Reading Between the Lines:

Letters in Plautus

By

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Abstract

This dissertation is a study of the epistolary motif in Plautus. It aims to foster a more profound appreciation of the playwright’s dramaturgy by showing the great extent of literary self-consciousness present in his employment of the theatrical epistle. I offer a close, linear reading of the five “letter plays” – Trinummus, Bacchides, Persa, Curculio and Pseudolus, treating each text in a separate chapter to observe how the plot develops, or is undone, through the conventions of the epistolary medium, and to elucidate the dramaturg’s acute awareness of the complexities associated with letters. These comedies feature epistles composed, delivered and read onstage to duplicitous ends, for their scheming personae invent, forge and steal missives to solve the crux through epistolary fraud. The intricate mechanics of each comedy’s internal deception play upon common tropes such as παρουσία, penmanship, formulaic greetings, and epistolary time, and the textual schemers capitalize on the pitfalls of communication by letter, employing the latent perils associated with the separation of text from author, messengers, and delivery for the success of their
ruses. In the hands of Plautus’ comic heroes, epistles are a dangerous weapon of deception and a showpiece for cunning and skill in the art of ludere.

Another important aspect that I explore in my work is the potential self-referentiality implicit in the use of an embedded epistle qua writing within writing. I argue that the letter is, inter alia, an important tool of Plautine metatheatre, for the personae often employ missives in the internal plot as dramatic scripts, increasing the mise-en-abyme effect of the “play-within-the-play” via the epistolary motif. In this vein, I pay particularly close attention to onstage reading and composition, reflecting upon how these scenes mirror the dynamics of performance. Further, it is my contention that Plautus uses the metatheatricality of this device and the mise-en-abyme it generates to allude to his own poetics and mode of composition as a translator by variously playing upon the letter as a metaphor for text, an image highlighted by the implicit contrast of writing with the oral performance medium of drama.

In the course of my discussion, I also strive to reveal word play, bilingual puns and allusions to myth and literature, as I am firmly convinced that Plautus engages with the Greek poetic tradition much more than has been perceived by previous scholarship. Thus my analysis of epistolography in Plautus contributes to Plautine studies not only by providing an in-depth examination of the letter as a prominent dramatic element, but also by revealing the learnedness and sophistication of this playwright and translator of Greek comedy.
Acknowledgements

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Reading Between the Lines:
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A cunn-ing introduction: A tricky text in Twelfth Night

In Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night, the clever chambermaid Maria forges a letter to trick her fellow servant, Malvolio, into thinking that their mistress Olivia is in love with him. The unsuspecting steward comes upon the text ‘planted’ in Olivia’s garden as Maria and her accomplices, Sir Toby, Sir Andrew and Fabian, watch on, commenting in asides on the pompous behaviour of the “niggardly rascally sheep-biter”.¹ Foreshadowing the premise of the ruse to be played out, Malvolio already fantasizes about marrying Olivia and being raised to noble status, fancying himself the worthy subject of his mistress’ affections even before discovering the guileful epistle. When Malvolio picks up the note, he exclaims thus upon its penmanship (II.5.71-72):

By my life, this is my lady’s hand. These be her very C’s, her U’s, and her T’s, and thus makes she her great P’s. It is, in contempt of question, her hand.

Sir Andrew’s dull-witted reaction – Her C’s, her U’s and her T’s. Why that? (II.5.74) – doubly emphasizes the racy joke for the audience: Malvolio’s handwriting analysis spells out “cut” – the female pudenda.² As we discover in the next line, these distinctive letters make up, in fact, an epistolary inscription.³ The dupe now reads the missive’s address aloud (II.5.75):

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¹ II.5 vv.4-5.
² Cf. Partridge (2011), 196, 208, Scragg (1991), Warren and Wells (1994), 146 and Smith (2001), 64. The great P’s refer to abundant urination. For an ancient comparandum, cf. the opening tableau of the Pseudolus. In that play, the eponymous slave quips that Phoenicium’s messy handwriting makes it seem as if the letters on the wax are having sex (vv.24-25), thus foregrounding the erotic playfulness of the entire scene. A fitting contemporary parallel to Shakespeare’s racy cleverness (although not in an epistolary context) is a 2009 song by pop artist Britney Spears. Her song, If You Seek Amy likewise contains a dirty double entendre, spelling out, as it were, “F-U-C-K me”. Scragg (1991), 5-16 suggests a second interpretation of Malvolio’s letters, less sexy and more criminal: “While laughing at the incongruity of ‘cut’ and ‘pee’ in the mouth of a steward, the members of the audience are thus encouraged to visualize ‘cut P----’ [cut purse] and in doing so a seventeenth-century spectator may well have been prompted to transfer an anxious hand to his side” (p.5).
³ Perhaps surprisingly, the epistolary inscription contains neither a C nor a P. Scragg (1991), 1 suggests that either Shakespeare “expected his audience to imagine the existence of some additional
'To the unknown beloved, this, and my good wishes.'

The text's rightful recipient is unnamed as (we shall soon discover) is its author: *Twelfth Night*’s deceitful letter is doubly ambiguous, revealing neither its real provenance nor its true destination. Nevertheless, Malvolio has already worked out the epistolary roles himself, (incorrectly) identifying his mistress as its creator and himself as its object. In fact, the steward imposes upon the text his own reading even before opening it to reveal the contents within: to Malvolio’s mind, the epistle from his “mistress” ‘says’ sex. That is, when looking upon Olivia’s writing (or what he thinks is his mistress’ hand), Malvolio ‘sees’ (and speaks of) her vagina, imagining the pleasurable implications of what is supposedly her love note. The opening of the letter that follows these lines, in fact, reenacts precisely this: Malvolio’s rupture of the seal and penetration of the epistle’s confidential interior stands for the sexual act he is envisioning as he contemplates “Olivia”’s script. The same erotic image is suggested by the epistolary insignia that fasten the missive shut, stolen by the forger from her mistress to ‘authenticate’ the counterfeit missive. This stamp depicts Lucretia, the virtuous wife of Collatinus who was raped by Sextus Tarquinius. Malvolio recognizes it, thereby affirming his assumption about the epistle’s composer (II.5.76-77): *And the impressure her Lucrece, with which she uses to seal.*

words that Malvolio neglects to read aloud, or he was aware that such discrepancies pass unnoticed in the playhouse and was indifferent to an exact correspondence between the letters and the lines*. Warren and Wells (1994), 146 conclude that the letters are mentioned only for producing the obscene joke.

4 At II.5.90, just before commencing his reading of the letter’s contents, Malvolio wonders about its recipient: *To whom should this be?* But, as it seems to me, the servant has already revealed his reconstruction of the unspecified epistolary roles by way of his double entendre.

5 Roberston (1996), 125 observes that “Malvolio sees in the feminine hand those body parts he most desires…[f]or him the feminine hand promises the cut”. She suggests that “Malvolio is exposed as a bad reader who forces from texts the meanings he desires, plucking from Maria’s letter a projection of his own desire, a satisfaction of self-love”. On Malvolio’s self-directed misconstrual of the text, cf. also Scragg (1991), 2-3. *Alter* Warren and Wells (1994), 146 who think that “presumably this word-play is unconscious on Malvolio’s part”.


7 The story is told in Livy 1.57-58.
The mark, chosen by Olivia as an emblem of her chastity, is perverted within the context of the deceit to represent Malvolio’s fantasy instead, the sexual subtext of the legend prevailing over its exemplum of purity: the reference to this classical story, prefaced by Malvolio’s very bawdy exclamation, makes us think not of Lucretia’s honourable righteousness, but of the sex act that stands at the centre of the legend. Indeed, one might even say that the seal reveals the true intentions of the falsified author, for Olivia, who has, in reality, written no love letter at all, is an apt parallel to Lucretia: neither woman desires the man who lusts after her. Further, this orientation of unrequited sexual yearning in Twelfth Night’s epistolary scene gives the steward’s ‘speaking name’ an ironic twist, for he, in this scenario, is no Malvolio at all, but a Benvolio. It is Olivia who does not wish what her servant is hankering for, although the forgery committed by Maria has ostensibly transformed her into Malvolio’s willing lover.

This naughty reaction to the forged missive in Twelfth Night amply demonstrates the rich potential of embedded letters in literature. Shakespeare here invokes and meditates upon various conventions of epistolary exchange, using the document’s seal, greeting and penmanship as the materia for his comedy. Further, the playwright employs a missive to generate error, capitalizing upon one of the dangers associated with epistolary communication – the potential for misunderstanding – to trick Malvolio into thinking that it was his absent mistress who penned the note he finds in the garden. Rather than explicitly ‘spelling out’ the details of her falsified premise by naming the document’s author and addressee, the handmaid takes advantage of the communicative ambiguity of letters while simultaneously playing into Malvolio’s haughty disposition, creating a text that induces the servant to draw his own (erroneous) conclusions regarding the mysterious missive’s constellation of epistolary roles. Further, thanks to the physical separation characteristic of epistolary exchange, Olivia is not around to

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8 Cf. Stewart (2008), 59, who observes that this image of the Roman matrona was “of all the seal-rings available for a woman...perhaps the most clichéd”. He, too, perceives that the stamp and the story it conjures up is “supremely inappropriate” in the present scenario, although he identifies the irony as lying in the fact that in this text, Olivia allegedly offers herself to Malvolio (pp.59-60).
speak against the phony missive that purports to convey her love for “the unknown beloved”. Maria’s letter-stratagem works like a charm.

This Shakespearean letter episode also underscores the particular potency of theatre as a ‘stage’ for the epistolary motif. The action of reading a letter aloud, as Malvolio does following his amorous reaction to the anonymous inscription, is evocative of dramatic performance: by reenacting the author’s voice aloud, the reader conjures up his or her persona, temporarily taking on an entirely new part within the context of the storyline. Thus theatrical letters have a natural affinity to the dramatic script, a potential for self-reflexivity that allows the playwright to refer obliquely to the dramatic medium in the course of performance. In Twelfth Night, the forged letter is explicitly metatheatrical. Beyond the ‘performance’ Malvolio puts on by reading the text, the message itself, I propose, prescribes theatre. It instructs the steward to assume a new role in the household, effecting a reversal in status such as that which occurs on stage when an actor assumes his role: the letter orders Malvolio to change his dress, his behaviour and even his speech, exchanging his servant persona for that of a nobleman, so that he might begin to ‘act the part’ of what will (supposedly) be his new life with this secret beloved (II.5.116-128):

“If this fall into thy hand, revolve. In my stars I am above thee, but be not afraid of greatness: some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon ’em. Thy Fates open their hands. Let thy blood and spirit embrace them. And, to inure thyself to what thou art like to be, cast thy humble slough and appear fresh. Be opposite with a kinsman, surly with servants; let thy tongue tang arguments of state. Put thyself into the trick of singularity. She thus advises thee that sighs for thee. Remember who commended thy yellow stockings and wished to see thee ever cross-gartered. I say, remember. Go to, thou art made, if thou desir’st to be so; if not, let me see thee a steward still, the fellow of servants, and not worthy to touch Fortune’s fingers. Farewell. She that would alter services with thee,

The Fortunate Unhappy’.

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9 I explore this concept in greater detail below; cf. pp.11-12.
10 Cf. Scragg (1991), 3 and Stewart (2008), 58 on the scene’s internal audience. Stewart observes thus: “Malvolio’s reading of the letter is staged in a manner that accentuates the theatrical aspect of letter-receiving: we watch him reading, commenting on and interpreting the letter, and we watch other characters watching him, commenting and interpreting his commentary and interpretation”.
Maria, then, literally writes a mini-plot into the play, generating confusion by simulating Olivia’s authorship to, in turn, stimulate poor Malvolio’s sexual urges and entertain his onstage and offstage observers.11

Ancient epistolography and letters in Plautus

Given the complex (and, often, hysterical) dynamics engendered by the appearance of epistles on stage, an analysis of this plot device in Plautine comedy is both desirable and useful for gaining a more profound appreciation of the playwright’s dramaturgy. The motif is employed extensively in Plautus’ oeuvre: there are 18 letters referred to in 9 out of 21 surviving plays.12 In five of these comedies - *Trinummus, Bacchides, Persa, Curculio* and *Pseudolus* – an epistle functions as an essential element of the plot and is composed, delivered or read onstage. Like Maria’s, the majority of these texts are tricky, used by the characters to disseminate false information so as to execute a deceptive scheme, and are thus appropriated, stolen or forged *ex nihilo*.

This study of letters fits into the recent scholarly trend that has made epistolography a major area of interest in Classics. During the past couple of decades, there has been a significant increase in critical attention focused on ancient letters both documentary and literary, with various studies shedding light on the social conventions of letter writing, epistolary categories, and the use of embedded epistles in different literary genres.13 Of particular relevance is Rosenmeyer’s 2001 monograph, which explores fictional letters throughout Greek literature. Rosenmeyer explores the epistolary motif starting from Homer’s Bellerophon and the σήματα λυγρὰ he unknowingly bears, continuing all the way down to the

12 This count includes the fragmentary *Vidularia*, from whose scanty remains it is impossible to tell whether letters were mentioned, or even figured prominently in the text. Scafuro (2003/2004), 20-21 lists all the epistles in the Plautine corpus, counting 16. However, she is incorrect in positing a possible letter at *Curc*. 346-348: the parasite does not steal a letter from Therapontigonus, only his signet-ring. I argue for three more letters in the course of my discussion; cf. pp.62-65 and pp.151-152, *infra*. This brings the total of letters in Plautus to 18.
Second Sophistic, identifying the common characteristics, themes and anxieties associated with this medium in classical literature. In chapter 4 (pp.61-97), the author investigates theatrical letters, elucidating the epistolary motif in Euripides, the first playwright (as far as we can tell) to have brought missives onto the stage.14 Rosenmeyer investigates the letters in *Iphigenia among the Taurians, Iphigenia at Aulis* and the *Hippolytus,*15 demonstrating the tragedian’s sophisticated manipulation of letters and the fascinating synergy that results from the intersection of performance and text.16 In his BMCR review of her book (2002.06.20), Whitmarsh notes the author’s exclusion of letters in Middle and New Comedy and in “Roman Greek texts”, remarking that this constitutes an important gap. Although no Greek plays featuring the epistolary motif survive, the notice of several comedies entitled Ἑπιστολή or Ἑπιστολαί17 demonstrates that epistles in all likelihood did function as a plot device in New Comedy. The fragment of Antiphanes’ comedy *Sappho* in which the epistle is compared to a mother and the letters to the infants she carries at her breast (fr. 194 Kassel-Austin),18 likewise suggests the presence of letters and writing in the genre, as does the work of later epistolographers. The Second Sophistic author Alciphron recreates the world of New Comedy by imagining letters written by the stock characters of Menandrian drama, and, significantly, seals his oeuvre with an epistolary exchange between Menander and a fictional beloved, the *hetaira* Glycera.19 Aristainetos, writing in the 5th or 6th century, also composed letters populated by comic characters, lifting *personae, scenarios* and even entire lines from the Greek comedy of ages past.20

Taking Whitmarsh’s observation as his springboard, Jenkins’ 2005 article, “At Play With Writing: Letters and Readers in Plautus” offers a discussion of the epistle

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14 Rosenmeyer (2001), 62-65 surveys the evidence for the epistolary motif in theatre before Euripides.
15 Rosenmeyer (2001) also briefly discusses the evidence for Euripides’ other, lost letter play, the Pulamedes at pp.64-65.
17 Cf. Rosenmeyer (2001), 64 and n.11, and Jenkins (2005), 363.
20 For a survey of what we know of this obscure late-antique epistolographer, cf. the introduction in Bing and Höschele (2014), the first English translation of Aristainetos in almost three hundred years.
in four of Plautus' plays, *Pseudolus, Trinummus, Curculio* and *Bacchides*. Before Jenkins, the Plautine epistles had received limited treatment: in 1965 Monaco wrote a paper entitled "L’epistola nel teatro antico", in which he considers Phoenicium's letter in the *Pseudolus* and its literary antecedents in Euripides. Petrone's 1983 monograph on deception in Plautus makes some important remarks on the playwright's use of this motif, as does Slater, whose groundbreaking 1985 book reads these texts as an important element of the corpus' pervasive metatheatricality. Jenkins' work builds on Slater's by exploring the metatheatrical dimension of letters in Plautus, paying particular attention to the duplicitous power of text to introduce fiction into the play. His argument also follows in the footsteps of Alison Sharrock, who, in a 1996 article, discusses the letters of the *Pseudolus* as text, and the act of misreading within the context of the comedy's internal intrigue.

Although these analyses have established an important starting point for discussion, they hardly cover all aspects of this crucial plot device, and much remains to be said about the writing and reading of letters on the Roman stage. My dissertation aims to fill precisely this gap. The chapters that follow, then, are a thorough study of the embedded epistle in Plautus, exploring the letter as an agent in the plot of the five “letter plays” to discern how the action develops through this motif. I also consider the various ‘minor’ missives in these texts, elucidating how authentic letter exchange often foregrounds and mirrors epistolary deception. I show how the dramaturge manipulates and, at times, subverts this medium’s conventions in the *minutiae* of these textual ruses, demonstrating a great extent of literary self-consciousness and an awareness of the complexities associated with letters. It is to a brief discussion of these *topoi* that I will now turn, introducing the

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22 Petrone (1983), 133-136 describes the two types of epistles in Plautus, identifying the motif *qua* medium of information and driving force in the plot (cf. Rosenmeyer's idea of 'kinetic' letters on pp.10-11, *infra*). Petrone ultimately suggests that the deceitful letter of Euripides' *Hippolytus* determined the use of the epistolary medium for intrigue in Plautine comedy (pp.134-135).

23 In particular, Jenkins fails to take into account the prominent letter and epistolary deceit in the *Persa*. 
concerns and customs of ancient epistology that serve as the basis for so much of the fooling around with letters that happens in Plautus.

**Epistolary conventions**

Epistolary exchange implies absence. We use letters to say what we cannot (or prefer not) to say in person, delegating the job instead to a text that will go forth and ‘speak’ for us. A written document, then, has the capacity to represent its author, embodying the composer’s presence despite his or her physical absence. This concept of παρουσία is a common motif in Greco-Roman epistology, as the ancients viewed letters as reenacting face-to-face communication through text. The idea of παρουσία originates in official letters dispatched to relay an order and meant to invoke the authority of the author through his simulated presence. This is, in fact, how epistles first function in Greek, as revealed in the etymology of the Greek word for letter: ἐπιστολή means “command”, and is subsequently transferred to signify written communication. An epistolary dialogue, then, is a conversation with an absent interlocutor, a notion conceived of in classical antiquity as *sermo absentium*.

This communication by proxy enabled by the transmission of text is potentially problematic. A medium that operates *de facto* in the absence of its author makes it highly vulnerable to forgery for, as we saw in *Twelfth Night*, a letter’s composer is not around – nor is she supposed to be – to verify the authenticity of a missive and its text. Further, the separation of the epistle from its author that inevitably results in the process of transfer is a circumstance fraught with latent peril to the message contained within: once committed to the messenger (or the mailbox), a letter passes completely out of the author’s control, and the ensuing...

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24 For the influence of the original function of the letter on the development of epistology in the ancient Greek world and the concept of παρουσία, cf. Stirewalt (1993) *passim* and especially pp.4-10.

25 Cf. Ps.- Demetrius Περὶ Ἐρμηνείας 223 where an epistle is defined as one half of a conversation. Thraede (1970) explores epistolary communication in both classical and late antique literature as *sermo absentium*, including the ancient idea that a letter could evoke the presence of the absent writer; cf. 39 ff., 83 ff., 146 ff., 162 ff, and *passim*. Cf. also Steiner (1994), 114, who discusses the ability of a written text to stand in for its author: "To possess the written composition is to have the writer present...".
voyage between composer and recipient contains manifold dangers to which an epistle might fall victim. The reliability of the courier is a particular *locus* of anxiety: can he be trusted to efficiently and faithfully fulfill his task?\(^26\) The messenger sent by an epistolary composer in his stead to correctly consign his *παρουσία* is granted both tremendous responsibility and the opportunity, should he be so inclined or so incompetent, to wreak havoc on the dialogue for which he is the conduit. Thus a *nuntius* might steal a letter, misdeliver it or fail to deliver it altogether. One might see this tension and ambiguity associated with epistolary messengers in the Newman character of the TV show “Seinfeld”, who is the sinister mailman and antagonist to its protagonist Jerry. Newman hilariously embodies the negative stereotypes about undependable and ill-intentioned postal workers: he claims that no mailman successfully delivers more than 50% of his assigned mail, and that letters marked with “do not bend” are deliberately rumpled (“The Andrea Doria”); he boasts that packages with damaged or illegible addresses are “freebies” offered *gratis* for the postal workers to loot (“The Labelmaker”) and – my personal favourite – Newman calls in sick when it is raining, flying in the face of the US Postal Service’s motto – “Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds”\(^27\) (“The Calzone”). The Plautine letter plays meditate extensively on this ambivalence of the messenger, and contain true couriers and false impersonators who variously fail and succeed – both spectacularly so – in their epistolary errands.

Another major problem associated with communication by letter is *miscommunication*: the ancients had ambiguous feelings towards the written word, which they viewed as easily falsified or misconstrued because unaccompanied by the author.\(^28\) To this interpretive menace we might add the pernicious effect of time.

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\(^{26}\) Cf. White (1986), 215.

\(^{27}\) Remarkably, the USPS motto is taken from Herodotus. In this passage (8.98.1), Xerxes sends a messenger to Persia with word of the disaster at Salamis. The Persian message relay system is described by Herodotus as follows: τούς ὁπετε νιφετός, οὐκ ὀμήρος, οὐ κούμα, οὐ νὺξ ἔργει μὴ οὐ κατανύσοι τὸν προκείμενον αὐτῷ δρόμον τὴν ταχιστήν. On this royal postal system as a tool of tyranny (communication by letter in Persia is reserved for the King) and the ingenious plans invented to circumvent this monopoly on epistolary exchange, cf. Steiner (1994), 149-154.

\(^{28}\) Jenkins (2005), 362 cites Isocrates’ first epistle, in which the author laments the “lability of the written sign” (1.3). In a similar vein, Plato’s *Phaedrus* contains a censure of the written word in the
Letters are, by nature, chronologically complicated, for they contain various levels of narrative located in different moments of time. A letter’s present is already in the past once the author has written it, and even more so once the epistle reaches its recipient. Latin’s epistolary tense reflects this chronological lag: a letter’s composer uses the imperfect tense where English would use the present in order to streamline his chronological orientation with that of the addressee, thus attempting to close the time gap separating sender and receiver within the context of his epistolary narrative. As a result of this chronological distance built into epistolary communication (and particularly so in the ancient world), the accuracy of information communicated in a letter is implicitly in question. This issue of chronology is complicated even further when epistles occur in fiction. As Rosenmeyer demonstrates in her analysis of letters in Euripides, such embedded letters are conditioned not only by the time of the narrated action reported within the letter itself (erzählte Zeit), the time of narration by the internal correspondents in writing the letter (Erzählzeit), and the performance or reading time, but also by the time of the dramatist’s organization of the letters.

These properties and pitfalls of epistles make them a singularly adept medium for generating mischief. In the Plautine letter plays, epistolary conventions are used and abused by clever schemers to deceive their enemies and accomplish their tricky ends. Control of text enables powerful comic characters to introduce their own fictive premises into the narrative, propelling the play forward into the duplicitous direction of their choosing. Rosenmeyer has called this ability of letters to drive the plot “kinetic potential”, distinguishing communicative letters, which

tale of Theuth and Thamus at 274c-275e; cf. n.145, infra. In Euripides’ IT, the letter-writer Agamemnon informs his messenger of the epistle’s contents in an attempt to mediate this communicative ambiguity of letters, equipping the old man with information so that he might field questions provoked by the text in its addressee, Clytemnestra; cf. pp.162-164, infra.

29 For the temporal polyvalence of epistolary communication, and the associated problems, cf. Altman (1982), 123.

30 For the ancient epistolary tense and chronological issues associated with letters, cf. Trapp (2003), 36 ff. He observes that the sender’s assumption of the receiver’s chronological viewpoint underscores the personal nature of epistolary communication. Cf. also Rosenmeyer (2001), 74-75.


32 Rosenmeyer (2001), 61-97, especially 74-75.
describe action, and kinetic letters, which *provoke* action.\(^{33}\) Both types occur in Plautus, and the dramaturge plays upon this locomotive force of letters, teasing the spectators with their potential that might – or might *not* – be unleashed to further the storyline.

**Metatheatre and the originality of Plautus**

This study also explores Plautus’ use of the embedded epistle *qua* writing within writing – a textual *mise-en-abyme*.\(^{34}\) Via the depiction of internal composition and reading, figures within the narrative may be portrayed as engaging in the very activity through which they themselves are created by the author and realized in the minds of the audience.\(^{35}\) As Slater first elucidated, internal letters thus fit aptly into Plautus’ metatheatrical comedies, which depict overtly dramatic productions inside the larger play planned out and put on by the characters – the “play-within-the-play”. Thus the compositional activity (equivalent to the scheming process itself\(^{36}\)) of the comedy’s controlling character – the “internal playwright” – mirrors Plautus’ own composition of the text inhabited by the *personae*. Further, when these epistles are read on stage, an image is generated of the players reciting their script and, by so doing, acting out their performance, complemented and reinforced by the explicit theatricality of the internal deception. The natural likeness of epistolary communication to the act of performance underscores the aptness of this metaphor: the evocation of an absent person through the recreation of his voice as written in


\(^{35}\) Whereas Classical Greek authors are not spoken of as “writing” but as “creating” (ποιεῖ) their texts, Roman poets *are* characterized as writers and their creative activity as writing, which makes this metapoetic metaphor a legitimate one; cf. e.g. Pseudolus’ *poeta fiam* monologue at Ps. vv.394-414 featuring the poet’s writing tablets and the didascalic reference at *Casina* 32-34 (*Diphilus/hanc graece scripsit, postid rsum denuo/latine Plautus cum latranti nomine*).

\(^{36}\) There is a strong association between writing and scheming in the Plautine letter plays, which alludes to the ancient conception of writing as inherently slippery and potentially deceptive (cf. p.9 and n.28, *supra*). This concept has been thoroughly treated by Rosenmeyer (2001). Rosenmeyer explores how the attribution of the letter’s *primus inventor* to a foreign woman, Atossa Queen of Persia (pp.25-28), sheds light upon the suspicion associated with epistolary communication in the ancient world. On the association of writing in Greek literature with the tyrannical opponents to Athenian democracy and, in particular, the autocratic East, cf. Steiner (1994), 127-241.
an epistle is strongly reminiscent of playacting, whereby an actor brings a character into existence.\textsuperscript{37} The use of letters, then, intensifies the metatheatrical dynamic of the “play-within-the-play” by introducing an image of the script composed by Plautus and given to the acting troupe for the comedy’s realization.

In my analysis, I bring this conceit a step further than Slater and Jenkins by exploring the potential for self-referentiality implicit in the use of embedded epistles in a translation. That is, I argue that the Latin playwright uses this plot device, \textit{inter alia}, to allude to his own poetics and mode of composition by variously playing upon the letter as a metaphor for his Greek model material, an image highlighted by the implicit contrast of writing with the oral performance medium of drama.\textsuperscript{38} I suggest that Plautus creates a metatext of sorts,\textsuperscript{39} using the epistle as representative of his original in order to underline the creativity and independence of his adaptation.\textsuperscript{40}

I do not propose this metapoetic metaphor of literary adaptation for all of the Plautine epistles, for I have found that the image of text manifests itself differently in each of the letter plays. My study does, however, broadly investigate the topic of translation, seeking to shed light on Plautus’ aesthetic as a translator of Greek comedy. I propose to read for clues of Plautus’ innovation based solely upon his own work, attempting to perceive what the playwright may have to say for himself about his novelty through a close reading of possible references to the Greek play standing behind the Latin one. This is a novel approach to an old problem. Scholars addressing the “Homeric Question of Latin Studies”,\textsuperscript{41} that is, the extent of Plautus and Terence’s independence from their model texts, have traditionally attempted to reconstruct the Greek plays in order to then, in turn, make an argument about the originality of the Latin adaptations. This critical model is tautologous, as it seeks to

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{37} Jenkins (2005) and (2006), 101-107 shows how Plautus’ players exploit this metatheatrical potential of epistolary communication to reflect the nature of dramatic performance.
\textsuperscript{38} Rosenmeyer (2001), 66; cf. also p.49, infra.
\textsuperscript{39} Possanza (2004) proposes the idea of a “second original” in his analysis of Germanicus’ \textit{Phaenomena}. He argues that the Latin poet corrects, changes and adds to Aratus so as to reflect the history of reception of the \textit{Phaenomena} and the Augustan poetic milieu, playing all the while upon the reader’s knowledge of the original text.
\textsuperscript{40} Sharrock (1996) argues for an intertextual relationship with the Greek model text in the \textit{Pseudolus}, surmising that the spectator is meant to notice the difference between Plautus’ play and the plot in the Greek original.
\textsuperscript{41} Halporn (1993), 191.
\end{footnotesize}
found ideas about Roman comedy upon a purely speculative reimagining of the plots of Greek New Comedy. It is true that the papyrological finds of the last century have brought this genre out of obscurity: we now have a small part of Menander’s oeuvre, and the fragments of the Ἄστικς Ἐξαπατῶν published by Handley in 1968 have finally allowed for the comparison of segments of a Roman comedy, the *Bacchides*, with its Greek original. Nevertheless, the fact remains that we have yet an incomplete picture of New Comedy and its various exponents, who, aside from Menander, have survived as merely names with a few fragments attached. To expect to be able to say anything concrete about how the lost comedies of Menander may have worked in detail (and much less those of other playwrights) from reading the *Dyskolos* or the *Samia* seems untenable. Thus I reject this approach in my discussion, preferring to found my arguments upon what we have (Plautus’ text) rather than what we do not have (Plautus’ models). I formulate my case without venturing into the elusive territory of speculative reconstruction using evidence from the Latin plays to argue that the translator may allude to his relationship to his model material by means of metatheatrical and self-referential devices.

**Critical approach: A learned Plautus**

While taking into account recent criticism in Roman comedy on performative aspects and elements of improvisation in the plays, my study of the letters in Plautus is one closely anchored to the text. Following the lead of Sharrock (1996),

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42 For the problems associated with deducing the originality of the Latin playwrights by reconstructing the elusive genre of Greek New Comedy, cf. Danese (2002).
43 Aulus Gellius (*NA* 17.4) informs us that Menander was thought to have written over 100 comedies. As it stands now, we have a great number of fragments but only six readable plays: roughly half of the text of the Ἀστικς, Περικερομένη and the Σικυώνιος survive, whereas the Δύσκολος is complete and the Επταποντάς and Σάμιος are almost so.
44 Handley (1968). I discuss the much-debated relation between the Δικς Ἐξαπατῶν and the *Bacchides* in chapter 2.
46 For an analysis of Menander’s dramaturgy based upon the text we do possess, cf. Holzberg (1974).
48 Eckard Lefèvre has led the charge in attempting to demonstrate Plautus’ indebtedness to the preliterary theatrical genres of Italy and to illustrate the high degree of originality in the Latin playwright’s adaptations; cf. e.g. Lefèvre, Stärk and G. Vogt-Spira (1991), Lefèvre (1995), (1997) and (2011).
(2009) and Fontaine (2010) in analyzing Plautus’ work from a readerly perspective, my aim is to tease forth each text’s productive matrix actualized in various types of reception. In the course of my discussion, I strive to reveal word play, bilingual puns and allusions to myth and literature, as I am firmly convinced that Plautus engages with the Greek poetic tradition much more than has been perceived by previous scholarship. In this way, my analysis of epistolography in Plautus contributes to Plautine studies not only by providing an in-depth examination of the letter as a prominent dramatic element, but also by revealing the learnedness and sophistication of this playwright and translator of Greek comedy.

Implicit in my work is the assumption that at least some members of the audience would have been capable of detecting such sophisticated poetics and were, further, familiar enough with the Greek literary tradition (and particularly so the comic one) to appreciate Plautus’ play upon it. In view of the widespread import of Hellenic culture in the Italian peninsula in the middle republic and the evidence for Romans of various social strata travelling to Greece,49 this appears to be a reasonable position. It strikes me, indeed, as rather unlikely that only a dramaturge like Plautus would have had access to Greek texts for the purposes of adaptation alone. While the precise identity and cultural level of the republican theatrical audience remains an elusive question,50 it does not seem unjustified to suppose that some spectators were familiar with Greek literature, whether these were the cultural elite, individuals from the Hellenistic word, or other translator-playwrights. Chrysalus’ famous joke in the Bacchides, in which he mentions the name of his Greek

49 Cf. Gruen (1992), especially ch. 6. Gruen describes the “dramatic expansion” of interest and competence in Greek language and culture at Rome during this period. He surveys the evidence for this engagement throughout the orders of Roman society, citing, for instance, the appearance of Rhomaioi in Greek inscriptions starting in the third century – Romans or Italians who moved to or visited Greece (p.234). On spread of Greek theatre throughout the Mediterranean, cf. Gentili (1977) and Rawson (1985).

50 Cf. Cèbe (1960), Chalmers (1965), Handley (1975) and Wilson (1998). There is some evidence for the identity of Plautus’ audience in the playwright’s own text: at Poen. 17-45, the prologus lectures various groups of spectators about their behaviour during the performance, calling out a scortum (v.17), servi (v.23) and matronae (v.32). Further, the actor commands nurses with babies to stay home (vv.29-31), lest esurientes hic quasi haedi ovbagiant (v.31). This interesting passage suggests a very diverse audience including slaves, at least some of whom must have been Greek; cf. p.15, infra.
counterpart in Menander’s Διεξαγωγῇ in incontrovertible proof that Plautus invited his audience to at least perceive allusions to his model texts - regardless of how many spectators were actually able to do so. After all, why would Plautus occasionally invoke his source material if such references meant nothing at all to the contemporary audience? Particularly telling is Terence’s reticence on the topic in the prologue to the Heauton Timoroumenos. That Latin translator demurs to cite his Greek original since much of the audience, he thinks, already knows it (vv.7-9):

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nunc qui scripserit
et quoia Graeca sit, ni partem maxumam
existumarem scire vostrum, id dicerem.
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Now, who wrote it, and which Greek play it is, unless I didn’t think that most of you know, I’d say.

