Antonia Aluko, *Intersectionality in Plautus' Poenulus: Issues of Identity*

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Intersectionality describes the overlapping and interconnecting layers of marginalisation a person faces due to having two or more marginalising characteristics within their identity (e.g. race, sexuality, gender, (dis)ability, age etc). Intersectional theory is valuable in understanding identity,[1] and how different characteristics intersect/interact within the world of Roman comedy. By reading intersectionally, we can begin to understand social hierarchies, revealing facets of what we determine identity to be. In comedy this creates humour. Roman comedy, regardless of stylisation/perversion, reflects real lives and so, comedy emanates from the truth of everyday experiences as we recognise ourselves.[2]

Plautus' *Poenulus* (254 to 184 BCE) was a *palliata*, a Roman comedy adapted from a Greek original,[3] likely written in the beginning of the third-century BCE whilst the Second Punic War (218 to 201 BCE), or Hannibalic War, was still in living memory. The plot surrounds Agorastocles who is

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[1] For the purposes of this article, I deem identity to be the characteristics that typify an individual or group of people.

[2] In this way, Roman comedy resembles observational comedy, where humour emanates from aspects of everyday life (Byrne 2012: 9). It is the recognition of ourselves and our unique experiences that we see in comedy which creates humour and resonates with us (Byrne 2012: 9-10). Dutsch has already written of how Roman comedy, regardless of its stylisation or perversion, reflects real lives and experiences (Dutsch 2008: 47). See Dutsch 2008 for more on the nature of Roman comedy's real-life influences.

[3] The *Καρχηδόνιος* (the Carthaginian) by Alexis.

enamoured by Adelphasium, a prostitute, kidnapped from Carthage and enslaved and by the end of the play it is revealed that she is a free woman.

Stereotypes/stock characters recur in Plautine comedies.[4] There are similarities between the rigidity stock characters' actions/personalities and Roman social hierarchy.[5] The *servus callidus* (clever slave) is confined to stock behaviour regardless of attempts to change social status/identity in the plot. These regular comedic facets remind the audience of the strict, immovable social structure they adhere to.[6] Group

Plautine scholarship on the *Poenulus* has reached an impasse as scholars mention the play in passing[7] or focus on nuanced aspects, e.g. reconstructing Punic or singular lines/characters[8]. As a result, this paper will use intersectionality to bring forth and answer questions of identity within the *Poenulus.*

As noted above, Intersectional Theory, coined by Crenshaw to explain Black women's experience of racism and sexism in modern society, defines how a person can experience layers of difference or 'marginalising characteristics'[9] excluding them from society and each of those distinct groups.[10] When these different characteristics meet, the individual is at a

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[4] O'Bryhim 2020: 123, 131.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] E.g. Raia 1983; Manuwald 2011; Lomas 2014; Prag 2014; Witzke 2015.

[8] Including but not limited to Krahmalkov 1988; Franko 1995; Franko 1996; Dutsch 2004; Bork 2018; Moodie 2018.

[9] I will use this term to describe a person's identifying aspects that can be discriminated against e.g. race/ethnicity, gender, class (or enslaved status), sexuality, disability etc.

[10] Crenshaw 1998: 314-5. These distinct groups can include but are not limited to various ethnic communities (e.g. the Black Community), the LGBTQ+ community, the Feminist Movement etc. Although each of these groups have a marginalising characteristic, the singular focus of the axis of

unique social location and has an exclusive experience dependant on how their identity is understood and presented. These social locations can be placed onto a social map that can be viewed, analysed, and investigated.[11] This paper explores the social map of the *Poenulus'* characters to further understand each of the social locations/experiences that can be attributed as intersectional.

My argument concentrates on three of the *Poenulus'* characters who exemplify difference in some way, exploring how they navigate their identity. Section 1 explores Adelphasium's creation of space to distance herself from the perspective of other enslaved prostitutes.[12] Section 2 analyses Milphio's weaponization of gender, language and meta-theatricality[13] to dominate women through obscuring his enslaved status. Section 3 briefly addresses the nurse, Giddenis, as the object of ridicule and, arguably, the most intersectional character in the play. This paper uses intersectionality to shed new light on the identities of the *Poenulus'* characters through demonstrating how notions of identity appear, interact, and intersect; creating a clearer understanding of how characters navigate and balance aspects of their identity in the context of their societies in the Plautine text.

