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*Deception as Social Commentary in  
Plautus's Captivi*

By Audra Russo

During the time of Plautus, society relied heavily upon the distinction between slaves and freedmen. So as to confirm the claimed superior morality and intelligence of the free people, slaves were openly considered and presented as "morally...[and] inherently inferior" in all aspects.<sup>1</sup> In his play *Captivi*, however, Plautus's association of slaves and freedmen through deception boldly challenges the social construction of the relationship between these two social classes. This important social commentary can only be effective because Plautus presents his audience with the conception that the distinction between slaves and freedmen is merely a state of mind. As Tyndarus and Philocrates play off of this notion they are able to create their deceptive plot, thus revealing the reality of social perceptions.

In the play, before anyone mentions the supposed relationship of Tyndarus and Philocrates, the Overseer assumes that both were free men. "LOR. Domi fuistis credo liberi."<sup>2</sup> Although this is ironic in the sense that both were truly free at some point (and that Tyndarus was free in the very place

where he is now captive), it also illustrates the importance of social construction when determining the class of an individual in the time of Plautus. The only indication as to what status these men had possessed in their original society is social interaction with each other. Because the two men had grown up with each other, they are close and act as if they were brothers (no matter what class differences were imposed upon them by society). Although the Overseer's observation is not specified in the play, he most likely saw that outward relationship and he concluded that they were of the same class.

Although he had designated the men with this 'free' status, in this society he only recognizes them as slaves to Hegio. Not even considering the respect that they may have earned at home, he proceeds to treat them as if they were slaves, referring to Hegio as their master. "LOR. At pigeat postea / nostrum erum, si vos eximat vinclis / Aut solutos sinat quos argento emerit."<sup>3</sup> When Hegio told the Overseer about the men, he did not describe them as particularly harmful, but still encouraged him to watch them with great care while, at the same time, loosening their chains and allowing them to walk around.

HE.

...[M]aiore quibus sunt iuncti demito

<sup>1</sup> Moore, Timothy J. *The Theatre of Plautus*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998. 181.

<sup>2</sup> Goetz, Goergii, and Friderich Schoell, ed. *T. Macci Plautus: Comoediae II. Captivi*. line 197.

<sup>3</sup> *Captivi*., lines 203-205.

Sinisto ambulare, si foris intus voluent  
Sed uti adseruentur magna digentia...  
...Non videre ita tu quidem.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, if Hegio had presented them differently - as guests or, conversely, as highly threatening people - the Overseer would have formed a completely different impression of Tyndarus and Philocrates. In this way, much as it is in society today, initial impressions are influenced by information from a bias secondary source.

In Act III, the importance of this social "mindset" is revealed as well. In a specific scene, quite possibly the epitome of the aforementioned concept, Tyndarus had been avoiding contact with Hegio, who knows him as Philocrates, and Aristophontes who knows, actually, the real Philocrates and Tyndarus. "AR. ...[E]go domi liber fui, / Tu usque a puero seruitutem seruiuisti in Alide."<sup>5</sup> Tyndarus now is attempting to convince Hegio that he [Tyndarus] is, in fact Philocrates, even though Aristophontes claims differently.

The concept of class as mindset is demonstrated in all three of the characters in the scene, but is most complicated for Tyndarus because he knows that Aristophontes is correct. He also knows that, for fear of his life, he needs to convince Hegio that he knows himself to truly be Philocrates. These two completely different mindsets present a difficulty when he must incorporate both into his verbal struggle.

Hegio, who has been misled since their introduction, has been under the impression that Tyndarus is Philocrates. He, however, is growing confused since Aristophontes is so passionate about his knowledge that Tyndarus (as Philocrates) is, in fact, a slave. Thus the situation creates a battle of persuasion versus fact between Tyndarus and Aristophontes, respectively. Aristophontes is confused as well, because he has learned for himself that Tyndarus is actually a slave and must defend this knowledge by convincing Hegio of the truthfulness of his argument and proving Tyndarus's insanity, as Tyndarus, simultaneously, is attempting to expose Aristophontes's 'mental illness'.

