

NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

PLAUTUS *PSEUDOLUS* 782: A FULLONIOUS ASSAULT

Ballio, the pimp of Plautus' *Pseudolus*, has threatened any slave who cannot produce a birthday present for him with *cruciatu maximo* (778). The *puer*, in his monologue, complains that he cannot attract clientele and is consequently too poor to buy a present. Ballio's threat worries him (781–82):

nunc, nisi lenoni munus hodie misero,
cras mihi potandus fructus est fullonius.

Mihi potandus fructus est fullonius would seem to refer to a form of punishment. Are we to understand the literal compulsion to drink *fructus fullonius* as the sort of punishment the boy dreads?

M. M. Willcock suggests that the phrase “falls into the category of wildly imaginative periphrases for beatings put into the mouths of Plautus' slaves.” *Fructus fullonius* refers to stale urine used in the Roman world by fullers. Since cloth was beaten at fullers' establishments, he argues, the reference to fullers' compound is a reference to beating.¹ This association is tenuous. The boy is not afraid of being treated as cloth is but of having to drink the fullers' solvent. Willcock's interpretation fails to account for *potandus*.

To be sure, the periphrasis is metaphorical. The boy will not be forced literally to drink *fructus fullonius*. But how are we to understand this metaphor? Drinking urine, I would suggest, refers not to the beating of wool at fullers' shops but rather to oral rape.² Urination often signifies ejaculation in Latin.³ So by extension, to be forced to drink urine would mean to be forced to perform fellatio. As Adams points out, such expressions do not reflect the failure of ancient societies to distinguish

1. M. M. Willcock, ed., *Plautus: "Pseudolus"* (Exeter, 1987), p. 124. See H. Blümner, *Technologie und terminologie der Gewerbe und Künste bei Griechen und Römern*, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1912), pp. 174–76, on fullers' use of urine.

2. It is not immediately clear how *fructus* refers to liquid. But *massici montis fructus* at *Ps.* 1303–4 denotes wine. So *fructus*, it would seem, can be used metonymically for liquid.

Interestingly, at *Eur. Cyc.* 589, after Silenus realizes that the drunk Polyphemus intends to treat him as Zeus did Ganymede, he apparently refers to semen as bitter wine (οἶμοι· πικρότατον οἶνον ὀνομαι τάχα). How might we account for the synesthesia? Perhaps Silenus is apprehensive about the prospect of having to drink, and therefore taste, the Cyclopean ejaculate.

3. See J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (Baltimore, 1982), p. 142. This association exists in Greek as well. The word for *μοιχός* (adulterer) is related to the verb *ομείζω* (urinate). *μοιχός* is the o-grade agent noun of the root *h₃meiǵh-*, and the initial laryngeal fails to vocalize adjacent to a nasal *o*. See Chantraine, *Dictionnaire Étymologique de la Langue Grecque* (Paris, 1968), s.v. *μοιχός*.

between urine and semen. It is in abusive and insulting contexts that writers choose to equate ejaculation and urination.⁴ The boy does not fear literal irrumation; he is simply saying that if he fails to get a birthday present for Ballio he will “get screwed,” i.e., be maltreated. The language of sexual domination is the language of aggression.⁵ And such a periphrasis would not be inappropriate for a male prostitute.⁶

Although the boy does not mean that he will be literally raped but rather harmed (“I’ll get screwed”), as his speech continues, there is a slippage, characteristic of the economy of humor, from the metaphorical to the literal; the boy begins to speak unambiguously of performing oral sex (785–89):

si quispiam det qui manus gravior siet,
quamquam illud aiunt magno gemitu fieri,
comprimere dentes videor posse aliquo modo.
sed comprimenda est mihi vox atque oratio;
erus eccum recipit se domum et ducit coquom.

Illae rei (783) and *illud* (786) refer back to lines 782. But a realistic calculation of monetary gain begins to replace the boy’s utter dread. If he could attract an *amator* who would give him money, although it (*illud*) is accompanied by a great groan, nevertheless, he says, he would grit his teeth and bear it.⁷

With this reading in mind, we might consider whether Plautus was playing with two meanings of *comprimere*, constrict and restrain or control.⁸ In line 788 the verb is used zeugmatically in the second sense. *Comprimere dentes* (787) could then mean both endure (i.e., grit the teeth) and keep the teeth in check. It is obvious that the *puer*, in the situation he envisions, will need to exercise such dental restraint.

According to my interpretation, lines 781–89 of the *puer*’s speech would be translated thus:

Now unless I get a present for my pimp today,
tomorrow I’ll have to swallow launderer’s liquid.
Oh, how small I am even now for that,
and gosh how terribly terrified of him.
If anybody would give me some cash,
although they say there’s a lot of groaning involved,
I think I could keep my mouth open
But now I’ve got to shut it;
here comes my master leading the cook along.

M. KWINTNER
Cornell University

4. Some abusive passages where *meio* and *mingo* = *stupro* are Catull. 67.30 and Hor. *Sat.* 2.7.52.

5. Compare, for example, the threat in Catull. 16.

6. See M. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York, 1980), pp. 95–96, on the sexual exploitation of slaves.

7. The collocation *comprimere dentes* occurs once elsewhere, as far as I am aware, Sen. *De ira* 1.1.4. In this passage the expression would seem to mean clench the teeth (in anger).

8. See *OLD*, s.v. *comprimere*.