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their oppression can and has invited those who belong to more than a singular group e.g. Black women to face misogyny in the Black community and racism in Feminist spaces.

[11] Space in social geography is 'the container of social relations and events', Valentine 2013: 2.

[12] Valentine 2013: 3.

[13] Baldick 2008: 'metadrama [metatheatre]', the actor's awareness of their character's status.

I: Adelphasium

Through the *Poenulus*, Adelphasium repeatedly distances herself from women and slaves which suggests how she uses social affective distancing as a coping mechanism for the traumatic aspects of her identity as an enslaved sex worker (*Poen*.265-75). Social affective distance, conceived by sociologist, Bogardus, is outlined by Karakayali as the connection between sympathy and feeling socially near to another person or group.[14] Hence, if a person feels less sympathetic for another, they feel socially far or distanced from that person/group.[15] This idea of social distance, which can change depending upon whom is being addressed (affective distance) then explains Adelphasium's negative regard of groups to which she should belong (women, enslaved people and female sex workers)[16] as she struggles to reconcile with her social position at the intersection of class and gender.

Being pure is one of the facets that allows Adelphasium to insult, denigrate and distance herself from other sex workers. Adelphasium names the other prostitutes *servilicolas sordidas,* soiled slave-girls (*Poen*.267). These adjectives degrade the enslaved women whilst uplifting Adelphasium as exceptional as unlike the other prostitutes, Adelphasium is *purus* (pure) and unsullied. Plautus utilises purity as a praised characteristic to justify Adelphasium's critique of her peers. Unlike the other prostitutes she is not soiled as she retains virgin status regardless of enslavement.

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[14] Karakayali 2009: 540.

[15] Karakayali 2009: 540-1.

[16] Adams 1983: 321; Witzke 2015: 9, 11; I will not conflate these groups as they each have unique experiences/social locations which deserve to be distinguished.

Adelphasium uses various synonyms for prostitute, *prosedas*, *alicarias* and *amicas,* to describe other sex workers but refers to herself only as a slave/*servus* (*Poen*.265-70, 363,1200). *Proseda*, derives from the verb, *sedeo,* and relates to the act of sitting. The ancient commentator Paulus draws the connection from Plautus' use of *prosedas* to women who advertise sex outside a *stabula* (animal stables/brothel, c.f. Paul.*Fest.*p.226M). *Proseda* is dehumanising, associating prostitutes to animals; thus, *prosedas* indicate lower classed prostitutes. *Amicas* (lover) seems kinder in comparison to the connotations of *proseda*. Similarly, *alicarias* is a spelt grinder, suggesting another lower-class worker. Hence, Adelphasium naming these women negative, socially low terms indicates her perception of other prostitutes and the variety in terms suggests she considers herself a high-class sex worker.[17] Adelphasium never specifies the type of slave she is, which could emanate from a position of shame/disgrace; as Lorde writes there is shame in identifying the aspects of difference you experience.[18] It is clear that her self-reference as a *servus* is another act of distance from the low-class workers she insults.

Adelphasium's disdain of other prostitutes is not simply a criticism against her peers but a show of her distancing from the enslaved class as an identification forcibly placed onto her and not something she had chosen. She marginalises this group to distract and distance from her intersectional identity as an enslaved prostitute. Intersectionality is helpful here in understanding how through belittling other prostitutes Adelphasium upholds the basis of her own lost identity. This allows her to assume a higher status

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[17] Adams 1983: 321; Witzke 2015: 9.

[18] Lorde 1984: 114, 118.

for herself over other courtesans than what her intersectional identity entails. One can assume that Plautus portrays her in this manner to remind the audience that Adelphasium is a suitable love interest for Agorastocles even though she is currently in the role of slave.

Thus, Adelphasium as the *pseudo meretrix* (fake prostitute) is unlike other prostitutes not simply through her former free status as Rei suggests but also through the retention of her purity. The *pseudo meretrix* aligns with the role of the *puella* (girl) in remaining pure, subservient, and docile yet open to sexual activity via her profession, characteristics that fulfil the desires of the Roman male.[19] These characteristics place Adelphasium as a figure of ultimate Roman male desire, eroticising her innocence whilst elevating her from the debauched connotations of prostitution.

