A RATHER UNUSUAL OLD MAN.
HEGIO IN PLAUTUS' CAPTIVI

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‘You will find it worthwhile’, avers the Prologue to the Captivi (54 ff.), ‘to pay close attention to this play of ours. It’s not a re-working of old, familiar themes, and it’s not like other plays: for there aren’t any filthy lines in it, that are best not remembered; there’s no perjuring pimp, no immoral courtesan — and no braggart warrior'. He was lucky the audience didn’t walk out, for he appears to be denying them the stock elements and themes in which they delighted. The Epilogue (1029–1035) reiterates the unusual nature of this play, which is in conformity with ‘pudicos mores’; there are no unseemly goings-on, no love-affairs, no supposititious children, no financial fraud, no love-sick young man buying his girl's freedom behind his father's back. Plautus is laughing at the conventions of the New Comedy, and at the very features which he himself exploited so successfully. He is also stressing his awareness of the fact that the Captivi differs markedly in its tone and sentiment from most of his other plays.

The central theme is the heroic loyalty of Tyndarus, who sacrifices his own chance of freedom in order that his master, Philocrates, may escape. In many of Plautus' plays the slave helps his young master achieve some less than admirable goal, and there is usually a reversal of the roles of master and slave, with the master abasing himself and admitting dependence on the slave's leadership. In the Captivi the exchange of roles is actual, not metaphorical; Philocrates pretends to be the slave, so that he may be sent home to ransom Tyndarus, who remains Hegio's prisoner, to be exchanged for Hegio's son, who is a prisoner of war in Philocrates' home country. There is some comic exploitation of this role reversal, in language and parody of comic slave behaviour, but on the whole the situation is treated seriously and the emphasis is on Tyndarus' nobility of character, and on the trust and confidence between himself and his master Philocrates. This accounts for the comparatively elevated tone of the Captivi (although the play is not wholly free from farce, especially in the role of the parasite Ergasilus).

Hegio, the father of Philopolemus, who has been taken prisoner in Elis, plays a central role in the Captivi, because his efforts to secure his son's release lead to his purchase of Philocrates and Tyndarus, and, in the end, it is discovered that Tyndarus is in fact also Hegio's son, stolen in childhood by a slave and sold to Philocrates' father. Given the relatively moral tone of the play and the generally serious treatment of Philocrates and Tyndarus, it is to be expected that Hegio, as father of the hero, will also be treated seriously, and will not debase the theme.
And this is, to a great extent, the case: but the result is that Hegio, as a comedy
\textit{senex}, is far from typical.

The \textit{senex} in comedy has a long history: one thinks of such memorable
characters of Old Comedy as Philocleon in the \textit{Wasps} or Strepsiades in the
\textit{Clouds}. In New Comedy there are equally memorable old men, who dominate
the action of plays like the \textit{Dyskolos} or \textit{Epitrepontes}, and are far more interesting
and complex than the young men who are supposed to be the heroes, and who,
despite their misanthropic or miserly behaviour, command the audience's
grudging respect.\footnote{Menander also explored the tensions between young and old,and the relationship between father and son, and seems to have favoured an ideal
of mutual trust and respect, and judicious indulgence in education.\footnote{Terence
followed in his footsteps, and gives us some interesting old men, some harsh,
some indulgent,\footnote{but all concerned about their sons' problems or behaviour.
Although sons may act irresponsibly, they are often anxious about deceiving their
fathers. An instance in the \textit{Andria} is apposite. Simo is deeply concerned about his
son's relationship with a courtesan, and plans a pretended marriage to test
Pamphilus' feelings. Pamphilus is appalled, but it never occurs to him to disobey
his father:}} Such filial devotion would be unthinkable in Plautus. There, sons regularly
wish their fathers dead, or plan to cheat them of substantial sums of money (to be
spent on their girl-friends).\footnote{In plays like the \textit{Mostellaria} and \textit{Pseudolus}, fathers
pose a threat to their sons' happiness. Other Plautine fathers may be remarkably
easy-going, like Demeaetns in the \textit{Asinaria}, who suggests a way to defraud his
wife in order to get money for his son's love affair.\footnote{He wants to win his son's
affection by his indulgence, and as a reward for his assistance claims, and is
granted, a share in the girl's favours (735–740). Fathers often remember — or are
reminded of — their own youthful indiscretions, and this makes them tolerant of
their sons' escapades, as in the \textit{Bacchides}, where we have two contrasted fathers,
Nicobulus, who is harsh and strict, and Philoxenus, who is indulgent, like
Demeaetns. In the end the sons are let off because both fathers admit to their
own past follies (1207–1211).\footnote{A further type of Plautine old man is the \textit{senex amator}, who is a rival in his son's}}
love affair, and offers great comic scope for bawdy and farce. Examples are Demipho in the *Mercator*, a relatively tame play, and Lysidamus in the *Casina*, a hilarious and grotesque character to whom Plautus gives full rein: as for the rival son, who in the Greek original was destined to marry Casina after her identity was discovered, Plautus deliberately wrote him out of the play (64–66).

