Tricking the Trickster: Milphio’s Downfall

Initially, *Poenulus* appears to be a typical Plautine play in which a young lover employs his *servus callidus* to obtain his beloved, and yet this play ends not as a trickster slave comedy, but rather with an *anagnorisis*. The slave Milphio is supplanted from his role by the Carthaginian Hanno. In an interesting twist, the clever slave loses control over the plot precisely at the moment when he believes he is most in control. When he believes he really is the *servus callidus*, he fails to look beyond the plot he is creating to see the recognition plot that takes over. Through Milphio, Plautus challenges the superiority of the clever slave precisely through the relationship between identity and roles one might play.

Given the heightened sense of role awareness (Slater [1992]), *Poenulus* is useful for thinking about the relationship between identity and roles. Following Slater [2000], scholars have discussed the importance of the *servus callidus*’ metatheatrical self-awareness. Batstone [2005] notes that the truly metatheatrical characters are those “who know that they are both other than the plot in which they appear and constructed by that plot (33).” Plautus highlights this quality in Milphio in the initial encounter between slave and master. The slave recognizes that he is called to adopt the role of *servus callidus*, but he simultaneously asserts the perspective of actual slaves when he speaks of the beatings he regularly takes (141-144). In so doing, he makes us aware of the tension he feels between being other than the plot and constructed by it.

The strength of a Plautine clever slave’s plots derives precisely from his awareness of this tension. As Milphio seeks to deceive the pimp, he encourages his assistant to play a traveler in need of Lycus’ services. In so doing, he asks his assistant to embrace the opportunity to play a role he knows he is different from (Maurice [2004]). At the same time, this feigned role perfectly fits the plot that constructs the pimp. Driven by money, Lycus does not question the truth of who the slave claims to be. He sees only the prospect of profit. Failing to maintain a metatheatrical perspective, the pimp is easily ensnared by Milphio and his co-conspirators.

The clever slave is equally susceptible to being trapped by the plot. Having accepted the call to play the *servus callidus*, Milphio embraces the chance to plot at every turn. After he learns that his master’s beloved is actually a freeborn Carthaginian, he sees the arrival of Hanno as an opportunity to craft one final deception. Plautus questions the imperviousness of the clever slave when Milphio is caught pretending to know Punic, though Hanno clearly knows Latin (1023-1031). Having ceded the strategic advantage of knowing where performance ends and reality starts (i.e. how one is different from, but constructed by a plot), Milphio commits to his theatrical role, seeing performance everywhere. He suggests that Hanno pretend to be the father of his master’s beloved, and he interprets Hanno’s claim to be their father as evidence of excellent acting (1106). When Hanno cries over the loss of his daughters, Milphio believes he sees the mark of an arch-deceiver (1110). Trusting that as a *servus callidus* he has a privileged position within the Plautine world, Milphio fails to understand that the developing plot makes his role irrelevant.

Through *Poenulus*, Plautus pushes us to think about the consequences of our attitude towards our identity. When we adopt a theatrical approach towards our life (we are different from our plots), we are able to reimagine our world. At the same time, we cannot forget that we are constructed by the plots we are called to participate in. We cannot stand outside our world like gods. Should we forget this, we become like Milphio, trapped by one plotline and unable to see another developing. Plautus urges us to understand that our success stems from our ability to navigate this tension between our difference from our roles and the ways that plots construct roles we might play.

**Works Cited**

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