Adelphasium's disdain is a show of her distancing from forced assimilation into the enslaved class. Instead, she chooses to marginalise this group of lower classed sex workers to distract from her intersectional identity at the intersections of race (as a Carthaginian), class (as a sex worker) and gender (as a woman). At these intersections, she should experience extreme marginalisation from the other, 'socially respectable' characters (e.g. Agorastocles) in the play. Yet, through distancing herself, she is able to don the guise of a different role that places her socially above those who would be in the same class as her, she insults and denigrates them. As a result, Adelphasium moves from the role of an enslaved Carthaginian prostitute into that of the sex labourer *puella*, once free but still pure. Through outlining her purity and difference as above other courtesans, Adelphasium demonstrates

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[19] Raia 1983: 1.

her use of distancing to cope with her new status as an enslaved freeborn sex worker.

II: *Milphio*

Plautus' *servus callidus* (tricky slave) trope and Milphio's possible occupation of the role has been extensively discussed.[20] Less scholarship discusses Milphio's utilisation of language to gain authority on the stage in contrast to his socio-economic position. Johnstone calls this authority 'status': tensions of dominance between characters on stage which differs from characters' social status. [21] Johnstone does not account for these character's lived experience and so, I propose the opposite, that language/dominance by Plautine slave characters allow them to gain verbal authority in a role that in the Roman Republic would usually lead to silence.[22] Milphio's language perpetuates the clever slave trope with double entendre and puns, allowing him to claim superiority/authority over women. He vies for more power within the *Poenulus'* social hierarchy by accessing and diminishing parts of his identity, valuing gender over enslavement.

Milphio, through his speech creates intersectional tensions, placing gender as the higher prized characteristic, enabling him to criticism women. Yet the object of Milphio's criticism is unclear: citizen or enslaved women or women in general. This ambiguity highlights that socio-economic status is

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[20] See Maurach 1964; Maurice 2004; Moodie 2018; Stewart 2012.

[21] Johnstone 1979: 36; Moodie 2018: 322.

[22] Stewart 2012: 8.

less vital to one's identity in the *Poenulus* than gender, creating an opportunity where the enslaved Milphio can discriminate to protect his masculine identity. Lorde theorises that one with a singular marginalising characteristic criticises others with different characteristics to increase their own superiority; reminiscent of Black men's patriarchal access despite their marginalisation and using this access to exhibit misogyny/sexism.[23] This section demonstrates Milphio's speech as a platform where he gains status through marginalising others despite his own enslavement.

Milphio uses sexism, ableism and misogyny to uplift his status by claiming that he can keep a secret better than a mute woman (*Poen*.876). The deployment of *mutae mulieri* (dumb/mute woman) portrays Milphio's negative characterisation of women by placing himself as more intelligent if one translates *mutae* as dumb. The noun, *mulieri* (woman) creates ambiguity in the object of Milphio's denunciation: enslaved or free women.

If we translate *mutae* as mute, Milphio is using ableist language to suggest he is more trustworthy than a woman who has never spoken. This hypothetical woman becomes a target for ridicule, subverting the talkative women stereotype by having no voice. Milphio weaponizes humour to attack the intelligence of a disabled woman, irrespective of class. This ambiguity is interesting as marginalised groups e.g., women and enslaved people modify 'dominant language' for subjective means.[24] Relation between these groups extends past comedy, demonstrating how marginalised communities gain power through speech despite their social standing and important when

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[23] Lorde 1984: 117-9; Crenshaw 1998: 329, 331-3.

[24] Richlin 2017: 313.

considering how diverse audiences could have resonated with this language and its purpose. As Richlin writes, all comedy contains a seed of truth.[25] Hence, there is truth behind the double meanings on stage. Perhaps, Milphio's words are purely a comic device which Plautus exploits to create comedy in his narrative. Even if this is so, I argue that Milphio's denigration of women is what facilitates this humour and so, we must recognise that misogynistic language enables Milphio's superiority, and demonstrates a conceptualisation of women as the crux of ridicule. In conflating all women despite class, Milphio emphasises and critiques their similarities as the object of male ridicule whilst increasing his own status on the stage, highlighting differences in sex.