TYN. Hegio, istic homo rabiosus habitus est in Alide:

Ne tu quod istic fabuletur auris immittas tuas. Nam istic hastis insectatus est domi matrem a patrem, Et illic isti <qui> sputatur morbus interdum uenit. Proin tu ab istoc procul recedas...

...Viden tu hunc, quam inimico uoltu intuator?...

...giscit rabies: caue tibi.<sup>6</sup>

AR. Ain, uerbero?

Me rabiosum atque insectatum esse hastis meum memoras patrem?

Et eum morbum mi esse, ut qui med opus sit insputarier?<sup>7</sup>

Hegio is influenced by Aristophontes's simple explanation after the intense exchange between the two men. The two competitors, trying to impose their mindsets upon Hegio,

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 120, 113-115.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 543-544.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., lines 547-551, 558-559.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 551-553,

illustrate the power of this type of persuasion.

As a result of this outcome, Tyndarus does not have the support of Hegio's state of mind. When Hegio believed that Tyndarus was Philocrates, Tyndarus had the confidence that he could act as someone of a higher class than a slave. Upon being found out by Hegio, he still has confidence in himself, but he reverts back to referring to Philocrates as master and admitting that he was owned. "TYN. Optumest: / At erum serserusui, quem seruatum gaudeo, / Quoi me custodem addiderat erus maior meus."<sup>8</sup> It is interesting that, even though Philocrates and Tyndarus could be considered friends, Tyndarus feels compelled to meet the standards of those who consider him a slave.

Before considering how Plautus challenges the social constructions of slavery and freedom, it is important to examine the social construction of slaves, as well as possible reasons why these social constructions of the classes existed, and how they were most likely implanted. By understanding the constructions and discovering the possible social motives for and processes by which the system could have been established, Plautus's attempts to challenge the system are more understandable. Slaves, Romans believed, were inherently slaves.<sup>9</sup> They were born slaves and would always remain slaves, unless there was a disturbance in the social

order. Freedmen did not only consider slaves to be morally inferior, but they also stereotyped slaves as "uglier, less intelligent, and generally worse"<sup>10</sup> beings than themselves.

These constructions may have occurred as a result of the need for the dominant culture to feel some sort of superiority. Certain cultures may have been chosen based on beliefs, the fact that historical conflicts existed between that particular culture and the dominant society, or merely because they appeared different. In any case, for some reason, certain people are chosen to become inferior beings for the dominant society. The way in which the superiority of the dominant culture is implemented, probably similar to how it has been implemented in modern society, is by merely creating a state of mind within themselves, by which the dominant society convinces itself that their culture is the superior culture. This mindset is then personified and acted upon. As this society treats the delegated culture as inferior, the delegated culture may begin to assume the roles given to it by the dominant culture in order to avoid castigation that could occur if they do not comply. Eventually, the mindsets of both the freedmen and of the slaves become so universal, that the freedmen accept it and, unfortunately, many of the slaves accept it as well, as if that is how society is destined to be constructed. Thus,

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<sup>8</sup> *Captivi*, 706-708.

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<sup>9</sup> Moore, 181.

boundaries are created between the two classes, which, according to society, should not be touched. Plautus, however, manages to erase these boundaries in *Captivi*, challenging the audience to reconsider how their society had been constructed and how valid the boundaries between slaves and freedmen truly are.

Throughout most of the play, Tyndarus and Philocrates have decided to deceive Hegio by trading places as master and slave in order for Philocrates to get permission to go home for a while. The first obvious parallel between these two men is that both of them are slaves under Hegio's reign. The most important issue to consider, though, is that they are able to exchange roles easily, deceiving those with whom they came in contact, excepting Aristophontes, who had, of course, known both of them prior to the encounter.

