

The Play : *The Pot of Gold*

II. An Analytical and Critical Survey

1. An Introductory Note

The Pot of Gold, one of the popular comedies of Plautus, seems to have its ancestry in some Greek comedy, which inspired and supplied the dramatist concerned as his model to pursue. The play might have been indebted to the famous Greek master of the New Comedy, Menander here, although there is no exact evidence of it. But the main themes of the play—avarice and miserliness—are found satirized in a good many plays of Menander and as such, it is not unlikely that some of Menander's plays might have been followed here and presented as Plautus's own in his plays.

The Pot of Gold is a comedy, for it ends in a happy wedding. At the same time, it is a satire to expose two recognizable human follies—avarice and miserliness.

About the date of writing the play, there is nothing available except the time of the death of Plautus, which was 184 B.C. The play must have, therefore, been written before that year.

Like all the plays of Plautus, the setting of *The Pot of Gold* is in Athens, though the original language in which the play is written, is Latin. His characters in the play also resemble the Athenians, and much of the social manners and practices prevalent then in Athens are found expressed in the play.

As stated already, *The Pot of Gold* is set in the city of Athens, though the themes and issues and the people, highlighted in the play, are all Romans. This is a comedy, as stated already, though, as noted also, modelled after some Greek comedy.

The Pot of Gold is a hilarious comedy with a human theme of love, marriage and extreme avarice and miserliness at extremity. Of course, the play has some moments of sadness and lamentations, but these are few and far between and rather serve to evoke satire and fun. The humour of the play, rather satiric humour, arises from the conduct of the main character Euclio mainly.

The play has a lot of characters; of them, mention may be made of the following—Euclio, Phaedria, Lyconides, Strobilus and Megadorus.

Euclio is the chief character and he is the centre of attraction of the play. Phaedria is his daughter, whose marriage the play celebrates, but she is not presented on the stage and has not taken any active part in the action of the play. Lyconides is the lover of Phaedria. His sexual relation with Phaedria leads to an unhappy pregnancy which is not known to her father. But Lyconides is frank and good enough to decide to marry the woman and finally does so.

Megadorus is a neighbor of Euclio. He is a prosperous man with a good mind and a sympathetic heart. Strobilus is the steward to Megadorus, who serves to expose what is ludicrous and funny in the main character of the play, Euclio. There is also a divine character in the play, that is Lar Familiaris, the household god of Euclio's family. Of course, there are other characters, too, including slaves and servants of Euclio, Megadorus and Lyconides.

The scene is at Athens, outside the houses of Euclio and Megadorus. The houses are at some distance apart, and between them is a shrine of Fides (Good Faith), a small structure which can be entered by a door.

2. The Plot of the Play

The Pot of Gold is a hilarious satiric comedy. Though it ends as a happy comedy, with wedding bells more tuneful, the main motive here is to expose the human vices of avarice and miserliness. The plot of the play centers around Euclio, an aged person, who is mean and greedy, poses to be poor, though possessed of a pot of gold, which he is anxious to hide from others' eyes.

The plot of the play runs thus. Euclio, a mean, miserly, old man has got a pot of gold, no doubt ancestral, by the kindness of the family deity, Lar Familiaris. He is anxious to hide this pot of gold from everyone and keeps it hidden from place to place to secure it against any theft or loss. This effort to preserve his gold pot makes him anxious, suspicious, petulant and quarrelsome. He even shows himself to be

poor to make people believe that he has nothing of gold so that they may not think of any pot of gold with him.

Euclio has a daughter, Phaedria, who is in love with a young man belonging to the family of his close neighbor, Megadorus. In their meeting on a festival occasion, an accidental sexual union has made Phaedria pregnant, much to the discomfort of the daughter and the housekeeper of the family Staphyla, who is extremely affectionate to her, although she is very often rudely treated by Euclio, out of suspicion and fear, to lose his pot of gold.

Megadorus, an aged gentleman of riches, ease and good nature, under the provocation of his sister, Eunomia, agrees to marry Phaedria. He goes to Euclio and asks for his daughter's hand. Euclio agrees, after much talks and arguments, on getting the assurance that Megadorus will not demand for any sort of dowry. Megadorus is kind and sympathetic enough to agree to marry the daughter and arrange the wedding feast at his own cost and sends his servants to Euclio's house for the purpose.

Megadorus's men enter Euclio's home to make the preparation for the wedding feast. Naturally, they talk loosely and loudly while engaging in their work. At that time Euclio is not present. But he can never get out of door for a long time lest someone may find out his pot of gold. So he returns in no time. He hears the noises made in his house and apprehends that some persons are attempting to take away his pot of gold. He hurriedly comes back and hits one of the servants, as he thinks that they are after robbing his pot of gold.