I do not wish to assert, however, that these plays were written exclusively for well-read and erudite spectators capable of discerning the subtleties of Plautus’ aesthetic. Rather, it seems to me that these texts may be read simultaneously on different levels, yielding laughs and providing entertainment for both the philhellenic members of the upper classes and the everyday inhabitants of Rome in the late third and early second centuries BC – a population that included a significant number of Greek immigrants. I strive, then, to read these texts in their various layers, elucidating the lightly-worn sophistication of Plautus’ oeuvre as well as the playwright’s deft proficiency in fusing the bawdy with the high brow to make everyone ‘roll in the aisles’.

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51 Cf. vv.649-650: non mihi isti placent Parmenones, Syri, / qui duas aut tris minas auferunt eris; This metatextual reference was first elucidated by Handley (1968), 9 in his inaugural publication of the Menander fragments. For my metatheatrical interpretation of these verses, cf. pp.100-113, infra.

52 On these didascalic references in the Plautine prologues (8 in total), cf. p.55 and n.162 infra.

53 I disagree, then, with Fontaine’s contention (2010, p.185) that “…Plautine comedy was performed for a small and predominantly aristocratic audience, and an audience that was ipso facto interested in theatre” (p.185).

54 Cf. e.g. the discussion in Gruen (1992) ch. 4 of the “significant numbers” of Greek artists and craftsmen who came to Rome in the early second century.

55 Cf. e.g. the last section of my discussion of the Bacchides, where I argue for such a multi-layered joke in Chrysalus’ stance towards his Greek model (pp.100-113, infra).
I treat the five letter plays each in a separate chapter, investigating every text’s epistolary motif through a close, linear reading. These chapters are arranged according to mischief type. I begin with epistolary forgery, the modus operandi of choice in four comedies. The Trinummus and its unread forgeries come first, followed by the Bacchides, the Persa and the Curculio. Last (but certainly not least) is the Pseudolus, the only Plautine letter play to feature the interception of a real and authentic letter.

In my first chapter, A Country for Old Men, I explore the failed epistolary ruse of geriatric tricksters in the Trinummus. These two senes forge letters as if sent from the old man Charmides, who is traveling abroad. The epistolary intrigue is subverted, however, by the impromptu collision of the returning senex with the bogus messenger, and the motif disappears from the play along with the unread letters themselves. I argue that the pair of falsified missives might represent the script for the play’s collapsed internal deception and for the comedy writ large. Further, I submit that these texts may function as symbols of Plautus’ Greek original, Philemon’s Thesaurus, and that their discreditation and dismissal in the comic competition between Charmides and the hired sycophant might represent the translator’s assertion of his own authorial independence.

Chapter two, ...Fool Me Twice, Shame on Me, examines the highly sophisticated, two-pronged epistolary attack of the clever slave Chrysalus aimed at getting the money from his erus maior to buy his erus minor’s girlfriend. I offer a close analysis of the multiple letters and epistolary scenarios in this play – some true, some false and others an admixture of the two - which occur in the Vorgeschichte and during the course of the play, both onstage and off. In the final section of this chapter, I attempt to solve two of the most vexed critical problems in the Bacchides: the number of tricks in the Greek and Latin plays, and Chrysalus’ reference to a duplex facinus in vv.640-641. My metatheatrical reading proposes a
solution that evinces the competitive stance that the *Bacchides* takes towards its Greek model, Menander’s Εἰκόνα ἐπιτρήτων.

The *Persa* is next, in a chapter entitled *When the Cat’s Away*. I observe how the *servus amans* Toxilus usurps his absent master’s voice to convince the *leno* Dordalus of a fictional scenario, feigning his *dominus*’ παρουσία in a false letter that is “delivered” all the way from Persia. This trap, which deftly invokes the distance inherent in epistolary exchange to pull the wool over the *leno’s* eyes, works like a charm. Dordalus buys the “Arabian captive” (who is, in fact, the freeborn daughter of the play’s parasite) up for sale by the letter’s “courier”. The pimp is defeated when the *virgo*’s “angry” father shows up and hauls him off to law for trafficking in citizen girls. I suggest that the feigned epistle functions metaphorically as a dramatic prologue for the play’s internal production, explicitly framing Toxilus’ ploy as a micro-comedy within Plautus’ text. Further, I consider the *servus*’ “play-within-the-play” to reveal that it duplicates and reverses the plot elements of the comedy it inhabits, producing a ‘specular inversion’ of the *Persa* and an image of Plautine *vortere*.

In chapter four, *Hunger is the Handmaid of Genius*, I consider the pithy *Curculio*. In this text, the eponymous parasite helps his patron Phaedromus get the girl by forging a letter from the soldier he recently met in Caria, a man who also happens to be the main rival for ownership of the *meretrix* Planesium. I demonstrate how Curculio’s knowledge of the transaction set in place for the courtesan’s purchase and his possession of the *miles*’ signet-ring allows him to create and deliver a counterfeit letter that appears completely authentic. The *anulus* is transformed from a tool of epistolary deception to an identification token when it triggers Planesium’s *anagnorisis* as the soldier’s long-lost sister. I reflect upon this crucial plot device that joins the epistolary plot to the *anagnorisis* storyline and offer some observations on the themes of transfer and travel it precipitates.

Finally, chapter five, *Opportunity Makes a Thief*, investigates the *Pseudolus*. Similar to the *Bacchides*, this plot springs from a situation of conventional letter exchange in the *Vorgeschichte*. The *meretrix* Phoenicium has written to her boyfriend lamenting their imminent separation: she has been bought by a fierce
soldier. The *servus callidus* fortuitously comes upon a fix when he collides with the rival’s messenger who bears an epistle to complete the girl’s purchase. Pseudolus manages to steal this text, intercepting it so that he may consign it to the *leno* using an imposter messenger. After an in-depth reading of the opening scene featuring Phoenicium’s love note and Pseudolus’ comic meditation upon the letter and its conventions, I elucidate the intricate series of switches in epistolary role and repeated deliveries of the same, stolen text that occur throughout the course of this play.

**A note on the *Epidicus***

In this study, I do not discuss the brief references to letters at *As.* 761-762, *MG.* 130 and *Truc.* 397. Of some interest, however, are the letters in the *Epidicus*. While away on campaign, the young man Stratippocles has been assailing his slave (the eponymous hero of the play) with multiple epistles,\(^{56}\) begging him to get his hands on the cash to buy his girlfriend, Acropolistis. Epidicus has followed his *erus minor*’s epistolary instructions and duly fulfilled his comic role by tricking his elder master out of the money to buy the *meretrix*. Upon Stratippocles’ return, however, Epidicus discovers that things have changed. While abroad, the *adulescens* purchased a captive, for whom he owes 40 *minae* to a banker (vv.130-135):

EP: *quod ad me attinuit, ego curavi: quod mandasti <tu> mihi impetratum est. empta ancillast, quod tute ad me litteras missiculabas.*
ST: *perdidisti omnem operam.* EP: *nam qui perdivi?*
ST: *quia meo neque cara est cordi neque placet.* EP: *quid retulit mihi tanto opere te mandare et mittere ad me epistulas?*
ST: *illum amabam olim, nunc iam alia cura impendet pectori.*

EP: As for me, I’ve taken care of business: What you ordered of me has been accomplished. The girl has been purchased, which you yourself were constantly sending me missives about. ST: You’ve wasted all your efforts. EP: Oh really: how did I waste them?
ST: Because she is neither dear to my heart, nor is she pleasing. EP: What does it matter, then, that you instructed me with such vigor and sent me letters?
ST: *That* girl I did love once, now quite another concern hangs over my heart.\(^{57}\)

\(^{56}\) v.58: *quia cottiidie ipse ad me ab legione epistulas/mittebat.*

\(^{57}\) All translations are mine. The printed text is that of Lindsay’s OCT, the standard scholarly edition for the plays of Plautus.
Epistolary time has undone Epidicus’ clever scheming. In the lapse between composition and reception, the author has experienced a change of heart, transferring his affections to another girl after having sent the slave a barrage of urgent messages about procuring his former flame. The plot of the play has shifted and, thanks to the thorny chronological orientation of his master's letters which reflect Stratippocles’ previous disposition, Epidicus’ task qua servus callidus has doubled: he must now contrive yet another scheme to find the money for the new girlfriend. This epistolary scenario is a remarkable one, for it is the reverse of those in the five letter plays: rather than a slave who employs the conventions of epistolary exchange to his deceptive advantage, the Epidicus features a clever servus who is tripped up by the dynamics of this medium. Nevertheless, this ‘minor’ instance of the motif is, like those I shall explore in what follows, still generative of theatre: it is thanks to this epistolary miscommunication that a play will follow featuring Epidicus’ brilliantly intricate machinations.
1. A Country for Old Men:
The *Trinummus*' unread letters

**Introduction**

Before delving into the intricate machinations of epistolary scammers the likes of Pseudolus and Chrysalus, I shall first explore the *Trinummus*. This is a text that tries to be a letter play, but fails: its epistolary ruse can barely get off the ground before it is detected and uncovered by the very man who is supposed to have sent the forged letters forming the basis of the deception. The play is set in Athens. Charmides, a previously well-to-do gentleman, has departed for Seleucia to repair his fortunes, which have been whittle away by the unrestrained tastes of his spendthrift son, Lesbonicus. The *senex* has left Lesbonicus and his sister (known only as *virgo*) to his friend Callicles in trust. During Charmides’ absence, Lesbonicus has continued to live the high life, going so far as to sell the family home to fund his vices. Callicles buys the house to save for Charmides what unbeknownst to Lesbonicus is buried within: a treasure of three thousand *nummi*. Trouble arises when the rich young man Lysiteles decides to help out his friend Lesbonicus by marrying the *virgo*, for whom Lesbonicus can no longer provide a proper dowry without completely impoverishing himself.  

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58 According to Anderson (1993), 41-45 Lysiteles may be characterized as a *sodalis opitulator*, which Apuleius lists among the stock roles of New Comedy at *Flor.* 16. In line with his general argument about Plautus’ engagement with his Greek models, Anderson maintains that the Latin translator deconstructs Philemon’s sentimental emphasis on the friendship between Lysiteles and Lesbonicus. On the *sodalis opitulator*, cf. also Maurice (2003), who argues that Plautus parodies the characteristics of this stock character. She discusses the *Trinummus*’ sets of friends (Megaronides and Callicles, Callides and Charmides, Lysiteles and Lesbonicus) on pp. 175-181. Fantham (1977) posits an ethical dilemma in Philemon’s original based upon Lysiteles’ desire to help and Lesbonicus’ refusal to accept such a slight to his honour. She relates this, along with the opening scene between Megaronides and Callicles, to Peripatetic ideas about friendship and the obligations associated with this relationship. On philosophy at Rome and the *Trinummus*, cf. also Grimal (1969); on the connections between Hellenistic philosophy and Greek New Comedy in general, cf. Wiles (1991) and Hunter (1985), 147ff.

59 For discussion of the stage set-up, especially in regards to where the *posticum* (v.194), now inhabited by Lesbonicus and Stasisimus, may have been situated on stage, cf. Hunter (1989), 217-219. Hunter concludes that in this play only two doors of the possible three are used, and that one of these two represents the *posticum*. Megaronides would have been depicted as living offstage. Lefèvre (1995), 71-72 argues that the *posticum* is reached by a passageway through Callicles’ current house.
intentions. Callicles takes it upon himself to give the virgo a dowry from the buried treasure in accordance with his commitment to look after Charmides’ interests. Lest Lesbonicus discover the existence of the treasure, and the fidelity of Callicles’ pledge to Charmides be cast into doubt by the suspicion of theft, Callicles and another neighbourhood senex, Megaronides, devise a plan. They will forge two letters from Charmides in Seleucia. One letter will be addressed to Callicles, supposedly containing 1000 nummi and instructions to use the money for the virgo’s dowry. The other letter will be for Lesbonicus, informing him of Charmides’ instructions to Callicles. The 1000 nummi will, in the interim, be secretly withdrawn from the buried treasure by Callicles. A messenger allegedly delivering the letters from Charmides’ own hands is to be played by a professional trickster, hired for 3 nummi by the two old men and dressed up as if arriving from abroad.

The old men’s attempt at deception is unsuccessful. As the costumed sycophant approaches Callicles’ door to begin his delivery of the letters, he encounters none other than Charmides himself, who has unexpectedly returned to Athens. Charmides quickly catches on to the unsuspecting sycophant, and spends some time fooling around, taking good comic advantage of his own and the external audience’s superior state of knowledge. When Charmides finally reveals his identity, the sycophant leaves the stage in anger, taking the undelivered letters with him. The text then proceeds quickly to its happily ever after, the dowry dilemma solved by Charmides’ return.

With its deception undone and its comic cast notably missing the usual


61 Hunter (1989), 219 views Megaronides as a πολυπρόγμων, i.e. a comic character who sticks his nose into the business of others. Compare this to the reading of Benz (1990), who argues that the moralizing Megaronides “Censorinus” is meant to parody Cato the censor. Aliter Moore (1998), 81-84, who suggests that Megaronides’ ramblings portray him as an old fool obsessed with morality and, thus, a figure of fun. Fontaine (2010), 162 reads Megaronides’ name as a pun on megaron/aedes + onides (a Greek suffix used by Plautus to coin fictional names), which relates to his excessive interest in the sale of Charmides’ house demonstrated in the play’s opening scene.
suspects, the Trinummus is tame by Plautine standards. Segal, echoing the sentiments of Wilamowitz, calls the Trinummus Plautus' only "boring" play, and, in fact, the text has received comparatively little critical attention. Scholarly discussions have focused mostly on its emphasis on mos and fides, and various attempts have been made to read the text as an expression of the political climate in the early second century BC. Critics have also used the Trinummus to get a sense of Philemon's Thesaurus, which Plautus proclaims to be his model in the prologue, focusing, as Frances Muecke put it, "less on Plautus' flesh and more on Philemon's bones". Most have agreed that Plautus' "flesh" consists primarily in the comic role reversal in which the returning senex turns the tables on the sycophant, successfully tricking the professional trickster; it shows, they argue, signs of extensive modification by the Latin playwright. I, too, believe that the scene has something

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63 Segal (1974), 252. According to Wilamowitz (1925), Plautus' play is a bore because Philemon's was, too: "Im Trinummus hat Philemon den Versuch gemacht, ernster, tiefer, menandrischer zu werden, was unbefriedigend ausgefallen ist. Denn in ihm langweilt man sich selbst bei Plautus, und es ist nur die zopfige Zimperlichkeit, die den Trinummus bevorzogt, weil er dezenter und tugendhafter scheint" (p.165).
64 On the other hand, the Trinummus has been a very popular subject of modern theatrical reception. On the various adaptations of this text, including Der Schatz of Lessing, cf. Lefèvre (1995), 147-168.
65 Cf. Frank (1932), Stein (1970), Segal (1974), Anderson (1979), Slater (1987), Benz (1990), Petrone (1993), Lefèvre (1995), Riemer (1996), 184, Gabba (1988) and Mazzoli (2006). Aliter Moore (1998), 81-89, who argues that the metatheatrical moments throughout the play serve to undercut the pervasive moralizing. The appearance of Luxuria, who gives the play's brief prologue, and her daughter Inopia add fuel to this debate. Slater (1987), 268-269 sees these divine personifications as alluding to the polemics surrounding the Oppian law, and the alleged moral corruption wrought by the influx of wealth in the wake of Rome's military triumphs in the period after the second Punic war. The dates suggested for the play seem to support such a reading, as they all place the Trinummus in the decade after the end of the war; cf. Ritschl (1845), 348, Gratwick (1981) and Slater (1987). The argument of Anderson (1993) for a relative chronology of the Mercator and Trinummus (which puts the latter about a decade later than the former) is, likewise, based upon Plautus' treatment of sentimental themes (pp.30-59).
67 Muecke (1985) argues that Philemon's play centred upon the confusion and misunderstanding of Charmides upon his arrival at Athens, especially in regards to Callicles' purchase of the house. Lefèvre (1995) deduces Plautus' original contribution by separating Plautine "Diskontinuität" from Philemon's σκοπεύσεως. It is his view that the collision scene contains material from both playwrights, and he identifies particular speeches or motifs as especially Plautine (cf. especially p.113). Riemer (1996) focuses on the scene featuring Charmides and the sycophant as the Latin playwright's main contribution, asserting that Plautus has altered the title of the play in order to draw the audience's attention to the changes he has introduced (a suggestion which had already been made by Petrone (1983), 78-81). In Riemer's view, a slave performing a trick in the Greek comedy has been replaced in the Trinummus with the sycophant, whose metatheatrical encounter with Charmides is purely Plautine material. He infers this based largely upon a variety of inconsistencies he perceives between
to tell us about Plautine innovation, though my method of interpretation differs significantly from the traditional approach. I will argue that the collision scene, in fact, constitutes a statement of originality on the part of the Latin translator. I would like to suggest that the undelivered letters function self-referentially, in that the collapsed epistolary deceit might be read as a statement of Plautine innovation vis-à-vis his model text. Essentially, my discussion attempts to discern what Plautus’ own take is on his originality by reading the embedded letters as signifiers of the playwright’s stance towards Philemon’s play. This approach differs significantly from the work of scholars like Riemer and Lefèvre, who base their observations about the extent of Plautus’ innovation in this text on what they think Philemon wrote, exemplifying the critical *circulus vitiosus* of much scholarship on the relationship of Plautine comedy to its Greek models.

In what follows, then, I give a close reading of the *Trinummus*. I focus on how Plautus builds up to a surprise ending featuring the unexpected return of Charmides and his frustration of the letter scheme, which is just at that moment being put into action. I offer a detailed analysis of this deception and its negotiation of epistolary conventions, observing how the complicated chronological dynamics of written communication cause the ruse to collapse, along with the plotline it promises the audience. Subsequently, I suggest a metatheatrical reading of the *Trinummus*’ epistles. I argue that the subverted epistolary intrigue may be read self-referentially as alluding to Plautus’ mode of composition and, ultimately, may constitute a stance of authorial independence from his Greek model text.

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the deception plot and the larger play, concluding that the “Spiel im Spiel” is a scene isolated from the rest of the text. Riemer also gives a review of scholarship on the question of Plautus’ fidelity to Philemon, most of which inclines towards the view that the *Trinummus* is quite close to its original (pp.35-40).

68 We possess not a fragment of the Ὑγιαυρός, and the remains of Philemon’s poetic output are very slim indeed; for a recent work on Philemon and his place in Greek New Comedy, cf. Bruzzese (2011).
The Trinummus is introduced by the goddess Luxuria, who begins by explaining to the audience that she has helped the youth Lesbonicus spend himself out of house and home (v.13). She leads her daughter Inopia to the adolescens, as he must now live out his impoverished existence under her sign (v.15). But beyond this, the goddess gives us no more information. Luxuria explicitly refuses to reveal anything about the play to come, instead leaving the task to Callicles and Megaronides, the two old men who will soon take the stage (v.16-17):

\[
\text{sed de argumento ne exspectetis fabulae:}
\]
\[
\text{senes qui huc venient, i rem vobis aperient.}\]

But don’t you expect the plot of the story:
The old men who will come here on stage, they’ll reveal the matter to you.

As Raffaelli has pointed out, the Trinummus inverts the standard formula of the divine prologue. In fact, he defines its beginning as an antiprologo, for its προλογίζον will not use her godly omniscience to provide information about the plot yet unknown to the characters. Luxuria’s reticence about the play’s outcome is anticipated at the beginning of the prologue, it seems to me, by Inopia when she responds thus to her mother’s command in the first verses of the play (vv.1-2):

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69 Scholarship on the prologue has centred upon the question of whether the prologue spoken by the personified goddesses is attributable to Philemon, or not; for a summary cf. Hunter (1989), 216-227. Hunter concludes that Plautus keeps the appearance of the divine pair from the Ὁησοῦπος, but cuts out the narrative prologue they perform in the Greek play. He also revives the hypothesis that this prologue is modeled on scenes from Attic tragedy which feature gods travelling in pairs (p.225 ff). On the Trinummus’ prologue, cf. also Stein (1970), 7, Segal (1974), 257 no. 7, Fantham (1977), 407-408 and Lefèvre (1995), 86-88 and 119-120. Lefèvre maintains that Τρυφή gave an extensive expository prologue in Philemon’s play, which revealed Lesbonicus’ poverty thanks to his relationship with a hetaera. It is his view, however, that this divine prologue probably occurred after an initial scene featuring Lesbonicus or Callicles (p.121).

70 These verses are echoed in Terence’s Adelphoe vv.22-24. Deufert (2002), 28 thinks that the lines in the Trinummus are an interpolation stemming ultimately from Terence, whereas Sharrock (2009), 71-72 considers the expression ne expectetis (which is also to be found in the Casina, v.64) to be typically Plautine. Riemer (1996), 51-52 argues that this phrase points to the existence of a fuller prologue in Philemon’s original; cf. p.57, infra.

71 Cf. Raffaelli (2009), 28 ff. He adds that Luxuria does not help the characters in the play as divine prologi are wont, but hinders them. Hunter (1989), 223 suggests that in the Greek original, a divine prologus “would probably have foreshadowed the return of Charmides.” Slater (1985), 149-150 calls Luxuria’s silence “typically Plautine”, observing that her primary function is to induct the audience into the world of the play. To my mind, Luxuria’s reticence is a deliberate part of the build-up to Charmides’ surprise entrance later in the text.
Luxury: Follow me this way, daughter, so that you can do your duty.
Poverty: I’m following, but I don’t know what I may say the end will be.

_İnopia_ is unsure as to where her mother now leads her, and what her _munus_ there might be. Her statement, however, might also be read metatheatrically as reflecting the audience’s state of ignorance at the end of the prologue, with _finis_ referring to the conclusion of the play which _Luxuria_ (and the playwright) refuse to reveal. _İnopia_’s uncertainty, then, parallels that of the audience.

In retrospect, it is clear that the one piece of information most significantly kept from the spectators is the imminent return of Charmides. The _senex_, thought to be far away from Athens in Seleucia, will return while the play is in full swing, and render the epistolary scheming of Callicles and Megaronides superfluous. In fact, Charmides’ clash with the hired messenger constitutes the scene of most comic interest in the _Trinummus_, but we are given no hint in the prologue that the action will develop as such. Thus, _İnopia_’s words may also be read as foreshadowing the surprise ending that awaits the spectators in this performance.

Sharrock has pointed out that, paradoxically, the less a prologue says, the more it ‘says’ by remaining “delightfully incongruous”, as the playwright teases the audience with his control of knowledge. This seems to me to be the case in the _Trinummus_: its ambiguous beginning is deliberate, serving to mount suspense about how the comedy will develop. In fact, Plautus continues to equivocate throughout the first half of the play, refusing to reveal the text’s direction in preparation for a sudden turn in events and surprise ending. This _para prosdokian_ technique writ large is Plautus’ ‘comedy of disappointment’, a comic practice which critics used to mistake for poor dramaturgy, but now recognize as being characteristic of the Latin

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72 The commentators note that _İnopia_’s expression is colloquial, and stands for something like _qui finis futurus sit_. Cocchia (1921), 4 supplies _itineris_ after _finem_ for clarity. Cf. also Gray (1897), 58, and Conrad (1931), 51.
73 One might compare the prologue to Menander’s _Ἀστιγμὸς_, in which the return of Kleostratos, who is _scheintot_, is foreshadowed by the prologue-speaker _TÜRKI_, at vv.108-113.
75 I am borrowing the terminology from the title of Ireland’s 1983 article “Menander and the Comedy of Disappointment”; cf. n.76 _infra_.

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playwright's craftsmanship. Much as his players dupe and deceive one another on stage, Plautus tricks his spectators into a set of expectations for this unfolding comedy which he never intends to fulfill.

Determined to help relieve Lesbonicus’ poverty, Lysiteles reveals to his father, Philto, his intentions to marry his friend’s sister without a dowry. Although Philto initially expresses some doubt about taking on an impoverished daughter-in-law, he eventually accepts his son’s request (v.276-v.391). In fact, the senex approaches Lesbonicus himself to arrange the deal, and the betrothal of the virgo is soon contracted (v.572). However, the terms of the engagement are yet to be negotiated as Lesbonicus refuses to allow his sister to suffer the consequences of his irresponsibility and be married sine dote. He vows to give the virgo the ager, his last earthly possession, as her dowry (vv.508-510), but this is a condition which both Philto and Lysiteles refuse. Neither party is willing to compromise, and this impasse appears to be the crux which must be resolved to reach the Trinummus’ “happily ever after”. How will the generous offer of Lysiteles be reconciled with the stubborn pride of Lesbonicus?

The text seems to anticipate a possible outcome of this conflict: Lesbonicus will do as he has declared, and then, in his destitution, follow in the path of other young men of new comedy and attempt to depart Athens as a mercenary. This

76 Cf. Goldberg (1995), 35. Goldberg calls this “an energy much more in the Aristophanic than the Menandrean style.” He observes that “Plauntine plots may suddenly change direction, abandon or leave unrealized certain promising directions while introducing other, new ones as the need arises.” In the same volume, however, Zagagi (1995: 81-85) argues that such false starts are, in fact, not exclusive to Plautus, but occurred in Greek New Comedy, too. For this technique in Menander, cf. Ireland (1983). False starts and sudden changes in direction have traditionally been labeled “inconsistencies” by scholars, and attributed to Plautus’ mucking about with his (perfect) Greek models. On the “discontinuity” of the Trinummus, cf. Riemer (1996), 57 ff. and Lefèvre (1995), 86 ff.

77 For a similar argument about the Pseudolus, cf. Sharrock (1996) and pp.184-185 infra. In Sharrock’s reading, Pseudolus tricks the audience into thinking that he has no plan to get Phoenicium from Ballio to Calidorus, but really has a well-laid deception in hand the whole time. Thus Sharrock sees the twists and turns in Plautus’ plots as intentional.

78 This scenario resembles that in Menander’s Δυσκολος when Sostratos tries to convince his father to allow him to marry Gorgias’ poor half-sister although she is όποιος (v.308).

79 In Menander’s Ξώμιο, the young Moschion declares his intention to take up a mercenary’s life out of anger for his father, who suspects his son of having had an affair with his own lover. Charinus makes a similar threat to depart as a mercenary in Plautus’ Mercator and in Terence’s Heautontimoroumenos, Clinia is driven to leave for Asia to escape the wrath of his father, Menedemus.
wretched course of action is suggested twice by Lesbonicus’ slave Stasimus (v.595-601 and v.717-728)\(^\text{80}\) and echoed by Lysiteles after arguing with his obstinate friend (vv.698-703). Thus, spectators might very reasonably expect that the youth will attempt to skip town after having sold the *ager*, saved at last minute by Callicles’ disclosure of the treasure or his father’s timely return. Instead, built-up audience expectations are defeated when this thread of the plot disappears entirely from the text: as Stasimus departs for the *forum* to collect money for a *viaticum* just in case, Megaronides and Callicles enter (v.729). The two *senes* are deep in discussion about how Callicles might intervene in the dowry dilemma, which he has learned of from Stasimus. For this end, Megaronides devises an epistolary scheme to secretly extract money from Charmides’ hidden hoard. This now becomes the focus of the text, supplanting the plotline surrounding the conflict between the two *adulescentes* and Lesbonicus’ desperate desire to fulfill his duty to his sister. In fact, these two movements aimed ultimately at giving the *virgo* her dowry are parallel threads in the text, yet they remain separate: Callicles and Megaronides never learn of the young men’s dispute or of Lesbonicus’ intention to sell the *ager*, and the *adulescentes* do not ever find out about the letter ruse plotted by the two *senes* *callidi*. Even more significantly, however, both are *false* leads. The two storylines aimed at procuring a dowry for the poor *virgo* are rendered unnecessary and dismissed from the plot by the *Trinummus’* surprise ending, Charmides’ unexpected return to Athens.

**II: Writing up an epistolary failure**

Under the mistaken assumption that Lesbonicus will, in fact, agree to betroth his sister to Lysiteles *sine dote* (v.735),\(^\text{81}\) the old men agree to intervene in the dilemma, and Megaronides cooks up a deceptive plan. There is no other way to secure a dowry for the *virgo*, for Megaronides insists that borrowing the funds from a friend

\(^{80}\) Cf. vv.595ff. Hunter (1989), 229-230 suggests that the speech at v.717 ff., which repeats what Stasimus has already said, is a Plautine addition to the play. On Stasimus’ monologues, cf. Lefèvre (1995), 107, who attributes such repetitions to what he considers Plautus’ characteristically messy dramaturgy.

\(^{81}\) On Callicles’ ignorance of Lesbonicus’ intention to, in fact, give his sister a dowry, cf. n.60.
is hopeless (vv.758-762), as is the prospect that Charmides will be back from Seleucia in time to solve the predicament (vv.744-745):

\[
nunc si opperiri vis adventum Charmidi,  
perlongumst.  
\]

Now: if you want to wait for Charmides' return, it's a long way off.

Thus, the *senes* falsify two letters in Charmides' name in order to give a credible source for the newfound dowry money. In the process, Megaronides and his accomplice Callicles are morphed into crafty schemers who will try to solve the comedy's *crux* by deceptive means. These geriatric tricksters are not what the audience expects, and it has often been observed that the *Trinummus* inverts the conventional comic formula by replacing the usual *servus callidus* with two old men who transgress the confines of their stock roles to deceive.\(^{82}\) What is more, the *senes* are not swindled out of their cash by an *adulescens*, as usually happens in comedy, but the ruse they formulate is aimed at giving money to a young man! The contrast between the moralistic portrayal of the two old men (Megaronides in particular) in the first scene, and their cunning ways here is striking. One might say, then, that the saturnalian role reversal typical of Plautine comedy is inverted in the course of the *Trinummus*, when the stodgy oldsters of the opening scene are transformed into swindlers who try to trick a young man into *taking* their gold. This epistolary scheme concocted by Megaronides and Callicles functions as the text's inner deception, its "play-within-the-play".\(^{83}\) The scheme's special status is underscored by the use of the term *consilium*, an ordinary word from the sphere of politics which takes on programmatic force in Plautine comedy to refer to a play's internal plot\(^{84}\) (v.764): ME: *scitum, ut ego opinor, consilium inueni.* ("I've hit upon a plan, and a cunning one at that, it seems to me"). Megaronides, in fact, unmistakably characterizes the deception as a dramatic performance, even portraying himself as


\(^{83}\) Segal (1974), 258 is the first to have characterized the *Trinummus’* internal deception thus. On the concept of the internal plot in Plautine comedy, cf. Slater (1985) and p.11, *supra.*

\(^{84}\) Cf. Sharrock (2009), 11.
the internal play's conductor. He describes the contracting and costuming of a professional actor to play the part of messenger using the theatrical *termini technici conducere* and *exornare*\(^85\) (v.v. 765-770):

**ME:** *homo conducatur aliquis iam, quantum potest,*  
*quasi sit peregrinus.* CA: *quid is scit facere postea?*  
**ME:** *is homo exornetur graphic in peregrinum modum,*  
*ignota facies quae non usitata sit,*  
*mendaciloquom aliquem – CA: quid is scit facere postea?*  
**ME:** *falsidicum, confidentem – CA: quid tum postea?*  

**ME:** Let's hire some guy, as soon as possible,  
someone who seems exotic .... CA: What should he know to do then?  
**ME:** Let's dress him up vividly in the manner of a foreigner,  
someone with a strange face which isn't familiar,  
someone who speaks lies... CA: What should he know to do then?  
**ME:** ...a false talker, a daring sort of guy.... CA: What then?

Thus Megaronides takes control of the *Trinummus*. He shapes the direction of its plot through his command of the central deception, assuming the role of internal director, what Slater has called the “literary playwright”.\(^86\) The fact that the internal performance will be executed by means of an epistolary forgery makes Megaronides' playwright role *literally* and explicitly literary: he and Callicles will compose false letters to execute their plan, entrusting them to the hired actor for delivery.

The old men's metatheatricality and power to take the reins of the play

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\(^85\) On *exornare*, cf. Gray (1897), 149 and Cocchia (1921), 98. Muecke (1985), 175 ff. discusses the theatrical terms in the scene where Charmides collides with the sycophant, including *conducere* and *conductor*. Muecke's analysis is based largely upon the work of Jory (1966), who explores the various terms related to theatrical production in Plautus. Muecke argues that the *termini technici* portray the internal deception as explicitly theatrical, which she connects with the ancient association of acting with deception (cf. p.52, *infra*). However, she does not comment upon the *senex*'s use of theatrical language when planning the scheme, noting only that “...Megaronides hires the imposter, provides him with the letters and coaches him in his role” (p.170). The old man says *conducere* again at v.815, and the sycophant calls him *conductor* when beginning his performance at v.856. For a general discussion of the production of Roman comedy, cf. Duckworth (1965\(^3\)), 73-76, and Marshall (2006), 20-31; neither however, discusses the term *conductor*. The *prologus* of the *Asinaria* uses the term literally in his introduction to the play (1-3): *hoc agite sultis, spectatores, nunciam, / quae quidem mihi atque vobis res vortat bene / gregique huic et dominis atque conductoribus.*

\(^86\) Cf. Slater (1985), 13. The other type of internal playwright Slater discerns is improvisational, taking part in the internal performance himself. It seems to me that this important role of Megaronides (and his accomplice Callicles) is foreshadowed by *Luxuria*'s “antiprologo”: these two old men will, indeed, reveal the *Trinummus*' plot to the audience, as the goddess says at vv.16-17. Not only do they provide the *argumentum fabulae* in the first scene, but here Megaronides lays out what the audience *thinks* will be the *Trinummus*' plot, the unfolding of the epistolary scheme.
appear to mark them out as the *Trinummus*’ comic heroes. Their epistolary scheming, it seems, will trick Lesbonicus into believing that his father has sent home money for his sister’s dowry and solve the comedy’s conflict. But letters, the *senes*’ chosen method of deception, are thorny things, bringing along with their message many potential pitfalls. In fact, the falsified epistles “sent” from Charmides in Seleucia will become entangled in the complicated dynamics engendered by this medium of communication, which provokes an epistolary disaster.

