

Catch or Release? The Usage of a 'Seeking' Character by Plautus

This paper attempts to identify and document a previously unrecognized trope in Plautus: the figure of the 'seeker' and his (or her) search for a missing family member. As is well known, Greek New Comedy and the Roman *palliatae* are populated by a slew of standard character-types: the *miles gloriosus*, the *servus callidus*, the *adulescens amator*, the *senex iratus*, among others. Another common feature is a character who is in some sense "lost" or "missing" due to capture by pirates, exposure as free-born children, or some other mishap. These same plays very often also have someone who is seeking the missing figure, usually an older family member. I argue that these seekers conform to a character-type of their own.

Nowhere in the secondary literature is the 'seeker' recognized as a character-type alongside the more familiar examples. In *Roman Laughter*, Erich Segal established a pattern of Saturnalian inversion—where master and slave change places—in Roman Comedy, and the trope of the 'seeker' encompasses several aspects of this inversion, where the expected and unexpected change places. Timothy Moore, in his *The Theatre of Plautus*, notices several similarities in the behavior of the slaves in the plays that also feature "seekers" according to my analysis, but he does not discuss similarities among their masters.

The seeker figure, as I define him, is typically an agelast—someone who does not realize he is in a comedy and does not get the jokes. He is not, however, a negative figure, as other agelasts (like the pimps) tend to be. In the course of his search, he goes to great lengths and great expense to find his missing family (e.g. Hegio in *Captivi*, Hanno in *Poenulus*, Menaechmus in *Menaechmi*). Although an important man in society, he is easily fooled by the *servus callidus*. The 'seeker' never finds the missing person on his own, but the clever slave usually intervenes and reunites the family, not without significant personal risk. Unlike the *senex* figure, the seeker

is not necessarily an old man, although he is invariably someone in a position of equal or relatively greater authority and respectability than others he encounters. Lastly, the seeker is flawed in character, suggesting his authority and position are undeserved.

The best evidence for these figures are *Poenulus*, *Captivi*, and *Menaechmi*. In *Epidicus* and *Cistellaria*, however, an alternative version of this trope appears as the slaves search for the missing person on behalf of their masters, who are simultaneously searching, thereby creating a ‘competitive’ search. Three more plays: *Rudens*, *Miles Gloriosus*, and *Truculentus*, all share a few aspects of this trope as well. In *Truculentus* in particular, the seeker trope appears as interference to the main plot in a form of *contaminatio* which (I argue) is key to understanding the play’s reception.

There are several ramifications of recognizing this trope and character-type. A variation on Segal’s Saturnalian inversion appears in that the assisting slave is more competent than the seeking master. By emphasizing the master’s social importance (eg *Epidicus*, 517 ff, *Captivi*, 781-789), Plautus sets him up for a comparison with the slave. Time and time again, the prominent free man is incapable of achieving his desires without the machinations of the slaves. As *Epidicus* notes: *Ego sum defessus reperire, vos defessi quaerere.* (1.720) The master was looking, but *Epidicus* was *finding*. In such cases, the slave outdoes the master at the very task the master seeks to accomplish. Furthermore, the slaves’ language of leading troops, besieging houses, or summoning meetings all suggests that they are truly not only the ones who *are* in charge, but belong in charge too. (See Segal 129, Arnott, 78) Additionally, since the seeker exhibits a flawed character, the slaves are seen as more honorable than these flawed masters. Lastly, the seeker, by virtue of his seriousness, forces the audience to confront serious issues amidst the comedy. Through these examples, I hope to show that this trope and character-type

have a distinct identity of their own in Plautus and should be recognized as another standard framework Plautus employs in his comedies.

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