Thereafter he comes across Megadorus, who is much surprised at the peculiar conduct of his future father-in-law. But he is really a good, honest man who is strongly opposed to the system of dowry and wants to help others in the matter. Euclio overhears him and realises that Megadorus is a thoroughly honest man and has no intention to rob his gold.

Strangely enough, Euclio is scared for the loss of his gold. He is anxious for its safe custody somewhere else than his own house. He finally decides to keep the pot of gold hidden in the shrine of Good Faith, that is situated on an empty space between his house and Megadorus's.

But a slave of Lyconides, the seducer of Phaedria, secretly notices this and removes the pot. Very soon Euclio returns to the shrine to find the pot lost. He goes crazy and rushes out, as his young pregnant daughter goes into the labour pain.

On learning the state of his beloved Phaedria, Lyconides talks to his mother who is the sister of Megadorus. She tries to dissuade his brother from marrying the maid who is going to give birth to Lyconides's baby. The brother agrees and admits to settle the marriage of Lyconides in his place. But he instructs the young fellow to restore Euclio's pot of gold from the slave by releasing him from slavery. The pot of gold is restored to Euclio who agrees to get his daughter married to Lyconides. So the lovers are in a happy wed-lock. Euclio, however, acts strangely thereafter. He gives the pot of gold to his son-in-law and daughter after the marriage and thereby releases himself from all sorts of anxiety and depression.

3. The Social and Moral Aspects of the Play

The Pot of Gold is a comedy, rather a satiric comedy in which Plautus presents an amusing setting of human follies and vices. His purpose is to expose and ridicule what is grossly wrong and laughable. But in his aim to satirise and make fun of individuals' defaults, he does not ignore the social life and trend of the time to which they belong.

Like all of Plautus's plays, *The Pot of Gold*, too, is set in Athens. The people presented are Athenian. Yet, the themes and issues that are highlighted in the play are Roman. His comedies appear to be a replica, rather a reflection of the society of his time. His characters and their conduct help to build an idea of the manner in which the Roman society functioned in Plautus's time. *The Pot of Gold* gives an insight into Roman life at that time and the social practices in particular. Plautus's society, as presented, is not high, aristocratic. This is rather of low, common life. His penetrative power is straight and clear and what is mean and low in the then social life, especially the position of women and slaves in the then Rome, are shown in the play.

First, women did not enjoy much freedom in Roman times. Their

position can be well guessed from a comment of a Roman writer, "Our ancestors, in their wisdom, considered that all women, because of their innate weakness, should be under the control of guardians". He actually means the eternal sub-ordination of women to men. So, after the father, it was the husband's duty to be a woman's guardian. In the absence of either, the state recommended a male relative who would be appointed as a guardian. Girls were given the same education as boys, but only girls from rich families continued their education beyond primary stage. Women, in fact, had no say in their own matter.

Marriages were arranged, and girls were given dowries. The dowry system was a prevalent social evil. According to the Roman custom, the marriages of girls were arranged at a young age but the actual wedding took place when she became an adult. Interestingly, marriage gave the Roman women immense freedom. A Roman wife would be her husband's companion at all social ceremonies. She would be seated next to him at banquets and shared control over children, slaves and the household. Often it was she who supervised the slaves. But she must always remain sub-ordinate to her husband.

Slavery was a common evil in the Roman society. Slaves were made by either capturing from the losing side of a war or bought from provinces, like Turkey. Much of the Roman economy depended on the exploitation of slaves. The public works were managed by the slaves. Educated slaves helped in the administration and private industries. Slaves helped in the household matters. They could also be gladiators, and most actors of the Roman stage were slaves. They were considered a sign of prosperity for the owner, and even people with modest means owned slaves. Some households even entrusted the management of the household affairs to the slaves. *The Pot of Gold* bears out enough evidence in the matter.

Plautus's play prompts a number of moral principles necessary to keep life happy and peaceful. Money does not make life happy, unless one knows how to use it. In this respect, Megadorus, a character in the play, points out to his nephew, Lyconides that money is never to be valued for its own sake. It is to be employed for winning happiness

not only for one's ownself but for others, too. He advises his nephew that if the slave, who took away the pot of gold, is ready to return that, in exchange for his freedom, he must welcome the proposal, because this is to bring happiness to three persons, Euclio, the slave and Lyconides himself.

The dramatist also propagates his view that greed for gold brings unnecessary annoyance and restlessness. Euclio's excessive attachment to his pot of gold is actually haunted with the fear of losing his gold. It is only by giving that pot of gold to his newly wedded daughter and her husband as a dowry that he restores himself to mental peace and contentment. Megalorus's parting remark in this respect is worth quoting and following: "Contentment, peace of mind and sound sleep at night are worth more than a dozen pots of gold". A good satire is amusing as well as instructive. Plautus's *The Pot of Gold* well bears this out. The play, indeed, is a sturdy picture of the then social situation and the moral requirements for a happy and peaceful life.