**III: The trouble with letters**

The letters forged by the trickster old men for their ruse attempt to transmit Charmides’ authority by proxy, giving orders to Callicles and Lesbonicus in regards to the *virgo*’s betrothal. In essence, the *senex*’s presence is being simulated by means of the epistolary medium: Charmides is not at Athens to deal with the situation, so he (supposedly) replaces himself with letters, conveying his will by means of his παρουσία. In fact, as Jenkins has observed, the *Trinummus*’ epistolary situation plays upon the concept of letters as *sermo absentium*, comically inverting it when Charmides, the alleged author, collides with the missives he is supposed to have written: the supposedly absent author is unexpectedly present.\(^87\)

If we unpack the dynamics of presence and absence in this text’s epistolary ruse a bit further, it becomes clear that the plan contains a fundamental flaw which will bring about its unraveling. Ironically, the fiction of the old men’s deception can only be maintained if Charmides is *not* present to contradict it, and in fact, the schemers take it for granted that the forged author will not be present to bear witness *against* the false letters, which is underscored by Megaronides’ words quoted above (vv.744-745). As Rosenmeyer observes, “[l]etters on stage are prime couriers of intrigue because of the liberating lack of human interaction which might otherwise prevent the confusion in the first place, or alternately, separate fact from fiction.”\(^88\) In the *Trinummus*, it is precisely the letters’ accidental interaction with the wrong human

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\(^{87}\) Jenkins (2005), 378.

\(^{88}\) Rosenmeyer (2001), 95.
which will cause the failure of the deception they contain. Charmides is much closer than Megaronides and Callicles imagine.

The *senes'* scheme, then, is tripped up by that eternal pest of communication by letter, epistolary time: when Callicles and Megaronides forge the missives under Charmides’ name, Charmides is nowhere to be seen. Upon the letters’ delivery, only a few verses later, things have changed. But this pair of missives is not only subject to (and caught out by) the thorniness of regular epistolary exchanges, but is, in fact, entangled further in the intricate dynamic of embedded epistles. It may well be that Charmides’ ship is docking at port when the two old men plan their epistolary deception, or indeed that Charmides himself is already ashore. But Plautus deliberately keeps Charmides’ whereabouts under wraps in order to preserve the expectation of the intrigue’s performance based upon the assumption that the *senex* will not be present to contradict the letters’ story. Thus, the epistles’ weakness consists in the erroneous assumption of the trickster old men in the *ErzähLzeit* that Charmides is abroad and will still be when Lesbonicus receives the forged letters, a mistake which will affect the credibility of the letters’ content in the performance time.89 This mix-up is achieved by the playwright’s adept reordering of the various chronological layers associated with written communication in the text.

The disastrous epistolary clash which occurs when Charmides comes face to face with his own letters offers an interesting thematic reversal of the scenario in Euripides’ *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, in which the recipient, Orestes, accidentally meets with an epistle addressed to him. Whereas in the *Trinummus* the epistles’ voyage to their addressees is interrupted by an unexpected encounter with their “author”, in Euripides’ tragedy, the letter’s voyage is dispensed with by the addressee’s accidental presence.90 We might also, then, look at the letter debacle in the *Trinummus* as reflecting one of the greatest risks associated with epistolary communication: interception. The separation of letter from author makes the

89 Altman (1982), 127 expresses the fundamental problem: “the letter arrests the writer in a present whose future is unknown”.

90 I do not mean to suggest that Plautus is deliberately inverting this specific epistolary situation in Euripides, though the parallel between the two texts does seem to imply the persistence of literary *topoi* surrounding letters. For the humour associated with the undoing of Pylades’ perilous journey to deliver Iphigenia’s letter, cf. Jenkins (2006), 99 -101.
message contained therein vulnerable, and its voyage towards the intended recipient is filled with peril as the “weakest link in the epistolary chain.” Such is the fate of the false missives sent by Callicles and Megaronides, as they are intercepted by Charmides on their way towards their addressees. Significantly, however, the waylaid letters remain unread and unopened, falling victim to both interception and non-delivery in the same moment. As a result, the epistles’ realization in the play is thwarted, and the deception they are meant to enact never takes place. Charmides, then, subverts the letters’ kinetic potential in the plot. In fact, the interruption of the missives’ journey to delivery functions, it seems to me, as a physical reflection of the suppression of their kinetic force in the play.

Despite the risky nature of epistolary communication and the many possible hazards in the voyage from author to addressee, however, the tricksters of the Trinummmus worry not about the forged letters’ delivery but about their reception: in the course of planning, Callicles raises doubts about the letters’ potential to appear authentic. Will Lesbonicus believe that the epistles are from his father if they are not sealed with his signet ring? (vv.788-790)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{sed epistulas quando opsignatas adferet,} \\
\text{nonne arbitraris eum adulescentem anuli} \\
\text{paterni signum nosse?}
\end{align*}
\]

But when he will deliver the letters sealed, don’t you think the boy knows the seal of his father’s ring?

In response, Megaronides insists that one could invent many reasons for why Charmides’ seal has changed, including that the letters had been opened for inspection by customs officers (vv.790-795):\footnote{Monaco (1965), 349 argues that Plautus here wants to show the audience how easily one might forge a letter despite the security of a seal. Scafuro (2003/2004), 9 n.30 suggests that Megaronides’}

\footnote{Jenkins (2005), 377 observes, “[Callicles] is worried, in essence, that the son will not recognize the validity of the reading”. On the motif of the seal in the Trinummmus and in comedy generally, cf. Riemer (1996), 68-70. On the role of seals in the embedded epistles of Euripides, cf. Rosenmeyer (2001), 70 and 85.}

\footnote{Jenkins (2006), 40-42. He discusses the preoccupation with misdelivery in Cicero’s letters, for which reason multiple copies of a letter were often sent as a safeguard. The anxiety associated with the separation of the message from its author relates ultimately to couriers, whose potential unreliability is a common epistolary topos; cf. White (1986), 215. In Euripides’ Iphigenia at Aulis, Agamemnon’s second letter to Clytemnestra is intercepted by Menelaus; cf. Rosenmeyer (2001), 80-88, Jenkins (2006), 87-95.}

\footnote{Monaco (1965), 349 argues that Plautus here wants to show the audience how easily one might forge a letter despite the security of a seal. Scafuro (2003/2004), 9 n.30 suggests that Megaronides’}
etiam tu taces?

sescentae ad eam rem caussae possunt conligi:

illum quem habuit perditid, fecit novom.

iam si opsignatas non feret, dici hoc potest,
apud portitorem eas resignatas sibi
inspectasque esse.

Won’t you shut up?
Hundreds of excuses could be amassed for that matter:
He lost the one he had; he had a new one made.
Besides, if he doesn’t deliver the letters sealed, this can be said:
They were opened at customs, and inspected.

The old men’s exchange is, I suggest, implicitly metatheatrical. In discussing potential problems which might arise in the execution of the scheme, they are presenting a likely source of comedy to come in the performance they are mounting, particularly, it seems, surrounding the issue of Charmides’ seal.94 The audience can imagine what sort of trouble might arise upon the letters’ delivery, and the potential for comic fun in the alien seal. In retrospect, however, we know that no such scenarios will occur: the forged letters will never be delivered, as the epistolary intrigue will not come to fruition. But the audience of the Trinummus, or a first-time reader, does not know that Charmides’ return (and thus the debunking of the forged missives) is imminent, and expects the performance of the letter scheme, as Jenkins has observed: “[i]n elaborating at length the preparations made for the epistolary ruse, Plautus has prepared us for an elaborate ‘reading’ scene.”95 This is a scene, however, which the playwright never intends to deliver.

Built-up expectations, then, are yet again knocked down after the audience has been prepared for the plot to develop in a given direction. The epistolary deception and all of its possible complications are part and parcel of Plautus’ comedy of disappointment, a dramaturgical bait-and-switch of sorts. Like the conflict between the adulescentes and the suggestion that Lesbonicus will sell the ager and then depart Athens as a mercenary, the entire letter scheme is a false start.

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94 Cf. Riemer (1996), 68: “...der Zuschauer zu Recht auf ein Possenspiel um die überzeugungskräftigste Lüge gespannt sein darf: Wie wird Lesbonicus auf das Fehlen des echten Siegels reagieren, und auf welchem Wege werden die Zweifel schließlich beseitigt?”.
The ruse will be debunked and defeated in the most spectacular way when the plot takes a surprise turn, resolving the problems of the *virgo*’s dowry, the buried treasure and the sale of the house all at once. Upon the exit of the *senes callidi* Megaronides and Callicles, none other than Charmides strolls on scene, hymning his thanks to Neptune for a safe sea voyage back to Athens.\(^{96}\)

**IV: Surprise! The comic power of Charmides**

Charmides’ return to Athens is unexpected.\(^{97}\) Although we might assume that the *senex* will, in fact, come home during the play as travelling fathers are wont to do in comedy,\(^{98}\) we are clueless that his homecoming will occur at this very moment to collide with the sycophant’s delivery of the forged letters: neither Charmides’ ship nor the man himself are spotted at the harbour, as is Theopropides of the *Mostellaria* (v.348 ff.).\(^{99}\) Moreover, it is not until much later in the play (v.1068) that any of the characters (with the exception of the hired sycophant) will learn that Charmides has returned to Athens. None of them witnesses the comic encounter between forged epistles and real author, and, in fact, the plot carries on behind the scenes as if Charmides were yet abroad. That is, Callicles is off digging up the treasure, preparing to fake his reception of 1000 *nummi* for the *virgo*’s dowry in

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98 Riemer (1996), 41 points out that the one exception to this rule (amongst the plays which have survived) is the *Persa*, in the course of which Toxilus’ master remains abroad.

99 Cf. Hunter (1989), 223 and Danese (1991), 117. Some scholars have seen allusions in the text that point to Charmides’ imminent return; Muecke (1985), 170-171 suggests that Charmides’ return is “surprising, but not unexpected”, and according to Hunter (1989), 222 “it is clear that the audience is well prepared for this return without the actual timing of the entry losing its effect”. The verses they cite in support are those in which various characters yearn for Charmides’ return, like Stasimus at vv.617-619: *o ere Charmides>s*, *quam apsenti hic tua res distrahitur tibi/utinam te rediisse salvum videam, ut inimicos tuos/uliscare, ut mihi, ut erga te fui et sum, referas gratiam!* It seems to me, however, that the words of Megaronides to Callicles at vv.744-745 speak against such an expectation amongst the characters or the spectators; cf. Riemer (1996), 41. Interestingly, both Hunter (p.222) and Muecke (p.171) cite these very lines as foreshadowing Charmides’ return.
accordance with the plan; Stasimus is at the forum looking for the repayment of a debt should he need some cash to depart for a mercenary’s life, and Lesbonicus and Lysiteles are (presumably) each off fretting about the dowry impasse. Thus, it is as if Charmides enters the play, unbeknownst to all the other players, from outside the narrative frame.\footnote{Riemer (1993), 41ff. discusses the empty stage which precedes Charmides’ entrance, and the comic conventions of return by sea which are omitted in the Trinummus, whereby “fällt Charmides’ Erscheinen an dieser späten Stelle des Dramas aus dem Rahmen” (p.42). Muecke (1985), 170 also thinks that the stage is empty prior to Charmides’ arrival.} In fact, Danese has argued that the \textit{senex}’s entrance song is equivalent to a breach in the dramatic fiction of the play since it occurs when Charmides is yet assumed to be abroad. He concludes thus:

\begin{quote}
Il ringraziamento a Nettuno si configura quindi, questa volta, come un vero e proprio ‘a solo’, completamente astratto dalla vicenda, una sorta di pausa scenica, nella quale un personaggio può presentarsi direttamente al pubblico prescindendo da qualsiasi collegamento o coinvolgimento con l’intricco. E la funzione scenica che Plauto attribuisce al racconto di Carmide è precisamente quella di segnalare al pubblico (e non gli altri personaggi della vicenda) che è ricomparso all’improvviso questo inatteso personaggio, che tutti gli altri immaginano altrove.\footnote{Danese (1991), 117.}
\end{quote}

In other words, the hymn to Neptune serves to put the audience “in the know” about Charmides’ return. Moreover, it informs them of the \textit{senex}’s identity so they will be “in” on the many jokes to follow, which play upon the sycophant’s ignorance that he is performing his skit for the very man whose messenger he claims to be. The spectators’ knowledge, then, is aligned with that of Charmides. This positioning of the audience’s perspective places their sympathy with the \textit{senex}, signaling the comic power he will wield in the subsequent scene, when, contrary to generic expectations, he will defeat the wiles of the professional trickster hired to deceive his son.\footnote{Cf. pp.36-44, \textit{infra}.} The old man’s dominance is also foreshadowed by the verbal mastery demonstrated in his elaborate hymn of thanks to Neptune. As Anderson observes of the song, “[s]uch verbal skills and self-confidence do not belong to Plautus’ conventionally stupid father: it is evident that we are to react favorably to this intrepid \textit{senex}}}.” \footnote{Anderson (1979), 339; cf. also Muecke (1985), 174.}

The extraordinary comic power possessed by Charmides is derived, it seems
to me, from his status as an outsider in the *Trinummus*. That is, the *senex*’s entrance from outside the narrative frame situates him *outside* the play’s fiction, endowing him with greater knowledge and perception than the other characters. Let me explain what I mean. The fictional premise of Plautine comedy is, usually, twofold: the larger play contains a smaller production, the “play-within-the-play”, devised and acted out by self-conscious *personae* in order to deceive their oblivious comic victims.\(^{104}\) As we have seen, this text’s internal production is the epistolary scheme devised by Megaronides and Callicles, through which the two old men hope to trick Lesbonicus in order to solve the problem of the *virgo*’s dowry. Significantly, Charmides’ character functions above this internal plot, as he is privy to its falsehood: Charmides knows, of course, that he did not compose these letters to Callicles and his son. Moreover, the *senex* has knowledge superior to that of the characters attempting to mount the deception, namely that he has returned to Athens from Seleucia. One might say, then, that the *Trinummus* has three distinct levels of knowledge, which correspond to three layers of fiction. The topmost is inhabited by the metatheatrical and comically powerful Charmides, whose knowledge in this scene is on par with that of the audience, as he is aware of the pretence of the letters and his own presence at Athens. The second level of knowledge is represented by Megaronides and Callicles, who have invented the epistolary scheme and thus devised the “play-within-the-play”, but have no idea that the absent author they have falsified is now present. Together with the tricky oldsters we might group the sycophant they hire, although this professional actor is distinguished from Megaronides and Callicles by the fact that he knows Charmides only by name, and has never seen the travelling *senex* in person. Finally, at the very bottom is the knowledge of the characters not in on the old men’s ruse or, in fact, those meant to be its targets – Stasimus and Lesbonicus. Significantly, however, the arrival of Charmides will prevent the execution of the letter scheme altogether. The hapless Lesbonicus will never receive the forged letter from his “father” and, thus,

\(^{104}\) Petrone (1983), 85 notes: “Tra le caratteristiche di maggior rilievo delle scene d’inganno è il fatto che si svolgono su due livelli e presuppongono due piani: quello della funzione e quello della verità...”.
never be tricked into believing its content. Instead, the internal plot collides with the highly self-conscious Charmides at the apex of knowledge, with very funny results.

Thus the *Trinummus*‘ topmost levels of awareness are inhabited by old men who run the dramatic action: two *senes* plan the “play-within-the-play”, and another one subverts it, outstripping the ruse with his own ploy.105 This unusual alignment of comic power plays into what we might call the ‘reverse’ topsy-turviness of the *Trinummus*, whereby the conventional victim of the genre (the *senex*) becomes this comedy’s deceptive hero, and its usual protagonists are the victims. In fact, the two geriatric ‘camps’ each pit themselves against typical comic ‘winners’: Callicles and Megaronides take on an *adulescens* and his clever slave, whereas Charmides (as we shall soon see) challenges a professional sycophant. By inverting the regular constellation of sympathetic and unsympathetic *personae* in comedy, the *Trinummus* restores the order of everyday life outside the saturnalian world of the *ludi*, where *summi viri* always triumph over those below them on the social ladder. I wonder, in fact, whether we might even posit a connection between the *Trinummus*’ powerful oldsters and the playwright himself. That is, if Plautus himself was a *senex* at the time of composition (a distinct possibility if the scholarly attempts to date this comedy are on the right track106), then we might read an association between the play’s creative old men and particularly so the *pater* Charmides, the *Trinummus*’ geriatric hero, and Plautus, the πατήρ τοῦ λόγου.107

105 Callicles and Megaronides’ exclusive knowledge of the stash of gold hidden in Charmides’ house further indicates the position of power inhabited by old men in this play.
106 Cf. n.159, *infra*.
107 I am grateful to David Sansone for suggesting this idea to me. There is, in fact, a comic routine on Charmides *qua* pater in the collision between the sycophant and the *senex*; cf. pp.41-42, *infra*. 
IV: A comic match of wits

The sycophant now joins Charmides on stage, dressed in his traveler’s costume and ready to play his part. Oblivious to the presence of the senex, the trickster speaks of the deception he is about to perform and candidly refers to his employment to act a part in the production, using the same explicitly theatrical terms previously spoken by Megaronides. The sycophant is, in fact, very intent upon success, declaring himself ready even to deceive the man who has hired him to deceive. He will prove his mettle by adding on an extra bit of cheating to the program (vv. 855-860):

\[
\begin{align*}
nunc adeo si quid ego addidero amplius, \\
eo conductor melius de me nugas conciliaverit. \\
ulle me exornavit, ita sum ornatus; argentum hac facit. \\
ipse ornementa a chorago haec sumpit suo periculo. \\
nunc ego si potero ornametinis hominem circumducere, \\
dabo operam ut me esse ipsum plane sycophantam sentiat. \\
\end{align*}
\]

Now, if I add on just a little something extra, all the better will the director get a deal from me on my tricks.
As he outfitted me, thus am I costumed; money works that way.
He himself procured this get-up of mine from the costumer at his own risk.
Now, if I swindle the man out of the costume,
I’ll give it all I’ve got so that he sees I really am a swindler.

The sycophant, then, presents himself as a metatheatrical trickster par excellence. One might even say that he is depicted as fraud personified by definition of his name, for, as Sharrock points out, sycophantia is a programmatic word in Plautine comedy that signifies “the artful cleverness of tricksters.” In fact, the actor’s

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108 Muecke (1985), 174 points out that Charmides would also have been dressed as a traveler upon his arrival at Athens; cf. also Riemer (1996), 44. Thus, the sycophant’s costumed appearance parodies that of the senex. However, the sycophant probably enters from the opposite stage-wing (Johnston 1933, 97 thinks it must be the right, as this is the “city” entrance), putting the characters in position for the scene of eavesdropping to follow. Thus, the trickster would enter from the “wrong” side for a traveler, immediately giving away his disguise. Could this detail serve to tip off a theatrically self-conscious Charmides to the deception? Both would have probably been wearing the petasus, as Marshall (2006), 58 observes: “The use of the petasus functioned as a shorthand within the stage world to indicate that a character had travelled (or was about to travel) a great distance...”. Marshall gives a general discussion of costume in Roman comedy on pp.56-66. Cf. also Saunders (19663), who mentions the Trinummus’ sycophant on p.137, and Duckworth (19653), 88-94.


111 Cf. Sharrock (2009), 10. Muecke (1985), 180 thinks that the sycophant is a character without a name, which reflects his inability to successfully play the role of Charmides’ messenger. But the
expressed desire to cheat his employers out of the rented costume suggests that he wishes to make Megaronides and Callicles his own comic victims. By successfully deceiving the *senes callidi*, the sycophant would transcend the layer of fiction they inhabit in an attempt to transform himself into the *Trinummus'* omniscient hero. Although his theatricality and self-consciousness should qualify him for the part, the sycophant must contend with Charmides in order to reach the top of the play's comic hierarchy. Armed with – ironically – the knowledge of his own identity, of which the sycophant is ignorant, Charmides has a leg up in this contest of wits. In the comic match to follow, then, it will be the *senex* who swindles the swindler.\textsuperscript{112}

Remarkably, the hired actor has already been spotted by Charmides before he addresses the audience. In fact, it is the *senex* who announces the sycophant's arrival on stage before the actor can introduce himself (840-842a):

\begin{verbatim}
    sed quis hic est qui in plateam ingreditur
    cum novo ornatu specieque simul?
    pol quamquam domum cupio, opperiar,
    quam hic rem agat animum advertam.
\end{verbatim}

But who's this guy who's walking along the street, with both a strange costume and appearance? By Pollux, although I really do yearn for home, I'll wait around, and pay attention to what this guy's up to.

Unobserved, Charmides watches the opening of the sycophant's performance for 27...
verses. His status as an eavesdropper establishes his priority in the forthcoming scene, and confirms the comic power hinted at in his monody.\footnote{Petrone (1983), 76 perceives that “...il sicofante, abituamente colui che viene a sapere tutto e ascolta non visto le più segrete confidenze, sia invece spiao mentre parla ad alta voce”. Cf. also Slater (1985), esp. 162-165: “It should be clear, however, that though an eavesdropper may acquire useful information from the seclusion of his hiding place, he has a far more important theatrical function in interpreting the scene he eavesdrops on to the audience. Any comments he makes aside interpret, either explicitly or implicitly, the scene that both he and the audience are observing. In that he is also an audience of the scene, he and the members of the audience share a bond that inclines them to accept whatever judgment he passes upon that scene” (pp.162-163). Cf. also Moore (1998), ch. 2.} Moreover, it indicates the old man’s place outside the fiction within which the trickster operates, a status which gives him the ability to perceive the plot \textit{qua} deception: although it is clear that the actor is yet out of earshot,\footnote{Cf. Muecke (1985), 174. Of course, if Charmides \textit{could} eavesdrop upon the sycophant already at this point, he would know almost everything right off the bat.} the \textit{senex} immediately discerns the trickster’s theatricality, perceiving that he is dressed up to play a role. Charmides uses the same word, \textit{ornatus}, to refer to the costume that the trickster himself uses to describe it at v.857 (quoted above).\footnote{Notably, the old man is never tricked by this outfit into thinking that the sycophant is a traveler (Charmides initially takes the sycophant to be a petty thief or cut-purse, vv.862-864), which is precisely the part the trickster is meant to play. This is a clue, I think, that the hired actor will, inevitably, fail in his part. Cf. Muecke (1985), 176 and p.52, \textit{infra}. Faure-Ribreau (2012), 212-219 discusses the difference between the terms \textit{ornamenta} and \textit{ornatus}, arguing that whereas the former designates “[...] les éléments concrets du costume et de l'apparence d'un personnage, qui correspondent à sa \textit{persona}”, \textit{ornatus} describes the overall effect of the \textit{ornamenta}: “Si les \textit{ornamenta} sont les moyens employés pour accomplir l'action décrite par le verbe \textit{ornare}, l'\textit{ornatus} désigne donc le résultat de cette action et est envisagé à travers l'effet qu'il produit sur le spectateur (interne ou externe au spectacle) qui le regarde” (p.215).} Wondering why the would-be thief is knocking at his door, Charmides finally makes his presence known and addresses the sycophant to ask what his business is. When the actor recites his story about having been sent as a messenger to deliver letters to Lesbonicus and Callicles, Charmides is struck that the trickster is looking for his own son and friend. He expresses his surprise thus (vv.876-877):

\begin{quote}
\textit{meum gnatum hicquidem Lesbonicum quaerit et amicum meum quoi ego liberosque bonaque commendavi, Calliclem.}
\end{quote}

This guy is looking for my son Lesbonicus, and my friend, the one I entrusted my children and fortune to, Callicles.

Of course, the sycophant cannot hear what Charmides has said, or else the whole premise of the scene would be ruined: the comedy of the situation is based upon an
essential difference in knowledge between the two characters, due to which the
sycophant unwittingly continues performing his role as Charmides' messenger from
abroad for Charmides himself long after the senex has caught on to the deception. In
other words, the trickster has no idea who he is speaking to. Thus, Charmides'
words are addressed directly and exclusively to the audience, unheard by the other
character on stage. In fact, the old man will make eight of these bomolochic asides
throughout the course of his exchange with the sycophant, voicing his reaction to his
performance, as Muecke has noted, and declaring the formulation of his own
counter-deception. Thus, Charmides demonstrates the ability to communicate
directly with the audience outside the fictional world inhabited by the sycophant
right from the beginning of the scene. This power further underscores the senex's
alignment with the spectators, and his great metatheatricality.

Completely oblivious to Charmides, the sycophant continues his act, asking
where he might find the epistolary recipients he seeks (v.878): fac me, si scis,
certiorem hosce homines ubi habitent, pater ("Fill me in, if you know, where these
men live, Father"). Aware that he is dealing with a trickster (v.890), Charmides asks
the sycophant the motivation of his errand. He responds thus, unwittingly
highlighting the ignorance that will cause the failure of his role (vv.894-895):

pater istius adolescentis dedit has duas mi epistulas,
Lesbonici. is mihi est amicus.

The father of this young man, Lesbonicus, gave me these two letters.
He's a friend of mine.
Ironically, the trickster does not realize that the man standing before him, whom he

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117 Cf. p.43, infra.
118 Slater (1985), esp. pp.158-160 and Moore (1998), ch. 2 discuss asides in Plautine comedy,
discerning the special function of this device to communicate directly with the audience in order to
influence their perception of a given scenario. Thus, the ability to speak to the audience unbeknownst
to the other characters on stage is a form of comic power.
119 Muecke (1985), 179 notes, "...in accordance with the reversal of roles, it is Charmides who is
linked to the audience by his increasing awareness and self-confidence. Thus the audience is, as
usual, linked to the character who triumphs...". Muecke, however, cautiously qualifies the
characterization of Charmides qua victor, arguing that like the sycophant, the senex is "left perplexed
by the encounter" (n.44). While it is true that upon the sycophant's exit Charmides expresses anxiety
and uncertainty about what business the sycophant might have been involved in (vv.1000-1003),
there seems to me to be no doubt about the senex's comic victory over the trickster and defeat of the
internal deception.
addresses as pater,\(^{120}\) and the pater Lesbonici, supposedly his employer and close acquaintance, are one and the same. This marks him out as a comic loser, and invites the audience to laugh at his expense.\(^{121}\) Charmides, on the other hand, has caught on to the situation, gaining the upper hand by virtue of his greater knowledge. He declares his realization that the sycophant claims to deliver letters allegedly from himself in an aside to the audience (teneo hunc manufestarium./me sibi epistulas dedisse dicit. “I’ve caught this guy red-handed. He says I gave him the letters”, vv.895-896). The scene proceeds as an extended inside joke between Charmides and the spectators, who get to enjoy watching the sycophant attempt to perform his part in the knowledge of the scenario’s implicit irony. The senex prolongs their laughs by hiding his identity\(^{122}\) and encouraging the sycophant to continue.\(^{123}\) The actor is more than happy to oblige, and is delighted when Charmides prompts him to tell his fabulously embellished story of wide-ranging travels, which include a trip to the throne of Jupiter (vv.940-944).

It is not long before this bold senex decides to turn the tables, usurping the sycophant’s role as fraudster from his privileged position of knowledge.\(^{124}\) Charmides now transforms into a trickster,\(^{125}\) declaring his intention to cheat the professional swindler in an aside to the audience (v.900):

\(^{120}\) Pater, as the commentaries note, is an appropriately respectful address for the trickster to use. The sycophant does so again at v.884; cf. Brix (1873), 101, Gray (1897), 160, and Cocchia (1921), 110. In Menander’s Δύσκολος Κνημών is addressed as πάτερ several times (i.e. vv.107, 171), and Sikon the cook notes that he calls old men thus when trying to butter them up to borrow something (v.494): εὔθες πατέρα καὶ πάππα. Later in the scene, Charmides plays upon the sycophant’s ironic use of the address pater, teasing him thus: (vv.919-920): nisi nomen patris/dices, non mostrare istos possum homines quos tu quaeitis.

\(^{121}\) Muecke (1985), 181 perceives the joke here in the Trinummus, observing that it also occurs in the Mostellaria at vv.952-962. Coincidently, the Mostellaria is thought to have been modeled on another text of Philemon’s, the Φάσμα.

\(^{122}\) Danese (1991), 138 observes that Charmides’ concealment of his real identity continues the Odyssean theme of his nostos hymn to Neptune: like this comic senex, Odysseus hid his identity upon his homecoming (albeit for completely different reasons). Likewise, Fontaine (2010), 141 calls Charmides “some modern-day Ulysses”.

\(^{123}\) Muecke (1985), 175 remarks that Charmides “…puts the sycophant through his paces for the benefit of the audience”.

\(^{124}\) Lefèvre (1995), 110 notes that Charmides uses the same words to describe his deception of the sycophant as the sycophant himself uses at the beginning of the scene; cf. also Muecke (1985), 183.

\(^{125}\) Petrone (1983), 78ff. observes the “metamorfosi di Carmide in eroe ingannatore”, and Muecke (1985), 178 argues that the distinctly Plautine Charmides has “largely absorbed the ‘Charmides’ of the Greek play”.

42
mihi quoque edepol, quom hic nugatur, contra nugari lubet.

By Pollux, since this guy’s tricking me, it pleases me to use tricks against him.

The comic competition Charmides initiates seems to be reflected in the repetition of the verb nugari. This word play alludes, I think, to the doubling of the trickster role in the scene. Such a form of geminatio occurs three times, with sycophanta at v.958 (quoted below), and again with nugator at v.972.\textsuperscript{126} In fact, one might even say that the word order in v.900, nugatur contra nugari, mirrors the ongoing contest with one fraudster against another – nugator contra nugatorem, as it were.\textsuperscript{127}

Charmides’ assumption of the Plautine trickster’s vocabulary makes the scene’s implicit role reversal explicit, demonstrating his self-conscious assumption of the comic upper hand. The senex even echoes the sycophant’s earlier expressed intention to cheat his employer out of the rented costume (quoted above; vv.859-860), declaring his desire to make the sycophant his own comic victim by cheating him out of the 1000 nummi he claims to bear from “Charmides” (vv.958-961):

\begin{quote}
enim vero ego nunc sycophantae huic sycophantari volo, 
si hunc possum illo mille numnum Philippum circumducere 
quod sibi me dedisse dixit, quem ego qui sit homo nescio 
neque oculis ante hunc diem umquam vidi.
\end{quote}

Indeed, I now really do want to trick this trickster, if I can swindle this guy out of those 1000 nummi which he says I gave to him. I don’t know who the guy is; before this day I have never seen him with my own eyes.

Now Charmides becomes a thief, completely transcending the limits of his stock persona qua respectable Athenian gentleman. Not only does the senex express the desire to rob the sycophant of the gold he claims to carry, but Charmides even steals the actor’s lines word for word, saying of the sycophant verbatim what the sycophant had said of him earlier in the scene (vv.847-850):

\begin{quote}
viden egestas quid negoti dat homini misero mali 
quen ego nunc subigor trium numnum caussa ut hasce epistulas
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{126} Petrone (1983), 78 observes that the repetition of the trickster words here in v.900 and in v.958 reflects the intersection of two deceptions, that of Charmides and that of the sycophant.

\textsuperscript{127} Lefèvre (1995), 111 argues that contra is a “Stichwort” in this scene, as it may represent (like the scene between Lysiteles and Lesbonicus) a “volkstümliche Form des Wettkampfs” between two improvising actors.
In his attempt to get the sycophant to hand the gold over to its rightful owner, the senex at last reveals his identity: he is Charmides ipsissumus (v.988). Once the incredulous actor is finally convinced that this old man is who he says he is (that is, the Charmides he claims to know so well!), he realizes that the gig is up. The actor leaves the stage in anger, cursing the presence of Charmides as he goes (vv.996-997):

*ego abeo. male vive et vale!*

*qui te di omnes advenietem peregre perdant, Charmides!*

I’m out of here. Go to hell and fare badly!
May all the gods damn you as you return from abroad, Charmides!

**V: A scripted flop**

The *Trinummus* “play-within-the-play”, then, is called off thanks to the comic power of Charmides. In fact, it is the internal plot’s subversion which constitutes the comic high point of the play, and Charmides stands out among Plautus’ heroes not only for his age but also because of the effect his character has upon the text: instead of

128 Muecke (1985), 174 observes that the sycophant unknowingly points out his own problem: although he pretends otherwise, he really has no idea who Charmides is (and therefore that the senex stands before him!). Of course, the irony lies in the fact that whereas the sycophant really is ignorant of who Charmides is, the senex perceives the trickster and his deceptive purpose from the beginning of the scene. Muecke, however, thinks otherwise, arguing thus: “...neither of the characters has the full knowledge which the audience has; both are, to a greater or lesser extent, blundering in the dark. And both are ignorant of the same thing—for neither knows who the other really is” (p.175). Muecke continues to consider the questions of identity and naming raised by the scene, discussed also by Lefèvre (1995), 111-112.

129 Muecke (1985), 183 notes the irony in the fact that Charmides’ method of stealing the sycophant’s gold is by revealing his true identity.

130 Muecke (1985), 183 points out that “…the sycophant has some grounds for believing him to be an imposter too, Charmides being caught in his own device, the very fate that he is trying to impose on the sycophant”.

131 Riemer (1996), 55 points out that the *Trinummus’* foiled deception is exceptional: although intrigues can be unsuccessful as in the *Casina* or the *Mercator*, or uncovered before execution such as in the *Samia*, the epistolary scheme in the *Trinummus* is frustrated just as it is being performed.
an internal playwright who composes and develops the direction of the play’s central intrigue (as Megaronides attempts to be), Charmides is an internal plot crasher who shuts down the deception in progress by destroying the fictional premise upon which it is based. The senex succeeds in doing so by usurping the guileful powers of the sycophant for himself, devising a deception to trump the trickster he encounters. Charmides must extemporize this reaction, as he is confronted with the sycophant’s story completely unprepared. The last thing he is likely to expect upon his arrival at Athens is to meet a costumed trickster at his door. This is evident in the old man’s asides, in which he declares his impromptu counter attack (vv.896, 900), and proclaims that he has encountered the actor at just the right time, highlighting the spontaneity of their collision (v.911):

\[
\text{temperi huic hodie anteveni.}
\]

I’ve preempted this guy just in the nick of time.

