COUNTER-THEATRICALIZATION IN PLEUTUS’
*CAPTIVI* III.4*)

BY

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ne vereamini
quia bellum Aetolis esse dixi cum Aleis:
foris illi extra scaenam sient proelia.
nam hoc paene iniquomst, comicochoragio
conari desubito agere nos tragodemiam.
(58-62)1).

In these lines of the prologue the play’s speaker relates to the audience that, although there is war between Aetolia and Elis, there will be no warfare onstage since it would be unfair for a comic enterprise to turn into tragedy. Later, at III.4 Philocrates’ relative, Aristophonetas appears on stage and progressively reveals to Hegio Tyndarus’ deception. Tyndarus devises the noble scheme of sacrificing his freedom by remaining Hegio’s captive in order to send his master Philocrates to his home country. Tyndarus’ deception of Hegio is construed as comic play and then is performed on stage2).

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1) The text of the *Captivi* is quoted from the OCT edition of W.M. Lindsay (Oxford 1980; Reprint).

2) Earlier scholars have frequently detected tragic elements in Tyndarus’ *fallacia* which involves an identity switch, characterizing it near-tragedy. More recently critics have successfully refuted such notions, showing that the overall plot of the play contains elements that define it as typical comedy. On this point see R. Hunter, *The New Comedy of Greece & Rome* (Cambridge 1985), 116-7, although the author discusses a pattern of structural similarities between the plot in the play and the situation of Orestes and Pylades in Euripides’ *Iphigenia at Tauris*. For similarities between Euripides’ *Iphigenia at Tauris* and Plautus’ *Captivi*, see also G. Petrone, *Teatro antico e inganno: sinzioni Plautine* (Palumbo 1983) 62-3. The author treats the *fallacia* of Tyndarus’ identity switch as bearing relationship with tragedy: “La non neutralizzata tragicità della particolare fallacia dei *Captivi*, che tuttavia è definita e

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Aristophontes, however, fails to perceive Tyndarus’ noble intention and discloses to Hegio the slave’s deception by turning theatre into reality. In this manner he becomes a facilitator of tragedy as he exposes the slave’s trickery and thus ironically goes against his own will to see his relative Philocrates returning to his home country.

In what follows I intend to demonstrate how Aristophontes undoes the slave’s ruse, set up as comic play within Plautus’ Captivi; in theatrical terms, he counter-theatricalizes its performance by turning the slave’s theatre into reality. Moreover, in Act III.4 there are several features such as the use of the motif of killing and the device of dramatic irony that are reminiscent of tragedy, although the scene itself remains the most farcical in the play.

All the way back to Aristophanes tragic parody was used as a basis for comic action (e.g., Dikaiopolis in the Acharnians). More