Although de Melo has chosen to translate *mutae* as dumb,[26] the adjective's alternative meaning as mute/silent could suggest Milphio's sympathy towards the silencing of women on the Roman stage and wider society as an enslaved person whose role knows silence.[27] This positive reading contrasts his earlier responses to female dominance in Adelphasium's commanding tone, characteristic of the prostitute unlike submissive, female, Plautine voices (*Poen*.271-4).[28]

Milphio's speech indicates he believes a trustworthy woman is one that is silent despite enslaved people associating silence with fear.[29] Milphio

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[25] Ibid.

[26] *Poen*.876 trans. by de Melo 2012: 111.

[27] Klein 2015: 58; Stewart 2012: 8.

[28] Barrios-Lech 2014: 484.

[29] Richlin 2017: 332; In Richlin's monograph, *Slave Theater in the Roman Republic*, she discusses how being silent onstage evokes connotations of fear, irrespective of class. She follows on, noting how in Roman drama, some forms of slave speech (e.g. "backtalk") is punishable by their master. Drawing on her analysis, it is clear to see how an enslaved person's speech can lead threats of reprimand (and possible, violence), eliciting fear from the possible danger speech would elicit.

uses puns to impose silence upon women akin to disabled women without voice. Moodie highlights this use of double meaning in the *Poenulus* can be aggressive which aligns with the misogynistic and ableist the use of *mutae* as mute.[30] This misogyny subverts Milphio's enslaved role as, according to Stewart, he serves as Agorastocles' tool and talking piece.[31] Thus, Milphio acts beyond social expectations in criticising women, placing sex/gender above slave status.[32] Fitzgerald names these interactions between the household and social hierarchies as 'tensions' and these tensions can be viewed intersectionally.[33] Plautus enforces this conflict between societal roles and private intentions in slave characters.[34] Evidently, Milphio diminishes his enslaved identity to place his gender centre stage, as he knows that freedom after helping Agorastocles is unlikely (*Poen*.129-139).

Observing Milphio intersectionally unlocks the *servus callidus'* language use to diminish parts of his identity by utilising patriarchal condemnation of women. In deflecting/distracting from his marginalised experience, Milphio helps us navigate the social map within the *Poenulus*. Therefore, Milphio's use of comedic speech portrays the pressure between different aspects of one's identity.

Is Milphio claiming that women should be in that position of fear through their silence? That may be too presumptuous to ask. Yet Milphio via his use of puns and comedic language alludes to wishing women to occupy the role of being silent like the women who, through disability, have no voice.

[30] Moodie 2018: 325.

[31] Stewart 2012: 187.

[32] Klein 2015: 58.

[33] Fitzgerald 2019: 189.

[34] Stewart 2012: 46.

III: *Giddenis*

Giddenis is the nurse, who, along with the main love interest, Adelphasium, was kidnapped and (presumably) sold into sex work. She is the one who recognises Adelphasium and Anterastilis' father and her former master, Hanno and thus, facilitates their recognition scene, uniting the father with his daughters. Barsby supposes that Giddenis was a Plautine addition to the Greek original, creating a layer of interest when looking deeper into her character.[35] We do not know why Plautus added Giddenis to the narrative but her position in text is a precarious one in terms of identity and so, she is important as the character whose social location has the most intersections. Much of the little scholarly discourse on Giddenis only mentions her in passing and mostly in relation to her master, Hanno; she has been largely omitted in scholarship as a minor character.[36] Greater analysis of her identity/experiences could help map her perilous social standing.

Giddenis is denied the recognition scene (*anagnorisis*) with her own son (accompanied by Hanno in his search for his daughters) that Hanno is permitted when commanded to be silent by her Carthaginian master (*Poen*.1145). In response, I ask "ain't she a Carthaginian too?" in the same vein as the speech supposedly written by Sojourner Truth.[37] Giddenis is

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[35] Barsby 2004: 106.

[36] See Raia 1983 and Fantham 2011.