The role the sycophant has been hired to act out, on the other hand, has been carefully planned and practiced before the commencement of his performance. In fact, two characters remark twice, unambiguously and in a very short space, that the player has rehearsed his role as Charmides’ messenger. The first to do so is Megaronides when he says this to Callicles as he plans the epistolary ruse (vv.815-818):

\[
\text{ego sycophantam iam conduco de foro}
\text{epistulaisque iam consignabo duas,}
\text{eumque huc <ad> adolescentem meditatum probe}
\text{mittam.}
\]

I’ll hire a trickster from the forum straightaway, and straightaway I’ll give him two letters. I’ll send him to the young man here very well rehearsed indeed.

The old man’s words might be those of any conductor preparing to put on a show: he will hire the actor, provide the props, and make sure that the player is ready for his part before he takes the stage.\(^\text{132}\) The key word here is meditatum: the young man to play the trickster will be rehearsed\(^\text{133}\) for his role, and thoroughly at that – probe.

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\(^{132}\) Muecke (1985), 170 observes that Megaronides “coaches [the sycophant] in his role”.

\(^{133}\) Brix (1873), 95 and Cocchia (1921), 102 translate meditatum as “well-taught”, whereas Gray (1897), 152 perceives the allusion to the messenger role, translating “well-drilled in his part”. 

45
Likewise, the sycophant announces his rehearsal to the audience upon the commencement of his skit, largely repeating what Megaronides has said just 30 some-odd lines before (vv.853-855):

\[
\text{ill'qui me conduxit, ubi conduxit, abduxit domum, quae voluit mihi dixit, docuit et praemostavit prius, quo modo quidque agerem.}
\]

That guy who hired me, when he hired me he brought me to his place.
He told me what he wanted from me, he taught it to me and showed me in advance how and what I should be acting out.

Mirroring the threefold repetition in the preceding line, the sycophant pleonastically emphasizes in verse 854 that the conductor has readied him for how he should act, employing three different verbs to tell us virtually the same thing: “he told me, he taught me, and he showed me beforehand”. In fact, the preparation prior to the performance is underscored by the addition of the adverb prius modifying the verb praemostavit, which already contains a sense of precedence in time inherent in the prefix prae.

The notion of the sycophant’s rehearsal suggests that the messenger role is fixed, mapped out before the commencement of his performance by the Trinummus’ internal playwright. In fact, the text implies that this part has been scripted through the sycophant’s repeated association with writing. As Jenkins has observed, the use of the adjective graphicus by both Megaronides (v.767) and Charmides (vv.937, 1139) to describe the hired actor hints that he is “written”: although graphicus’ primary Latin definition is “exquisite”, “skillful” or “worthy of being painted”,\(^\text{134}\) the Greek adjective γραφικός means both “paintable” and “suited for writing”, from the verb γράφω which can signify “to paint” and “to write”. Thus, one might discern an allusion to the fact that the old men “write” the sycophant’s role into the ruse,\(^\text{135}\) setting out the details of the part he is to play.

\(^{134}\) The commentaries take the adverb graphicus as referring to the similarity of the sycophant to his role. Brix (1873), 92 says: “so ähnlich (einem Fremden) wie ein Gemälde seinem Original”; cf. also Gray (1897), 149 and Cocchia (1921), 98. One of the entries for graphicus in the Thesaurus Linguae Latinae is, in fact, “ad scribendum aptus” (2b), though the instances of the adjective and adverb in the Trinummus are defined as relating to the similarity of the sycophant to his role: “iam non homo verus, sed tamquam imago et species homini” for graphicus (1), and “quasi in pictura” for graphicus (1). graphicus also appears in the Epidicus (v.410), Persa (v.843), Pseudolus (v.519) and Stichus (v.570).

\(^{135}\) Cf. p.29, supra.
Ironically, this fixedness of his role will prove to be the trickster’s downfall upon encountering Charmides: when the run of his skit does not go according to plan, the sycophant can do nothing but stick to his part. Unlike the senex, he cannot improvise even though the situation demands it for his theatrical production to succeed. An interesting example is offered by the mini-episode in the collision scene surrounding Charmides’ name. As the sycophant repeatedly claims to know the composer of the letters he carries intimately, he should naturally, then, know the senex’s name. The trickster, however, cannot seem to remember it when Charmides asks him for it, even though this name is on the tip of his tongue, so to speak (vv. 913-917):

SY: fieri istuc solet, quod in manu teneas atque oculis vides, id desideres. litteris recomminiscar. <C> est principium nominii.
CH: Callias? SY: non est. CH: Callippus? SY: non est. CH: Callidemides?

SY: This tends to happen, that you are missing what you hold in your hands and see with your eyes. I’ll call it to mind again by means of the letters. The name begins with C.
CH: Callias? SY: That’s not it. CH: Callippus? SY: That’s not it. CH: Callidemus?
SY: That’s not it. CH: Callinicus? SY: That’s not it. CH: Callimarchus? SY: It’s no good.

136 Pace Jenkins (2005), 378, who argues that the sycophant is an “active creator of new fictions”. This does not seem to me to be the case at all: as I demonstrate in what follows, the sycophant sticks to the story handed to him by Callicles and Megaronides, which proves ultimately to be his downfall. Likewise, Lefèvre (1993), 111 and Riemer (1995), 31 argue that the encounter between the sycophant and Charmides as a whole is an improvised skit, and Mazzoli (2006), 21 thinks that the sycophant’s travel stories are devised on the spot. Petrone (1995), 180-181 suggests that the sycophant’s performance (particularly in the “name game” discussed below) is a reflection on acting techniques and on improvisation in general, which is “ormai codificato, sancito d’all’uso ripetuto, riconoscibile” (p.181).

137 Muecke (1985), 175 claims that the sycophant’s forgetfulness is a “conventional element” of such comic scenes.

138 A few lines earlier, the sycophant literally says that Charmides’ name is on the tip of his tongue (vv.908-910): SY: devoravi nomen imprudens modo. CH: non placet qui amicos intra dentes conclusos habet. SY: atque etiam modo vorsabatur mihi in labris primoribus. Gray (1897), 163 calls Charmides’ expression a “comic exaggeration”. But I wonder whether this is not, in fact, an obscene double entendre. Charmides seems to be punning upon the sycophant’s metaphor for having forgotten the name, saying that he does not take kindly to those who hold their friends between their teeth, i.e. give them fellatio. As the sycophant belongs to the lower classes populated by slaves, parasites and rogues, one might even read a veiled reference to the possibility that the sycophant is a prostitute, in which case Charmides means that he dislikes the sort of man who makes his friends by taking them into his mouth, as it were. This reading of Charmides’ line gives a new twist to the notion of being a ‘parasite’. For the use of eating as a metaphor for sex and oral sex in particular, including the verb devourare, cf. Adams (1982), 138-142, especially pp.139-140. For the use of dentes in allusions to oral sex, and references to fellatio in general in Plautine comedy, cf. Fontaine (2010) 234-237.
In an attempt to overcome his lapse, the sycophant tries to jog his memory by recalling the letters, *litterae*, of Charmides’ name. This is very significant, as the Latin word *littera* can signify a simple letter of the alphabet (like the C with which Charmides’ name begins), or the inscribed letters in a written document. In fact, the plural *litterae* may refer precisely to an epistle, the very props the actor is supposed to be delivering. Could the forged letters, then, represent what the sycophant is supposed to *say* in the performance of his role?\(^{139}\)

The sycophant’s attempt to rely upon the *litterae* he carries when he forgets his lines implies, it seems to me, that the *Trinummus*’ epistles may function as a symbol of the theatrical script,\(^ {140}\) especially given that for the sycophant, these *litterae* serve as a crutch, and do not represent the actor’s own, true knowledge. The composition of the false letters by Megaronides *qua* internal playwright and their pivotal role in enacting the deception points to an analogy between these texts and the plot of the scheme. Just like a script, the epistles are portrayed as containing the plot of the production to be acted out and given to the actor by the *conductor* (cf. Megaronides’ words quoted above, vv.815-818). The self-conscious depiction of the ruse as a theatrical production strengthens this image, as does the failure of both the letters and the scheme to be realized: one might say, then, that the epistles’ unread message reflects the unperformed skit. This same image is, in fact, suggested again a few lines after the name guessing-game, when Charmides insists that the stumbling trickster hand over the 1000 *nummi* he claims to bear. The sycophant can say nothing in his defence but fall on the testimony of the letters he holds (vv. 981-982):


CH: *fassu’s Charmidem dedisse aurum tibi. SY: scriptum quidem.* \(^ {141}\)

CH: C’mon! Do it, if you are going to do it. SY: What should I do? CH: Give back the gold. SY: You’re dreaming, old man.

CH: You admitted that Charmides gave you the gold. SY: That’s what’s written, at any rate.

\(^{139}\) Jenkins (2005), 377 points out that the adjectives Megaronides uses to describe the sycophant, *mendaciloquos* and *falsidicus*, emphasize speech.

\(^{140}\) For a similar argument about Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, cf. Rosenmeyer (2001), 94. She suggests that Phaedra’s letter functions as a “miniature script” within the larger tragedy.

\(^{141}\) Might the actor playing the sycophant have waved the unread letters at this point?
Jenkins observes that “...everything in the scene inhabits a never-never land between written and real....even the thousand gold pieces that the sycophant carries (as he lamely confesses) exist only on the page”.\textsuperscript{142} That is, the sycophant says that the gold “is written only”, referring, I submit, to the written words that stand behind his story – his script! Such a reading of the sycophant and his role is supported by the manifest textuality of the internal skit, which involves literary playwrights, letters, and a \textit{graphicus} actor. One might say, then, that the sycophant is trying one last-ditch effort to stick to his theatrical script in the face of Charmides’ onslaught, uttering something like “That's what my script says, anyway!”.

\textbf{VI: Text vs word}

Significantly, the written texts of the \textit{Trinummus}, stand-ins for the script of the comedy’s internal deception, are left unread. This is an important detail especially if considered in light of the clash of media that occurs when letters appear on stage. In her study of the epistles in Euripides, Rosenmeyer has perceived that the appearance of writing in dramatic performance has the effect of revealing theatre’s hidden textuality by evoking the script: “When a character ‘reads’ a letter, the visible script, frozen in time from the moment of its recording, is brought into focus in a way that the memorized and thus invisible lines of the rest of the tragedy are not”.\textsuperscript{143} This tension between spoken and written word is heightened, it seems to me, in Plautine comedy, for the plays posture themselves as a largely improvisational performance. That is, these comedies are meant to appear as spoken, but not written. Plautus’ literary imitation of improvisation actively fights against writing, attempting to hide a play’s origin in text.\textsuperscript{144} This play’s collapsed epistolary scheme and debunked forged letters might be understood in this perspective. The potential tension between spoken and written word never occurs

\textsuperscript{142} Jenkins (2005), 378.
\textsuperscript{143} Rosenmeyer (2001), 66.
\textsuperscript{144} Jenkins (2005), 361-362 notes this concealment of text in Plautine comedy, and argues that it even extends to the characters themselves: “[...] Plautine characters are duped by their own ontology. For the most part, the written characters of the drama never realize that they are written...”.
in the *Trinummus* because the counterfeit missives go undelivered and unread which may function, I submit, as an image of Plautus' aesthetic eschewal of text. An oral, performative context is privileged when the play's internal letters are denied realization, keeping the *Trinummus*’ script concealed by dismissing the internal deception’s “script” offstage.\(^{145}\) The victory of the improvising *senex* over the scripted sycophant supports this reading, as the match mirrors Plautus’ poetic predilection for orality: the part written up by Megaronides and Callicles cannot withstand Charmides' extemporized onslaught, which provokes the miscarriage of the ruse, the end of the “play-within-the-play”, and, as a consequence, the rejection of its script.

Thus, the competition of comic craftiness between Charmides and the sycophant may be said to represent the collision of two performance styles, improvisational vs. rehearsed performance. The triumph of the old man symbolizes the victory of improvisation, and thereby the spoken word, which is depicted as the most comically powerful mode of action. But I wonder whether we might not unpack the metaphor one step further: could the *Trinummus*’ acting contest\(^{146}\) also symbolize the confluence of the scripted Greek and native Italian oral performance styles in Plautus’ work?\(^{147}\) That is, I would like to suggest that the encounter

\(^{145}\)To Plautus' rejection of the written word in favour of the spoken one, we might compare the story of Theuth and Thamus in Plato’s *Phaedrus* at 274c – 275e. In this tale, the god Theuth shows his invention of writing, among other arts, to his fellow god Thamus so that these τέχναι may be bestowed upon the Egyptians. Thamus criticizes the letters, claiming that this technology will teach the Egyptians forgetfulness, leading them to rely upon writing rather than their own memories (in this myth and its connection to ancient thinking about memory and the distinction between speech and writing, cf. Steiner 1994, 103-104, 115-116). The *agon* pitting text against speech in the *Trinummus* seems to be almost a dramatization of Plato’s censure of the written word. I owe this parallel to Peter Bing.

\(^{146}\)Earlier in the text, there is another scene which resembles an acting contest: in vv.705-708, when Lesbonicus and Lysiteles meet to discuss the terms of the betrothal established by Philto, Stasimus compares their dispute to a dramatic *agon*, and congratulates Lysiteles for his winning performance. Because we have no evidence for dramatic competitions at Rome during Plautus’ time, these lines have been attributed to Philo’s original, or considered partly spurious; cf. Gray (1897), 142, Cocchia (1921), 91-92 and Conrad (1931), 115. Segal (1974), 258 n.14 comments that Stasimus plays the sophisticated drama critic, and Gratwick (1981), 332 calls this passage “the earliest surviving piece of Roman literary criticism.” On these verses, cf. also Lefèvre (1995), 106-107.

\(^{147}\)Marshall (2006), 275-276: “The earliest playwrights in Rome operated on a cusp as the technology of writing and increasing trade across the Mediterranean revolutionised their culture...Plautus and his contemporaries drew together performance genres and produced an amalgam of the literate...and the preliterate”. Marshall relates this to his argument that the Plautine
between Charmides and the sycophant might be read as a poetic agon of theatrical genres, in which the Greek graphicus tradition is undercut and undone by Italian improvisatory poetics. The botched letter plan and collision of “author” and “messenger” might be read programmatically as amounting to a statement of the playwright’s aesthetic preferences. The Trinummmus’ failed “play-within-the-play”, then, might constitute an expression of Plautus’ literary allegiance to the theatrical forms native to Italy and, therefore, a rebuffing of the genre serving as his comedy’s model.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the construction and stylistic features of the scene featuring Charmides and the sycophant have often led scholars to attribute it to Plautus and to argue that it shows signs of extensive modification by the Latin playwright from what he found in the original Greek play. The intensely comic situation of role reversal punctuated by metatheatrical allusions does indeed seem to me to contain the “impronta plautina”, and I wish to build on this hypothesis based upon my foregoing observations. However, as outlined above, my approach to perceiving this element of originality will differ considerably from what other critics have attempted: instead of trying to reconstruct the Θησαύρος, I will explore what hints Plautus himself might give us to shed light on how he has adapted Philemon’s play.

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148 Significantly, the word used repeatedly to describe the sycophant’s “writtenness”, graphicus, is Greek. On the essential “scriptedness” of Greek New Comedy, cf. Goldberg (1995), 35. He argues that in this genre, authorial control over characters and the prevalence of “omniscient prologues, consistent characterizations, and reasonable reactions (even to unreasonable situations)”, all give the audience the guarantee of predictability and consistency.


150 Petrone (1983), 79.
VII: Plot crasher, a Plautine original

Key to my argument about the nature of Plautine innovation in the *Trinummus* is Frances Muecke’s reading of the sycophant, and her observation that he is condemned to only ever *trying* to play his role. That is, the hired player never actually convinces Charmides of his portrayal, and thus does not succeed in closing the gap between actor and part in performance. Muecke argues that the text’s explicit portrayal of an actor attempting to play his part creates slippage of sorts between perception of the player at Athens hired by the scheming old men, and the player at Rome acting the sycophant in a comedy of Plautus. This ambiguity is supported by the reoccurrence of theatrical *termini technici*, as Muecke notes, throughout the encounter between *senex* and trickster, but also, as I have shown, in the planning stages of the deceit,\(^{151}\) which serve to frame the plot as an explicitly dramatic performance.\(^{152}\)

I wonder whether we might not push the analogy Muecke has observed a step further, extending it to encompass the internal and external performances of the text. That is, it seems to me that by equivocating on the depiction of the sycophant in the internal performance and the actor in the *Trinummus*, the text conflates its “play-within-the-play” with the comedy as a whole. This is indicated by the name of the sycophant’s acting skit: in the introduction he performs at the beginning of the theatrical inset, he tells us the name he has given to this day of performance, which is the same as the larger comedy’s title, *Trinummus*\(^{153}\) (vv.843-

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\(^{151}\) Cf. p.29 and n.85, *infra*.


\(^{153}\) Muecke (1985), 178 observes: “the name of the sycophant’s day is the same as that of Plautus’ play, because the play and day coincide for the actor/sycophant, both the intrigue and the play answering to the description artes nugatoriae”. Although most agree that the title *Trinummus* draws attention to the comic *pièce de résistance* of the play, the precise meaning has generated some discussion amongst scholars. Some have seen the “three penny” title as a pun on Philemon’s “treasure”, contrasting the meager payment which the sycophant receives with the (presumably) buried fortune of the Greek original; cf. LeFèvre (1995), 88 and Riemer (1996), 50, 129, 182. However, Jocelyn (1999), 47 points out that the sum of three *nummi* is not trivial at all, and thus would not form a “striking or witty antithesis” with the original Greek title. Fontaine (2010), 141 n. 84 argues that *Trinummus* is not a straightforward “*nomen-omen*” etymological pun on the sycophant’s payment, but a pseudo-etymological, *para prosdokia* joke: *tri* does not refer to *tres* but is, in fact, the “intensifying” prefix to be found in Naevius’ title *Triphallus* (Überdick) and Petronius’ “Tri-malchio” (Über-King). Thus *Trinummus* means something like “Übercoin”. On the play’s title, cf. also Muecke (1985), 165 n.5.
I'm calling this day "Three Nummi", for I've hired out my labour today at the price of three nummi for shady business.

The hired actor's words sound, in fact, very much like a prologue, and as Riemer has pointed out, his expression nomen facere connects back to Luxuria's prologue when at v.20 she tells us about the new title Plautus has given to Philemon's play.¹⁵⁴

The explicit appellation of the would-be deception's scene of performance, coinciding with the title of Plautus' comedy, and the recital of a second prologue establishes this point in the text as a pivotal one. The self-consciously theatrical ruse inside the play's larger plot is the text's defining moment – its title scene,¹⁵⁵ and I submit that the comic encounter is presented as tantamount to the play itself.¹⁵⁶

This is implied, furthermore, by what the sycophant says to Charmides at the end of their encounter. Reaching out of the play world to the "real" world inhabited by the audience, the actor threatens the senex with punishment from the Roman magistrates in charge of theatrical productions at the ludi scaenici¹⁵⁷ for having debunked the internal fiction and, as a consequence, his role as messenger (vv.989-990):

enim vero serio quoniam advenis –
vapulabis meo arbitratu¹⁵⁸ et novorum aedilium.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Segal (1974), 258 and Riemer (1996), 54. In fact, one might even say that this is the third prologue we encounter in the Trinummos, if we count the argumentum fabulae we get from Callicles and Megaronides in the first scene.
¹⁵⁶ Cf. Sharrock (2009), 96: "...internal plotting and external plotting (that is, the best laid plans of the characters in the play, and the plot of the play) are mutually reinforcing". Aliter Riemer (1996), who sees the episode as separate from the rest of the play (and Plautus' contribution to his translation of Philemon; cf. n.67, supra): "Die Einlage trägt nicht zur Fortsetzung der Handlung bei, sondern ist ein selbständiger Abschnitt innerhalb der Handlung. Der ursprüngliche Handlungsverlauf wird sogar eigens unterbrochen, um das 'Spiel im Spiel' zu ermöglichen" (p.81-82).
¹⁵⁷ Muecke (1985), 184 argues that the reference to the aediles reveals that Charmides is, like the sycophant, playing a role as an actor in the Trinummos. Riemer (1996), 46 suggests that the sycophant "geriert sich hier als Schauspieldirektor, was vielleicht mit der tatsächlichen Besetzung in der Uraufführung übereinstimmte". He also argues (n. 117) that the sycophant role constitutes the prima pars of the Trinummos, for which reason these lines referring to the aediles would take on an extra, metatheatrical dimension of meaning as spoken by those in charge of production.
¹⁵⁸ These words complete the role reversal at the comic heart of the foregoing scene: a lowly day-labouring trickster threatens an Athenian signore with a beating! Gray (1897), 171 points out that the
Well! Since you’ve now arrived in earnest, you’ll be beaten at my behest and that of the new aediles.

The sycophant’s reference to the aediles suggests that they will be upset with Charmides for wrecking the performance they have paid for.\(^{159}\) That is, Charmides’ intrusion is depicted as having crashed the *entire comedy* by subverting its central deception. His impromptu arrival *does*, effectively, end the play: the conflict surrounding the *virgo’s dowry* is resolved,\(^{160}\) and the end of the play is nigh (just under 200 lines away), containing no great complications or revelations.

If we accept this conflation of internal and external productions, and the frustration of *both* by Charmides, the “play-within-the-play”’s epistle-scripts might represent the script of the *Trinummus* itself. Moreover, if I am right in positing an allusion to the generic influences upon Plautine comedy in this play’s juxtaposition of spoken and written word, the letters may also function as an image of the Greek play invoked by Plautus as his model, Philemon’s Ὑπομονόρος. The image of writing within writing, in fact, naturally mirrors the relationship between translation and original, in which there are two texts and two authors. The adaptation is written “inside” the model text, as it were, and the Latin play depends upon the Greek for its existence. The fascinating thing about the *Trinummus* is that it destabilizes this dependence upon its original: if the forged epistles are read as being symbolic of Philemon’s play, their dismissal signifies the subversion of the *graphicus* Greek comedy itself.

I propose, then, that Charmides’ play-crashing may refer metapoetically to Plautus’ treatment of the *Trinummus’* original and, thus, function as an image of his authorial independence from it. Specifically, I submit that the improvising *senex* represents the Latin playwright’s addition to the Ὑπομονόρος, through which he asserts his creative contribution to Philemon’s comedy and the triumph of his own

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\(^{159}\) This line has proven to be of pivotal importance for those attempting to date the *Trinummus*. Ritschl (1845), 348 observes that the aediles will only have seemed “new” at the *Megalensia* in April, which (according to Livy 34.54.3) did not feature dramatic performances until after 194 BC, for which reason the *Trinummus* has consistently been dated to after this year.

aesthetic preferences. I do not mean to suggest, however, that Charmides did not return to Athens in the Θησαυρός, or that Plautus has added him to the play as an extra character. The old man certainly may have played the same part of father abroad in the Greek play, and indeed, returned to Athens early and bumped into the sycophant just as he does in the Trinummus.\footnote{Muecke (1985), 172 thinks that Charmides did meet with the false messenger in Philemon and was left confused by the encounter. This is part of her larger argument that the Greek play centred upon the emotional ups and downs of Charmides when he arrives at Athens and misunderstands all that has transpired in his absence. Likewise, Lefèvre (1995), 123 argues that the Θησαυρός contained this comic collision scene, though, in his view, the second half of the Trinummus' scene in which Charmides tricks the trickster is Plautine.} It is my contention that Plautus has shaped the epistolary deception and its defeat by Charmides to reflect his own poetic preferences and stance towards his model, whether these scenes occurred in that model or not.

Of course, Plautus' play with embedded text and the contest between improvised and scripted performance would be all the more fun if the Trinummus' plot were to represent a significant departure from its Greek model, whatever that departure might be. The Latin text's prologue suggests, in fact, that major changes have been made to Philemon's Θησαυρός. This play is one of eight in Plautus' corpus that contain so-called didascalic references, verses indicating the play's Greek model and author. Although these lines have been excised by some scholars as non-Plautine,\footnote{Like Cocchia (1921), 5, 8, Hunter (1989), 223-224 thinks that these lines in the Trinummus are a later interpolation by "scholars or actors" based on the seemingly "random" occurrence of didascalic information in Plautus' corpus. Moreover, given that Terence never calls himself by name, he assumes that Plautus cannot have done so either (vv.9 and 18), which seems to me to be an unjustified jump in logic. Hunter also gives a review of previous critics' opinions. Aliter Segal (1974), 254-255, Lefèvre (1995), 88 and Riemer (1996), especially pp.25 ff., 51 ff. For a general discussion of the dramatic didaskalia, cf. also Goldberg (2005), 70 ff. Goldberg argues that these are the production notes of actors and producers which became integrated into the play texts by later editors. This is in harmony with his larger argument that Roman comedy became literature only in the late republic when scholars took to these texts and edited them for reading.} it seems to me that the didascalic references are just the opposite: they function like a sphragis, highlighting Plautus' authorial autonomy and originality by calling attention to his Greek model. That is, Plautus wants to underline his creative deviation from the original text and, thus, invokes it. Here are the lines in question (vv.18-21):

\begin{quote}
\textit{huic Graece nomen est Thensauro fabulae:}
\textit{Philemo scripsit, Plautus vortit barbare,}
\end{quote}
This play's name in Greek is “The Treasure”:
Philemon wrote it, Plautus translated it into barbarian,
and he made its name “Three Nummi”. Now he’s asking you
that this play be allowed to have this name.

In fact, one might even say that Plautus’ request for the spectators’ permission to
rename his Greek original makes them complicit in his creative adaptation: by
granting the playwright their leave to morph Philemon’s Θησαυρός into his own
Trinummuś, the audience becomes an active participant in Plautus’ changes to the
model and are, thereby, prepared for and alert to the crucial tension between model
and translation.

In a similar vein, when Luxuria first introduces herself and her daughter to
the audience several lines later, she tells us that their names are as such because
Plautus wanted it so (vv.8-9):

primum mihi Plautus nomen Luxuriae indidit;
tum hanc mihi gnatam esse voluit Inopiam.

In the first place, Plautus gave me the name “Luxury”;
then he wanted “Poverty” here to be my daughter.

These verses in the Trinummuś’ prologue, it seems to me, are a particularly strong
expression of authorial volition: as Luxuria says, Plautus voluit.¹⁶³ Thus, a
considerable element of Plautine originality and creative use of his model is to be
expected in the play.¹⁶⁴ It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that the hoard buried in
Charmides’ house – the namesake of Philemon’s play – remains in the background
throughout the Trinummuś and is barely mentioned at all.¹⁶⁵ The treasure’s
contents, of the written sort or the real, never appear on stage or come into play in

¹⁶³ Segal (1974), 254 notes the “creative responsibility” of the Latin translator expressed in the
prologues of both the Trinummuś and the Casina. Riemer (1996) is also concerned with such
statements which he argues yield insight into “den eigenschöpfischen Willen des Plautus”, of which
the Trinummuś’ prologue “enthält ein besonders auffälliges Zeugnis” (pp.19 ff).
¹⁶⁴ Petrone (1983) notes that the prologue “segna infatti il rilievo caratterizzante ed autonomo agli
occhi del commediografo stessò” of the sycophant role, which Petrone sees as having been
extensively modified by Plautus from his original.
¹⁶⁵ The treasure is referred to seven times total in the Trinummuś, at vv.18, 150, 750, 783, 798, 1110
and 1145. Segal (1974), 264 and Petrone (1983), 81 n. 50 also note the treasure’s absence from the
play.
the course of the plot: the 1000 nummi destined in the old men’s plan to serve as the virgo’s dos are, ultimately, not needed because Charmides’ premature arrival solves the problem entirely. In other words, the senex’s plot-crashing keeps the thesaurus buried throughout the course of the Trinummus.\textsuperscript{166} Given the element of authorial independence hinted at in the Latin play, I submit that the treasure’s absence throughout Plautus’ comedy may function as yet another image of the Latin playwright’s subversion of his Greek model text.

One might view, then, the Trinummus as a metatext of sorts. The Latin comedy seems to be playing allusively with its relationship to the Greek model: Plautus underlines his play’s creative divergence from the Θησαυρὸς, using embedded writing to convey this metaliterary meaning. How exactly the two texts differ is impossible to conjecture without a shred of evidence about Philemon’s comedy, but there may be clues. As scholars have suggested, there are moments in the play such as Megaronides’ dismissal of Callicles’ concerns about the seal as a waste of time (vv.796–797),\textsuperscript{167} or Luxuria’s refusal to give a prologue\textsuperscript{168} that may, in fact, be hints at the text standing behind the present one, which Plautus refuses to follow “to the letter”, as it were.\textsuperscript{169} To these instances we might add the name guessing routine in the encounter scene between Charmides and the sycophant: the senex suggests names beginning in C-A-L-L when the actor tells him the name begins with a C. Of course, the sycophant is searching for Charmides, which also begins with a C, but only in Latin: Callias, Callippus, Callidemides and Callinicus would all be spelled κ–α–λ–λ in Greek, whereas Charmides would begin in χ – α.\textsuperscript{170} The joke in

\textsuperscript{166} When Charmides meets Callicles shortly after his encounter with the sycophant, Callicles tells his friend that he has been off digging up the buried treasure (v.1100-1101): thesaurum ecodiebam intus, dotem filiae/tuae quae daretur. There is no indication in the text, however, that Callicles has the 1000 nummi in hand (certainly Charmides would have remarked upon it if he had, especially given his recent exchange with the sycophant), which means that the 3000 nummi are, as they have been throughout the entire play, hidden somewhere offstage.

\textsuperscript{167} Cf. n.93, supra.

\textsuperscript{168} Cf. n.70 supra.

\textsuperscript{169} Handley (1975) 117-122 makes a similar argument about the opening of the Mercator, where the adulescens refuses to perform the typical lovers’ lament.

\textsuperscript{170} Fontaine (2010), 141-147 reads a series of bilingual puns in this name-guessing episode. He argues that Charmides plays with the sycophant’s ignorance by punning on both parts of his name: first, the senex suggests a series of Greek names starting in κ–α–λ–λ, although he knows that the sycophant searches for one starting in χ – α. By doing so, he puns upon the sycophant’s description
the *Trinummus*, then, would not have worked in the Θησαυρός,\(^\text{171}\) which a quick-witted and Greek-speaking spectator could have easily picked up on. In fact, this type of bilingual pun seems to be set up already in the prologue, when Plautus invokes his model text: the aspirate consonants of the Greek author and title, Φιλήμων and the Θησαυρός are transformed, respectively, in the Latin *Plautus* and *Trinummus*.\(^\text{172}\) The same metatextual game may be at work in v.768 (quoted above), as Megaronides is planning out his “play-within-the-play” in the guise of internal playwright. When describing the actor needed for the job, the *senex callidus* states that he should have a face that is not familiar (*ignota facies quae non uisitata sit*). Could this be coy allusion to the fact that the sycophant part in the *Trinummus* will be very different from that in Philemon’s?

Barring a particularly lucky yield from the sands of Egypt, however, we shall never know for sure. Nevertheless, it is likely that Plautus’ text plays upon the relationship between his translation and model much more than we are capable of discerning. It seems that the Latin playwright *does* have something to say for himself about his adaptations of Greek comedy, which we can perceive without having the originals or attempting to reconstruct them, if only we are willing to read between the lines.

\(^{171}\) I am grateful for this observation to the comments of Peter Bing during a presentation of an early draft of this chapter.

\(^{172}\) This was suggested to me by both David Sansone and Toph Marshall during a presentation of the paper at the APA 2013 annual meeting.
2. ...Fool Me Twice, Shame on Me:

The *Bacchides* and its epistolary ‘Golden Boy’

Introduction

Compared to the *Trinummus*, the *Bacchides* resides in more familiar Plautine territory, with its love plot, slippery slave-hero and resoundingly successful epistolary ruse. In fact, this comedy features the most complex epistolary motif in the Plautine corpus: letters initiate the action, cause its undoing, and, finally, serve to fix everything up again, resolving the *crux* of the plot and ushering in its ‘happily ever after’. Here is the *argumentum fabulae*, in brief: while travelling to Ephesus to collect a debt owed to his father, the young man Mnesilochus meets and falls in love with a *meretrix* named Bacchis.173 Since the courtesan is on her way to his home city of Athens, the *adulescens* writes a letter to his friend Pistoclerus with orders to find her and keep her safe until his return. Pistoclerus does so, and discovers the girl living at the house of her charming courtesan sister, also named Bacchis (I will call her Athenian Bacchis for clarity’s sake),174 with whom he begins a love affair.175

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173 In the extant text (cf. n.176, *infra*), it is never made clear where the two lovers met, though it seems likely that this was in Samos; cf. n.194. Barsby (1986), 114 notes that in New Comedy courtesans are frequently from Samos.

174 As Barsby (1986), 114 observes, presumably this sister would have been originally from Samos as well. Despite the apparent suggestion of fragment V in Lindsay’s edition (*sicut lacte lactis similest*) that the two Bacchis sisters are identical twins - for which view, cf. Questa (1975), 11, Clark (1976), 86, Grisolia (1976), 56 and Petrone (1983), 189-190 - Bertini (1995), 13-14 persuasively argues that this is probably not the case: confusion in the play is not caused by the sisters’ identical appearance, but, rather, by their identical names. LeFèvre (2011), 72 agrees. David Sansone has pointed out to me that the courtesan sisters’ common name is, in fact, a Roman detail, for Roman girls would all bear the female form of their father’s *nomen*, with multiple daughters distinguished by *minor* and *maior* or ordinal numbers (it is not known whether the *hetaerae* had matching names in Menander’s comedy too). Of course, the name *Bacchis* is Greek, and so we have a neat combination of the Roman naming convention combined with a Greek name. I wonder whether this may be, in fact, signaled in the title of the comedy with a bilingual joke. *Bacchides* is the nominative plural of the third declension noun *Bacchis*, and therefore means “the Bacchises”. But the suffix -ιδῆς forms a patronymic in Greek, and so, one might say, *Bacchides* could also be understood as “the progeny of Bacchus” (cf., in fact, vv.53 and 371). This, I propose, is a pun on the Roman practice of naming daughters after their fathers, and Plautus’ use of this practice for his Greek girls. Thus the names of the *meretrices* “tell” us twice who their father is, once in Latin and once in Greek.