Almost all Plautus’ *senes*, whether angry spoil-sports, complaisant parents or lecherous would-be lovers, lack dignity. They are easily duped by their slaves; they are the butt of their slaves’ or their neighbours’ wit and sarcasm; and they are at the mercy of domineering wives who hold the purse-strings. Hegio, as I hope to show, has some of the characteristics of the stock character *senex*, which are exploited a little for comic effect, but his portrayal is both more individualistic and more sympathetic than that of other Plautine *senes*.

The first indication of his character we are given comes from his son’s parasite, Ergasilus, who bewails the fact that circumstances have forced Hegio to engage in buying up prisoners of war, in the hope of finding one he can exchange for his son: this pursuit, says Ergasilus, is ‘inhonestum et maxume alienum ingenio suo’ (99). Our sympathy for Hegio is immediately engaged. His son has in the past been generous to Ergasilus, and Ergasilus tells us that the father is the same decent sort of chap. In fact, Hegio is genial towards Ergasilus, but fails to offer him the sort of lavish meal he is hoping for (176 ff.), although he turns up trumps in the end, when Ergasilus brings news of his son’s return, by generously promising to maintain him for life if the news turns out to be true (897).

Hegio’s own first words in the play suggest that he is humane, and bear out Ergasilus’ assertion that dealing in prisoners of war is ‘alienum ingenio suo.’ He gives instructions for the heavy chains shackling the prisoners together to be removed and replaced by light chains, leaving them free to walk about the house (110 ff.). Later he has them both completely released from their chains (354–355). He says to Tyndarus (who is posing as the master, Philocrates, and who is about to ask him a favour—to let his ‘slave’ go back to Elis): ‘quidvis, dum ab re ne quid ores, faciam’ (338). Stock character *senes* are frequently mercenary, and are deservedly tricked out of their money. Hegio is at pains to let us know—rather sententiously—that he is not money-minded:

> ‘ego virtute deum et maiorum nostrum dives sum satis. non ego omnino lucrum omne esse utile homini existumo: scio ego, multos iam lucrum lutulentos homines reddidit; est etiam ubi profecto damnunm praestet facere quam lucrum. odi ego aurum: multa multis saepe suasit perperam.’ (324–328)

This is actually a bit too good to be true, and very un-Roman, since the Romans were a materialistic people who had a high regard for *res*. Even though Plautus shows sympathy for Hegio, he is not averse to parodying the standard *senex* through him.
Stock character *senes* are also, as we have seen, often lecherous or bawdy, and frequently dominated by wives who are the butt of numerous jokes about 'barking bitches'.

Hegio has no wife, so there are no jokes arising out of marital conflict. There are no women even mentioned, let alone appearing in the play, so there is no scope for bawdy. However, there are one or two dirty jokes to be found if you look for them, and two are at the expense of Hegio, carrying imputations of his homosexuality. At 867 Hegio says to Ergasilus, who is demanding a splendid celebratory meal, ‘tuo arbitratu, facile patior,’ and quick as a flash Ergasilus retorts, ‘credo, consuetu’s puer’.

And in the last act, when Stalagmus, the runaway slave who had stolen Tyndarus as a baby, has been brought home, Hegio comments on his unco-operative attitude thus: ‘bene morigerus puer, nunc non decet’ (966). These are brief intrusions, insufficient to destroy the sympathetic portrayal of Hegio, but they show that Plautus has not entirely abandoned his usual style.

Another characteristic of Plautus' style that is less prominent than usual, but not entirely missing from the *Captivi*, is punning repartee. Old men sometimes engage in this sort of exchange with their slaves, and usually come off worse, since Plautine slaves are masters of linguistic as well as other forms of trickery. But Hegio gives Ergasilus as good as he gets in their exchange of badinage (152 ff.), and shows greater verbal dexterity and ingenuity than most men, using the sort of extended metaphors that more often belong to the *callidus servus*. The joking exchange is not just played for the laughs, but serves to characterise Hegio as good-humoured and fairly shrewd. The scene ends with Hegio's wittily-expressed insistence on the simplicity of his fare (to the disappointment of Ergasilus, who longs for a lavish dinner). This further characterises Hegio as a decent man.

