

Staging the Foreign: a look at Plautus' *Curculio*

This paper examines the relationship of Plautus' *Curculio* to the notion of foreignness or exoticism. Though the onstage location of this play is dubbed Epidaurus, it is merely a “sort of default mode in which the location is just a marker of hybridity” (Richlin 2005). When *Curculio* arrives from exotic places off-stage to Epidaurus, he changes the whole setting from a theatrical Greece to a hybrid Rome with his aggressive speech, thereby blurring the boundaries between the two. His one-eyed character has no depth perception, physically or literarily, and therefore sees no difference between “There” (onstage) and “Here” (in Rome). I argue that this awareness of Greco-Roman hybridity is a precursor to *Curculio*'s staging of the imaginary foreignness of Caria. Though the audience never sees this exotic place whence *Curculio* is meant to have come, *Curculio* paints the picture with his words and stage props (Sharrock 2008). By staging foreignness, *Curculio* brings the foreign “outside” within his world, a skill which is perfectly in keeping with his playful demonstration of Greco-Roman hybridity.

I proceed to show how *Curculio*'s main adversary, Lyco the banker, provides the counterexample to the parasite's staging of the foreign imaginary. The unfortunate banker does not succeed in this play because he is not behaving as a conqueror of the Greek stage—he remains fixed in Roman geography and remains unable to recognize a local posing as an exotic traveller. He believes that he lives in a city where only Roman laws—the ones he himself understands and exploits—apply. He appreciates the exoticism of the East as a source of profit but does not use his experience with “alien money” to create foreignness as *Curculio* does. The confrontation between *Curculio* and Lyco ends in *Curculio*'s triumph as the banker falls for his scheme. Lyco, who cannot move beyond Rome, fails to understand where he is, in “Plautopolis” where Greek philosophers crowd the streets and Greek stock characters loiter in the Roman forum (Gratwick 1982). Lyco is therefore a perfect victim for *Curculio*'s foreign narrative, well-

supplemented as it is by Curculio's invocation of foreign places and his array of "foreign" stage props. Unfortunately, Lyco insists on looking for all foreignness in the distance and not productively engaging in the foreignness surrounding him.

Using these two characters as my primary examples, I show how the *Curculio* foregrounds both Greek and non-Greek foreignness and weaves Rome, Greece, and "other" (either the East or Carthage) in a three-stranded plait throughout the plot. Curculio and the choragus have been convincingly shown to be reflections of each other inasmuch as they both display the blurred lines between the onstage "Greece" and the Roman forum in which the audience is watching the play (Moore 1991, Barbiero 2016). My position is that the chaotic display of hybrid Greco-Roman elements is irrevocably linked to Curculio's creation of an imaginary foreign narrative for his onstage victim, Lyco. Lyco unnervingly cites Roman laws which were the source of real problems among the citizenry and never performs the "Roman self-consciousness about...non-Greekness and the adaptation of Greekness" (Dufallo 2013), choosing instead to ignore Greekness entirely. Lyco's reference to the *foro* and his self-definition as one of the *argentarii* suggests that his allegiance is to Romanness, an identity which is contrasted with Curculio's creative hybridity (Gaertner 2014). Although Lyco himself lives on *argentum alienum*, he is imprisoned in the here and now.

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