As both Tyndarus and Philocrates readjust their mindset, as actors do when preparing to play a role opposite of their natural personality, the men remind each other of the roles in which they are about to submerge themselves.

PHIL. Et propterea saepis ted ut meminiris moneo: Non ego erus tibi, sed seruus sum. nunc obsecro te hoc unum: Quoniam nobis di immortalis animum ostenderunt suum, Vt qui wrum me tibi fuisse atque esse [nunc] conseruom uelint, Quom antehac pro iure imperitabam meo, nonc te oro per precem, Per fortunam incertam at per mei ye erga bonitatem patris, Perque conseruitium

commune quod hostica euenit manu, Ne me secus honore honesties quam seruibas mihi, Atque ut qui fueris et qui nunc sis meminisse ut memineris.

TYN. Scio quidem me te esse nunc esse te me.<sup>11</sup>

They must first convince themselves that they are becoming the other person or else anyone could penetrate the ploy in an instant. While even the initial impression that this plan could be successfully accomplished began to break the boundaries between classes, the first real advancement in the process was the ease by which each transformed into the other. If slaves, as society believed, were inherently slaves and freedmen inherently free, it should, in theory, be difficult for both parties to modify their presentation of themselves, especially since the change converted them into a character of a different social status. The way that the slaves would carry themselves and the level and complexity of their speech, would most likely be difficult to change if they had always only known how to act as society has ordered them, aside from what they have observed. Through this transformation process Plautus shows the audience that a slave has the capacity to think as a freedman would think and even carry himself as a person of higher class carries himself. Thus, society must reconsider whether or not slaves would be capable of such a way of life.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 182.

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<sup>11</sup> *Captivi*, 240-249.

Both Tyndarus and Philocrates plan the deception, raising issues of morality. Deception, although a popular issue in metatheater and Plautine comedy, is considered to be lying, which is usually deemed as an immoral act. A stock stereotype played in the theatre and held in society is that slaves may be clever and deceitful, and so, they are, consequently, immoral. Through his role in the deceptive plot, Tyndarus clearly illustrates this stereotype, but the audience cannot overlook that Philocrates plans and carries out the plot as well. Plautus presents an important argument to the audience through this aspect of the plot. Not only do slaves have the capacity to act as freedmen, proving that they cannot be inherently slaves, but freedmen also have the capacity to act as stereotypical slaves. Though discomfiting to the audience, with this revelation, Plautus proves the immorality of freedmen, admitting that all cultures have the capacity to be immoral, just as all cultures have the capacity for rational thinking and greatness.

Moreover, as Tyndarus is revealed as being the son of Hegio, the argument given by Plautus is strengthened even more so. "PHIL. Quin isitc isust Tyndarus tuos [Hegio's] filius."<sup>12</sup> Not only has a freedman become a slave, but that slave also had the opportunities to act as a freedman, consequently returning him to slave status, then back to the class of a freedman. These

rapid transitions within the play, nearly confused the Plautine audience, but exemplified the truth of society. If placed in a situation, or class, and convinced that it was the place in which you were meant to be or were going to be held for the rest of one's life, anyone is able to conform to the code of conduct for the particular society, thus obliterating the possibility that slaves are inherently the subservient people.

Raising important issues about the nature of slaves and perceptions of cultures formed for mere convenience, Plautus's challenges of the social construction created subjects of "potential discomfort"<sup>13</sup> among people of the dominant society. After considering themselves superior to many other cultures for so many years, to be presented with ideas that disputed these values was overwhelming. The slave races were always considered races that represented all of the faults of humanity. Suggesting that slaves may possess the virtues supposedly granted to those who consider themselves superior and that those supposedly superior have the faults designated to the slave culture, the audience may reconsider the assumptions and realize that faults and virtues could, quite possibly, be more evenly allotted than their dominant society would have enjoyed to believe.

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<sup>12</sup> *Captivi*, 990.

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<sup>13</sup> Moore, 181.