

## Living Property: Depictions of Slavery in Roman New Comedy

The narrative of the good slave, pervasive since antiquity, is used to this day to justify both ancient and modern slavery. Specifically, the same stereotypes developed by Romans prescribed to enslaved people and used to justify enslavement were used by early modern Americans to advocate for slavery in the 19th century—and beyond. In Roman New Comedy, slavery was presented in a watered-down manner, proving digestible to Roman audiences, allowing them to be at peace with the institution of Roman slavery. New Roman comic plots often included discussions of slavery and even placed enslaved characters front and center. In fact, 44% of Plautine monologues were spoken by slaves (Fitzgerald, 2019). Many fixtures of New Roman Comedy include scenes, characters, and plots that subvert the status quo by pushing back against harmful stereotypes, yet ultimately uphold them. Using Terence's *Phormio* as a framework, along with Plautus' *Pot of Gold* and *Amphitryon*, I discuss how New Roman Comedy seems to subvert social norms while ultimately upholding the paradigm and creating justifications for slavery.

Terence's *Phormio* is a particularly interesting play because of its opening scene—a conversation between Davus and Geta (ln. 35-75), two enslaved men—includes an extremely blunt conversation about the unfair nature of slavery where Geta explains how he would like to escape enslavement (O'Bryhim, 2001). This conversation directly refutes a widely-held Roman belief that slaves must be slaves for they have an innate nature of pleasing and cannot live meaningful lives unless they have a master to please (Joshel, 2010). Another Roman belief held to justify slavery, which completely contradicts the previous one, states that slaves are bad by nature and unless they are controlled by a master, they will drink, gamble, and sex themselves to

death (Joshel, 2010). Considering these two attitudes towards slaves bolstering a framework where slavery is positioned as necessary for a functioning society, the plot of *Phormio*, which unfolds after Geta and Davus' initial conversation, is particularly interesting. In it, Geta goes out of his way to assist the son of his owner, Antipho, execute a scheme behind the back of Demipho, Antipho's father and Geta's owner. On one hand, Geta is demonstrating bad behavior in his master's absence, but on the other hand, he is risking his life to aid his master's son. Finally, when analyzing *Phormio* and its prevalence in the Roman zeitgeist, it is important to acknowledge that Terence, the play's author, was himself a *libertus*—brought to Rome from his native Africa then manumitted by his owner.

While *Phormio* is the focus of my discussion on portrayals of enslaved people in New Roman Comedy and stereotypes used to uphold the institution of slavery, *Pot of Gold* and *Apmhitryon* add additional insight on slave identities and the use of violence to control misbehaving slaves. For example, Euclio's malicious threats toward his slave Staphyla in *Pot of Gold* (ln. 30-59). The examples drawn from Plautus' corpus highlight how violence was used as a comedic plot device. The violence, however, never became physical and remained empty threats, hence being watered-down compared to real-life violence of Roman slavery.

Typically, Roman writings on slavery were rife with stereotypes mentioned above and acted as guides on how to be the best master to slaves. An example of this is Epistle 47 where Seneca explains that the best kind of slave master is a stoic one (Seneca, Gummere, 1917). Even in the letter where Seneca continuously asserts that slaves are human beings, he concludes with an assertion that slavery is necessary for the functioning of Roman society. According to Seneca, good slaves only exist when they have good masters. In a society where slavery is justified by

contradicting stereotypes and the plight of enslaved characters is a punchline, there is no way for the depictions of enslaved characters in New Roman Comedy to truly subvert the status quo. Ultimately, the depictions of enslaved characters in Roman New Comedy serve to uphold, rather than challenge, established societal norms.

#### Works Cited

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