychologist in order to perceive the foibles and the ridiculous traits of our fellow human beings and in order to make us see them. In the character of Sosia and the adventure which befalls him Plautus has exploited the humorous possibilities to the fullest. He examines in the form of a literal projection almost every conceivable way in which a person can try to take an objective point of view on himself. Plautus, I believe—but if not he, then his Greek predecessor—has grasped intuitively the realization that Sosia's dilemma is in essence that of every man—in short, the human condition.

We must conclude then that in the case of *Sosia versus Sosia* it appears impossible to arrive at any satisfactory decision. In the first place how can one possibly determine which Sosia is the defendant? Moreover it seems clear that the guilty party is really the gods, who started the trouble by allotting but one form to two persons. Unfortunately the gods do not usually acknowledge the jurisdiction of the human court.

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NOTES

¹ For examples of this critical view cf. the following.

"There is unalloyed fun in Sosia's bewilderment on finding another Sosia as like him 'as milk is like milk.' One does not know whether to marvel more at Roman toleration for such representation of the gods, or at the author's introduction in such surroundings of his sweetest and purest woman. Alcmena's character is apparent in her unaffected grief over parting from her husband, her love of virtue, and conscious freedom from wilful guilt. Her spotless honesty makes the supreme god a charlatan." J. Wight Duff, *A Literary History of Rome from the Origins to the Close of the Golden Age* (New York, 1953) p. 129.

"The arrival of Sosia to announce his master's return leads to an amusing low comedy scene in which the slave is almost convinced by Mercury that he has lost his identity. . . . [Alcmena] is a devoted wife and a person of honor and dignity; she is the noblest woman character in Plautine