4. The Comic Spirit in the Play / Sources of Comedy '*The Pot of Gold*'

Plautus's '*The Pot of Gold*' is an enjoyable comedy. It is a comedy not simply because of the happy end of two lovers in a marriage but also of the presence of the plenty of humour and fun, with satire finely intermingled. The principal source of the comic spirit of the play is its principal character Euclio. That old fellow, the father of a neglected daughter, is absorbed with a pot of gold which he has suddenly come to possess in his own house by the grace of the household god Lar Familiaris. That pot of gold is the root of all problems and restlessness. He is constantly haunted with the fear of losing this pot. He grows, as a result, suspicious, quarrelsome and often loses his temper. He least bothers about the state of his only daughter. He pretends his poverty, grows extremely miserly and tries to present himself as a miserable man, lest anyone should think him rich with a pot of gold.

The comedy in the play arises mainly from the dramatic irony of the action concerning Euclio. Despite all his obsessive efforts to

protect his pot of gold, this is somehow stolen from him. Funnily, it is his own fault that Lyconides's slave gets his hands on his pot of gold and steals it.

Comical situations also arise in the play from the dialogue. Witty descriptions of characters and recalling past incidents by Strobilus, Euclio and other characters add to the humour of the play. Euclio's description of Staphyla in an early scene is demeaning, no doubt, but gives rise to much laughter and fun.

The main source of the comic spirit of the play, however, remains in Euclio who, in his frantic attempts at preserving his gold and his suspicions of the others proves himself foolish and laughable.

The play is replete with instances of comic irony, when there is a gap between the dialogues and the intention of the character and the subsequent action. For instance, the exchange of words between Euclio and Lyconides is a classic example of Plautus's wonderful dramatic irony. Lyconides meets Euclio, who laments the loss of his gold. The former misinterprets it, and assumes that Euclio is talking about Phaedria. He then admits that he is the cause of Euclio's unhappiness, which leads to Euclio's suspecting him to be the thief. But Lyconides actually means the pregnancy of his daughter Phaedria, caused by him.

Ultimately the pot of gold is recovered by the young lover from his slave by releasing the latter from slavery.

On getting back the lost pot of gold, Euclio strangely changes. His lust for gold passes away. He agrees to the marriage of his daughter with the repentant youth and presents his pot of gold to the couple as a marriage dowry.

So the comic spirit becomes full of joy and fun. The satiric tone of the play has a moral lesson that the lust for gold is a curse of life.

5. The Soliloquy in *The Pot of Gold*

One of the fundamental tasks of a dramatist is to reveal the inner world of a character. This is no easy task. At the same time, it is essential to the understanding of a play and different characters. The task was particularly difficult in the earlier age. The property of the

stage was then extremely inadequate. The background music, as a revealer of the thought or feeling of a character, was yet to develop. Consequently, the old dramatist had immense difficulty in the matter of revealing the psychology of his men and women.

The dramatist's only resource to reveal a character in order to bring out his mental mechanism is the use of dialogue as a substitute for the direct analysis as well as commentary of a novelist. But the scope of the ordinary dialogue is rather inadequate to bring out the hidden recesses and the secret springs of the conduct of a person, particularly of a complex character, whose motive or objective may well be concealed from other characters. To comprehend fully and clearly the motive of action of such a person, the knowledge of the interior of his or her character is necessary. The dramatist is to dissect his men and women, but he has not the easy means of the novelist. What he does here is to allow them to do the work of dissection themselves. Those men and women think aloud to themselves, and their expressed thought is overheard by the audience.

This expression of the inner thought, which is overheard by the audience, is known popularly as the 'soliloquy'. This may be generally defined as thinking of himself or herself by one dramatic character. It is the device which a dramatist may well employ to analyse and scrutinize, like a novelist, a character. The soliloquy is the only exception to the use of dialogue for the purpose of revealing the basic nature of a man or woman. Of course, the term 'soliloquy' here includes the soliloquy proper as well as one of its particular variants— 'aside'; which is, in fact, a short soliloquy.

Although a hilarious comedy, *The Pot of Gold*, has several soliloquies. They serve to reveal much the nature of the speaker. At the beginning of the play, Euclio's soliloquy informs the audience of his intention to pretend to be poor in order to get a donation. His pretension on poverty for the safety of his pot of gold is also revealed. This gives the audience an insight into Euclio's true nature. The slave who steals the pot of gold, too, makes a long soliloquy when he enters. His soliloquy not just acquaints the audience with his nature, but also

anticipates some twists and turns in the action of the play. Megadorus's speech about dowry can also be classified as a soliloquy. Of course, in this case, the soliloquy has a listener on the stage. Unknown to Megadorus, Euclio overhears his views on dowry and decides that it would suit him to marry his daughter to Megadorus. In this way, the soliloquy in the play is found useful to move the action of the play forward.