175 Whereas Clark (1976), 87 argues that Pistoclerus’ affair with Athenian Bacchis is part of the sisters’ plan to resolve the issue of Bacchis’ contract with the soldier on their own, thus attempting to enlist the aid of the *adulescens* against Cleomachus, Slater (1985), 95-96 reads the seduction of Pistoclerus by Athenian Bacchis into the role of *adulescens amans* at the outset of the play as induction into the world of comedy and the functional equivalent of a prologue.
the opening of the play as we have it, Mnesilochus and his slave Chrysalus have just returned from their voyage. The servus learns from Pistoclerus that Bacchis has been located, though her freedom from another obligation must be bought. Thus the intrigue-weaving Chrysalus fabricates a scheme to siphon the requisite gold from the money Mnesilochus had collected at Ephesus. This ruse, although initially successful, is ultimately doomed to fail, for in a fit of misdirected anger towards his beloved, whom he wrongly believes to have betrayed him with Pistoclerus, Mnesilochus admits to the whole deception and returns the stolen money to his father, Nicobulus. The misunderstanding between the adolescents is soon clarified, and we find ourselves back at square one: Bacchis’ freedom must still be purchased from the soldier. Mnesilochus begs his slave to do the impossible and swindle his father yet again, though the old man has been put on his guard by Mnesilochus’ confession. Cleverly taking advantage of his distrust, Chrysalus spins a new story to fool Nicobulus and to bring the play to its happily ever after.

In this chapter, I explore the Bacchides’ intricate letter motif: how, I ask, does the text meditate upon and manipulate epistolary conventions in its extensive use of missives both sincere and deceptive? First, I consider the epistolary activity in the background to the play’s action. I argue that two messages sent and received before the comedy opens serve to set up the scenario of this letter play by means of their kinetic force in the plot. In this section, I also discuss the important role of signs and false missives in Chrysalus’ first intrigue, which fakes an epistolary disaster and invents a letter out of thin air. I then move on to the trick devised by the servus callidus to remedy the impetuous confession of his erus amans. Chrysalus devises a brilliant plan to successfully rob the senex of his nummi a second and a third time,

176 Save for a set of 34 non-continuous verses preserved in the indirect tradition, the beginning of the Bacchides does not survive. It seems likely that the opening scene would have given the audience the background information necessary to follow along, such as the relationship between Mnesilochus and Bacchis, and the courtesan’s contract with Cleomachus. Based upon the pattern manifested in other Plautine comedies, both Questa (1975), 14-15 and Barsby (1986), 94 think it most plausible that Pistoclerus would have given a delayed prologue following a scene of dialogue. On the various problems presented by the fragments and possible reconstructions, cf. Bader (1970), Gaiser (1970), Questa (1975), 13-16, Barsby (1986), 17, 93-94 and Lefèvre (2011), 81-82. On the Bacchides’ position in the manuscripts, which favored the loss of the opening scene, cf. Tontini (2001).

177 For this critical term, cf. pp.10-11, supra.
using a pair of letters to pull off his two-pronged heist. These missives are dictated, delivered and read before the audience; they create a veritable showpiece of epistolary mischief and accomplish a very sophisticated psychological assault on the old man. In my analysis, I delve into the details of this complex scheme, which has not been sufficiently explored or explained in previous scholarship.

Chrysalus’ second set of intrigues will lead me to the final part of my discussion, in which I offer some observations on the relationship between the Bacchides and its Greek model based upon the number of tricks in the Latin text. Since Eric Handley’s 1968 publication of fragments from Menander’s Διεξαπατων, the synkrisis of the parallel Greek and Latin passages has been at the forefront of Plautine studies, for the Bacchides is the first Roman comedy that can be compared to the text upon which it is based.178 The discovery of the Διεξαπατων has shown Plautus to be an independent and creative adaptor, who transforms the tone and pace of his model significantly.179 However, despite the great insights yielded by the reemergence of Menander’s text, the broken succession of verses gives an incomplete picture of the Διεξαπατων and uncertainties about the relationship between model and adaptation remain.180 Much of the difficulty arises from the fact that all of the fragments are from the first part of the Greek play, beginning towards the end of Act 2 as the father and tutor of Moschos (Pistoclerus) encourage Sostratos (Mnesilochus) to reprimand his friend for his disgraceful affair,


179 Fraenkel (1922) had hypothesized as much long ago; cf. also Fraenkel (1960), an Italian translation of Plautinisches im Plautus with addenda. However, skeptics of Plautus’ originality remain; cf. Bain (1979) and, more recently, Damen (1995), who notes about the Διεξαπατων fragments: “They certainly do not resolve the burning question of Plautus’ originality for they show him as both a literal translator and a liberal adaptor” (p.28).

180 Damen (1995) explores what the Διεξαπατων fragments do not tell us about Plautus (although I will disagree with some of his conclusions in what follows).
and breaking off after Sostratos confronts Moschos for his alleged betrayal. The total absence of the second half of the Greek play has generated much speculation about the extent of Plautus’ innovation in this part of the Bacchides, leading some critics to conclude that it is the locus of significant change to the model text.181

One of the most important questions in this vein has been the number of schemes attempted by Syros and Chrysalus, the slave protagonists in the Greek and Latin plays, as scholars have puzzled over how to reconcile the two tricks seemingly required by the title of Menander’s text, “Double Deceiver”, with the three deceptions in Plautus’ comedy.182 Much of this debate is devoted to speculating on Syros’ ruses or discerning the Menandrian or Plautine origin of Chrysalus’ tricks – an exercise in futility, it seems to me, given the limitations imposed by the evidence of the Δις ἔξα πατών. Unlike previous treatments, my discussion of this “tricky” number problem will focus on Plautus’ play alone. We may ask, in nuce: Why are there three intrigues in this translation of a Greek play entitled the Double Deceiver? I look to Chrysalus’ celebratory monologue after his first heist at v.640 ff. and the pervasive doubling motif throughout the Latin play to shed some light on this question. Building upon the ideas proposed by other scholars, I suggest, ultimately, that Plautus’ Bacchides establishes a stance of comic one-upmanship with its Greek original, outdoing Syros and the Δις ἔξα πατών through a metatextual game of numbers.

BACCHIDES: Take one

I: Letters in the background

Before Mnesilochus inaugurates a spell of epistolary deception and comic competition by his misapprehension, written signs figure prominently in both the Bacchides’ Vorgeschichte and in Chrysalus’ original intrigue, much more so than has been previously recognized. Jenkins briefly touches upon the epistolary motif in the first half of this text in his exploration of the Plautine letters, but his analysis fails to

181 Cf. n.318, infra.
182 Lefèvre (2011), 45-60 gives a thorough review of the scholarship on this question; cf. also my own summary on pp.100-102, infra.
perceive the full role of epistles in setting up the plot and in fooling the senex Nicobulus for the first time.\footnote{Jenkins (2005), 383 limits his discussion to cover Mnesilochus’ letter to Pistoclerus, and Chrysalus’ “disquisition on forgery and authenticity” in his lying tale to Nicobulus. Essentially, he argues that both scenarios are a setup for the more extensive epistolary motif in the second part of the text. In his view, the “straightforward” letter exchange between the adulescentes launches the plot, introducing “a commonplace epistolary situation” only to subvert it later in the play. Similarly, Chrysalus’ use of signs in his wild pirate story serves to “…make a thematic point: not all signs are to be trusted”.
\footnote{Cf. Barsby (1986), 111.}} I will show how the situation present at the beginning of the <i>Bacchides</i> is, in fact, lined up by a set of kinetic epistles sent and received before the action begins. We learn about the series of events put into motion by these letters indirectly, when Chrysalus tells his wild pirate tale to Nicobulus at vv.258-313 as part of his first scheme, though it seems likely that such details about Mnesilochus’ voyage abroad would have been revealed in the text’s lost prologue.\footnote{Neither Jenkins (2005) nor Scafuro (2003/2004) include this <i>symbolus</i> among the Plautine letters. However, Barsby (1986), 121 does note the resemblance of this scenario to the epistolary one in the <i>Pseudolus</i> (Phoenicium spells out the situation in her letter to Calidorus (vv.55-58): <i>ea caussa miles hic reliquit symbolum / expressam in cera ex anulo suam imaginem, / ut qui huc adferret eius similem symbolum / cum eo simul me mitteret</i>.), and Skafte Jensen (1997), 323 observes: “A remnant of an older system [of letters] exists in the <i>symbolus</i> which Mnesilochus has carried to Ephesus to demonstrate his identity towards his father’s guest-friend (v.263); it may also, however, be understood as a signet used to seal a letter, the kind that seems to be suggested by the <i>anulus</i> mentioned in vv.327-330”.
\footnote{Such is the fictional epistle between Mnesilochus and Theotimus invented by Chrysalus; cf. p.68, infra.}}

They are as follows: wishing to collect a loan owed to him by an Ephesian man named Archidemides, Nicobulus sent his son Mnesilochus to Ephesus as his messenger. Thus the <i>adulescens</i> departed Athens in possession of a <i>symbolus</i> identifying him as the rightful deputy of Nicobulus’ instructions, and the authorized recipient of the gold in question. Although the token has not been categorized as one of the <i>Bacchides’</i> epistles by previous critics,\footnote{This is the opinion of Del Corno (1973), 82 and Barsby (1986), 121, who notes: ‘The <i>symbolus</i> (both word and practice are Greek) was a token of identification, originally a pair of identical or matching objects held by two parties so that each could recognize the agent of the other’. On such <i>sýmbolɔs</i>, cf. Steiner (1994), 30-32.} it seems to me that this scenario is, in fact, a quasi-epistolary one: Mnesilochus delivers his father’s orders using the <i>symbolus</i> to authenticate his message. Whether the <i>symbolus</i> is the impression of a signet ring left by the lender on some document,\footnote{This is the opinion of Del Corno (1973), 82 and Barsby (1986), 121, who notes: ‘The <i>symbolus</i> (both word and practice are Greek) was a token of identification, originally a pair of identical or matching objects held by two parties so that each could recognize the agent of the other’. On such <i>sýmbolɔs</i>, cf. Steiner (1994), 30-32.} or a matching set of objects,\footnote{This is the opinion of Del Corno (1973), 82 and Barsby (1986), 121, who notes: ‘The <i>symbolus</i> (both word and practice are Greek) was a token of identification, originally a pair of identical or matching objects held by two parties so that each could recognize the agent of the other’. On such <i>sýmbolɔs</i>, cf. Steiner (1994), 30-32.} it functions like a letter. The token ‘says’: “He in possession of this is the legitimate...
legate of Nicobulus. Pay back your debt!” The same kind of message is borne by Harpax in the Pseudolus: Polymachaeoplagrides sends the courier with an epistle\(^{188}\) (subsequently stolen by the play’s eponymous hero) confirming him as the authorized recipient of the girl Phoenicum from the pimp Ballio.

Within the context of this initial epistolary situation, a second letter comes into play when the courier of Nicobulus’ message turns into an author. Upon meeting and falling in love with Bacchis, Mnesilochus writes a letter to Pistoclerus instructing his friend to locate the meretrix and secure her until his return to Athens. An epistle in the true sense of the term,\(^{189}\) this missive contains mandata (v.196), directives transmitted by written word. Mnesilochus cannot pursue the girl in person because of his commitment to execute orders of his own, but a travelling text can. So the adulescens attempts to secure Bacchis’ affections via his epistolary presence - his παρουσία. One might even say that this missive is akin to a love letter, for Mnesilochus’ epistle acts as an intermediary of seduction,\(^{190}\) though admittedly the type of seduction one employs with a girlfriend engaged by wage; that is, the adulescens attempts to secure the meretrix’s affections by sending a missive declaring his intent to become her employer. Mnesilochus appoints Pistoclerus, the addressee, to mediate the transaction in his absence.

This epistolary situation between the adulescentes is, in fact, generated by what is, in my view, the Bacchides’ first quasi-letter: had Mnesilochus never left Athens bearing the symbolus to collect his father’s debt, he would not have had to enlist the aid of Pistoclerus in his absence (in fact, he might not have ever even encountered Bacchis). What is more, these two missives in the background of the

\(^{188}\) This symbolus is explicitly called a ‘letter’; cf. Ps. vv.647, 690, 715.

\(^{189}\) Cf. my discussion of the origin of the word ἐπιστολή on p8, supra.

\(^{190}\) Altman (1982), 15-42 discusses the letter as a vehicle of seduction in the modern epistolary novel, exploring its ambiguity as a tool of both connection and separation: lovers may use epistles as a sly and romantic means of approach or a callous method of abandonment. She points out the essential ambivalence of love letters, which both evoke the absent author by proxy and emphasize the distance separating the lovers. Mnesilochus’ letter has a similar twofold effect: his inability to woo the object of his desire in person is felt in the replacement of himself through the epistolary medium and the agency of his friend. Accordingly, the lover’s renewed presence at Athens and by Bacchis’ side is stressed upon his arrival: Chrysalus bids Pistoclerus to tell the courtesan that Mnesilochus is now here in the flesh to act upon the love he has already proclaimed in his absence by letter (vv.227-228): tu intus dicito/ Mnesilochum adesse Bacchidi.
text’s action are mirror images of one another: the first letter travels from Athens to Ephesus couriered by Mnesilochus, who is to represent his father at Ephesus, whereas the second epistle is sent back to Athens by the same while he is in Ephesus, asking his friend to act as his own substitute at Athens to get the girl. In this way, the letters are inverted doublets of one another, the first of many such sets inhabiting this text.

II: Epistolary manipulations

When the play begins, Mnesilochus and his entourage have just returned to Athens, a journey that has lasted two years. Chrysalus quickly searches out Pistoclerus for news of Bacchis, praying to Apollo that he will encounter the adulescens before Nicobulus so that he may have the necessary information to formulate an attack on the old man’s money (vv.174-177). The slave’s prayers are swiftly answered: Chrysalus meets Pistoclerus, and learns that he has followed the letter’s instructions (v.200). The youth happily reports that Mnesilochus’ beloved still pines for him, though she is obliged to another; Pistoclerus informs Chrysalus that the meretrix is under contract to a miles named Cleomachus (vv.222-223). The soldier will take her away with him to Elatia on this very day (v. 591) unless he is reimbursed the price he has paid to possess the girl.

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191 Cf. v.389: ex Epheso huc ad Pistoclerum meum sodalem litteras/misi, amicam ut mi inveniret Bacchidem; cf. also v.561.
192 I discuss the Bacchides’ doublets in the final section of this chapter; cf. p.112, infra.
193 This seems like an extraordinarily long trip, but Chrysalus makes a point of telling the audience that it has been two years since he laid eyes on his homeland in his very first words on stage (v.170-171): erilis patria, salve, quam ego biennio,/postquam hinc in Ephesum abivi, conspicio lubens.
194 The text is ambiguous as to the precise sequence of events surrounding Bacchis’ contractual obligation to the soldier and her affair with Mnesilochus, and it is tempting to think that these circumstances were laid out in a lost prologue. We are told by the soldier’s parasite at vv.573-574 that the meretrix had been brought to Athens by Cleomachus from Samos, which must mean that she had already been purchased by him. Evidently, Mnesilochus knew while he was abroad that the girl would be in Athens, since he writes to Pistoclerus instructing him to find her there. This is a detail often confused by critics; for example, cf. Clark (1976), 86. Bacchis must, then, have already been obliged to Cleomachus when Mnesilochus met her or has somehow informed Mnesilochus of the fact in the meanwhile, perhaps by letter. Upon his return to Athens, then, Chrysalus must already be aware that he needs to steal some money to buy the meretrix’s freedom, but he needs to be acquainted with the precise details before launching his attack on Nicobulus’ gold.
Despite having to deal with an impending deadline and a fearsome soldier, the brazen Chrysalus proclaims that he will ‘strategize some stratagem’\(^{195}\) to steal the requisite money for his young master’s love affair. He improvises\(^{196}\) a long and complex story to fool Nicobulus out of his money, cooking up a ruse that is epistolary, though it does not involve forging letters or appropriating real missives for mischievous purposes. Rather, Chrysalus invents a tale that manipulates the truth about the epistolary exchange in the background of the play’s action in order to plot its future course. Part of the *adulescens*’ charge as the bearer of his father’s instructions to Archidemides is to act as courier of the debtor’s response by bringing the repaid *nummi* safely back to Athens. Although in reality Mnesilochus *has* brought back the gold, the clever slave pretends that he has *not*, lying that the young man was blocked from doing so by a wild series of events. This pretence transforms Mnesilochus from faithful courier into every letter-writer’s nightmare, a bad messenger.\(^{197}\)

Chrysalus tells the following story to fool his unsuspecting victim: when Mnesilochus relayed his father’s message, Archidemides allegedly denied both his debt to Nicobulus and the authenticity of the *symbolus* presented, heaping insults on the ‘false’ messenger (vv.259-268). The issue subsequently went to arbitration at the hands of the praetor, which resulted in the debtor reluctantly handing over the 1,200 gold pieces he owed (vv.270-272). But the treacherous Archidemides had not yet given up: when Mnesilochus and his crew were ready to depart, a band of pirates allied with the scorned debtor lay in waiting to ambush their ship. The Athenians only narrowly evaded the attack (vv.279-305). Fearful of being robbed, the group deposited part of the money for safekeeping with Theotimus, the priest of the temple of Diana at Ephesus (vv.306-313). Chrysalus declares to Nicobulus that he does not know how much of the recollected debt Mnesilochus has brought back with

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\(^{195}\) This is Barsby’s excellent translation of Plautus’ *figura etymologica, aliquam machinabor machinam* (v.232).

\(^{196}\) Cf. Slater (1985), 99.

\(^{197}\) On the *topos* of bad messengers, cf. pp.8-9, *supra*. 
him to Athens (vv.316-324), thus allowing the *adulescens* to steal *ad libitum* from his father’s gold.

By this elaborate story, Chrysalus perverts the truth of the letter exchange in which the *Bacchides*’ action originates, fabricating an epistolary disaster. Archidemides is transformed into a treacherous correspondent who denies the veracity of a *symbolus* he knows to be true, and refuses to send back the rightful response. The Ephesian debtor is faked as having invented a forgery, a “fictional *mise-en-abyme*”, as Jenkins notes. Interestingly, this role Chrysalus contrives for Archidemides activates a bilingual pun inherent in his name. As has been observed, Nicobulus makes an etymological quip in reaction to Chrysalus’ tale (vv.283-285):^{200}

> adeon me fuisse fungum ut qui illi crederem,  
> quom mi ipsum nomen eius Archidemides  
> clamaret dempturum esse, si quid crederem?

Was I such a dummy that I trusted that guy, although his very name, Archidemides, proclaimed that he would steal whatever I entrusted to him?

Nicobulus laments his failure to perceive the implication of Archidemides’ *sprechender Name*: although in Greek his name simply means “son of the ruler of the people”,^{201} the *senex* connects it to the Latin verb *demo*, “to take away or subtract from”,^{202} which foretells the debtor’s ‘treacherous’ nature (unlike the cunningly invented name Theotimus, which suggests that he will honour his commitment). In fact, Archidemides is no regular swinder, but an arch-thief! This false Latin derivation is triggered by the scenario which the *servus callidus* has created: had Archidemides never tried to ‘steal’ from Nicobulus, this meaning of his name would never have occurred to the old man. What is more, the word play is Plautus’ own:

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^{199} Jenkins (2005), 383.  
^{201} Barsby (1986), 123.  
^{202} The TLL defines *demo* as synonymous with verbs which signify subtraction or theft, like *detraho, auferro* and *tollo*. 
the pun on a Latin verb does not work in Greek, and thus cannot have stood in the
ΔΙΤΕ ἔξαπατῶν.203

Because of Archidemides’ ‘treachery’, Nicobulus must now travel to Ephesus himself to obtain the balance of his money, as Chrysalus tells him at vv.325-326: nunc tibimet illuc navi capiundumst iter,/ut illud reportes aurum ab Theotimo domum ("Now it’s up to you to take up a journey there by ship,/so that you might bring back home that gold from Theotimus").204 In order to do so, the senex must bear the sign allegedly established between his son and Theotimus, Mnesilochus’ ring (vv.327-330):

CH: anulum gnati tui
facito ut memineris ferre. Ni: quid opust anulo?
CH: quia id signumst cum Theotimo, qui eum illi adferet, ei aurum ut reddat.

CH: See to it that you remember
to bring your son’s ring. Ni: What need is there of a ring?
CH: Because that’s the sign with Theotimus, so that he might
give back the gold to him who brings that [ring] to him.

Thus Chrysalus weaves yet another quasi-letter into his epistolary fiction, inventing this one out of thin air. On the pretext that the veracity of Nicobulus’ message and symbolus has been denied, the slave fabricates an inverted doublet of the real scenario inside the context of his lie. Just as Mnesilochus bore Nicobulus’ symbolus to collect the debt at Ephesus, now, in Chrysalus’ fib, Nicobulus is to become the

203 Barsby (1986), 123 thinks that the name ‘Archidemides’ is from Menander, rejecting the possibility that Plautus has invented it himself to produce the pun. It is demonstrable that Plautus has kept another name from Menander in this part of the play, Theotimus (v.306); as Barsby (p.124) observes, the same name appears in the ΔΙΤΕ ἔξαπατῶν in frag.55 when Sostratos reveals Syros’ intrigue to his father. Without new evidence of Menander’s text, however, it is impossible to tell whether Barsby is right about Archidemides. But the Latin pun here suggests some kind of play with the original to me (cf. e.g. pp.57-58, supra), and I wonder, in fact, if Nicobulus’ words might be hinting at a pun from the ΔΙΤΕ ἔξαπατῶν. That is, Archidemides’ name could be connected to the Greek verb δῆμευω, “to seize as public property” or “confiscate”, an idea I owe to Regina Höschele. If this were the case, Plautus would have incorporated Menander’s play on words into his own text by translating it into Latin, and alluded to this detail when he juxtaposes the “public” preservation of the money in Diana’s temple to holding it “privatim”. This kind of bilingual play with the model text is an attractive suggestion, but it remains purely speculative without more of the ΔΙΤΕ ἔξαπατῶν for support.
204 Barsby (1986), 124-125 observes: “This is a brilliant but desperate suggestion, typical of the Plautine tricky slave, which will keep the old man out of the way for the moment but cause even more trouble when he returns”. On the ship imagery in the scene and elsewhere throughout the play, cf. Clark (1976), 90-91.
courier of his son’s *signum* with Theotimus to finally get back his gold. Here is an illustration of this complex situation:

**REAL SCENARIO:**
- Nicobulus *correspondent*
- Mnesilochus *courier*
- *symbolu* Athens → Ephesus

**INVENTED SCENARIO**
- Mnesilochus *correspondent*
- Nicobulus *courier*
- *signum* Athens → Ephesus

The inversion is even reflected in the language used for the epistolary document, for the Greek of Nicobulus’ *symbolu* is turned into a Latin *signum* established between Mnesilochus and Theotimus.\(^{205}\) In the process of all this switching, Mnesilochus turns into the author and Nicobulus the messenger, a swap in epistolary roles that mimics on a fictional level the real reversal that occurred in the text’s *Vorgeschichte* when Mnesilochus the courier became an author, placing it on its head: Chrysalus transforms the author Nicobulus into a messenger of his son’s “letter”.

These elaborate epistolary switches and reversals ultimately serve to distort the details of the letter exchanges in the background of the text, all in the name of deception. In essence, Chrysalus constructs a fiction in which Nicobulus’ use of his epistolary presence has failed so that Mnesilochus’ own pursuit to employ παρουσία may succeed. That is, the *adulescens’* epistolary objective to get the girl can triumph if he is able to steal the money necessary for her freedom. The slave tries to bring this about by transforming Nicobulus’ successful use of his epistolary παρουσία to get his money from the debtor into a flop, turning Mnesilochus into a deceptive messenger through manipulation of the truth.

### III: ‘Kinetic’ failings

Thus does the clever slave Chrysalus lay the groundwork to resolve the problem at the core of the plot, the ownership of Bacchis. His wondrously intricate epistolary story, however, will be subverted by Mnesilochus due to a mistake: Lydus,

\(^{205}\) Barsby (1986), 125 notes, “The implied arrangement is similar to that with Archidemides, though this time the terminology (*anulus…signum*) is Latin.”
Pistoclerus’ tutor, tells Mnesilochus that his pupil has taken up with a courtesan named Bacchis (vv.472-473). Since the *adulescens* does not know that his beloved has a namesake sister, he assumes that Pistoclerus has betrayed him by taking up with his own girl.206 Enraged, Mnesilochus declares his intent to give every stolen penny back to his father so that Bacchis will be left to beg from a pauper (v.518).207 He subsequently comes clean to Nicobulus, revealing the truth and returning the money collected at Ephesus, thus dashing all of Chrysalus’ scheming efforts. In Slater’s words, “...and in a stroke the whole plot so far is undone.”208

This misunderstanding occurs because Mnesilochus is not *au courant*;209 he is on the wrong side of a one-way letter exchange that privileges the recipient over the author. The youth cannot know that there is another courtesan named Bacchis, for although there are two sisters, there is but one letter. The text implies, however, that Pistoclerus has sent a reply to his friend. At v.526 Pistoclerus comes onstage, speaking these lines back into the house of the sisters (vv.526-529):

*rebus alis antevortar, Bacchis, quae mandas mihi:*
*Mnesilochum ut requiram atque ut eum mecum ad te adducam simul.*
*nam illud animus meu miratur, si a me tetigit nuntius.*
*quid remoretur. Ibo ut visam huc ad eum, si forte est domi.*

Bacchis, before all other affairs I’ve put your orders to me -

206 It is ironic that Mnesilochus should suspect his friend Pistoclerus whose *sprechender Name* (original to Plautus) ‘says’ that he has, in fact, remained faithful, πιστός - something Mnesilochus should ‘remember’ especially since the first part of his name might be derived from μνήμη – ‘memory’! Further, as Peter Bing has suggested to me, it is not, perhaps, surprising that someone named ‘Mnesilochus’ would suspect that he has been ‘ambushed’ by his friend, for his name is built, in part on λόξος – ‘to lie in wait’. Owens (1994), 390 connects Pistoclerus’ name with the theme of fides, which he argues has been incorporated into the Latin text by Plautus in his adaptation of Menander: “Built on the Greek pistis, this name echoes in Greek the new Roman theme and underscores Pistoclerus’ true innocence”. This recalls the play with the falsely derived significance of Archidemides’ name at vv.283-285, which Nicobulus blames himself for not perceiving. Whereas Pistoclerus’ name ‘says’ he has not committed the crime of which he is accused, Archidemides’ name ‘speaks,’ by false etymology, of his allegedly treacherous nature.

207 This central episode of the *Bacchides* (vv.494-562) featuring the confrontation between the two *adulescentes* corresponds to the sections of the Δις, ἐξαπατῶν deciphered from the Oxyrhynchus papyrus discovered in the mid-20th century.

208 Slater (1985), 101. He notes, moreover, that “Mnesilochus has not the power to create his own plot, to be his own poet, but he has the negative power to undo the plot of Chrysalus”. Compare the plot-crashing abilities of Charmides in the *Trinummus*; cf. pp.44-45, supra.

209 Evidently, Chrysalus and Mnesilochus do not cross paths after the slave meets Pistoclerus and fools Nicobulus, and so the *adulescens* is left completely in the dark about the fate of his girlfriend, the fidelity of Pistoclerus and the fact that there are two Bacchis sisters. Significantly, Chrysalus does not know this detail either; cf. v.719-720.
that I search out Mnesilochus and that I lead him with me to you. But I really wonder what is keeping him, if the message from me has reached him. I’ll go look him up in the house here, if by chance he’s at home.

Pistoclerus tells the audience that he has sent word to Mnesilochus, presumably to inform him about the status quo and give him the very information about the namesake courtesans which would clarify the equivocation. Whether the youth refers to the envoy he has dispatched or the message itself is unclear, for nuntius can mean both, and as the OLD notes, it is often difficult to distinguish between these meanings. However, both senses imply oral communication, for which reason it appears unlikely that Pistoclerus’ message is another text. Nevertheless, yet again the scenario strongly resembles an epistolary one, for the adulescens sends an intermediary to relay news to Mnesilochus about Bacchis, and thus responds, one might say, to the missive his friend had sent him about the same girl. That is, Pistoclerus answers Mnesilochus’ written message with an oral one, another set of inverted doublets in this play. In fact, these two instances of communication are also opposites in their respective fortunes: whereas Mnesilochus’ letter arrives at Athens from abroad, overcoming all of the perils associated with a travelling text to successfully reach its addressee and pass on its instructions, Pistoclerus’ message, which is to be delivered just around the corner, has been, ironically, “lost in the mail”. The very important information about two Bacchises, then, does not reach Mnesilochus in time.

So the conversation by proxy between the two young men founders completely, breaking down when the addressee turns author and attempts to send back his response. Interestingly, however, this quasi-epistolary dialogue is kinetic in virtue of its failure, for Mnesilochus’ misunderstanding and hasty admission forces Chrysalus to start again da capo, to cook up another ruse and another plot for this play. In fact, one might say that just as Chrysalus manipulates the epistolary exchanges in his first attempted heist, Plautus complicates that between the adulescentes for his comic ends, both generating deception and, thereby, comedy, through their epistolary machinations.

\[210\] OLD s.v.1 and 2.
BACCHIDES: Take two
I: cape stilum

The first part of the *Bacchides*, then, is replete with messages, epistles and epistle-like tokens. These instances of communication by proxy act as kinetic agents of the plot’s inception, both forming the basis of Chrysalus’ initial scheme, and bringing about its demise. Ironically, the clever slave will rectify the damage done to his first plan through *yet more* epistolary scheming, looking to letters to resuscitate the play and remount his attack.211 He reenters the text at v.640 after a long absence,212 triumphantly proclaiming his cunning powers and misdeeds, which far outdo those of his predecessors.213 Like Mnesilochus before him, Chrysalus is now in the dark: he has no idea that his scheme has, in fact, been ruined, which imbues his celebratory song with irony for the spectators who have just witnessed its undoing. The despondent Mnesilochus soon informs the servus of the new status quo, and begs him to try his hand at deceiving the old man again (v.680-694). Although just caught red-handed in a lie (v.696), the servus callidus rises to the occasion and swiftly embarks upon another round of tricks to make his second blitz on Nicobulus’ gold. But it will not be easy: thanks to Mnesilochus’ rash confession, Nicobulus is now on the qui vive. The *adulescens* reports that the old man would not believe anything Chrysalus says, even if it were the truth (vv.699-701):

CH: *quid dixit? MN: si tu illum solem sibi solem esse diceres
se illum lunam credere esse et noctem qui nunc est dies.*

CH: What did he say? MN: That if you were to tell him that the sun is the sun,
he would think that it’s the moon, and that it’s night when it’s now day.

As Barsby observes, this statement presents the clever slave with a challenge he cannot refuse.214 Struck with his plan, Chrysalus declares that he will use Nicobulus’

211 Although the clumsy *adulescentes* have shown themselves to be incapable of navigating the pitfalls of this medium, Chrysalus is cunning enough to employ written communication for his deceptive end. As Jenkins (2005), 383 observes, “...the manipulation of verbal and written signs is the province of the crafty slave”.

212 The last time Chrysalus was onstage was v.367. Barsby (1986), 151 comments: “There is no indication from which stage entrance Chrysalus appears, nor does Plautus find it necessary to suggest what he has been doing since he reported the original deception to Mnesilochus”.

213 This speech forms the cornerstone of my discussion of the relationship between the *Bacchides* and the Δικ. ζεκαστων; cf. pp.100-113, *infra.*

suspicions against him to his own advantage. If the senex believes so ardently that he is a cheating liar, so be it (v.701): *emungam hercle hominem probe hodie, ne id nequiquam dixerit* (“By Hercules, I’ll thoroughly cheat that man today, lest he says that in vain”). He plots a crafty plan to fit these circumstances, a subtle psychological assault, which will first reel the senex in with the truth,\textsuperscript{215} then coax him with lies.

Chrysalus’ scheming begins with writing. He composes an epistle whose contents are the opposite of what the audience might expect, and, as it turns out, exactly what the situation calls for: the letter to Nicobulus warns the old man that Chrysalus is presently mounting an attack on his gold (vv.740-743).\textsuperscript{216} That is, the document reports what the tricky slave is presently contriving to do,\textsuperscript{217} and so tells the truth - precisely what the old man declared he would never accept if it came from Chrysalus. In fact, the servus will make the suspicious senex eat his words by feeding him a truth he has already swallowed, *viz.* that Chrysalus is a double-crossing delinquent. Of course, Nicobulus cannot know that this information comes, ultimately, from the slave himself. To disguise his involvement, the letter is inscribed and ‘sent’ by the old man’s tattletale son, a cleverly subtle strategy which plays into Nicobulus’ distrust of Chrysalus on the one hand, and his trust in Mnesilochus on the other: based upon the adulescens’ recent confession and the servus’ misdeed, Nicobulus will certainly believe the tidings borne by “Mnesilochus”’ epistle.

For this reason, Chrysalus must be careful to preserve every semblance of the letter’s veracity. Although the text is the slave’s own, Mnesilochus is commandeered

\textsuperscript{215} Primmer (1984), 52 observes that Chrysalus’ approach consists of telling the truth, a strategy he attributes to Menander. In Primmer’s view, however, the scheme in the *Bacchides* does not adhere to the consistent principle of its Greek model.

\textsuperscript{216} Interestingly, these tidings duplicate the foregoing action in the play, which led to this epistolary plan, namely the adulescens’ confession of the first ruse to his father. This duplication further recalls that in Chrysalus’ first scheme, in which the slave invents an inverted doublet of the epistolary exchange between Nicobulus and Archidemides; cf. pp.68-69, supra.

