

## Audience Expectations and Metatheater in Plautus' *Captivi*

Scholarship on Plautus' *Captivi* traditionally highlights the weirdness of the play among New Comedies (Duckworth 1952, Leach 1969, Gosling 1983). Scholars have described, among other “oddities” (Thalmann 1996), a serious tone that offers startlingly sincere commentary upon the master-slave relationship (Konstan 1983, McCarthy 2000), and—remarkably for a genre that so often explores the roles of women in ancient society—its complete lack of female characters (Viljoen 1963). Given the formulaic nature of New Comedy, such deviations from generic norms stand out so dramatically as to provoke debate over whether *Captivi* is really a Plautine play (Segal 1987). That the details of its plot and the tone of its dialog stand out compared to Plautus' other plays is undeniable. When viewed structurally, however, as a combination of two stock plotlines, *Captivi* will appear complicated but far more generically regular than has previously been recognized.

Through a consideration of comic trajectories in *Captivi*, I argue that Plautus tests the rules of New Comedy's characteristic plot formulae and thereby creates a metatheatrical effect that calls attention to *Captivi*'s generic status as a comedy. By incorporating specific, recognizable plot elements into the prologue (1-68) and opening scenes (92-106, 221-250), Plautus builds the expectation that *Captivi* will follow the patterns of the *servus callidus* and lost-child formulae familiar from plays like *Bacchides*, *Pseudolus*, *Rudens*, and *Menaechmi*. These details lead his audience to anticipate the successful deception of the *senex* Hegio and the reunion of Tyndarus with his birth family; nevertheless, through a series of mishaps initiated by Aristophontes' arrival (533), both the deception and the recognition plots encounter seemingly insurmountable obstacles that suggest that *Captivi* will end in the torturous death of a free-born citizen, sent to the quarries by his own father who fails to recognize him (721-726). Such a

conclusion would violate the rules of New Comedy, according to which masters are tricked, disobedient slaves are pardoned, and lost citizens return to their proper status. Following this collapse of the play's two primary plotlines, however, Plautus suddenly restores them to their typical trajectories with the introduction of Stalagmus. Thus in *Captivi*'s final scenes he corrects the disastrous outcomes of the failed deception scheme and Aristophontes' misidentification of Tyndarus so as to provide the generically required happy ending after all.

I argue that this deviation from and return to generic plotlines gives *Captivi* a unique two-arc structure that creates a pronounced metatheatrical effect, encouraging the audience to become aware of their expectations of the genre and to question whether the play that they are watching is a comedy. Punishing a slave in the quarries, for example, happens in the real world, not in the New Comic one, and so the more realistic *Captivi*'s plot appears, the less it resembles a comedy. Consequently, the farther the *servus callidus* and lost-child plotlines diverge from the expectations that Plautus initially activates, the more the audience recognize their understanding of New Comedy and the artificiality of its conventions.

Metatheater has come to be regarded as one of the most distinctive features of Plautine comedy, particularly when it appears as direct addresses to the audience, plays-within-plays, or references to playwrights and actors (Slater 1985). Yet the concept may also include the playwright's engagement and manipulation of the expectations of an attentive and experienced audience (Moore 1998). My extension of Plautine metatheater from a feature of individual lines and scenes to a component of the play's structure casts *Captivi* not as an outlier, but rather as one of the most Plautine New Comedies. When we recognize *Captivi* as a remarkable but generically consistent Plautine play, we can stop treating it as an anomaly and reintegrate it into our study of

Roman Comedy. As we learn more about Plautus' understanding and mastery of his genre, we learn more about the New Comic world that he builds in his plays.

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