6. The Significance of the Title of the Play

The title of Plautus's play is *The Pot of Gold*. This is significant enough, so far as the theme and the moral of the play is concerned. As a matter of fact, in the play *The Pot of Gold*, a real pot of gold, comes out of the grace of the family God, Lar Familiaris. This pot of gold suddenly makes Euclio a rich person to feel happy, but the effect is just the reverse. The pot of gold becomes the cause of his concern and anxiety, his suspicion and bad temper. He is constantly haunted with the apprehension that this may be stolen at any time. So, he tries to hide it from other's eyes and shifts its hiding place constantly, lest no one should know anything of the same. But this is not all. It also leads him to pretend himself as a poor man; his miserly nature is, thereby, revealed. Euclio's desperate desire to protect this pot of gold makes him restless and suspicious of everyone around him. In fact, he makes himself an object of pity and criticism by his possession of that pot of gold. Thus, the pot of gold controls the entire action of the play till the resolution of the problem by Euclio's decision to get rid of the same. The comic fun in the play, as already seen, revolves round the pot of gold. There is also a comic irony in the incident in which Euclio himself facilitates the slave of Lyconides to access to the pot and take it away. This leads to his pathetic lamentation, despite his daughter's agonized state caused by the labour pain of the birth of her illegitimate baby.

However, the happy end of the play follows from the same pot of gold. By releasing his slave from slavery, Lyconides restores the stolen pot from his slave. The pot of gold is returned by him to Euclio, who agrees to the marriage of his daughter, Phaedria with Lyconides

for his service to him in the matter of the pot of gold.

The play ends happily in the restoration of the pot of gold and the marriage of two young lovers, but the action of Euclio thereafter is strange. He does no more want to keep the pot of gold with him, but rather, gives it to the new couple as a marriage gift. His almost concluding speech in the last Act shows his realization of the moral that the pot of gold happens to be a curse and not a blessing to him –

“Day or night, I’ve not had a moment’s peace
with that treasure on my mind. Every hour
I have thought of some thief nosing round
my house, some accident exposing the
Whereabouts of the hidden hoard. A dozen times
a day I have tried to find new hiding places
for it, dug pits in my garden, pulled up the
hearth-stones, looked for secret crannies in
the rafters. A dozen times a night I have waked to
hear a spade scratch or a lock turned. Now
at last – I’m going to sleep.”

The moral aspect of the play is, thus, echoed in the term ‘the pot of gold’ which occupies the central position in the action of the play.

Hence, the title of the play seems quite just and appropriate, and perfectly reflects the content as well as the tone of the play.

7. Plot Construction

How far the plot in *The Pot of Gold* is Plautus’s original creation, is a matter of doubt. The Greek New Comedy happened to be a major influence on Plautus. It is quite natural that he borrowed a number of materials from his Greek predecessors, the authors of New Comedy, particularly Menander. It is apprehended that Plautus owes to Menander’s play *Dyskolos* for the materials of his *The Pot of Gold*.

Nevertheless, *The Pot of Gold* possesses a well-constructed plot. Even though the conclusion of the play is found missing, the subsequent translators are found to have reconstructed the ending of the play with aptness and ability.

The Pot of Gold has a very compact structure and reveals a good deal of Plautus's skill to construct his plot. There is no digression to distract the audience from the main line of the story. The major characters are well presented to keep the story of the play alive. Even the minor characters, such as the steward and the cooks, throw some useful light on Euclio's peculiar habits and thereby contribute to the comic element of the play.

In fact, Plautus's plot is single, which develops in a most convincing manner, without any deviation or digression. Its main theme is single and clear, and that is the human folly of avarice and miserliness. The play is largely built around one character, Euclio, whose show of poverty and love for gold remain interesting all through. All the situations and the events of the play are intended to ridicule those two follies of Euclio. Nothing hinders the advancement of the plot which develops at a brisk space to hold the attention of the audience throughout.

Of course, there is another aspect of the plot of the play. This is Phaedria's affair with Lyconides. The affair is not much shown, but indicated in the pregnancy of the girl who is never seen on the stage but whose cries, under the labour pain, is heard.

It is, however, in the happy union of the lovers in a marriage tie that turns the play into a pleasant comedy. Of course, this may be taken as a subsidiary plot, but it is closely associated with the main plot. The hero of the main plot gets his final relief and peace of mind by presenting his pot of gold as the wedding gift to the new couple.

Finally, as in the Roman plays, Plautus strictly maintains the three unities of Time, Place and Action in his play, *The Pot of Gold*. The action of the play is single that revolves around the theme of avarice and miserliness. The entire action of the play seems to take place within a short span of a few hours. The place remains always the same – a small part of a local street of Athens, where the houses of Euclio and Megadorus are situated, with an open space for the shrine of the god of good faith.