\textsuperscript{217} On the *cavere topos*, to be found also in the *Pseudolus*, cf. Petrone (1983), 66-67 and Sharrock (2009), 117 n.4, 189-190.
to act as his scribe, writing the missive in his own hand so that Nicobulus will recognize its “authenticity”, as Chrysalus explains (vv.729-730):

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    nam propterea <te> volo
    scribere ut pater cognoscat litteras quando legat.
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now, I want you to write for this reason, so that your father will recognize the letters when he reads them.

Moreover, the letter is fastened with Mnesilochus’ personal seal (v.748), and is delivered by the wily slave, the very party it convicts of guilt, which further ensures that Nicobulus gets no whiff of the renewed treachery against him. Thus, Chrysalus shows himself to be well versed in the conventions of letter writing, paying due attention to the customary epistolary greeting, penmanship, seal, and delivery to fashion the perfect document for his deception. The epistle is guaranteed to succeed in its ironically duplicitous purpose of persuading Nicobulus of the truth because it is exactly what it purports to be: as opposed to the faked letters in other plays, which the characters are anxious to make appear genuine, this missive is authentic, its text actually inscribed by Mnesilochus himself.

The dictation scene in which this mischievous epistle comes into being is unique amongst Plautus’ letter plays, and its explicit portrayal of writing onstage

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218 Slater (1985), 108 notes, “The hands are the hands of Mnesilochus, but the voice is the voice of Chrysalus”; cf. also Jenkins (2005), 385.

219 When the slave delivers the document to Nicobulus, he draws the old man’s attention to Mnesilochus’ personal seal (cf. vv.748, 789). The same routine is repeated when Chrysalus delivers the second epistle later in the text (cf. 984). Interestingly, this inverts the scene in the Trinummus, where Callicles worries that Lesbonicus will recognize the alien seal on the forged letters allegedly from his father; cf. pp.32-33, supra.

220 In fact, Chrysalus is also showing himself to be conversant with the literary tradition, for he is recreating here the ‘ur-scene’ of Greek epistolography in the Iliad, which features Bellerophon bearing the message of his own damnation. Chrysalus, in fact, explicitly compares himself to Bellerophon at vv.810-811, a passage I discuss in detail at pp.83-85, infra.

221 Cf. Skafte Jensen (1997), 323: “Each writer is characterized by an individual style; thus it is part of the trick against the old master that his son must write the message in his own hand, since the father will recognize his son’s personal handwriting”.

222 Slater (1985), 107-108 observes, “Chrysalus dictates a letter onstage – which is not a forgery. It purports to be from Mnesilochus to his father, and he does physically inscribe the letter”. Jenkins (2005) has characterized Chrysalus’ epistolary mischief as ‘metaforgery’. He argues that “…Chrysalus’ letter will defy correct reading because it is not really Chrysalus’ – or Mnesilochus’. A strange brew of truth and fiction, the letter will achieve its aim by blurring the line between authenticity and deception” (p.385).

is rich with metatheatrical imagery. The slave directs his young master to take up the stylus, and convert his words into writing (vv.728-729):

CH: *caepe stilum propere et tabellas tu has tibi.* MN: *quod postea?*  
CH: *quod iubebo scribito istic.*

CH: Quickly, you - grab the stylus and these writing tablets. MN: What then?  
CH: Write on it what I tell you.

The audience watches while Chrysalus conceives of the text and Mnesilochus commits it to the *tabellae* word for word, duly imprinting the wax according to the slave’s commands (v.733): *iam imperatum in cera inest* (“Your orders are now upon the wax”). Chrysalus’ complete control over the scenario and the letter’s text is stressed throughout the dictation scene by the prevalence of imperatives and verbs of ordering such as *iubere* (vv. 727, 729) and *imperare* (vv.726, 733), subtly alluding, perhaps, to the origin of the noun *epistula* from the Greek ἐπιστολή, “command”.224 In a typical instance of role reversal, Mnesilochus completely submits himself to Chrysalus’ demands, becoming, in the words of Jenkins, the *servus* “human stylus”.225 In fact, the *adulescens* is literally transformed into an *instrumentum*, to use Varro’s classification of the slave,226 though he is, interestingly, an *instrumentum mutum*: Mnesilochus forfeits his voice in deference to that of his *servus imperator*, who orders the youth to write to his father as follows (vv.731, 734-736, 739-744):

MN: *quid scribam?* CH: *salutem tuo patri verbis tuis [...]*  
MN: *'Mnesilochus salutem dicit suu patri.' CH: *adscribo hoc cito:* 'Chrysalus mihi usque quaque loquitur nec recte, pater, quia tibi aurum reddidi et quia non te defraudauerim' [...]  
CH: *'nunc, pater mi, proin tu ab eo ut caveas tibi: sycophantias componit, aurum ut aps ted auferat; et profecto se ablaturum dixit.' plane adscribito.

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224 Cf. p.8, *infra*. Skafte Jensen (1997), 323 likewise notes the reoccurrence of these words in this scene, which she connects to the power relations implicit in the act of dictation; cf. n.225, *infra.*  
225 Jenkins (2005), 385. In his work on Cicero’s correspondence, McCutcheon (2013) discusses what he calls the “economy of letters”, arguing that republican epistolography was intimately tied to social status amongst the Roman aristocracy. Only the most important missives were penned *sua manu* by Roman *nobiles*; otherwise the menial task of inscribing a letter was delegated to *operarii*; cf. especially pp.93-101. In this light, the constellation of author and scribe in this scene of the *Bacchides* is especially striking as an overt reversal of normal social roles. Skafte Jensen (1997), 323 observes, “[a]nd the relations between master and slave are turned upside down...in the ancient world, writing and reading aloud used to be slave’s labour”.  
226 Varro’s classification of a farmer’s equipment in his *De Re Rustica* (1.17.1) into three types of *instrumenta, vocale* (slaves), *semi-vocale* (animals) and *mutum* (tools such as a plough) may be one of the most misconstrued quotes from antiquity; cf. Carlsen (1995),18.
MN: *dic modo.* CH: ‘*atque id pollicetur se daturum aurum mihi quod dem scortis quodque in lustris comedim, congraecem, pater. sed, pater, vide ne tibi hodie verba det: quaeso cave.*’

MN: What shall I write? CH: Greet your father in your words...  
MN: ‘Mnesilochus greets his father.’ CH: Now write this, quickly:  
‘Chrysalus thoroughly reprimanded me, father, and not rightfully either, because I gave the gold back to you and because I didn’t deceive you...’  
CH: ‘Now, my father, for this reason be on your guard from him:  
He’s composing a trick to steal the gold from you;  
and he said that he’ll certainly take it away.’ Write clearly.  
MN: Ok, keep talking. CH: ‘And moreover, he promises that he’ll give me the gold,  
so that I might give it to harlots, squander it in brothels, live it up like a Greek,  
father.  
But, father, see to it that he doesn’t pull the wool over your eyes today.  
Please, watch out.’

Although Chrysalus effectively masks his voice by having Mnesilochus compose the letter *manu sua*, the clever document is, in fact, replete with puns alluding to the slave’s mischief. Nicobulus will understand *sycophantias componere* as referring to the ruse Chrysalus is at this moment preparing, but the phrase might also hint at the slave’s composition of the duplicitous epistle: *componere’s* primary meaning is “to write something up”, producing a *double entendre* which reveals the letter’s true author. What is more, this play on *componere* points to the equation between writing and scheming inherent in such an epistolary ploy, for by drafting the tricky text destined to fool Nicobulus, Chrysalus is simultaneously concocting his deception to steal the gold. Precisely as the missive says, the slave really is “composing” some tricks to rob the *senex* of his gold. Likewise, *verba dare* is a classic Plautine idiom for deception, though in this case the phrase may again be read as a subtle quip on dictation: Chrysalus *literally* gives Mnesilochus words to inscribe on the *tabellae* in order to fool the old man. One might see yet another joke in the

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227 Both Del Corno (1973), 131 and Barsby (1986), 155 argue that *verbis tuis* in v.731 means ‘in your own name’ *not* ‘in your own words’, as Jenkins (2005), 385 understands it. I wonder, however, if the expression is not deliberately ambivalent. On the one hand, the greeting Mnesilochus comes up with is the customary epistolary salutation, which Chrysalus need not dictate. On the other hand, *verbis tuis* might be yet another joke on dictation: Chrysalus tells Mnesilochus to write *verba tua*, but is, in fact, dictating *verba sua*!  
228 Barsby (1986), 156 notes that the Latin idiom is common, and not confined to Plautus or the genre of comedy.
phrase *et profecto se ablaturum dicit*, for the slave does *say* that he will steal the gold straight away; in fact, he *says* this very phrase to Mnesilochus as he dictates the text! The audience gets a laugh out of these sly jokes in the knowledge that the epistolary addressee-*cum-*comic victim will be utterly fooled, though handed a letter that “spells out” the whole truth.

In fact, not even the young man who has written out the epistle is capable of understanding the true meaning of Chrysalus’ text. Upon its completion, Mnesilochus asks his slave how a letter that tells Nicobulus the *truth* and instructs him to keep the trickster under guard will help in getting hold of the requisite gold (vv.749-750):

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opsecro, quid istis ad istunc usust conscriptis modum,  
ut tibi ne quid credat atque ut vincum te adservet domi?
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Please, what’s the use of this letter written thus, so that he entrusts nothing to you and guards you, tied up, at home?

According to Jenkins, this situation comically plays upon the usual circumstances of communication by letter, which ancients viewed as fraught with potential misunderstanding because of the author’s separation from his message. Jenkins argues that in this case, the “author” does not comprehend his “own” text, and so “...the interpretive gap which normally separates author from reader here engulfs even the author.” 229 Outside the fictive authorial premise of the ruse, however, the situation is, in fact, reversed. Chrysalus, the letter’s *real* author, is the only one to understand the *real* significance of its contents, for the wily *servus* refuses to provide hermeneutic insight into the text to anyone (including the play’s external spectators), keeping the details of the epistolary ruse entirely to himself.230 What is more, Chrysalus determines precisely how his letter will be *mis*understood by the addressee, deftly creating a document whose clever *double entendres* reveal its


230 Although the spectators were ‘in’ on the slave’s first plan, Chrysalus now keeps the details of his deception from us as well; cf. Del Corno (1973), 130 and Barsby (1986), 151. Lefèvre (2011), 99 thinks that Chrysalus’ refusal to reveal his plans is part and parcel of Plautus’ glorification of the slave character. It is interesting that the state of knowledge with which the scene began is thus inverted: Chrysalus, who entered so comically oblivious to the undoing of his first scheme, now keeps the dramatic omniscience to himself. We are all at the slave’s mercy for the balance of the performance.
origins, though Nicobulus will be incapable of perceiving them. Paradoxically, then, Chrysalus’ missive does fall victim to the “interpretive gulf” that exists between epistolary author and addressee, though this is all part of his brilliant plan. In an ironic twist on the hazards of interpretation implicit in this medium of communication, the slave uses the ‘lability’ of written signs to his duplicitous advantage, counting on Nicobulus’ misapprehension for the success of his ploy.

Thus Chrysalus retains complete command over his new stratagem, masterfully planning the details of his textual trick “from A-Z” to redo what Mnesilochus has undone. This measure of control in the play originates in, and is derived from, text, for the slave character generates the action and steers the plot of Bacchides by means of his epistolary deceit. In fact, as Slater has perceived, the dictation scene in which the powerful missive comes into being is a compelling representation of Chrysalus’ internal plotting abilities characteristic of the Plautine slave-hero:

...Chrysalus changes from an improvisatory playwright (a player first among equals) to a literary one. Ancient poets usually dictated. Chrysalus is dictating a play here: directly, by writing a speech for Mnesilochus, and indirectly, as the subsequent course of the play is shaped by the letter.

This onstage writing serves, in turn, to mirror the compositional powers of the external playwright, Plautus, through those of the internal playwright, Chrysalus, whose writing functions as a mise-en-abyme of his own creative genesis. The resulting letter, then, may be said to represent the script for the “play-within-the-play” which Chrysalus will mount to fool the senex, as it is inscribed with the plot to come. In fact, not only does the epistle contain Mnesilochus’ lines, as Slater points out, but it also scripts a role for Nicobulus: the old man will follow the letter’s instructions and so obediently play his part in Chrysalus’ production, albeit unknowingly.

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231 As I discuss below (pp.79-81) Chrysalus also presides over the letter’s delivery to ensure optimal conditions of reception.
But there is even more to unpack from this complex epistolary scenario. Jenkins has observed that here Plautus “…neatly juxtaposes the oral and the written in alternating responses (741-742 “plane adscribito”/ “dic modo” and 745 “loquere porro” “adscribide dum etiam”), a structure that finds its greatest compression in Mnesilochus’ request “loquere quid scribam modo” (745).” One might say, then, that the activity of dictation, the means of turning Chrysalus’ voice into Mnesilochus’ letters, is signaled in, and reflected by, the words of the text itself. What is more, dictation is a process that reverses the transformation in medium occurring in performance, since scripted theatre necessarily involves the movement from written to spoken word when a dramatic text is acted out onstage. Here in the Bacchides, the comedy’s words are reinscribed into text as they are performed in the dictation scene, moving back from speech into their original medium of text when inscribed on the tabellae. This figurative scenario, then, is a two-way street of sorts, at once recreating the comedy’s inception in text and inverting the transformation in medium that happens when a scripted text is realized in performance.

II: Bait and switch

After the epistle has been composed, Chrysalus swiftly dismisses the two adulescentes. They are to do their comic officium (feast and make love to the meretrices), while the slave does his by acting out the scheme that has been just now committed to the tablets (vv.754-760). Although the sight of Mnesilochus and Pistoclerus lying with the Bacchis sisters will, in fact, constitute a pivotal scene in the performance to come, like Nicobulus, the bumbling youths are really just puppets in the clever slave’s show. Clueless about the details of the internal plot, the hapless characters are coached into their roles by Chrysalus while he himself plays the lead, donning the mask of messenger to deliver “Mnesilochus” missive (the “smoking gun”) himself. In this way, the clever slave is a twofold jack-of-all-trades, for he is at once both dramatist and actor of the Bacchides’ “play-within-the-

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234 Jenkins (2005), 385.
235 Cf. pp.86-87, infra.
236 On the messenger qua stock role in comedy, cf. n.111, supra.
237 Cf. p.239, infra.
play”, and author and courier of the duplicitous missive. In fact, these confluences of role are parallel, related by virtue of the figurative equivalence between the letter and the theatrical script. That is, Chrysalus’ epistolary composition functions, as I have argued, as an image of playwriting, since the resulting document drives forward the plot and realizes the internal production through its kinetic force. By acting out the role of messenger, Chrysalus simultaneously delivers the letter and stages the comedy’s internal production, setting his deception in motion by unleashing a text into the fray.

As he is about to debut his performance by handing over to his elder master a “bundle of epistolary deceit”, as Jenkins puts it, Chrysalus reflects aloud upon his ploy and its unorthodox method of deception (vv.763-765):

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{sed nunc truculento mi atque saevo usus senest;} \\
&\text{nam non conducit huic sycophantiae} \\
&\text{senem tranquillum <mi> esse ubi me aspexerit.}
\end{align*}
\]

But now it’s useful for the old man to be fierce and furious at me; for it doesn’t suit this ploy for the old man to be calm when he catches sight of me.

The irony of the present scenario is marked. A scheming servus would usually want his senex victim to be relaxed and clueless when on the attack, such as was the case in Chrysalus’ first attempt on the gold. His second ruse, however, inverts this comic rule in its sophisticated psychological approach, which requires Nicobulus to be angry, signaled by the adversative phrase sed nunc. In fact, by capitalizing upon the old man’s rage, this exceptional intrigue uses the stock conventions of the genre to its advantage, as Chrysalus implies in his wry proclamation upon the old man’s grumbling entrance onstage (vv.772-773):

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{salvos sum, iratus est senex. nunc est mihi} \\
&\text{adeundi ad hominem tempus.}
\end{align*}
\]

I’m safe! The old guy is angry. Now’s the time for me to approach the man.

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238 Interestingly, Chrysalus’ double role goes against Slater’s own definition of the ‘literary playwright’, who, after having conceived of the “play-within-the-play”, works through other actors alone (pp.12-13).

239 Jenkins (2005), 386 notes that although a letter normally serves to substitute for its absent composer, in this case, “…the letter’s author is identical to the messenger”.

240 Jenkins (2005), 385.
Slater has elucidated the joke here, which alludes to a familiar Roman proverb originating in the world of theatre. He has also perceived the self-consciousness implicit in the wily slave’s words, observing that, “...the fact that the *senex* is *iratus* is a theatrical given: it is in his mask”. Thus Chrysalus slyly acknowledges the cleverness of his ruse, which ensures its own success by playing to Nicobulus’ natural comic state, *iratus*, to rob him of his gold, much as his duplicitous epistle will count upon the addressee’s misunderstanding to ensure “correct” reading. Incidentally, Chrysalus’ comment also demonstrates his sensitivity to the importance of time in epistolary consignment, for the *servus* realizes that the recipient’s state of mind at the moment of delivery will affect a missive’s reading.

Much like a conversation *viva voce*, an epistolary dialogue should take place when the addressee is of a suitable disposition to receive the news contained beneath the seal. In this case, the requisite mood is the naturally furious one of Nicobulus’ mask; the *senex iratus* is *always* ready for the letter Chrysalus has to deliver.

Thus Nicobulus cannot but fall for this well-laid trap, which uses the innate characteristics of his mask to fool him. After having read the letter offstage, the *senex* returns triumphantly berating the *servus*, thoroughly convinced of the truth it reports (vv.803-806):

NI: *eho tu, † loquitatus ne gnato meo †
*male per sermonem, quia mi id aurum reddidit,
et te dixisti id aurum ablaturum tamen

---

241 Cf. Slater (1985), 109. Chrysalus plays upon a Roman proverb, *salva res est, saltat senex*. The origin of the saying is a theatrical performance at the Apolline games of 211 BC, when the continued dancing of an aged actor despite a threat of war, which had driven all the spectators from the audience, ensured that the ritual of the performance was not interrupted and did not need to be repeated. On the proverb, cf. also Duckworth (1965), 13.

242 Slater (1985), 109 n.22 and 159.

243 Jenkins (2006), 45-46 explores this concept as expressed by Cicero in one of his letters, *ad fam.* 11.16.1, concluding: “...the messenger must gauge the correct time...for an approach; letters that do not arrive at the correct place at the correct time...are in effect read differently by the recipient...Only the *commodum tempus* ensures that the letter will be properly received, and properly read” (p.46). One might compare Plato’s *Phaedrus*, where Socrates meditates upon the necessity of tailoring speech to its specific circumstances and audience; cf. Socrates’ summary of the “art of dialectic” at 277b-277c.

244 Jenkins (2005), 386 notes: “It is here that our reading of Plautus must imagine Nicobulus’ performance as he performs his own act of Plautine reading.”
CH: quis homost qui dicat me dixisse istuc?

NI: Oh you! You’ve been bad-talking my son, because he gave me back the gold, and you said that you were going to steal the gold anyways using your tricks? CH: That’s what I said? NI: Yup. CH: Who is the man who says that I said that?

Nicobulus’ furious accusations play right into Chrysalus’ hands. The addressee has misunderstood the epistle just as the deceptive author intended him to, for he has read the sly double entendres on the missive’s true origins without a clue. All the same, the hapless Nicobulus becomes implicated in the subtle play on the dictation process implicit in the letter’s text, repeatedly using words associated with speech (vv.803-805). He comically accuses Chrysalus of speaking, and the pleonasm in vv.803-804 (loquitatus...sermonem) lays emphasis on the irony. Chrysalus does not miss the opportunity to underline the joke, “incredulously” repeating the old man’s charge and repeating the verb dicere threefold in two lines: “That’s what I said?” What man said that I said such a thing?”. But that is exactly what Chrysalus said, for the text of “Mnesilochus’” missive is the result of the slave’s speech, transferred to the wax through the process of dictation. What is more, although the old man reads the letter offstage, he is repeating its contents almost verbatim, adding another level of comedy to Chrysalus’ ironic questions in vv.805-806. Compare the following lines from this scene with those from the letter’s dictation, words that become inscribed into the missive’s text:

COMPOSITION: 'Chrysalus mihi usque quaque loquitur nec recte, pater, quia tibi aurum reddidi et quia non te defrudauerim...'

READING eho tu, loquitatusne es gnato meo male per sermonem, quia mi id aurum reddidit

In fact, this repetition is implicitly signaled in Nicobulus’ lines, for the verb loqui occurring in the epistle is transformed into the rare frequentative, loquitari,245 when the senex reechoes its text. Indeed, Chrysalus’ words have been said time after time, dictated, written, read and then repeated once more by the old man. In the process, the missive’s contents jump to and fro from word to text, changing back into

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245 Barsby (1986), 160 notes that the uncommon frequentative form loquitari is a feature of colloquial speech.
dialogue from the wax upon the letter’s reception. In this light, “Mnesilochus’”
warning to his father at the end of the epistle gains an extra layer of irony:

\[
\textit{sed, pater, vide ne tibi hodie verba det; quaeso cave.}
\]

Chrysalus has not only successfully tricked Nicobulus, but he has in the process
literally given the *senex* words:246 the old man repeats the text of the missive, thus
following the script composed for him “to the letter”.

As per the epistle’s instructions, the old man constrains the trickster to keep
him from going through with his devious plans, revealing that the *tabellae*
themselves have indicted Chrysalus for his misbehaviour247 (v.808-809):

\[
\textit{nullus homo dicit: hae tabellae te arguont,}
\]
\[
\textit{quas tu attulisti. em hae te vinciri iubent.}
\]

No man says it: these tablets accuse you,248 the very ones you brought: see, these order you to be bound.

Chrysalus responds with a brilliant joke, likening himself to a mythical character
who, similarly, bears the document of his own conviction (vv.810-811):

\[
\textit{aha, Bellerophontam tuo’me fecit filius:}
\]
\[
\textit{egomet tabellas tetuli ut vincirer. sine.}
\]

Ah! Your son has made me a Bellerophon:
I myself brought the tablets so that I might be fettered. So be it.

As Glaucus tells us in his famous exchange with Diomedes at *Iliad* 6.144-211,
Bellerophon was a Corinthian prince who fell foul of Queen Anteia of Argos for
refusing her advances. To get her revenge, the scorned Queen told her husband,
King Proteus, that Bellerophon had raped her. Instead of killing Bellerophon himself,
Proteus sends him to his father-in-law, Iobates of Lycia, with tablets bearing ὅμαται
λυγρά, dreadful symbols, which instruct the old king to put Bellerophon to death.249

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247 Jenkins (2005), 387 notes, “We have here a radical separation of the written from the writer: text
replaces and displaces its originary (sic) voice, and instead argues and barks orders on its own”. I
wonder whether Nicobulus’ words might not be a subtle joke on the mixed-up authorship of the
letter and the origin of the charges against Chrysalus.
248 Compare the yelling tablet in the *Hippolytus* at v.877: θόδος ἔλτος.
249 Rosenmeyer (2001), 39-44 discusses the Bellerophon story and its doublets (Euripides’
*Hippolytus*, for example) in detail, considering the important issue of precisely what sort of
communication the ὅμαται λυγρά imply, and the question of whether a writing system exists in
the world of Homeric epic. The myth is seminal in Rosenmeyer’s exploration of the letter in Greek
As Jenkins has noted, Chrysalus’ invocation of the story presents a humorous reversal, for “…[i]n Homer, Bellerophon bears the symbols from King Proteus without knowing the contents; in Bacchides, our Bellerophon is both Bellerophon and Proteus rolled into one, an unlikely comic collision of messenger and author”. But there is more to Chrysalus’ mythical allusion than Jenkins (or Nicobulus, for that matter) realizes.

In the first place, the contents of the epistles in the two scenarios are opposites, for the letter that Chrysalus delivers contains the truth, whereas the tablets carried by Bellerophon are based on a vicious lie concocted by the vengeful Queen. This forms a neat chiasm with the nature of the two messengers, for in the Bacchides the courier is a cheat, as opposed to the innocent, “true” letter-carrier in the Bellerophon story:

- Bellerophon – innocent, unknowing messenger
- Chrysalus – duplicitous, knowing messenger

False letter
True letter

On the other hand, however, the missives resemble one another in the nature of their origins: the epistle in the Bacchides is penned by Mnesilochus, but its contents come straight from the trickster Chrysalus. Likewise, King Proteus writes Bellerophon’s death sentence based upon the ruse plotted by his wife, Anteia. Although their genders are inverted, in both cases the person who physically inscribes the letter is not, in fact, responsible for the content of the text: behind both

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250 Jenkins (2005), 387.
Proteus and Mnesilochus lurk duplicitous tricksters who are the true epistolary authors.  

Thus, the clever slave’s reference to the Bellerophon myth invokes an interesting combination of similarity and inversion between the two epistolary situations. But it is also, I submit, a joke, for the outcome of the Bellerophon story ironically foretells the outcome of Chrysalus’ “indictment”. After hosting Bellerophon for nine days, Iobates asked to see the document Proteus had sent along with him. Perceiving his son-in-law’s message, Iobates set up a series of challenges for Bellerophon aimed ultimately at killing him. The Corinthian prince subsequently battles the Chimera, the fierce warrior Solymi and the Amazons, and finally, an ambush of Lycia’s bravest men (II.6.179-190). In every instance, Bellerophon was successful, and Iobates, at last, relented, and the myth has a happy ending. Despite the tragically ironic role he is made to play as the courier of his own execution order, Bellerophon is not killed, but triumphs, and is even awarded Iobates’ daughter for his tremendous skill (II.6.191-195). The reference to the myth in the \textit{Bacchides}, I would argue, slyly foreshadows the end result of Chrysalus’ ploy: just like Bellerophon, the slave delivers a tablet to an old man indicting him on a crime. Just like Bellerophon, the slave will masterfully overcome all the obstacles placed in his path to carry the day and, in the end, get the girl!  

Unsurprisingly, Nicobulus does not perceive the implication of Chrysalus’ allusion. Much as he is tricked by a text that spells out the truth, the comic victim fails to understand the \textit{servus’} double talk. Instead, the old man thinks that for the second time now, Mnesilochus’ warnings have put the brakes on his mischief. But by trusting the \textit{adulescens’} epistle, the hapless \textit{senex} has, in fact, been hoodwinked. Thus the bait. Now the switch.  

The first stage of the slave’s plan successfully played into Nicobulus’ constellation of treachery and fidelity by affirming the old man’s distrust of Chrysalus and his trust in Mnesilochus. Chrysalus now inverts this by undermining

\footnote{Rosenmeyer (2001), 43 notes, “Proteus may write the actual letter, but his rebuffed wife in essence dictates its contents”.
}
the father’s faith in his son. He completely turns the tables by hinting to the *senex* that by believing the truth in the letter, he is being fooled (vv.814-815):

\[
\begin{align*}
o & \text{stulte, stulte, nescis nunc venire te;} \\
& \text{atque in eopse astas lapide, ut praeco praedicat.}
\end{align*}
\]

0 fool, fool! You don’t know that you’re now being sold, and you’re standing on the block itself, as the auctioneer makes his announcement.

This is a highly ironic *double entendre* which speaks to the complicated mechanics underlying Chrysalus’ scheme. Nicobulus is being set up to change his mind about Mnesilochus: the slave will persuade the *senex* that his son is not the stand-up tell-tale he appears to be - v.786: *nosces tu illum actutum quali’sit* (“You’ll know right away what sort he is” – thus convincing Nicobulus that the true report of Mnesilochus’ epistle is actually *false*. But the spectators perceive the *real* meaning behind Chrysalus’ words, which refer to Nicobulus’ comic victimization. By being led to believe that his son is deceiving him, the old man actually *is* being deceived by Chrysalus. The slave now replaces the truth with fiction by undercutting Mnesilochus’ credibility. He confidently asserts that Nicobulus will even beg the slave to take his gold once he knows the “truth” about the young man (vv.824-827):

\[
\begin{align*}
(NI) & \text{numquam auferes hinc aurum. CH: atqui iam dabis.} \\
& \text{NI: dabo? CH: atque orabis me quidem ultron ut auferam,} \\
& \text{quom illum rescities criminatorem meum} \\
& \text{quanto in periculo et quanta in pernicie siet.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
(NI) & \text{You'll never take the gold away from here. CH: And yet, you shall very soon give it to me.} \\
& \text{NI: I'll give it? CH: And, in fact, you shall moreover beg me, yes indeed, to take it away,} \\
& \text{when you shall discover in the midst of how much danger and destruction is that accuser of mine.}
\end{align*}
\]

The dramaturge leads the *senex* across the stage, directing his gaze to the *mise en scène* prepared in advance, the *adulescens* lying with his girlfriend in the brothel.

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252 Rizzo (1990), 23 observes: "attraverso le due lettere egli [Chrysalus] determina un netto rovesciamento di situazione modificando in suo favore sentimenti e disposizione d’anima del vecchio e riuscendo così nell’impresa, apparentemente impossibile, di riacquistarne la fiducia". Rizzo, however, considers the complex *modus operandi* to be the work of Menander and argues that the two epistles in the *Bacchides* are to be attributed, ultimately, to the Διος Ἕλεμπτας.

253 Both Del Corno (1973), 141 and Barsby (1986), 161 explain the image here, which employs the practice of selling slaves ‘off the block’ to describe Nicobulus’ comic victimization. Anderson (1993), 166 observes the role reversal implied, which points to the upper hand Chrysalus has just gained over the *senex*. 

86
next door – more of the truth revealed for the sake of deception. The old man is stunned at the sight, realizing that his faith in Mnesilochus was misplaced (v.836): *interii miser* ("Wretch that I am, I'm done for!"). As Slater observes, “[b]y showing Nicobulus his son in the arms of Bacchis, Chrysalus diverts the old man's furious suspicion from himself to the son.” The *senex* will now do what he swore he would never do: put his trust in the wily slave.

### III: A lie, *per tempus*

Having skillfully exploited the truth to fool the old man and inverted his constellation of trust and distrust, the *servus callidus* finally moves on to fiction by fabricating a story about the 'true' identity of Bacchis. He alleges that Mnesilochus is, in fact, next door with a free, *married* woman, making their affair an unlawful adulterous one. Ingeniously, however, Chrysalus will not be the one to tell this lie. Although broadly hinting to the stunned *senex* that the girl in his son's arms is not, in fact, the *meretrix* she appears to be (vv.839-841), the slave leaves it to the blustering soldier to reveal who Bacchis ‘really’ is. Cleomachus appears, right on cue, decrying the crime of Mnesilochus (vv.842-843):

> *meamne hic Mnesilochus, Nicobuli filius,*  
> *per vim ut retineat mulierem? quae haec factiost?*

This Mnesilochus, the son of Nicobulus, is holding back my woman by force? What is the meaning of this?

The fictional pretence pivots upon the ambiguity of the soldier's words: Cleomachus thunders about the unlawful retention of his *mulier*, a term that could simply mean ‘woman' or ‘mistress', as the soldier doubtlessly intends it, or ‘wife'. Chrysalus cleverly adds to the verbal equivocation, informing Nicobulus that this angry *miles* is

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254 Chrysalus has cleverly taken advantage of the conventional comic stage to set the scene for the *senex* to catch Mnesilochus in *flagrante delicto*: the Bacchis sisters live next door to Nicobulus and all the action takes place on the street before the two houses. This configuration will also be of key importance in the next scene, when the raging soldier Cleomachus comes in search of Bacchis and her lover; cf. p.88, infra.


256 Curiously, Chrysalus' falsehood reverses the common *anagnorisis* plot of comedy featuring a freeborn girl who is mistakenly thought to be a courtesan. In this case, Bacchis really is a *meretrix*, but the slave will claim that she is freeborn; for a reconstruction of the Δις ἔξωπατων featuring an *anagnorisis* plot, cf. Lefèvre (2011), 149.
Bacchis’ vir, which could, likewise, mean lover or husband (v.851):\textit{vir hic est illius mulieris quacum accubat} (“This is the man of the woman with whom [Mnesilochus] is shacking up”).

In this way, Chrysalus manipulates the voice of the miles Cleomachus to do his deceptive bidding, just as he uses the hand of Mnesilochus to compose the duplicitous letter. The slave successfully hides himself by employing the agency of others, thereby keeping Nicobulus from suspecting his involvement in the events unfolding onstage. In reality, however, Chrysalus is behind everything. The internal playwright is in complete control, directing the clueless personae in their roles like puppets. What is more, his “play-within-the-play” dovetails neatly with the action scripted by the external dramaturge, for Cleomachus’ blustering entrance plays right into his scheming hands,\textsuperscript{258} as Chrysalus wryly proclaims (v.844): \textit{per tempus hic venit miles mihi} (“The soldier has come here, just in the nick of time for me”).\textsuperscript{259}

Terrified that Cleomachus will catch sight of Mnesilochus lying with his “wife”\textsuperscript{260} in the house next door (perfectly possible thanks to Chrysalus’ brilliant use of the stage space),\textsuperscript{261} Nicobulus is convinced to release the schemer so that he can strike a bargain with the furious soldier. In a brilliantly executed performance,

\textsuperscript{257} Cf. Slater (1985), 109 and Barsby (1986), 164. Surprisingly, neither mentions the identical play with the ambiguous meaning of mulier in the same scene, though Del Corno (1973), 145 does.

\textsuperscript{258} Barsby (1986), 163 observes that “…Chrysalus had the ‘soldier’s wife’ fiction in mind from the outset”. However, it is his opinion that Cleomachus’ punctual arrival onstage is one of the coincidences typical of comedy, for “…Chrysalus could hardly have guaranteed that the soldier would arrive on cue”. Slater (1985), 109 likewise sees spontaneity here, noting that “[w]ith this timely arrival, Chrysalus has materials for further improvisations”.

\textsuperscript{259} Questa (1975), 13 takes this verse to mean that Chrysalus and Cleomachus had already met at Ephesus, since the slave seems to recognize the soldier. I disagree. Cleomachus’ mask and costume would immediately reveal his identity, particularly to the metatheatrical servus, who has shown himself to be well aware of the conventions of the comic genre and its stock personae; cf. pp.80-81, supra.

