

**DEFINING IDENTITY: THE CASE OF THE MENAECHMUS
BROTHERS IN PLAUTUS' MENAECHEMI**

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In spite of its comic nature and what appears to be superficial commentary on the foreign culture experience of one character, Plautus' *Menaechmi* presents the serious ramifications resulting from the mistaken identity of another. The play focuses on the identity of two identical twin brothers named Menaechmus. This paper will examine an aspect ignored in scholarly attention, the importance of the verbs *noscere*, *scire* (to know), and *videre* (to see) in defining identity as the action develops, and subsequently their insignificance as signifiers of correct identity. This study undertakes a close reading of the sections of Plautus' text in Latin where the verbs *noscere*, *scire*, and *videre* refer to the identity of the twins. The Epidamnians, not knowing that they are identical twins, rely exclusively on the strength of their familiarity with the physical image (*forma*) of MenaechmusE, the native, to insist that they know MenaechmusS, the foreigner as well, and even expect him to know them just as well as they know him. And, by relying on the physical appearance of ME to identify MS as ME, the Epidamnians miss or overlook obvious signifiers of his non-Epidamnian identity, such as, his ignorance of the culture of Epidamnus, and emphatic insistence on his foreign identity. This method of identification, or rather misidentification, functions well in the play because never in the course of the play do the Epidamnians see or meet the twins together in person. When the Epidamnians use forms of *noscere*, they are based superficially on their familiarity with the *forma* of ME to identify MS as ME, not verified information. Likewise, when they (mis)identify MS using *scire* and *videre*, verbs that can attach a formal and factual basis to knowledge, they fail to establish the identity of MS correctly. Nevertheless, the concluding Act of the play questions the soundness of the judgment based entirely on the perception of the physical image, and shows that the onus of establishing identity correctly and accurately falls not on a single verb or verbs, such as *noscere*, *scire* or *videre*, but on substantial determinants of identity such as childhood memories and details of parentage that are carefully sought and verified through personal experience. Thus this process is indispensable to establish correct identity that occurs away from the knowing eyes of the Epidamnians whose index of identity had proven to be unreliable with respect to identical twin brothers of the same name.