

Quid “ego sum”?: Alienation, Interpellation, and “Epic”-ness in the *Amphitruo*

McCarthy has recently argued that Roman comedy functions as a dialogue between naturalistic and farcical modes, the complex interaction of which prevents the “revelation that the master’s authority is merely arbitrary, and so this liberatory potential goes unrealized as well.” I suggest, however, that the *Amphitruo* requires further examination in relation to the issues of authority and ideology raised by the text, especially considering elements in this comedy unique to Plautine drama. Building from previous scholars’ insights on Brechtian ‘epic’ elements in ancient drama (Moore 1998; Lada-Richards), I will employ the theories of Althusser, himself a reader of Brecht, to show how the manipulation of space on the stage and the incorporation of the gods in the *Amphitruo* not only bear ideological implications for the characters on the stage, but also for the members in the Plautine audience. The physical and verbal exchanges occurring onstage, at the moments when the characters Amphitruo and Sosia are deprived of their accustomed rank in society (and, with that, their identity), reveal to both characters and audience a moment of understanding (however fleeting) that authority is indeed arbitrary.

The *Amphitruo* is the only extant Roman comedy that includes gods as extended participants in the main action of the play. The gods’ interactions with humans in the play, I will argue, serve as an ideological reminder of the ‘historicized’ structure of society, as, for example, when Sosia runs into Mercury, who has disguised himself as Sosia. The effect of this destabilizing incident for Sosia, who contemplates (with extreme discomfort) what his identity must be now that this “new” Sosia has assumed the role of slave, results in a Brechtian alienation between audience and character. The audience is equally confused, and both parties, on stage and in the audience, are simultaneously compelled to contemplate the fixedness (or lack thereof) of authority and one’s position in society. This instability of authority is further exemplified, as the playwright presents moments of Althusserian misrecognition and interpellation on the stage. Again, in the case of Sosia, when Mercury refuses to acknowledge him by name, the now “former” Sosia is allowed to contemplate his “liberatory potential.” By not being subjected to his accustomed role as slave, he goes so far as to hope that Amphitruo will also not recognize him as Sosia, so that he might no longer be a slave.

Finally, I will explore how this instability of one’s position is reflected in the staging of the *Amphitruo*. In the play, only the characters of the gods are allowed to occupy the upper level of the stage, and their appearance on the upper level occurs only when in communication with human characters. This staging allows the audience to see the ideological interplay between characters represented on a vertical plane, particularly when they see Mercury, disguised as Sosia, sitting on a roof, hurling insults at Amphitruo, and refusing the general’s orders to acknowledge him verbally as master. The two-level staging suggested by the play, through which power and authority are explicitly assigned and denied to characters, further reinforces the arbitrary nature of authority in the audience’s mind.

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