It is perhaps a further instance of Hegio's good nature that after sending off the supposed Tyndarus he goes to look among his other prisoners to see if there is one that knows Philocrates. His intention seems to be to provide company for the supposed Philocrates (509 ff.). In the event, of course, this act leads to the betrayal of Tyndarus, since Aristophontes resolutely and in the face of a magnificent pretence by Tyndarus that he (Aristophontes) is insane, maintains that the prisoner Hegio has kept is not Philocrates, but his slave. In this scene Hegio proves to be as gullible as any other comedy *senex*: he readily believes that Aristophontes is mad, and reacts with excessive alarm. But when he finally does accept that he has been duped, his bitterness and anger are extreme, and vent themselves in cruelty. Tyndarus is chained again, threatened with torture, and sent to work in the stone-quarry. Aristophontes pleads for him, but Hegio is adamant: ‘diu ego hunc cruciabo, non uno absoluam die’ (731). This type of violent treatment of slaves is common enough in the plays, but is expressed as verbal threats only; this is the only instance of its actually being carried out. The purpose is of course to enhance our impression of the nobility of Tyndarus' character by what he endures on behalf of his master, but a secondary purpose is that of adding depth to the characterisation of Hegio, who is led to this extreme
by his bitter disappointment at losing (as he thinks) all hope of ransoming his son:

'nunc certum est nulli posthac quicquam credere.
satis sum semel deceptus. speravi miser
ex servitute me exemisse filium:
ea spes elapsa est. perdidi unum filium,
puerum quadrimum quem mihi servos surpuit,
neque eum servum umquam repperi neque filium;
maior potitus hostium est. quod hoc est scelus?
quasi in orbitatem liberos produxerint.'

(756–763)²³

As in many comedies, potential tragedy is averted by the return of Philocrates with Hegio's son Philopolemus, and the revelation that Tyndarus is Hegio's long-lost second son. Hegio has already shown some concern at what he had done to Tyndarus, explaining to Philocrates that it was due to his anger, and has offered to return him without ransom (942 ff.). Now he is deeply upset at what he has caused his own son to suffer, and recognises his nobility of character:

'eo miser sum quia male illi feci, si gnatus meust.
eheu, quom ego plus minusque feci quam me aequom fuit.
quad male feci crucior; modo si infectum fieri possiet!
sed eccum incedit huc ornatus haud ex suis virtutibus.'

(994–997)²⁴

The characterisation of Hegio may be seen, then, as a collection of opposites, with stock comedy features balanced by more individual traits of character. He is essentially genial and kindly, and shows sympathy with the plight of his prisoners; but in his anger he shows himself more cruel than any senex iratus. He is not ridiculous or lecherous or mercenary, like stock senes, but he is just as easily gullled as they are and just as angry when he discovers it.

In keeping with the tone of the Captivi, Plautus was forced to treat Hegio seriously, and not present him as the stock comedy senex. But if he had not liked the role he need not have made it so prominent in the play. His treatment of Hegio suggests that the old man interested him as an individual. It is interesting how he uses certain stock elements of character, with which his audience would have been familiar, and builds and expands on them, particularly by contrast, and sometimes by parody. In this way he creates and exploits a tension in the audience between their enjoyment of the stock comic traits of the senex and their sympathy for Hegio, who emerges as an unusually sympathetic and credible character.

The Captivi has often been called the least 'Platonic' of Plautus' plays. The basic reason for its being so different must be the nature of the Greek original (about which we have no certain information). But Plautus need not have chosen that particular play to work with if it had not interested him. It is as if he is playing with the conventions of comedy. He knew how to please an audience; he knew that they enjoyed plots of romantic discovery; the slave helping his young master; role reversal between master and slave; hungry hang-over earning his keep by his
witty manipulation of language; old man being deceived by the slave who is helping the young man. All these elements are typically Plautian, and they are all there in the Captivi, but in another dimension, as it were. If you are a fan of Plautus' more boisterous plays, the Captivi seems at first glance rather dull; but it is a fine, subtle work, the product of a master of his craft, and testimony to the range and variety of Plautus' comic skills.