\textsuperscript{260} Cf. vv.917, 961.

\textsuperscript{261} Chrysalus says, \textit{iube sis me exsolvsi cito;/nam ni ego exsolvor, iam manufesto hominem opprimet} (vv.857-858). Del Corno (1973), 146 and Barsby (1986), 164 note that manufestus, ‘in the act’, is a technical legal term for adulterers caught \textit{in flagrante delicto}. Moreover, Barsby perceives that the whole scene pivots upon Chrysalus’ placement of the couches in the house of the Bacchis sisters: Nicobulus is terrified that the soldier will glance in that direction and catch the lovers in the sisters’ house \textit{manufesti} – as he just has (p.163). In the view of Owens (1994), 391, this situation contains Greek convention in addition to reflecting the Roman concept of \textit{manufestus}, for he thinks that the “arrangement in which the adulterer is able to make amends to the injured husband with a payment of money seems peculiarly Greek".
Chrysalus gets Nicobulus to pledge Cleomachus 200 gold nummi for Mnesilochus’ “safety”. In reality, this money will purchase Bacchis’ freedom from her contract with the miles so that the young lover can have the girl all for himself. As Slater observes, Chrysalus here is the consummate director, prompting both the senex and the miles through their lines while both are completely unaware of their participation in his elaborate production. All part of the show, he even harries Cleomachus with insults throughout with, unbeknownst to Nicobulus, the soldier’s permission (vv.875-876: CH: atque ut tibi mala multa ingeram? CL: tuo arbitratu – CH: “And that I might pile many insults upon you?” CL: “As you wish”).

Thus Chrysalus manages to fool the old man for the second time in the play.

The servus exits once the transaction is complete, allegedly to reprimand the youth for his bad behaviour. In the meanwhile, Nicobulus remains onstage, cautiously suspicious about what has just transpired (vv.919-924):

nunc quasi ducentis Philippi emi filium,
quos dare promisi militi: quos non dabo
temere etiam priu’quam filium convenero.
umquam edepol quicquam temere credam Chrysalo;
verum lubet etiam mi has pell gere denuo:
aequomst tabellis consignatis credere.

Now it’s as if I’ve bought my son for 200 Philippi, which I’ve promised to give to the soldier; which I shall not give rashly, before I shall have met with my son. Never, by Pollux, will I hastily trust Chrysalus; but, actually, I’d like to read through these again: It’s only right to put one’s trust in sealed tablets.

Ironically, Nicobulus’ words reveal that he has been wholly deceived by the slave’s clever plan, for he persists in believing that the signed and sealed letter from his son is real and truthful – which it is. The senex cannot imagine why Mnesilochus would

262 Barsby (1986), 165-166 points out that the two men contract their agreement using the ancient Roman formula of stipulatio consisting of questions and answers from both parties. Owens (1994), 391-394 argues that the stipulatio scene depends upon fides, the sacred Roman obligation whereby Nicobulus is bound to pay the soldier what he has pledged, which characterizes the senex as particularly Roman.
264 This duplicates the scene earlier in the play at vv.494 ff. when Mnesilochus is asked to reprimand Pistoclerus for his affair with a meretrix by Philoxenus and Lydus.
265 It is ironic that Nicobulus talks is as if he has bought his own son for he has, in reality, bought Bacchis!
blow the whistle on Chrysalus’ scheming if the slave were doing his son’s dirty bidding – which he is!\textsuperscript{266} The key to this ruse is in the \textit{servus’} brilliant manipulation of the epistolary process and his appropriation of the \textit{adulescens’} voice to tell the truth. By delivering an authentic document written by Mnesilochus that indicts him, Chrysalus fools Nicobulus into thinking that he has had no part in a letter which he has, in reality, masterminded from conception to consignment.

The fun, however, is not over yet. There is still more epistolary deception to come, as Chrysalus is, in fact, offstage composing another tricky text. This additional letter will serve to steal a second sum of 200 \textit{nummi} from the old man, pocket money for Mnesilochus to enjoy along with his now- liberated girlfriend. One might say, then, that Nicobulus’ vow to read the tablets once more at v.923 (\textit{pellegere denuo}) is ironic, for it anticipates his forthcoming re-victimization at the hands of this epistolary miscreant. The old man \textit{will} read through a letter \textit{again}, and \textit{again} will he be deceived. Moreover, Nicobulus’ proclamation that it is right to trust a sealed letter (v.924)\textsuperscript{267} guarantees that he will fall for the doublet ruse, which will consist of another missive signed and sealed by Mnesilochus himself.

\textbf{III: Trojan metaphor}

An exultant Chrysalus soon returns onstage singing an elaborate \textit{canticum}, which occupies over fifty lines of text (vv.925-978). The song is a mythological \textit{tour de force} in which the triumphing slave likens his various misdeeds throughout the play to the three fates of Troy and the Greek sack of the city.\textsuperscript{268} This extended metaphor culminates in the equation of the play’s second letter to the Trojan horse,\textsuperscript{269} and the identification of the words upon these wooden tablets with the Achaean soldiers hidden within the horse’s belly (vv.935-936, 941-942):

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{266} Rizzo (1990), 23 and 29 notes that the success of Chrysalus’ scheme pivots upon the pretence that slave and \textit{erus minor} are not allied against the \textit{senex} (which they, of course, are!).
\item \textsuperscript{267} Jenkins (2005), 387 notes: “…Nicobulus nevertheless clings to the letter as a sliver of sanity amid the lunacy. He is simply unable to admit that writing could be the cause of mayhem”.
\item \textsuperscript{268} As Barsby (1986), 176 points out, the list of Ilium’s fates is somewhat confused in the ancient tradition, and Plautus’ three fates do not match with accounts given elsewhere.
\item \textsuperscript{269} Chrysalus compares his first, subverted trick to the theft of the Palladium, and the initial letter to the murder of Troilus, whose death is alluded to at \textit{Il.} 24.257 (vv.957-960); on this second \textit{fatum}, cf. Questa (1975), 65-66.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
nam ego has tabellas opsignatas, consignatas quas fero
non sunt tabellae, sed equos quem misere Achivi ligneum.

As for these signed and sealed tablets I bear,
they aren’t tablets but the wooden horse that the Achaeans sent.

tum quae hic sunt scriptae litterae, hoc in equo insunt milites
armati atque animati probe.

Then the letters which are written here, they are the soldiers within this horse, thoroughly
armed and ready.

The Bacchides’ characters are also incorporated into this Trojan metaphor. Fittingly,
Chrysalus himself is Ulysses, the architect of the duplicitous scheme that finally
ended the 10-year war (v.940). The victim of the slave’s ruse, the old man Nicobulus,
is compared to both Priam (vv.933, 973, 976 ff.) and his ill-fated city (vv. 929, 945),
whereas the two adulescentes Pistoclerus and Mnesilochus are likened to Epeus, the
builder of the horse and Sinon (v.937), respectively, for their roles in helping to
realize the deception. As Barsby notes of the comparison, “[t]he essential similarity
is that both [the Trojan horse and the Bacchides’ letters] are a means to storm the
enemy’s citadel. They are also both made of wood”. But it seems to me that there

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270 Elsewhere in the canticum, the slave likens himself to both Agamemnon and Ulysses in the same
line (v.946). These comparisons are role reversals which, one might say, mirror the social inversion
occurring in comedy: the lowly slave Chrysalus makes himself into the most noble and venerable of
all individuals in the ancient world, Homeric heroes. Skafte Jensen (1997), 318 notes, “[a]lready the
very fact of comparing the low social status of the protagonist and his rather unheroic pursuits with
the most lofty and tragic level of Greek myth is definitely enjoyable...”.

271 Mnesilochus is also equated to the lover Alexander/Paris at v.947. Such shifting imagery in the
metaphor (which occurs also in the comparisons involving Chrysalus, Nicobulus, and the soldier
Cleomachus) and other inconsistencies have caused some critics to doubt the origin and integrity of
the canticum, and hence to posit interpolations. As Lefèvre (2011), 19 fittingly puts it, quot philologi,
tot sententiae. He gives a thorough summary of the relevant scholarship ad loc. and on pp.102-116.
Following Fraenkel (1960), 57-68, Lefèvre himself thinks that the canticum is a genuine piece
of Plautine artistry (though later he claims that the song likely has “ein griechischer Kern”, p.137). He
argues at length against those who wish to athetize large sections of the canticum, such as Jocelyn
(1969), who regards the text as the confused result of interpolations and additions from both actors
and readers of the comedy. Thus also Questa (1975), 54-68. Likewise, Zwierlein (1992) discerns
hands of two Bearbeiter alongside that of Plautus himself. Barsby (1986), 171 takes a middle ground,
seeing the solution in a combination of Plautine artistry mixed with what he found in his original and
interpolations, whereas Slater (1985), 110-111 accepts the shifting identifications of the song as part
of Plautus’ technique. On the canticum, cf. also Scafoglio (2005), Sharrock (2009), 204, Jenkins

272 Barsby (1986), 174; cf. also Skafte Jensen (1997), 317-318, who makes essentially the same points
as Barsby, but argues that the terms of comparison in the Trojan canticum are not very similar at all.
is more to unpack from this metaphor. I will argue that the slave’s equation between his duplicitous missives and the Trojan horse serves not only to illustrate his *modus operandi* by analogy, but also, conversely, to suggest the similarity of the Greek war stratagem to an epistolary deception.

