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The Captives (Captivi)

Plautus · *c. 200–184 BC · Henry Thomas Riley (Bohn; Perseus text from a 1913 Bell reprint)*

Hegio of Aetolia has lost two sons: one stolen at four years old and sold in Elis, the other, Philopolemus, taken prisoner in the war with the Eleans. To buy his son back, the old man traffics in Elean captives, and among them purchases Philocrates and his servant Tyndarus. The two exchange clothes and names. The prologue and the company at the end both warn you that this is not the usual comedy of procurers and braggart captains.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What is a captive's fidelity worth, when a father is buying sons and a slave is secretly one of them?

"The Poets find but few Comedies of this kind, where good men might become better."

The company of players, at the close

Philocrates, dressed as the servant, is sent to Elis to arrange an exchange for Hegio's captured son. Tyndarus remains as a pledge, and begs him not to forsake that pledge. After he has gone, Aristophontes accidentally shows Hegio the deceit. The old man, losing all hope, sends Tyndarus in chains to the stone-quarries. Then Philocrates returns, bringing Philopolemus and the runaway Stalagmus, who once stole the other child. Stalagmus had sold that child to Philocrates' father: the slave Tyndarus is Hegio's lost son. The chains change hands.

KEY CHARACTERS

Hegio
the Aetolian father who traffics in captives to redeem one son, and has already bought the other without knowing it

Tyndarus
Philocrates' servant and, in truth, Hegio's stolen child; he stays as a pledge and is sent to the quarries

Philocrates
the Elean master who goes to Elis in a servant's clothes and returns with Hegio's captured son

Philopolemus
the son taken in the war, brought home in the exchange

Stalagmus and Aristophontes
the runaway who sold the child, and the captive whose recognition nearly ruins the plan

Grades 9–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

Not in the Hackneyed Style

THE PROLOGUE

A play without the usual ribald lines, and a father already half in the dark.

- The speaker of the prologue tells you that Tyndarus, in ignorance, is the slave of his own father. "What poor creatures are men, when I reflect upon it! This plot will be performed by us—a play for your entertainment." Then the special claim: "Really, it will be worth your while to give your attention to this play. 'Tis not composed in the hackneyed style, nor yet like other plays, nor are there in it any ribald lines unfit for utterance: here is neither the perjured procurer, nor the artful courtesan, nor yet the braggart captain."
- Do not be afraid because there is war between the Aetolians and the Eleans. The war is the circumstance; the action is in Hegio's house, among captives he has bought in the hope of redeeming his son.
- Hegio, a wealthy native of Aetolia, had two sons. One was stolen by a slave when four years old and carried to Elis and sold; for years the father could not learn what had become of him. In the war, Philopolemus, the other son, is taken by the Eleans. Hegio begins to traffic in captives, with the view of exchanging some prisoner of rank for that son. At this conjuncture the play commences.

> *"'Tis not composed in the hackneyed style, nor yet like other plays, nor are there in it any ribald lines unfit for utterance"*
>
> The prologue

02

Clothes and Names

THE SUBSTITUTION

Master and servant trade places, so that one may be sent home.

- Among the captives Hegio has purchased are Philocrates of Elis and his servant Tyndarus, taken together. With the object of deceiving Hegio, they change their clothes and exchange names as well. Philocrates pretends to be the servant of Tyndarus.
- Hegio, desirous to procure the exchange of his son, sends Philocrates (in the character of the servant) to Elis for that purpose. Tyndarus stays behind as the valued pledge.
- Tyndarus charges the departing man not to consider himself as free and forsake his pledge, and not to fail to bring Hegio's son home again in return for him. "Understand that you are sent hence valued at twenty minae. Take care to prove scrupulously faithful; take care that you show not a wavering fidelity. For my father, I am sure, will do everything that he ought to do." He is speaking, as Hegio hears it, in a master's character; the fidelity is the servant's own.

> *"For my father, I am sure, will do everything that he ought to do."*
>
> **Tyndarus** · Tyndarus to Philocrates, as the pledge is left behind

03

The Stone-Quarries

THE DISCOVERY

Aristophontes speaks, and the old man loses hope.

- After Philocrates' departure, Aristophontes, another Elean captive, accidentally puts Hegio in the way of discovering the manner in which he has been deceived.
- The old man, losing all hope of obtaining the liberation of his son, sends Tyndarus in chains to the stone-quarries.
- The acrostic argument is blunt: the son that was formerly lost, his clothes and his name changed with his master, causes that he is lost to Hegio a second time; and he himself is punished. Hegio has been buying captives in order to recover a child, and has punished, in ignorance, the other child already in his house.

04

The Runaway Brought Home

THE RETURN

Philocrates keeps the pledge, and brings two men with him.

- Shortly after, Philocrates returns, and brings with him Philopolemus, the son of Hegio, and Stalagmus, the runaway slave that had stolen the other son.
- It is then discovered that Stalagmus had sold the child to the father of Philocrates, and that he is no other than Tyndarus, the slave. Tyndarus is sent for, and is informed that he is the lost son of Hegio.
- The fidelity that kept the pledge has also, without knowing it, been the lost son's fidelity in his father's house. Philocrates does not abandon the man who stayed behind for him; and the exchange Hegio wanted is accomplished, with a second restoration he had not looked for.

05

The Chains Change Hands

THE CLOSE

A comedy where good men might become better.

- Stalagmus is then condemned to the chains from which Tyndarus is liberated. Hegio would have the fetters removed from one and given to the other. Stalagmus, who has no savings of his own, remarks on the justice of the transfer.
- The company of players come forward: "Spectators, this play is founded on chaste manners. No wenching is there in this, and no intriguing, no exposure of a child, no cheating out of money; and no young man in love here make his mistress free without his father's knowledge. The Poets find but few Comedies of this kind, where good men might become better."
- The claim is part of the play, not a later moral pasted on. Keep it, and keep the cost: a father has sent his own son to the quarries, and only a kept pledge and a returned runaway undo the sentence.

Fidelity · A Father · Captivity · Recognition · Exchange

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The prologue tells you, before the intrigue begins, that the slave is already the son of his master. The suspense is not "who is he?" but how a father can fail to know his own, and what fidelity can cost in the meantime.
2. This is still a comedy of substitution: clothes and names are changed, and a parasite (Ergasilus) has his part. The play itself insists it is not the hackneyed kind. Let the claim be tested, not swallowed unheard.
3. Tyndarus's charge—"Take care to prove scrupulously faithful"—is spoken in a borrowed character and is the real servant's plea. "For my father, I am sure, will do everything that he ought to do" is truer than he knows.
4. The stone-quarries and the final transfer of chains are the same iron. Stalagmus goes into the bonds Tyndarus leaves. The close asks whether good men might become better; it does not pretend that the years of slavery are undone by the last scene.

Quotations are verbatim from the Henry Thomas Riley (Bohn; Perseus text from a 1913 Bell reprint), Riley, The Comedies of Plautus; Perseus phi0119.phi005.perseus-eng2, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/plautus-the-captives/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.