

## “Have a Drink with Me”: The Secret Political Message of *Pseudolus*

The hero of Plautus's *Pseudolus*, aptly named Pseudolus, is a slave. This is not a play that deals in the wholly incomprehensible plights of the ruling class. This alone may implicate to the play's audience that it is attempting to be politically progressive. Showcasing the subjectivity of such a protagonist, encouraging us to empathize with him, showing us the world through his eyes, may be to some an inherently progressive act. However, the play's treatment of social class and money still indicate to me that *Pseudolus* is not politically progressive, rather, the opposite. The way in which Plautus presents slaves to the audience throughout the play, including an unnamed slave in Act III, Scene I, Harpax and Simia in addition to the titular *Pseudolus*, subtextually shares a message that seeking upward mobility is futile. And it's not that these slaves are just too ignorant to try and transcend their circumstances. With full self-and-social-situation-awareness, *they choose not to*. The central bet of the play, while appearing to position money as a make or break entity that determines social class, is in reality merely a red herring that Plautus employs to mask his true intent: to show that social class should be immutable. Thus, in political terms, I view *Pseudolus* as a play that goes beyond simply being “cautious”. To me, it feels like an attempt to suppress any revolutionary instincts the real lower classes or slaves of the time may have harbored.

Before we begin to discuss our Pseudolus in detail, let's begin with the aforementioned unnamed slave in Act III, Scene I. First of all, this slave's soliloquy appears completely out of the blue. From my point of view analyzing the structure of a play, nothing exists in this dramatic landscape by accident. Why include this character, who is entirely unrelated to any other character, and who will never appear again? To me, the clear answer is to provide cultural

commentary. The decision to not name the slave cements his status as a character that exists solely to flesh out the play's social and political context. Without a name, he is no particular slave, and also every other slave that we don't meet but is here implied to exist. Further, the very existence of such a monologue in the first place indicates to me that Plautus is interested in making such commentary, and had a rhetorically political intent in writing it. This feels important to the validity of the rest of my argument.

Moving to the text, what does Plautus imply to be the intimate thought process of the average slave? Immediately, he characterizes social class, in this case the unnamed slave's slavery, as a god-given fate, starting the soliloquy with, "When the gods make a lad the slave of a pimp...they give him many a heavy sorrow and trouble" (821). He further emphasizes slavery as inherent to this slave, having him refer to it as "this slavery of mine" rather than something to the effect of *oh boy does being a slave suck right now* (821). And what is this average slave to do with this state of slavehood? He is to, as Plautus writes in the stage directions, "([Look] at himself mournfully)" (821). In other words, he is to pity himself, and do absolutely nothing to try and change his circumstances. This slave is fully aware that slavery is his whole life, and it is awful. Yet, he doesn't mention even once a means to get out of it. He's resigned to it. The seeds are also planted in this speech that gaining money would not resolve the unnamed slave's problems, in fact, that money is a burden, something he would have to "grit [his] teeth and bear" (821). This slave's perspective on money is unique to him within the play, and being that this slave is the direct social commentary slave, it's important to hear him.

Another slave we meet aside from Pseudolus is Harpax. Harpax, like the unnamed slave, is choosing not to actively do anything to try and end his slavery. In a soliloquy in Act IV, Scene VII similar in tone and length to that of the unnamed slave, he emphasizes that he must not do

anything outside of his master's orders, saying quite explicitly, "I think my master's with me, even though he's not. I fear him when he's not here, lest I should have to fear him when he is here" (833). However, unlike the unnamed slave, he does believe that his inaction will one day pay off. Harpax asserts that "Slaves who think themselves free the minute they get out of their master's sight... will long bear the name of slaves", implying the hope that if he is a good slave his situation will change (833). Still, this moment still shows Harpax not doing anything on his own behalf, waiting for his master to free him. He also takes an attitude towards money that is not wholly positive, only referring to it as the bartering chip to get "the girl to take away", and his reference to other slaves "go[ing] in for high-living and harlots, eating up all they possess" gives money a dangerous quality as well. In the perspectives of both the unnamed slave and Harpax, taken together in their relatively isolated scenes, we can see Plautus building the theoretical foundation that slaves are powerless to improve their conditions, and more money in their hands would only harm them.

