**The Braggart Warrior**

Comic plays were very popular in the Roman Republic. Performed as part of public or religious festivals, these plays ridiculed recognizable human weaknesses and foolishness. The most popular writer of comedies in ancient Rome was Plautus (≈254B.C.-184 B.C.). Plautus adapted his most famous play, *The Braggart Warrior*, from a Greek comedy. It pokes fun at a conceited, boastful soldier named Pyrgopolynices and at the “friends” who flatter him to his face but laugh at him behind his back. The setting is the Greek city of Ephesus.

In the 1960s, several comedies of Plautus were turned into a musical, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to* *the Forum*. One of the characters was a braggart warrior.

*[Enter Pyrgopolynices, followed by Artotrogus and orderlies; the orderlies carry an enormous shield.]*

PYRGOPOLYNICES (*to the orderlies, as he struts about*): Take pains to make my shield shine far more brilliantly than do the rays of the sun when the sky is cloudless; when the need arises and the conflict commences1, I want it to dazzle the enemy’s sight on the battle site. (*Examining his sword*) Now I wish to comfort this poor blade of mine, so that it won’t be miserable or downcast at heart because it’s been hanging here at my side so long on a holiday2; it’s awfully eager to make mincemeat of the enemy. But where is Artotrogus?

ARTOTROGUS (*stepping forward*): He stands beside a man who’s brave and blessed and as beautiful as a prince; and as to your fame as a fighter—Mars3 himself wouldn’t dare mention it, or compare his achievements with yours.

PYRGOPOLYNICES: Was that the fellow I saved in the battle of Weevil Plains, where the commander in chief was Bumbomachides Clutomestoridysarchides4, the grandson of Nepture5?

ARTOTROGUS: Ah, I remember. You mean the one with the golden armor, whose legions you puffed away with a breath, just as the wind blows away leaves on a thatched roof.

PYRGOPOLYNICES: Heavens! That was a mere nothing.

ARTOTROGUS: A mere nothing, to be sure, compared to the other deeds I could mention—(*aside*) which you never did. (*To the audience*)6 If anyone has seen a greater liar or a bigger bundle of conceit than this fellow, he can have me as his own and I’ll guarantee the title7. There’s one thing to consider, though; his olive salad in excellent eating.

PYRGOPOLYNICES: Where are you?

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1*commences*: begins

2*holiday*: vacation

3*Mars*: the Roman god of war

4*Bumbomachides* *Clutomestoridysarchides*: In Latin, this name means “Roaring-battle-son

mighty-adviser-of wretched-strategy-son.” Plautus often made up long, ridiculous names.

5*Neptune*: Roman god of the sea

6Characters in Roman comedies often addressed the audience directly.

7*title*: statement of ownership

ARTOTROGUS: Right here, sir, Gad! That elephant in India, for instance! How you smashed its forearm with your fist!

PYRGOPOLYNICES: What? Forearm?

ARTOTROGUS: Foreleg, I meant to say.

PYRGOPOLYNICES: I didn’t hit very hard.

ARTOTROGUS: Of course not. If you had really put your strength into it, our arm would have transpierced8 the elephant all the way through hide, flesh, bone and all.

PYRGOPOLYNICES: I’d rather not talk about this now.

ARTOTROGUS: Heavens! It really isn’t worthwhile for you to tell me about it: I know all your achievements. (*Aside*) It’s my belly that’s responsible for all my sufferings. I have to ‘ear him with my ears, so that my dental work can make dents in food; and I have to agree to any lie he tells.

PYRGOPOLYNICES: What was it that I was saying?

ARTOTROGUS: Ah! I know already what you want to say. Heavens! You did it. I remember that you did it.

PYRGOPOLYNICES: Did what?

ARTOTROGUS: Whatever it is you did.

PYRGOPOLYNICES: Do you have –

ARTOTROGUS: You want a tablet9. I have it, and a pen, too.

PYRGOPOLYNICES: Clever of you to be so attentive with your attention.

ARTOTROGUS: It’s right for me to know your character through and through and to take pains that I get the first whiff of your wishes.

PYRGOPOLYNICES: Well, what do you recall?

ARTOTROGUS (*calculating*): Let me see. I recall there were one hundred and fifty in Cilicia, a hundred in Scythobrigandia, thirty Sardians, sixty Macedonians10—those are the men you slaughtered in one day.

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8*transpierced*: gone through

9*tablet*: stone writing pad

10Cilicia, Scythia, Sardi, Macedon, and Cappadocia (below) were all cities or kingdoms of the ancient world.

PYRGOPOLYNICES: And what’s the sum total of the men?

ARTOTROGUS: Seven thousand.

PYRGOPOLYNICES: Yes, that’s what it ought to be. Your calculation is quite correct.

ARTOTROGUS: I don’t write any of it down, either; I just rely on my memory.

PYRGOPOLYNICES: Well, you’ve a damned excellent one.

ARTOTROGUS (*aside*): The thought of food helps it.

PYRGOPOLYNICES: If you behave as you have in the past, you’ll have plenty to eat; I shall always share my table with you.

ARTOTROGUS: What about the time in Cappadocia when you would have killed five hundred men all with one stroke, if your sword hadn’t been dull?

PYRGOPOLYNICES: But they were worthless infantrymen; I let them live.

ARTOTROGUS: Why should I tell you what all mortals know, that you are the one and only Pyrgopolynices on earth, unsurpassed in valor11, in beauty, and in brave deeds? All the women are in love with you, and not without reason, since you’re so handsome. Take, for instance, those girls yesterday who caught me by my cloak.

PYRGOPOLYNICES (*concealing his eagerness*): What did they say to you?

ARTOTROGUS: They kept asking about you. “Is this fellow Achilles12? one of them says to me. “No,” says I, “but it is his brother.” Then the other one says to me, “Dear me, but he’s handsome, and such a gentleman, too. Just look how lovely his hair is….”

PYRGOPOLYNICES: Did they really say that?

ARTOTROGUS: Why, didn’t both of them beg me to lead you past there today, as if you were on parade?

PYRGOPOLYNICES (*pretending indifference*): It’s such a nuisance for a man to be so handsome.

ARTOTROGUS: Absolutely right, sir. They’re a bother to me; they beg, urge, beseech13 to be allowed to see you; they keep sending for me, so that I can’t devote myself to your business.

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11valor: courage

12Achilles: ancient Greek hero

13beseech: plead

PRYGOPOLYNICES: Well, I guess that it’s time for us to go to the forum14, so that I can pay the recruits I enlisted yesterday….

ARTOTROGUS: Well, then, let’s do it.

PYRGOPOLYNICES: After me, you attendants! (*All march off*.)

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14*forum*: public square in ancient Rome, where legal or political business was conducted.

*Write your answers to the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.*

**Comprehension**

1. List three superhuman feats supposedly performed by Pyrgopolynices.
2. (a) What is Artotrogus’ real opinion of Pyrgopolynices? (b) What reason does Artotrogus give for flattering Pyrgopolynices?
3. (a) How does Artotrogus trick Pyrgopolynices about the number of men Pyrgopolynices “slaughtered in one day”? (b) Does Pyrgopolynices see through the trick?

**Critical Thinking**

1. (a) To what social class do you think Pyrgopolynices belongs? (b) What does his attitude toward his inferiors show you about the Roman social system?
2. (a) How are the Roman gods treated in this scene? (b) What does this suggest about Roman attitudes toward religion?
3. Do you think soldiers like Pyrgopolynices were admired in ancient Rome? Why or why not?
4. Do you think that people like Pyrgopolynices and Artotrogus exist today? Where?