[37] Crenshaw 1998: 325; Sojourner allegedly wrote this eponymous speech describing the cruelty that she faced as an enslaved Black woman in 19th century America, criticising White women's ignorance and racism despite their shared female identity. I argue that Giddenis, is being thwarted by Hanno despite their shared Carthaginian origin, he is negating this aspect of Giddenis and their familiarity as slave and master to misogynistically denigrate her, ignoring the aspects of her identity that unite them both.

silenced, M Giddenis as an enslaved woman retains most parts of her identity despite a new enslaver, new location and changing the profession associated with her enslavement. She is tied to her ethnicity and yet loses its benefits all at once because of the other parts of her experience. Unlike Agorastocles, Giddenis is denied Hanno's connection via kinship and thus, protection from ridicule (*Poen*.1037).

Analysing the scene where Hanno and Agorastocles unite as kin, this connection allows Agorastocles to gain Hanno's aid, yet Giddenis is not entitled to this. She receives no benefit from aiding Hanno and instead will most likely remain an enslaved person. United origin does not erase Giddenis' other intersectional aspects: she remains an enslaved woman, subject to Hanno's patriarchal dominance, despite their shared foreigner status. Enslaved characters in Roman comedy are at the intersection of 'power relations between' the other characters.[38] Characters like Giddenis occupy this intersection of power and persona as a tool to display dominance, and here, Hanno's control. Even though when Hanno and Giddenis speak she is enslaved to the pimp, Lycus, she is still subject to him because freedom versus enslavement remains one of the most important axes of power and oppression in the Roman social hierarchy.

As the only female character in this palliata that speaks Punic, and she is silenced shortly after speaking (*Poen*.1145). Although Hanno is a character who faces harsh ridicule, he still makes Giddenis the crux of his joke where he calls her breasts *muliebri supellectili* (female furniture), referencing her

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[38] Fitzgerald 2019: 189.

past occupation as a nurse (*Poen*.1145).[39] He forbids her reunion with her son and denounces his own language in a female voice, reducing it to *clarus clamor* (loud shouting) rather than a touching scene of reunion (*Poen*.1146). Hanno's degradation and misogyny opposes the loyalty she provides in recognising him as her former master. It is Giddenis who enables Hanno to find his daughters through her recognition, but she is far from rewarded for this act, instead she is insulted and silenced (*Poen*.1120-31).

Giddenis' identity is precarious; she is the most marginalised character in this play as the kidnapped, aged, Carthaginian, female slave. At the intersection of age, race, gender, and class, Giddenis has no security whatsoever. Although the nature of Adelphasium and Anterastilis' maidenhood is a point of importance in the first act, there is no such talk of Giddenis' treatment under a new master, it is left unsaid if she has endured sexual assault and abuse since being kidnapped (*Poen*.1139). It is vague whether she would also have been a prostitute and if she were forced to engage in prostitution like the other women because of her age. Giddenis is left to the audience's imagination to understand her own experience. In looking further into her identity than her association to the other characters, we can uncover facets of Giddenis' identity and experience not previously explored as an enslaved (possibly in sex work), aged, Carthaginian woman. Giddenis' experience can be attributed as intersectional and for this, she faces extreme marginalisation in the play.

Conclusion

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[39] Dutsch 2004: 626.

The *Poenulus'* characters exhibit intersectional experiences that highlight how complex identities map onto the world of Roman comedy. Through consciously analysing the perspectives of various characters in the play (the enslaved female prostitute, the enslaved man, the aged, enslaved nurse turn sex worker) using intersectionality, we can view the different social locations that appear in this text and what it reveals about identity in Plautine drama within the historical context of Republican Rome. Identity in the *Poenulus* is complicated and multifaceted and we must use approaches that do not omit/obscure markers of identity but highlight how different identities interact with one another. Carthaginians as the focal point of a Roman play after the Second Punic War is a significant point of interest when considering race and ethnicity in the Roman Republic. However, when we begin to consider how racism, classism and misogyny intersect and constantly appears in this text, we must observe how these different modes of discrimination impact our understanding of how identity is conceived in this tumultuous time.

This paper demonstrates how intersectional theory can reveal more about classical texts and notions of identity and what we perceive identity to be in different social contexts (e.g. the Roman world and its texts). Comedy reveals parts of what we believe identity to be and the experiences that follow. Plautus, in using comedy, gives us a glimpse into the society within his text, what characteristics and intersections exist and how these characters navigate, map and categorise their own identities and the identities of others.

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