The outlier slave that we meet in *Pseudolus* is Simia. What makes Simia the most interesting to me is that he appears to be the most similar to Pseudolus, who holds the protagonist's perspective with which we are meant to align. In Act VI, Scenes II and III, Pseudolus is even complimentary of Simia, calling him "a philosopher" and directly admitting, "[he] like[s] him well" (828, 830). Yet, Pseudolus also highlights him as *too* good at being a cunning scoundrel, describing his walk as "a pompous swagger", his talk as "insolent" and perhaps most aptly calling him as "a perfect rogue and rascal" (825, 826). Most importantly, in Act VI, Scene III, Pseudolus is afraid that Simia will double cross him. The implication here is that Simia likes money too much, and may run away with it, as he says he often has (825). This makes Simia dangerous to the social order. The message to the audience via our protagonist is

clear: Don't trust the slave who might run away with the money. Simia is the one character in the play who could potentially break the pattern of the play, as he clearly believes he could use stolen money to improve his circumstances. Luckily for Pseudolus, Simia decides to keep his word.

Now is the point at which you may be thinking, *but wait a minute! Pseudolus is also trying to trick his way into money and improve his circumstances through this bet!* However, this is not so. From the very beginning of the play, the bet was never about the money. Pseudolus was simply trying to help his good friend Calidorus find some change to stop his love from being sold by Ballio. When he makes his promise to Calidorus, he says, "don't worry. I won't desert you in your love affair. I hope...I can find you some aid--in cash" (792-793). Cash is simply aid, and Pseudolus is here to help. Plautus apparently does not care about Calidorus and his romantic exploits as he spends the rest of the play focusing on filling out the plot with the more important political asides as discussed before, but it's important to remember that the only reason this situation exists in the first place is for Calidorus's personal gain that has nothing to do with money. The secondary bet Pseudolus makes with Simo is also not for monetary gain, but for a social gain...to stick it to his master. In their conversation in Act I, Scene V, both characters reference "the treadmill" as a site of punishment for Pseudolus if he doesn't follow through on his actions (810). The money in the bet is just another element introduced in this battle for social power that they share over Calidorus as Simo's son and Pseudolus's friend. It's never implied that Pseudolus will free himself with this money. It's just part of the deal.

The ultimate moment in which we are shown that Pseudolus is not in fact threatening the social order, and simultaneously the ultimate proof that the preservation of that social order is shown through the treatment of money, lies in the final scene. The scene begins with a very

performative “loading up” of Pseudolus’s money bag. Once Pseudolus has won the bet, this is the social reversal in which Simo appears to defer to Pseudolus. From a structural perspective, this is the completion of that secondary bet, and is really hammered home in the text. Simo hits the nail right on the head, moaning “I never thought I’d come to this, and play the suppliant to my own slave” (842). It literally takes fifteen lines between Pseudolus and Simo for this “loading up” reversal to occur. This is followed by a key piece of information that is brushed over in comparison, only included in one line (I’ve added bold for emphasis), that Simo “**can have half or even more**” of the money if he just goes for a drink with Pseudolus (843). This “drink” is the ultimate equalizer, preserving their pre-existing imbalance of power and money. We are supposed to admire Pseudolus here for his generosity. But this action is more than just generous, and could easily be lost in all the *we’re all friends and equals now* social hooplah. It preserves that status quo: The master remains the master and the slave remains the slave.

While I don’t claim to know anything about the historically accurate economic and political landscape within which *Pseudolus* exists, it does not feel a stretch to assume that the power differential between masters and slaves was integral to the functioning of society. Whenever I process art, I always ask myself who made it and to what end. In spite of knowing nothing (seriously, nothing) about Plautus, the text as I read it from my contemporary vantage point suggests to me that Plautus had some stake in preserving the status quo, and his message of social immutability was meant to be shared with a lower class or slave audience. That is not just cautious, but conservative.