

## The Dangers of Theater in *Miles Gloriosus*

In Plautus' early play *Miles Gloriosus*, the clever slave Palaestrio successfully deceives two main blocking characters, the slave Sceledrus and the soldier Pyrgopolynices. Though scholars tend to focus on the deception, I suggest that we need to take a closer look at the reactions of Sceledrus and Pyrgopolynices when they realize that they have been duped. Their reactions demonstrate the dangers of believing entirely in the fantasies that theatricality (here embodied by Palaestrio) presents. The dangers of theatricality are not limited to those within the play, but may also be extended to the relationship between the play and us in the audience.

It becomes clear in the parallels between Sceledrus and Pyrgopolynices (Forehand 1973, Saylor 1977, Moore 1998) that Palaestrio knows the value of a theatrical life, staging two deceptions in which his supporting cast dons a variety of roles. If we overemphasize Palaestrio's role as playwright, we run the risk of trapping the potential of this comedy on the stage. Following Batstone's (2005) response to Slater (2000), I will make the case that Plautus plays with a sense of metatheater that emphasizes life as a dream and the world as a stage. The reactions of the two blocking characters when they find themselves caught up in the dream world of Palaestrio are more important than the creative staging of deceptions by Palaestrio.

As Sceledrus enters the stage, he comments that he is sure that he saw the girl he should be guarding kissing a man next door unless he has been sleep walking (272-4). The deception of Sceledrus then hinges upon convincing Sceledrus that he did not see the girl, but her twin sister. As she becomes her imaginary sister and narrates the tale to Sceledrus, Palaestrio says in aside, "The dream of Palaestrio is told." (386). Sceledrus comes to believe that his eyes have failed him and that there really are two girls. Accosted by the neighbor, he apologizes for wrongly accusing the girl. He realizes that he is duped, but he proceeds to misidentify the reason that Palaestrio and Periplectomenus are plotting against him. Sceledrus believes that they plan to sell him down the river (579-580). He can see that Palaestrio has created a stage world in which there are twin sisters, the dream of Palaestrio, but he fails to understand that ultimately this dream is meant to remove him from the action so they can reunite Philocomasium with her lover.

Whereas Sceledrus sees what he did not see, pulled into the dream world of Palaestrio, Pyrgopolynices never lives outside the dream of self-delusion. The opening scene of *MG* (1-78) establishes the soldier's inability to realize that others are simply playing to his self-image in order to get what they want. Convinced that the neighbor's wife is madly in love with him, he willingly releases the beloved Philocomasium along with Palaestrio. Entering the neighbor's house, he is ambushed and threatened with castration. A slave returns to tell the soldier that he has been tricked by Palaestrio. An interesting twist happens. Informed that Palaestrio has tricked him, Pyrgopolynices says that there would be fewer adulterers if the same thing would happen as happened to him (1436-1437). We should keep in mind that he has not committed adultery. The wife was no wife, but a prostitute playing the part. Caught in the dream of his own hyper-masculinity, he has misread the theatrics of Palaestrio.

We are asked to applaud, and we may actually be taken in by the maxim that concludes the play. Plautus has encouraged us to think about the relationship between who we are and who we pretend to be. We can be dragged from a wakeful state into the topsy-turvy world of theatrical dreaming, where we do not see what we really see. On the other hand, we run the risk of becoming completely detached from the real world, pawns of those who can manipulate the dreams we create for ourselves. There exists a middle ground between the two where reality can be twisted into fantasy and fantasy can be exploited for the sake of reality. Unless we tread this middle ground, Plautus will have trapped us into applauding for a maxim that is as faulty as the perceptions of Sceledrus and Pyrgopolynices.

**References:**

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