NOTES

1. A version of this paper was read at the Conference of the Classical Association of South Africa in Pretoria in January, 1983.
2. Terence was less fortunate: Cf. the Prologues to the second and third productions of the Hecyra, which show how essential — and how difficult — it was for the playwright to capture and hold the audience's attention.
4. E.g. 274–276.
6. E.g. the Samia, and the originals of Terence's Andria, Heauton Timoroumenos and Adelphoe.
7. He seems to have been interested in contrasting pairs of fathers and sons in which the one father is understanding and easy-going and the other stern and unbending: this contrast is suggested in the Phormio, and developed at length in the Adelphoe.
8. ‘As for my father, words fail me. How could he treat something so serious in this off-hand way? He passed me in the street just now. “You're to be married today, Pamphilus,” was all he said: “go home at once and get ready.” To me it sounded like “Clear off and hang yourself.”’ (Translated Betty Radice, Terence, The Comedies, Penguin Classics, 1976).
9. E.g. Most. 233–234, Pseud. 660–662. On the hostility shown by Plautine sons towards their fathers, see Segal op. cit. 16 ff.
10. Denaenetus was similarly indulged in his youth by his own father, who personally dressed up as a sailor in an intrigue to abduct Denaenetus' girl-friend from a pimp (Asin. 68–73).
11. The original of the Bacchides was Menander's Dis Exapaton, and it would appear that Menander was fond of contrasting severe and indulgent fathers (cf. Terence's Adelphoe). D.N. Lacey (CJ 24, 1978–9, 132–135) has shown that Plautus altered the play in order to avoid confrontation between father and son (which interested Menander but is not a prominent theme in Plautus), and made comic capital out of emphasising the similarities between the fathers and their respective sons.
12. ‘... a rather undignified business, quite out of keeping with his own character.' With the exception of the version of 54 ff. on p.1, which is my own, all translations of passages from the Captivi are by E.F. Watling, Plautus, The Pot of Gold and other plays, Penguin Classics, 1965.
13. ‘I'll do anything to help you, provided it is not against my own interests'. (See note 12).
14. ‘... I am as well off as I need to be, thanks to the gods and my forebears. Nor do I consider every bit of profit an unmixed blessing to a man. I am quite sure that many a man has been corrupted by profit, there are even times when a loss can be more beneficial than a gain. I have no good word for gold; it has too often tempted too many people into wrong-doing.' (See Note 12).
17. ‘Oh well, have your own way. I'll consent to anything.' — 'Your habit from boyhood, I believe.' (See Note 12).
18. ‘He’s certainly not the amenable youth that he was ...’ (See Note 12). On the sexual connotations of *morigera/morigerus* see Gordon Williams, *JRS* 48 (1958) 19–22.


20. Themes of food and eating are frequent in Latin literature and are often symbolic of a person’s whole way of life and philosophy. Written at a time when Roman sumptuary laws forbade extravagant eating, Plautus’ plays are full of wishful references to forbidden foods (Segal, *Roman Laughter*, 47 f.). In the *Casina* and *Menaechmi* a longing for luxurious banquets symbolises the wish to flout other conventions and laws of moral behaviour. Much later, Horace and Juvenal were to make extensive use of food themes to indicate admirable or despicable life-styles (Hor. *Serm.* 1.6.111–118, 2.2, 2.4, 7.6.63–117, 2.8; Juv. 4, 5, 11. See also L. R. Shero, ‘The Cena in Roman Satire’, *CPh* 18 (1923) 126–143.

21. ‘I want him to suffer as long as possible; you don’t think I’ll let him off with one day?’ (See Note 12).


23. ‘By heaven, I’ll never trust a living soul again; once is enough ... But the pity of it is, I thought I had bought my son out of captivity; now that hope has vanished. One son I lost long ago, stolen by a slave at four years old, and never a trace of son or slave have I seen since; and now his older brother is a prisoner of war. Why should I be so cursed? Have I begotten sons only to be left childless in my old age?’ (See Note 12).

24. ‘I cannot bear to think of the terrible thing I have done to him, if he is my son! To have done so much more, yet so much less, than I had the right to do! My heart bleeds for what I have made him suffer; oh that I could undo what has been done! ... And here he comes ... in what a state for a brave and honest man!’ (See Note 12).

25. Segal (*op. cit.* 154) describes the *Captivi* as ‘a play which is in so many ways an inversion of the typical Plautine inversion.’
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