On the most basic level, both the Trojan horse and the *Bacchides’* letters are a guileful method of infiltrating behind enemy lines, a similarity which is underscored by Chrysalus when he delivers the *tabellae*. Upon encountering the *senex* after his lengthy song,273 the *servus* hands over the new letter allegedly sent by Mnesilochus to his father. Chrysalus prompts the old man to recognize the *adulescens’* seal upon it (v.986: *nosce signum. estne eius?* “Notice the seal. It is his?”), and Nicobulus immediately acknowledges his recognition (v.986: *novi* “I recognize it”). The slave encourages the *senex* to read the message within, and then makes a devious aside to the audience connecting the present scenario to the elaborate Trojan metaphor of his *canticum* (vv.986-988):

```
(to Nicobulus) pellege.
(to the audience) nunc superum limen scinditur, nunc adest exitium <illi> Ilio.
turbat equo’ lepide ligneus.
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Read it through.

(Now the upper lintel is sundered, now destruction is upon that Ilium. Delightfully does the “wooden horse” make trouble).

Thus the opening of “Mnesilochus’” second letter is equated with the dismantling of Ilium’s walls to allow the enormous wooden horse to pass through. Both are, in fact, crucial moments in the execution of Ulysses’ and Chrysalus’ duplicitous stratagems, for they represent the schemers’ surreptitious invasion. Once the Trojans allow the

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273 Critics have also taken issue with the staging at this point in the text, arguing that it is unrealistic to have Nicobulus onstage but *unaware* of what is going on around him throughout Chrysalus’ song; Williams (1956), 451 considers it uncertain that he did so (cf. also Questa 1975, 48-51 and Rizzo 1990, 30-31), whereas Jocelyn (1969), 145 and Barsby (1986), 169, 171 argue that the text gives no indication that Nicobulus has left the stage at any time between his line at v.924 and the slave’s *canticum*. Barsby (171-172) lays out the problem in detail, concluding that Plautus may have unskilfully adapted the Greek original, which would have had a choral break at this point to ease the difficulties. But as Slater (1985), 111-112 rightly observes, Chrysalus and Nicobulus are in “separate imaginative spaces” at this moment, and “...Nicobulus’ presence on the stage is the continuation of a challenge to Chrysalus’ powers”. In fact, the scene is a powerful representation of Nicobulus as a comic *loser* and Chrysalus as a comic *hero*.
wooden “votive” into their city, Pergamum’s fate is sealed. Similarly, Nicobulus’ unsealing of the tablets and his acceptance of the words inscribed within as truly those of his son amount to his utter deception; after all, the senex himself has just proclaimed his utmost trust in sealed letters (v.924: *aequomst tabellis consignatis credere*).274

Like the penetration of the Trojan defences, then, the evasion of Nicobulus’ suspicions regarding the letter’s veracity allows the contents of the wooden trick to spill out and wreak havoc: the tricky language inscribed upon the tablets can now set to work stealing the senex’s gold. This infiltration is successful because neither horse nor text is really what they appear to be. Rather, both siege engines pose as innocuous proclamations of surrender: the Greeks pretend to abandon the war on Ilium by their “offering” to Athena, and “Mnesilochus’” letter claims that the adulescens is (once again) submitting to the senex’s authority by informing on the slave and relinquishing his part in the attack. Chrysalus’ association of Mnesilochus with the Greek Sinon (v.937), then, is especially appropriate, since, as Barsby observes, “…Mnesilochus, like Sinon...is a pretended deserter, deceiving Nicobulus by denouncing Chrysalus in the same way as Sinon deceived the Trojans by denouncing Ulysses”.275 Plautus, however, has reversed their roles, for whereas Mnesilochus is the supposed author of the text inscribed on the tablets, Sinon is the man chosen to remain with the horse at the Trojan city gates, delivering, one might say, the Greek “gift” to the Trojans. A corresponding swap is present in the identification of Chrysalus with Ulysses, the author, as it were, of the Achaean ruse, since within the fictive premise of the *Bacchides’* internal skit, Chrysalus acts the part of messenger and certainly not author. These reversals implicit in the mythological metaphor produce a chiasmus between the roles in the two scenarios:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>Bacchides</em></th>
<th>Trojan myth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mnesilochus - &quot;author&quot;</td>
<td>Sinon - lying messenger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chrysalus - lying &quot;messenger&quot;</td>
<td>Ulysses - author</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

274 Thus Skafte Jensen (1997), 317 misses the point when she argues, “the idea of comparing the writing tablet with the wooden horse is ingenious, but the letter will break no lintel when it is given to Nicobulus”. On the tradition surrounding the dismantling of the gate, cf. Barsby (1986), 177.
This inversionary play with role in Chrysalus’ Trojan metaphor serves, I submit, to evince the resemblance of the Greek horse scheme to an epistolary deception such as those in the *Bacchides*. The comparison is, in fact, an apt one:

Sinon delivers the Achaean message, sent by the (allegedly) absent authors to the addressees—*cum*-victims of the ruse, the Trojans. Much like a tricky text, the Trojans experience difficulty “reading” the true meaning of the Greek symbol, for they are unsure whether the horse is a sincere token of peace or a sure sign of treachery (Hom. *Od*. 8.504-510):

In the same way that Nicobulus ultimately falls for the “correct” reading of the epistle (which is, in reality, all *wrong*), the Trojans are deceived into believing that the horse does, in fact, mean that the Greeks have given up on their siege. In both cases, the *real* message is concealed - that of the horse inside its belly, that of the missive behind the cleverly deceptive words of the text.

Finally, it seems to me that Chrysalus’ metaphor and, in particular, his reference to Sinon, might contain an allusion to an epistolary detail of the Trojan legend, which further implies its similarity to the *Bacchides’* letter schemes. In the version of events told by Aeneas in the second book of the *Aeneid*, Ulysses’ “victim” Sinon claimed his grievance with the Ithacan commander to be rooted in the murder of his companion, Palamedes of Nauplia. Although Sinon tells the Trojans that
Palamedes was murdered for having attempted to block the expedition to Troy,²⁷⁶ this is a lie, part of Sinon’s *captatio benevolentiae* to lure the Trojans into the Greek trap.²⁷⁷ Rather, Palamedes was murdered for having revealed Ulysses’ duplicitous attempt to escape fighting in the Trojan War.²⁷⁸ In Euripides’ *Palamedes*, Ulysses got epistolary revenge by forging a letter from King Priam and placing this, along with a quantity of gold, in the hero’s tent to suggest that the Nauplian leader was contemplating treachery (an especially ironic method considering Palamedes’ role in the invention of the Greek alphabet).²⁷⁹ The connection between Sinon and Palamedes is first attested in Virgil, circa 200 years after the *Bacchides* would have been first performed. However, the clever nexus of parallel and inversion between the *Bacchides’ persona* and the various players in the Trojan myth makes it distinctly possible, it seems to me, that this version of the fall of Troy existed in the second century BC.²⁸⁰ This, in turn, might suggest Ulysses’ epistolary ruse in Euripides’ tragedy to some members of the audience, adding a further element of similarity between Chrysalus and Ulysses as authors both of deceptive missives. Furthermore, the tricky slave’s letter ploys would constitute a reversal of Ulysses’ epistolary plan of retribution: whereas the epistle forged by Ulysses is allegedly from the old man Priam and accompanied by a parcel of the King’s gold, Chrysalus’ falsified missives are addressed to an old man (who is, moreover, explicitly equated with Priam) in order to *steal* his gold. The identity of the epistolary victims is also

²⁷⁶ *fando aliquod si forte tuas peruenit ad auris/Belidae nomen Palamedis et incluta fama/gloria, quem falsa sub priditione Pelasgi/insontem infando indicio, quia bella uetabat,/demisere neci…* (Aen. 2.81-85).
²⁷⁷ Paschalis (1997), 106. Paschalis observes that Sinon’s fraud is belied by Palamedes’ patronymic, *Belides*, son of Belus, who gave his name to *bellum*.
²⁷⁸ The story is part of the epic cycle, present in the *Cypria*; cf. Burgess (2001), 137-138.
²⁷⁹ Euripides’ *Palamedes* also contains another letter, a plea for help written by Palamedes’ brother on oar-blades and then sent out to sea. On the epistolary details of this fragmentary tragedy, cf. Rosenmeyer (2001), 64; Jenkins (2006), 15-36, who also discusses later appearances of the myth including in Philostratus and a speech of Gorgias, and Torrance (2013), 142-146.
²⁸⁰ Sinon is called *relictus* in v.938, suggesting that Plautus is, at least, familiar with an account of the fall of Troy in which Sinon was left behind, as he is in Virgil. If the connection between Sinon and Palamedes had not yet been forged when the *Bacchides* was composed, the coincidence of epistolary deception that would have been created by Virgil’s innovation is striking. Barsby (1986), 174 is hesitant to posit a definite association: “...it is not clear that this version of the story (viz. the account of the Greek ruse and Sinon’s role in it such as we get in *Aeneid* II) was current in Plautus’ day...”.
inverted, for it is the young Palamedes in the first case and the gullible senex in the
second.

Thus Chrysalus’ metaphor contemplates the resemblance of his own ruse to
the most infamous trick in the ancient world, vividly elucidating his attack strategy
upon Nicobulus and his riches. What is more, the comparisons drawn between the
personae in the text and the players in the Trojan legend portray, I submit, the Greek
artifice as quasi-epistolary, subtly hinting at the epistolary roles of Sinon and
Ulysses through the chiastic set of reversals implicit in their identification with
Mnesilochus and Chrysalus. Thus tracing the tricky letter as an instrument of
deception going all the way back to Homeric epic and the greatest war ever fought,
the Bacchides' servus callidus implicitly aggrandizes his own misdeeds and
foreshadows the success of his epistolary ploy.

IV: denuo

Unlike the Bacchides' initial tricky text, Nicobulus reads “Mnesilochus”’ second letter
aloud onstage, haplessly (and, therefore, ironically) commanding its author
Chrysalus to stick around so that he will know what the tabellae contain (vv.988-
989).\footnote{Lefèvre (2011), 117-118 notes the pervasive Doppeldeutigkeiten in this scene, which features
Chrysalus pretending to hear for the first time the contents of a letter he himself has composed.}
As Jenkins has observed, this reverses the scenario of the play’s first epistle,
for now the audience is present at the missive’s reading rather than its writing.\footnote{Jenkins (2005), 389.}
Nevertheless, the servus hints at its composition, slyly describing the dictation
scene\footnote{Chrysalus also alludes to his dictation of the letter later in the scene at v.1012 when he says this in
an aside as Nicobulus is reading the text: nihil est illorum, quin ego illi dixerim.} for the audience in what he says to the clueless old man upon delivery
(vv.982-985):

NI: quid ait? CH: verbum
nullum fecit: lacrums tacitus auscultabat quae ego loquebar:
tacitus conscrispsit tabellas, opsignatas mi has dedit.
tibi me iussit dare...

NI: What did he say? CH: He didn’t say a word:
Crying, he was listening in silence to what I was saying.
In silence he inscribed these tablets, which he gave to me signed and
sealed.
He ordered me to give them to you....

281 Lefèvre (2011), 117-118 notes the pervasive Doppeldeutigkeiten in this scene, which features
Chrysalus pretending to hear for the first time the contents of a letter he himself has composed.
282 Jenkins (2005), 389.
283 Chrysalus also alludes to his dictation of the letter later in the scene at v.1012 when he says this in
an aside as Nicobulus is reading the text: nihil est illorum, quin ego illi dixerim.
Playing upon the spectators’ knowledge of the first letter’s creation, the *servus* implies by his ambiguous description that this document is, likewise, a combination of his own words and Mnesilochus’ handwriting; as Chrysalus spoke, his young master listened, inscribed and sealed the tablets. The youth’s silence is emphasized, repeated twice over, since the voice Nicobulus will hear by reading the letter is, in fact, that of Chrysalus alone, although it has been well disguised as that of Mnesilochus.

The spectators, then, discover the slave’s new plot as the *senex* reads what has been written upon the wooden tablets. This reading scene is, in fact, the corollary of the earlier dictation scene in which Chrysalus composed his letter onstage. Thus the second missive is a natural complement to its predecessor, and together they present a complete picture of the epistolary process from the moment of composition through to delivery and reception. What is more, the same is true of the metatheatrical image generated by these internal texts. Nicobulus’ veritable performance of the second kinetic letter reflects a player’s “reading” of the script in acting out his part: by reciting the lines that the clever slave has written, the old man falls into the role scripted for him in this “play-within-the-play”, which entails his handing over another sum of cash. This at once inverts and completes the representation of the script’s composition in the dictation scene, engendering an image of the dramatic text from its inception to its realization. The *Bacchides’* set of epistles, then, functions as *mise-en-abyme* of the theatrical process, mimicking the genesis of the play within the narrative by their corresponding representations of the script as two halves of one whole.

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284 Jenkins (2005), 389 observes, “Mnesilochus is silent...because Chrysalus, as author, has again stolen his voice”.

285 There is a similar joke on voice in v.979: as Nicobulus becomes aware of Chrysalus’ presence onstage, he wonders aloud, *quoianam vox prope me sonat?* His question drives at the heart of the slave’s brilliant strategy, for the *senex* has been fooled, and now will be fooled again, into thinking that he hears Mnesilochus’ own voice in the *tabellae*. As the audience knows, however, Nicobulus has been listening to Chrysalus all along. Slater (1985), 111 has pointed out that the old man’s words may also be read as a joke on the unrealistic staging at this part of the play, for Nicobulus has been onstage all throughout Chrysalus’ fantastic soliloquy, but only hears him now (cf. n.273, supra).
Mnesilochus, Nicobulus reads, has sworn by sacred oath to give his beloved 200 nummi before evening falls (vv.1028-1030). The adulescens begs his father to pony up the sum lest he perjure himself, money that will be paid back six-hundredfold if he lives to see another day (vv.1030-1034). This cash is to be handed over to Chrysalus (v.997: pater, ducentos Philippos quaeso Chrysalo/da – “Father, please, give 200 Philippi to Chrysalus”) for the youth is ashamed to even enter into his father’s sight because of what he has done (vv.1007-1009):

pudet prodire me ad te in conspectum, pater:
tantum flagitium te scire audivi meum,  
quod cum peregrini cubui uxore militi.

I’m ashamed to enter into your presence, father:  
I’ve heard that you know of my great shame,  
that I bedded the wife of a foreign soldier.

Mnesilochus, then, allegedly replaces himself by means of his writing, substituting his epistle for himself. This is ironic because, of course, the missive’s author is really the courier Chrysalus, and not the adulescens at all, a fact which in itself again inverts the usual circumstances of epistolary communication by conflating the roles of author and letter-carrier.

In this way, Chrysalus’ intrigue at once relies upon and confirms the previous scene’s pretence regarding the identity of Bacchis by having Mnesilochus confess to committing adultery with the soldier’s wife. Nicobulus’ doubts about Chrysalus’ story and paying off the soldier (vv. 919-924, quoted above) are thereby

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286 Owens (1994), 396-397 argues that Mnesilochus’ promise to Bacchis is guaranteed by the Roman concept of fides, suggested by the terms ius iurandum and verba concepta (v.1028). The senex agrees to hand over the 200 nummi lest his son break his sacred promise. Thus Owens thinks that the Bacchides’ third deception is probably Plautine in origin, for it hinges upon this particularly Roman concept of social obligation; (cf. my discussion of the Bacchides’ “third” deception below, at pp.100-113). He concludes that the social message of the Bacchides is in the “ethnic antithesis” Plautus draws between the “Roman” allegiance to fides embodied in Nicobulus, and the “Greek” tendency to deceive and manipulate embodied in Chrysalus. I am hesitant to read any such ethnic prejudices into Plautine comedy. Further, it seems to me that attempts to discern a moral message in these plays miss the point entirely: Plautus is aiming, above all things, to make the audience laugh, and a guillable old man who falls repeatedly for his slave’s tricks is funny.

287 Thus epistolary discourse can be provoked not only by physical separation but also by reticence: sometimes, we use letters to say what we prefer not to say in person; cf. n.575, infra. Lefèvre (2011), 46, then, misses the point when he deems it to be “eine unglaubwürdige Situation, Vater und Sohn abermals durch einen Briefverkehren zu lassen, wenn sie ungehindert wenige Schritte voneinander entfernt sind” (cf. also p.55). For this reason, Lefèvre argues that whereas this second letter is from the Δίος ἔξεσι τῶν, it corresponds to the Menandrian epistle only “formally” and not in content.
dismissed,\textsuperscript{288} and in a stroke the success of the first theft is confirmed, and the groundwork for the subsequent one is laid. Once again, the letter's authenticity is key to fooling the recipient: Mnesilochus has, in fact, written and sealed these \textit{tabellae}, and why would the author falsely admit to such a crime? And once again, the slave's strategy involves presenting Nicobulus with information that he already believes to be true, viz. that his son is a foolish young man in love, in order to make an indictment of guilt. The subjects, however, are reversed, for Chrysalus is now replaced with Mnesilochus as the guilty party accused by the letter. In fact, the technique of assault this second epistle uses on the old man is the mirror image of its earlier duplicate in the text. Professing an outright lie about Bacchis' identity, the letter openly asks Nicobulus to hand 200 \textit{nummi} over to Chrysalus. This is the opposite of the first missive, which used the truth to deceive the \textit{senex} and warned him to guard his money from falling into the hands of the clever \textit{servus}.\textsuperscript{289} Likewise, in his first heist, Chrysalus insisted that the unwilling Nicobulus would eventually surrender the gold and even beg his slave to take it (vv.824-825).\textsuperscript{290} Now the \textit{servus} changes his tune, telling the old man to give up not a penny (v.1027), and slyly pretending to refuse the money when Nicobulus, who has fallen for this second ruse, willingly gives it up (vv.1059-1064):\textsuperscript{291}

\begin{verbatim}
NI: cape hoc tibi aurum, Chrysale, i, fer filio.
ego ad forum autem hinc ibo, ut solvam militi.
CH: non equidem accipiam. proin tu quaeras qui ferat.
nolo ego mihi credi. NI: cape vero, odiose facis.
CH: non equidem capiam. NI: at quaeso. CH: dico ut res se habet.
NI: morare. CH: nolo, inquam, aurum concredi mihi.
\end{verbatim}

NI: Take this gold, Chrysalus, go, bring it to my son.
I'll head from here to the forum, to pay off the soldier.
CH: To be sure, I won't accept it. So find yourself someone who will.
I don't want to be trusted with it. NI: Just take it, you're being annoying.
CH: To be sure, I won't take it. NI: But I'm begging you. CH: I'm telling you how it is.
NI: You're wasting time. CH: I don't, I say, want the gold entrusted to me.

\textsuperscript{288} Cf. Slater (1985), 112.
\textsuperscript{289} Lefèvre (2011), 59 notes that the second letter aims to achieve the opposite of the first letter.
\textsuperscript{290} Chrysalus' words in his first performance (v.825) foreshadow his second ruse for Nicobulus now does in fact beg his slave to take away his gold.
\textsuperscript{291} Del Corno (1973), 161 notes "...questa scena va tutta vista in filigrana rispetto alla lettura della prima lettera; ora Nicobulo non riesce a staccarsi dal servo, il quale a sua volta simula la più completa indifferenza". Slater (1985), 112 observes that Chrysalus uses reverse psychology here.
Once Chrysalus has been “forced” to accept the 200 nummi, Nicobulus departs to pay off the soldier, thoroughly fleeced of 400 nummi: hoc est incepta efficere pulchre (“There’s a deed well done!”, v.1068)! Surprisingly, the servus callidus now disappears from the text, disappointing the audience’s expectation of another elaborate canticum to outdo his previous songs with a “throwaway” rejection of a triumph (vv.1072-1073): sed spectatores, vos nunc ne miremini/quod non triumpho: pervolgatum est, nil moror (“But spectators, don’t wonder that I’m not holding myself a triumph: that’s all too common, and I don’t care for it”). But Chrysalus has accomplished his comic goals of freeing Bacchis from the miles and procuring some pocket money for fun; he now slips away, leaving the audience to enjoy the hilarious fallout of his scheming.

V: “Dissing” the Δις ἐξαπατῶν

Thus the Bacchides’ conniving slave successfully fools its senex by brilliantly manipulating letters both imaginary and real, again, and again, and again, and again. Now that I have explored Chrysalus’ complicated epistolary ploy in detail, I will turn my attention to the number problem that has caused consternation amongst critics: how to reconcile the two deceptions suggested by Menander’s title, Δις ἐξαπατῶν, with the three in Plautus’ comedy? Scholars have put forth various solutions. Of those convinced that the Bacchides probably adheres to Menander’s Intrigenkonstellation, some want to disregard the first subverted ruse and count

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292 These lines have often been taken as a means of dating the Bacchides to a year in which the triumphs at Rome were plentiful (originally the hypothesis of Ritschl 1845, 423, who fixed the date at 187 BC; cf. Questa 1975², 1-8 for bibliography and an in-depth discussion of the various methods used to date the comedy. Questa himself supports Ritschl’s conclusion based upon perceived references to the cult of Bacchus, allusions which would be of obvious relevance to contemporary Rome during these years). I, however, prefer Slater’s explanation (following that of Fraenkel (1960), 226-227), which reads Chrysalus’ refusal of a triumph as an aprosodoketon joke rather than a reference to a specific year (1985, pp. 112-113). Slater argues that the architectus dolis has tired of his stock role, and so retires from the play: “The clown will not stay and entertain us with his parodies of Roman triumphs and military honors. Chrysalus walks out of the world of comedy…” (p.117). Salamon (2004), 25 agrees. Perceiving a reference to ovationes, Gruen (1990), 137-138 proposes that these lines allude to contemporary debates at Rome about the frequency with which an ovatio (alluded to in v.1068-1069 veluti mi/event ut ovans praeda onustus cederem) was awarded to a successful general instead of a proper triumph in the early second century BC, whereas Moore (1998), 17 suggests that the recusatio reveals actor anxiety about spectator expectation.
only the two letters as the plays’ two tricks, whereas others include the first scheme in their tally and consider both instances of epistolary mischief as part and parcel of the same intrigue. Yet another school calls Chrysalus’ third deception a Plautine creation added on to the Δἴκεξαπατῶν’s two plays by the Latin translator. As part of this debate, the origin of Bacchides’ two letters has been called into question, since the Greek fragments give no clue as to whether Syros was an epistolary miscreant like his Latin equivalent Chrysalus. Thus, the epistles have been variously attributed to Menander’s Δἴκεξαπατῶν or to Plautus’ own invention.

293 This was originally the idea of Ritschl (1868), 365, and was later developed by Williams (1956), 450-455. In Williams’ view, deception and the extortion of money are to be considered two distinct actions, and the verb εξαπατῶν in the Greek title refers to the latter. He concludes that if the plot of the Δἴκεξαπατῶν was, in fact, similar to that of the Bacchides (a possibility he does not exclude), Menander would have counted two tricks (thus the “δἴκεξαπατῶν”), dismissing the first ruse in view of its financial failure. Williams argues that only a “moralist” would have been interested in drawing attention to elements of pure deception in the play regardless of each ploy’s success. Gaiser (1970), 78-79, Questa (1975), 52-54, Grisolia (1976), 59-60 and Finette (1983) agree. Further, Questa suggests that Plautus’ emphasis on three ruses vs. Menander’s two relates to his glorification of the slave.

294 This is the position of Kunst (1919), 109-110, Theiler (1938), 269-273, Webster (1950), 130-131 and Rizzo (1990), 12-23, 28. Although he does not say so explicitly, Del Corno (1973), 41-42 also seems to subscribe to this hypothesis. Both he and Webster (1950, 131) cite a passage of Galen for support, in which there is a reference to the clever slaves of Menander who deceive their masters three times. Galen, however, names slaves named Davos and Getas but not Syros.

295 Thus Fraenkel (1960), 57-58. In fact, Fraenkel’s original hypothesis in his Göttingen dissertation Quaestiones de media et nova comoedia (1912), 100-104 was that Chrysalus’ third intrigue had been borrowed by Plautus from another Greek play and transferred into the Bacchides via contaminatio. He subsequently (1960), 403 retracted this contaminatio hypothesis in deference to the point raised by Williams (1956), 452-455, that it would have been unlikely for Plautus to come upon a deception and letter that fit the Δἴκεξαπατῶν so perfectly (for William’s position, cf. n.293, supra). The notion that Chrysalus’ third theft of Nicobulus’ gold is a Plaunitine addition to Menander’ Double Deceiver is a view held by Thierfelder (1975), 98-99, Lefèvre (1978) (Lefèvre 2011, 45-60 restates this view along with an extensive bibliography of relevant criticism), Primmer (1984), 49-50, Barsby (1986), 170, Lowe (1989), 390-391, Owens (1994) and Stürner (2011), 185. Blänsdorf (2000), 161-163 thinks it certain that Plautus has changed the number and nature of ploys he found in Menander, but is rightly hesitant to speculate about the plot of Menander’s lost play “...es sei denn, der doppelte Betrug des Titels beziehe sich auf die geglückte Rettung der beiden Hetaeren durch Betrugsmanöver”.

296 According to Lefèvre (1978), the Bacchides’ letter intrigue is a messy combination of Menandrian and Plautine material. Barsby (1986), 170 doubts that either epistle as we have them in the Bacchides could have occurred in the Greek play, concluding that “[t]he solution may be to suppose a more realistic letter in Menander at this earlier point, in which Sostratos (‘Mnesiochus’) confessed to an affair with the Soldier’s wife and asked for money to buy the Soldier off; in this case Plautus’ adaptation will have consisted of inventing a new ‘first letter’ and using Menander’s single letter, suitably adapted, as a basis for his second”. Finally, Finette (1983) and Rizzo (1990), 18-19, who both consider the three tricks in the Bacchides to be a faithful reproduction of three deceptions in the Δἴκεξαπατῶν, judge the two epistles to be Menandrian in origin.
These approaches, however, are critically inadequate, for, in the main, they rely upon unverifiable assumptions about the plot of the Δικηγορία in order to explain the *Bacchides*.\(^\text{297}\) The fact is that we simply do not know how the damage done by Sostratos’ rash exposure of the first deception was repaired and the theft accomplished a second (and third?) time by Syros. For this reason, my discussion will be limited to what Plautus’ text might have to tell us about this apparent numerical discrepancy, beginning with verses that have, likewise, puzzled students of the *Bacchides* because of numbers: Chrysalus’ reference to a *duplex facinus* in vv.640-641.

At this point in the play, Chrysalus has already laid the groundwork for his first, ill-fated assault on Nicobulus’ gold by telling the old man his fantastic story about Archidemides the treacherous debtor. After a long absence,\(^\text{298}\) the wily slave reenters the text celebrating his misdeeds and powers of deception in an 18-line *canticum* that begins as follows (vv.640-641)

\[\text{hunc hominem decet auro expendi, huic decet statuam}^{299}\text{ statui ex auro} \]
\[\text{nam duplex facinus feci Hodie, duplicibus spoliis sum adfectus.} \]

This man is worth his weight in gold, a statue of gold ought to be erected for him, for I’ve done a double deed today, I am endowed with double spoils.

These verses have confounded scholars. Why does Chrysalus proclaim that he has effected a double deception and won double spoils when he has (so far) executed only one trick? Several proposals have been made, though none of them is completely convincing.\(^\text{300}\) Whereas Dumont and Jocelyn perceive the work of an

\(^{297}\) Owens (1994) is an exception. In his view, the *Bacchides’* third trick depends upon the Roman concept of *fides*, which Plautus has introduced independently of his model. It is on this thematic basis that Owens argues for the “Plautinity of the third deception” (p.387); cf. n.286, *supra*.

\(^{298}\) Cf. p.104, *infra*.

\(^{299}\) It is interesting that Chrysalus proclaims that a statue ought to be erected in his honour for having pulled off a trick which later, in his Trojan *canticum*, he will compare to the Greek theft of the Palladium. Whereas the Palladium was a primitive figure made out of wood, Chrysalus’ statue is one *ex auro* – another instance, perhaps, of one-upmanship.

\(^{300}\) That is, the relevant discourse – to my mind – has not fully explored the metatheatrical and metatextual effect of Chrysalus’ words. I do this below. Nevertheless, my own explanation of the *duplex facinus* does not preclude other solutions that seeks to explain this phrase on the level of the plot; cf. n.314, *infra*. 
interpolator, Barsby wants to relocate these lines to another passage later in the play when the slave has pulled off his second scheme. Conversely, Questa has tried to make sense of Chrysalus’ song as is by suggesting that the slave’s twofold deed consists in having tricked his elder master on the one hand and enriched his younger master on the other. Most recently, Pellegrini has proposed a solution to the ‘double trouble’ caused by Chrysalus’ lines, building on the ideas of two other critics. Enriching Questa’s view, she argues thus of duplex facinus:

...Chrysalus explique en quoi il a accompli un duplex facinus, un exploit à deux pendants: il a, dans l’intrigue, trompé Nicobule tout en aidant Mnésiloque et a, selon sa propre conception de la morale, agi en homo frugi en étant bon avec le bon jeune homme et mauvais avec le vieillard fourbe.

Seeking further to explain the slave’s following reference to duplicia spolia in the next line, she suggests that,

...Chrysalus, par rapport à ses prédécesseurs comiques, a dérobé des dépouilles deux fois plus considérables et il espère que Mnésiloque jouit lui aussi de cette capacité à être frugi, c’est à dire à dérober une somme importante.

The second part of Pellegrini’s hypothesis is, in fact, derived from the position of Damen advanced in 1995, which of all explanations of the troubling lines remains the most persuasive. Based upon the semantic range of the Latin adjective duplex and Chrysalus’ reference to the Δικεξιαστήρον’s slave, Syros, 8 lines later at vv.649-650 as an example of a schemer whose duplicity is inferior to his own, Damen thinks that vv.640-641 are a riddling and, ultimately, competitive allusion to the Bacchides’ Greek original. He argues thus:

302 Barsby (1986), 152: “...we may well wonder whether the passage was originally written to stand at some point later in the play (e.g. after 924), when Chrysalus had completed his second deception, and was transferred here in the process of composition”.
303 Questa (1975), 44-45. Essentially, Questa sees the duplex facinus comment as an exaggeration aimed at aggrandizing the comic hero’s accomplishments in trickery (much like his position on Plautus’ count of three deceptions vs Menander’s count of two; cf. n.293, supra). Questa sees Chrysalus’ ‘double deed’ as consisting of helping his erus minor (1 deed) and deceiving his erus maior (1 deed). Del Corno (1973), 123, Slater (1985), 103 and Lefèvre (2011), 98 agree.
304 Pellegrini (2011), 647.
305 The servus’ metatextual disparagement became manifest upon the publication of the Δικεξιαστήρον papyrus fragments, which revealed the name of the slave in Menander’s comedy to be Syros (vv.649-650): non mihi isti placent Parmenones, Syri,/qui duas aut tris minas auferunt eris; cf. Handley (1968), 9.
In view of the possibility that right from the start of the song Plautus is drawing comparisons between Menander’s comedy and his own adaptation of that play, ‘double’ can be seen as a sophisticated pun on the title of the Greek original, ‘The Double Deceiver’. By exploiting one of the meanings duplex can convey (‘twice as large’) when Menander clearly intends διό to have another (‘happening two times’), Plautus may claim that his slave unlike Menander’s has done a ‘double deed’ even before Chrysalus effects the second deception, because he has defrauded his master of a considerably greater amount of money than his Greek equivalent had at the corresponding point in the original...This bold misuse of duplex as a way of asserting the preferability of the Roman play to the Greek, a claim based on equating mere expense with ingenuity, is, when you add it all up, a perfectly workable witticism.\footnote{Damen (1995), 19-20, 22.}

Damen is right, it seems to me, in perceiving a pun on the title of Menander’s play in Chrysalus’ monody,\footnote{Pace Jocelyn (1969), 149 n.83, who explicitly rejects the idea that Plautus could be invoking his model here: “[i]f the author had this title [Διό ξεπαιτον] in mind he was more likely to be a scholastic interpolator than a dramatist with thoughts of what was to happen on stage and in the minds of spectators”.} as well as in suggesting an implicit element of comic rivalry initiated by the Bacchides towards its model. However, his explanation of the text runs into the same problem as the approaches to the number of deceptions in the Greek and Latin texts: by making its reading of duplex contingent upon an unknowable (as it stands now) detail of the Greek comedy, viz. that the sum Syros stole is numerically less than the 200 nummi procured at this point in the comedy by Chrysalus, Damen’s model is, by definition, speculative. What is more, it seems to me that it does not fully account for the effect of this metatextual allusion to the original on Plautus’ work. Like Pellegrini, I propose to take my lead from Damen’s interpretation, but to, likewise, proceed in a different direction by exploring a metatheatrical dimension of Chrysalus’ words. Ultimately, I will suggest that the servus’ invocation of the Διό ξεπαιτον is a sly reference to the dynamics of translation that may, in turn, shed some light on the question of 2 vs 3 tricks.

When Chrysalus enters singing these perplexing verses, the audience has not seen him for almost 300 lines. The slave was last onstage at v.367, when he closed the deal on the play’s first deception and hurried off to inform his young master of its success. In his absence, the status quo has changed dramatically, for the misinformed Mnesilochus has, in the meantime, come clean to his father and returned the stolen money. Chrysalus, however, has no idea that his work has been both undone and cut out for him in a single stroke. Rather, the wily slave thinks that...
he has resolved the *crux* of this play and fulfilled his comic *officium*, as he proclaims in his triumphant revel: (vv.642-648):

> erum maiorem meum ut ego hodie lusi lepide, ut ludificatust!
> callidum senem callidis dolis
> compuli et perpuli mi omnia ut crederet.
> nunc amanti ero filio senis,
> quicum ego bibo, quicum edo et amo,
> regias copias aureasque optuli,
> ut domoumeret neu foris quaereret.

How delightfully I’ve deceived my elder master today, how he has been duped!
A clever old man with clever tricks
have I compelled and impelled to believe everything I told him.
Now for my besotted master, the old man’s son,
with whom I drink, with whom I eat and make love,
I’ve obtained a princely golden sum,
so that he can take it from home, and doesn’t have to search for it out-of-doors.

The theatrically self-conscious Chrysalus qualifies his duplicitous accomplishment in terms programmatic for comedy – *callidus*, *dolus* and, above all, *ludus*, a word that signifies both the ritual festivals at which Roman comedy was performed, the *ludi scaenici*, and the trickery enacted in the productions themselves. Nicobulus is the victim of these games; the *senex* has been *ludificatus* today by the clever slave so that Mnesilochus can get his girl. In short, the *agelast* has been trumped and social reversal, the goal of comedy, has been achieved. As far as Chrysalus is concerned, all

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308 On the programmatic vocabulary of comedy, including the terms *dolus* and *callidus*, which serve to emphasize the scheming abilities of Plautine tricksters, cf. Petrone (1983), 94-98 and Sharrock (2009), 9-17. For the all-encompassing term *ludus*, implying playfulness and deception both within the play and in the larger festival milieu, cf. Petrone (1983), 202-209. She observes, "[l]udus è allora il senso e la natura del teatro romano...Il microcosmo della commedia plautina riproduce così il microcosmo della festa e dei Ludi che la riquadrano...L’interno della commedia è in relazione di omogeneità ed analogia con l’esterno della festa" (pp.207-208).

309 Mnesilochus uses the same expression to characterize his father’s first comic victimization at the hands of Chrysalus at v.523, and Nicobulus says it of himself in the penultimate scene of the comedy (vv.1090, 1100). As David Sansone has suggested to me, *ludificatus* might be yet another bilingual pun on Plautus’ original, for it alludes to the verb ἀπατῶν via a translation of the Latin participle into Greek, ἀπατηθείς. On the expression *ludum facere*, Chiarini (1979), 214-215 observes, "[s]i può anzí affermare che, nella fantasia di Plauto, l’idea della gioiosa partecipazione di attori e pubblico ai *ludi* in generale e quelli scenici in particolare fa tutt’uno con l’idea di una non meno gioiosa partecipazione di taluni personaggi (servi, meretrici, sifonati e simili) alla *ludificatio* di talaltri personaggi (padri taccagni, madri o moglie tiranniche, ruffiani dal cuore di pietra). Tra *ludos facere*, insomma, e *ludos facere aliquem*, tra “celebrare la festa” e “ordire ad attuare una beffa ai danni di qualcuno” non c’è alcuna sostanziale differenza“.
that is left to do now is indulge in comedy’s “happily ever after” by feasting, drinking and making love.

From the comic hero’s perspective, then, this performance is over. Without an inkling of the fact that his clever plan has gone awry, Chrysalus sings his victorious monody as the play’s swan song. His proclamation of having done a double deed ought to be read, I propose, under this metatheatrical lens. That is, it seems to me that the servus is referring to the conclusion of the present production – a false ending! Chrysalus candidly tells the audience that by pulling off his deception and thus solving the conflict at the heart of the play (or so he thinks), he has performed Menander’s comedy: nam duplex facinus feci hodie – “I’ve put on the ‘Double Deceiver’ today”. Aware that the text he inhabits is a translation, Chrysalus names Plautus’ model to claim that he has fulfilled its plot, even boasting that his theft outdoes that of his Greek Doppelgänger. The slave’s reference to a duplex facinus is a quasi Latin translation of Δικαίωμα του πανδημήν.311

This insight reveals the double irony implicit in Chrysalus’ words. Most obviously, the hapless slave’s triumph is ironically premature: having just witnessed Mnesilochus’ rash return of the stolen money, the spectators are well aware that he will have to come up with yet another scheme to fulfill his role in bringing the Bacchides to its conclusion. Although Chrysalus is this comedy’s architectus doli, he is in the dark about what has transpired onstage in his absense. But the servus’ metatextual reference to the Bacchides’ Greek model, I submit, yields an additional layer of irony: the “Double Deceiver”, of course, cannot yet be finished, for the Latin slave has only deceived once. Like Mnesilochus, the Greek youth Sostratos ruins the play’s first stratagem by returning the stolen money; like Syros, then, Chrysalus will have to start again. That none of this dawns on the servus callidus is all part of the

311 This is, in fact, not the only instance in which Plautus alludes to the title of his model via translation; cf. p.111, infra.
312 Cf. Sharrock (2009), 12: “for once the audience is in a position to laugh at the scheming slave, because Chrysalus at this point does not know that Mnesilochus has gone and ruined his lovely plot!”. On the prematurity of Chrysalus’ triumph and the audience’s position of superior knowledge, cf. Stürner (2011), 182-183.
fun. He has not seen the Δις ἔξοπατῶν!\textsuperscript{313} For those members of the audience that have, however, Chrysalus’ brazen metatheatricality in invoking the Greek play is undercut. He is comically clueless that his first trick is preconditioned to fail, and that he will be forced to follow in the footsteps of the slave whose misdeeds he disparages. There is a funny contradiction, then, in Chrysalus’ theatrical self-consciousness. Although the slave is aware that the comedy he inhabits is a translation of Menander’s “Double Deceiver”, he is oblivious of his relation to the model text at this point in the plot.

So Chrysalus’ mysterious reference to a double deed is in fact a sophisticated intertextual quip playing upon the knowledge of spectators familiar with Plautus’ model.\textsuperscript{314} But besides being a good joke, it seems to me that this allusion may be read as a tongue-in-cheek reflection upon the dynamics of translation. Through the slave’s comic ignorance of the fact, Plautus is slyly acknowledging that Menander’s play coerces his adaptation, determining its plot by virtue of its status as the Bacchides’ Greek original. That is, Chrysalus must deceive twice, because Syros does.

This relationship is partly generated by audience expectations, which are

\textsuperscript{313} As Peter Bing has pointed out to me, Chrysalus’ cluelessness about the plot of the Δις ἔξοπατῶν goes against the slave’s explicit literary self-consciousness (viz. his references to Bellerophon and the legend of Troy): he should, it seems, know the plot of Menander’s comedy. Perhaps, then, the servus is ‘pretending’ in order to lay the ground for a rather complex joke, as suggested to me by Peter Bing in litteris: “So the more knowledgeable among the audience will be chuckling because – unlike the slave – they know to expect a further trick. Yet ironically, this proves to be only a set-up. For what they don’t know is that Plautus will add a 3\textsuperscript{rd} trick in his version. He will thus demonstrate that his audience is as clueless as his slave: their knowledge of the Greek original (with its apparently unequivocal title) doesn’t suffice to allow the Plautine audience to anticipate the supplementary twists that the Roman playwright piles on”.

\textsuperscript{314} This hypothesis will probably encounter opposition from those who think that the vast majority of Plautus’ spectators were not, in fact, familiar with the Greek original of the Bacchides. Given the uncertainty of the cultural horizon of theatrical audiences in the middle republican period (cf. p.14-15, supra), this question is an impossible one to definitively answer, although the presence of metatextual allusions in the Latin text strongly suggest, it seems to me, that the playwright expected at least a part of his audience to perceive them. What is more, this particular joke necessitates knowledge only of the Greek play’s title and not necessarily its plot, and the so-called didascalic references in eight of Plautus’ plays bear proof that the author and title of the Greek model text were sometimes invoked directly by Latin dramatists. In this light, it is not very far-fetched to suppose that many of the spectators knew that they were watching a translation of a given Greek comedy. That said, I do not wish to assert that an audience member ignorant of the Δις ἔξοπατῶν or even of Greek comedy as a genre would be left completely in the dark by Chrysalus’ line, and my explanation is not incompatible with others which seek to explain the duplex facinus on the level of the plot, viz. Questa’s solution according to which the double deed consists in helping Mnesilochus and duping Nicobulus (cf. n.303, supra).
conditioned to anticipate that the plot of the Latin translation will follow in the course of the Greek comedy. The *Bacchides'* equivocation regarding the two sisters and Mnesilochus' rash restitution of the stolen gold is no surprise for informed members of the audience, who have already watched (or read?) it all unfold in Menander's play. This, too, is implicit in what Chrysalus says, for his words *also* foreshadow the *Bacchides'* future action (though not necessarily that of the Δις ἔξα πατών, as I will argue): although his character does not yet know it, the slave will, in fact, be forced to pull off a *duplex facinus* to rectify Mnesilochus' mistake. His second scam, which involves using letters to fool the old man, is itself twofold, and its artists reap *dupicia spolia* by successfully stealing two separate sums of money. Thus the *servus'* words address the spoiler effect inherent in the literary activity of translation by “telling” the audience what is to come, which duplicates the effect of previous familiarity with the model text.

In this way, it seems to me that Chrysalus' reference to a double deed is polyvalent. By both demonstrating his ignorance of the status quo and foretelling what will happen in the play, the slave's words hint at the aesthetics of translation. Plautus cleverly reflects upon his artistic activity by acknowledging the constraints that the original imposes upon its adaptation and the corollary of such a relationship upon audience expectations. But this limitation of the translator’s work is presented in the *Bacchides* only to be subverted later on in the comedy, for the Latin playwright, I submit, ultimately asserts his authorial independence by deviating from the model text’s course and outdoing it numerically. That is, I propose that the comic rivalry Damen has perceived in verse 641's *duplex facinus* is the answer to why there are three deceptions to be found in a translation of the "Double Deceiver": initiating a comic rivalry, the tricky slave Chrysalus one-ups his twice-duping Greek predecessor by accomplishing *three* schemes.³¹⁵ Thus the Latin playwright outdoes his original by fraud.

³¹⁵ Owens (1994), 404-405 makes a similar suggestion: "Bacchides itself may represent an assertion of Roman superiority. With the addition of a third deception, Plautus in a sense surpassed his model – a likely ambition in any artist, perhaps more so when the artist was Roman and the master Greek". Like Damen, Owens points to the explicit reference to Syros in vv.649-650 as support.
This metatextual *agon* of numbers between original and adaptation is explicitly signaled throughout the text. No instance is more obvious than Chrysalus’ bold statement of having surpassed the theft of his Greek equivalent at vv.649-650:

\[\textit{non mihi isti placent Parmenones, Syri,} \\
\textit{qui duas aut tris minas auferunt eris.}\]

I don’t like these Parmenos and Syroses, who steal two or three *minae* from their masters.

As Damen has perceived, the disparagement of Syros and his accomplishments strongly supports the idea of a contest in deception between the two plays. But there is more to Chrysalus’ words, for the slave is slyly hinting at the terms of currency in this rivalry of wits: might his mention of “two or three *minae*” be read as a suggestion of the three ploys with which Plautus will surpass Menander’s two? In fact, Chrysalus expresses the same sentiment in very similar terms in his Trojan *canticum*, a natural place to underline the *Bacchides*’ numerical superiority to the “Double Deceiver” for the song celebrates Chrysalus’ triumphs in trickery shortly before he dupes Nicobulus for the third and final time.\(^{316}\) The song opens as follows (vv.925-928):

\[\textit{Atridae duo fraternes cluent fecisse facinus maxumum,} \\
\textit{quom Priami patriam Pergamum divina moenitum manu} \\
\textit{armis, equis, exercitu atque eximis bellatoribus} \\
\textit{milli cum numero nautium decumo anno post subegerunt.}\]

They say that two brothers, sons of Atreus, accomplished a very great deed, when in the tenth year they took Pergamum, the homeland of Priam, fortified by divine hand, with weapons and horses, an army and the most elite warriors, along with ships – 1000 in number.

Once again, Chrysalus declares that his duplicitous works outdo Hellenic achievements. This time, however, the slave has outstripped the truly epic deeds of *two* Greek heroes, the Homeric brothers Agamemnon and Menelaus\(^{317}\) by stealing

\(^{316}\) Scholars have noted the slave’s emphasis on *three* tricks in his monody; cf. Del Corno (1973), 41-42 and Barsby (1986), 170. This has contributed to the debate over numbers, for Chrysalus’ clear reference to his accomplishment of a threefold deception in the play obviously puts the *Bacchides* into conflict with the *Double Deceiver*.

\(^{317}\) The comparison lends support, I think, to the notion that there is a game of numbers going on in the text: one Latin slave outdoes two Homeric heroes, just as three Plautine tricks outdo two Menandrian deceptions.
400 nummi, pocketing 200 nummi twice over in the play’s second round of tricks. Might this doubled sum (that is, two sums of 200 nummi) subtly reflect Plautus’ transformation of the Δικ εἰς εὐπροτῶν’s second ruse into a twofold scheme?

The farcical final scene of the Bacchides in which the two patres are seduced by the sorores meretrices and join their sons for a ménage-à-six also contains what I think may be read as witty clues revealing the comic rivalry between the Greek and Latin texts. Having discovered the true vices of Mnesilochus and Pistoclerus, Nicobulus and Philoxenus prepare to fetch the adulescentes from the house of the two courtesans and chastise them for their misbehaviour. Upon their approach, the courtesans mock the senes in an extended metaphor, calling the doddering old men imbecilic sheep that have wandered from the herd (v.1123, a pecu balitantes).

The sisters make the following joke about the two “sheep” (vv.1124-1125, 1127-1128):

Athenian BA: at pol nitent, haud sordidae videntur ambae.
BA: attonsae hae quidem ambae usque sunt

... Athenian BA: rerin ter in anno tu has tonsitari?
BA: pol hodie altera iam bis detonsa certo est.

Athenian BA: But by Pollux, they’re shiny! Neither of them seems really shabby.
BA: Indeed, they’ve both been completely shorn.

... Athenian BA: You think they’re usually cut three times a year?
BA: Well, by Pollux, one of them has certainly been shorn twice just today.

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318 Scholars have frequently suggested that this final scene of the Bacchides represents a drastic departure from the Δικ εἰς εὐπροτῶν in its extended sheep metaphor and four speaking parts; cf. Williams (1956), 450, Fraenkel (1960), 68-70, Gaiser (1970), 79-80, Clark (1976), 95-96, who also reveals the parallel structure thus created in the text with the opening scene which also features a seduction, Bertini (1983), 317, Barsby (1986), 184-185, Anderson (1993), 26-27 and Lefèvre (2011), 66-68 and 120-121. It has been proposed that Menander’s play was more likely to have ended with a scene stressing familial reconstitution and harmony; cf. Anderson (1993), 23-29. Aliter Holzberg (1974), 155-156 and Questa (1975), 68-69, in whose view the scene faithfully represents the plot of Menander’s play with only stylistic modifications.

319 In fact, the scene suggests the numbers two and three by its very set-up: two meretrices mock two old men, while three sinners—the two adulescentes and the servus (cf. v.1145-1146) wait inside the the sisters’ house.
The pun, which works based upon the metaphorical valence of *atondere* (“to shear”), to signify the act of deception, is in reference to the two separate sums of 200 *nummi* that Chrysalus has successfully stolen from Nicobulus in the course of the play. But it seems to me that there is more to this dialogue between the *meretrices*, and I propose that it may be another metatextual allusion to the Δις ἔξασπατῶν.

Like Chrysalus’ *duplex facinus, bis detonsa* is a quasi-translation of the original’s title, though the voice of the participle has been inverted from the active *exapaton* in Greek to the passive *detonsa* in Latin; that is, the “Double Deceiver” is turned here into the “Doubly Deceived”. Such an explicit reference to the model text together with yet another reoccurrence of the numbers two and three strongly suggests that these verses are meant to underscore the *Bacchides’* 3 ploys vs the Δις ἔξασπατῶν’s 2, though this time around the emphasis has been reversed from the trickster to the tricked. In fact, I wonder whether this exchange may not even be a tongue-in-cheek comment on the audience’s perception of the joke going on between original and adaptation; that is, Athenian Bacchis is asking, as it were, if the spectators have understood the joke!

By this reading, the constraints implicit in the relationship between an original and its copy are overturned by the Latin text, for in surpassing the Greek comedy’s tally of deception, the *Bacchides* has broken out of its Menandrian pattern. Rather than follow his model suit, the Latin translator engages the Δις ἔξασπατῶν in a contest of comic one-upmanship, making Chrysalus beat Syrus at his own game of deception by pulling off three ruses instead of two. The premature proclamation of having fulfilled Menander’s play which accompanies Chrysalus’ impudent critique of the Greek slave is all part of the ironic fun, for the *servus* now, in fact, outnumbers the Δις ἔξασπατῶν by becoming the Τρις ἔξασπατῶν, the *thrice* deceiver. One could

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320 In fact, the joke picks up on what Nicobulus says at v.1095 (*is me scelus auro usque attondit dolis doctis indoctum ut lubitumst*), as noted by Del Corno (1973), 175; cf. also vv.241-242.

321 Thus Barsby (1986), 186.
even read a reference to this numerical superiority built into the comic hero’s name: Chry-sa-lus has three syllables, where as Σύρως has only two.\textsuperscript{322}

Through his one-upping wily slave, then, Plautus asserts his authorial independence, at once acknowledging and defeating the limitations imposed upon his creativity by the dynamics of literary translation. By so doing, he also defies the expectations of the audience. Much like the troubled reaction of modern scholars to Chrysalus’ threefold trickery, a spectator who knows even only the title of Plautus’ model\textsuperscript{323} will anticipate two ploys in the \textit{Bacchides}. In fact, it seems to me that the playwright cunningly encourages this false expectation of a twin deception by means of the doubling motif that pervades the Latin text. In the \textit{Bacchides}, doublets are everywhere:\textsuperscript{324} there are two courtesans, two young men in love, two rivals for the affections of Bacchis, two old men, two slaves,\textsuperscript{325} two duplicitous letters and two sums of 200 philippi,\textsuperscript{326} just as there are two comedies and two playwrights – one Greek, one Latin.\textsuperscript{327} In fact, Plautus has even called his play ‘The Two Bacchises’ to match Menander’s doublet title.\textsuperscript{328} In the Latin play, then, there are two of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{322} Cf. also Pis-to-cle-rus (4)/Sos-tra-tos (3) and Mne-sil-o-chus (4)/Mos-chos (2). Chrysalus’ superiority, in fact, is also cultural, for the barbarian Syros – Syrian by name – is transformed into the ‘golden boy’ Chrysalus, whose nomen tells us that he is thoroughly ‘Greek’.
\item \textsuperscript{323} Handley (1975), 119 suggests that for Plautus, a reference to the author and title of the Greek model was conventional: “[f]rom the point of view of the audience, there can hardly have been much doubt from the start that they were to see a Greek play, and possibly…the naming of the Greek author and title is, as much as anything, a reminder that the goods are genuine”.
\item \textsuperscript{324} For a superficial discussion of the doublets in three of Plautus’ plays, cf. Bertini (1983). He discusses the Bacchides on pp.316-318, identifying the play’s doublets as two young men, two love affairs, two courtesans, two fathers, two deceptions and two letters (p.316). Cf. also Grisolia (1976), 56, Petrone (1983), 137-140, who traces the motif in Plautus to its origin in Euripidean tragedy, and Salamon (2004), 33-37, in whose view the Bacchides is a comédie double as well as a comédie du double. Salamon argues that the play contains a pair of metatheatrical, controlling characters Chrysalus and the Bacchis sisters, whose role in the first (as we have it) and last scenes of the play demonstrate that these meretrices have a directorial power over the text like the scheming slave.
\item \textsuperscript{325} Rizzo (1990), 40-47 argues that the scheming slave persona in both the Διήνεξις εξωπαττῶν and the Bacchides is, in fact, Sostratos/Mnesilochus’ ex-pedagogus, creating an opposite pair of inverted doublets with Moschos/Pistoderus’ strict tutor Lydus.
\item \textsuperscript{326} Interestingly, two times 200 nummi multiplied by 3 is 1,200 nummi – a figure mentioned twice in the text as the sum of money owed to Nicobulus by Archidemides (cf. vv.230, 272). Great thanks goes to David Sansone for this observation.
\item \textsuperscript{327} In fact, the act of translating a dramatic text creates doublets by definition, for every character in the original gains an equivalent in the adaptation. Thus not only does Nicobulus, for instance, have a double in the Bacchides’ other senex Philoxenus, but the twins are made into a triplet if we add the γυναῖκα of Menander’s play. Coincidentally (or perhaps not!) once again we encounter the numbers 2 and 3.
\item \textsuperscript{328} Cf. n.174, supra.
\end{itemize}
everything, except the very doublet that features in the title of the Greek model – the deceptions achieved by the conniving slaves! Thus the playwright underlines the numerical twist he has added to his adaptation by surprising the audience with a triplet instead of yet another doublet, drawing attention to his sly rivalry with the model text.

It is true, however, that the state of the Greek fragments only allows us to go so far in this argument: without resorting to conjecture, it is impossible to assert that Chrysalus actually accomplishes an extra trick compared to what Syros pulled off in the Δικός ἔξο πατων. But for the purposes of this argument, it matters not. The Latin text’s emphasis on outdoing its Menandrian model and its allusive play with the Greek title which counts two deceptions is evidence enough, it seems to me, that Plautus is making a statement about his own freedom as an adaptor of Menander. We do not need the lost sections of the Greek comedy to perceive the competitive stance the playwright takes up against his model, because Plautus has incorporated this into his own text independently of the Greek comedy.

A close reading of Chrysalus’ polyvalent metatheatricality and his threefold trickery has revealed, I hope, the way Plautus comments self-reflexively upon the dynamics of his own genre. By ‘dissing’ the Δικός ἔξο πατων through a subtle game of comic one-upmanship, the Latin translator gives us a glimpse into the relationship of his adaptations with their lost literary models and sheds light on his own sophisticated poetic workmanship.
3. When The Cat’s Away:  
The *Persa*’s letter from the East and inset performance

**Introduction**

Next, I explore a letter *usque e Persia*, or at least allegedly so. In Plautus’ *Persa*, the slave Toxilus is in love with the *meretrix* Lemniselenis, whose freedom he has sworn to buy from the pimp Dordalus on this very day. Toxilus employs an epistolary scheme to get the requisite funds, forging a letter from his master Timarchides, who is currently away on business in Persia.\(^{329}\) “Timarchides’” missive is, supposedly, delivered to Athens by a Persian,\(^{330}\) played by Toxilus’ friend and fellow slave, Sagaristio. The epistle explains that the Persian messenger has in his possession a young Arabian captive, whom he hopes to sell at Athens. Timarchides’ *familia* (represented in the play entirely by Toxilus) is to receive the foreign merchant hospitably and help him get a good price for his human merchandise. The girl, known only as *virgo*, is really the freeborn daughter of a parasite, Saturio. Saturio will “recognize” and “free” the *virgo* upon her sale to Dordalus, who will lose what he has paid for the illegal purchase of an Athenian citizen and be denounced before the city praetor. This Persian ruse is a resounding success, and the play concludes with a celebratory banquet, featuring the mockery and beating of the defeated pimp by the victorious slaves.\(^{331}\)

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\(^{329}\) There are, in fact, two parallel schemes in the *Persa*: Toxilus’ fellow slave Sagaristio unexpectedly gets the funds to buy Lemniselenis by stealing the money his master has given him to purchase oxen in Eretria. Sagaristio lends this cash to the *servus amans*, who manages to pay his friend back with the money embezzled via the epistolary plot. I discuss these concomitant schemes and the scholarly comment they have engendered at n.368, *infra*.

\(^{330}\) The play is named after this Persian character played by Sagaristio, whom Toxilus addresses in v.676 as *Persa* “Persian man”. Richlin (2005), 118 comments: “it is interesting to think about the form of this proper noun: masculine nouns ending in -a are rare in Latin, this one belongs to a set of nouns that transmute the ending from Greek, and Romans strongly associated the Orient, and sometimes Greece, with effeminacy.” Richlin entitles her translation of the *Persa* “Iranman”. On the Persian elements in the play (i.e. the actors’ “Persian” disguises and naming customs, parodied by Sagaristio at vv.701-705) and possible sources of Roman knowledge about this Eastern nation, cf. Faller (2001b). I discuss this ethnic costume of Toxilus’ theatrical ruse below, on p.142.

\(^{331}\) The highly farcical character of the banquet that concludes the play has often provoked critics to postulate Plautine originality vis-à-vis his Greek original (on which cf. n.335, *infra*); cf. Woytek (1982), 30-34, Hofmann (1989), 405, Bettini (1991), 265-266 and Benz (2001). Exploring this feasting scene and, in particular, the dancing sequences at great length, Benz argues that Plautus relies upon genres like mime for such scenes rather than his Greek comic models. In the reading of
The *Persa*, then, features an internal intrigue mounted and pulled off by a slave to get the girl *for himself*, an interesting innovation on the usual Plautine amatory plot which centres upon the *servus callidus* efforts to free the beloved of his young master. In this way, the play does not achieve social reversal by its end through the clever slave’s victory over his *erus maior*, but presents a comedy that is topsy-turvy from the beginning, in which *servi amant*. Toxilus’ hybrid *persona* and the pervasive saturnalian character of the *Persa*’s unparalleled slave milieu have been the main focus of scholarship, leading some critics to postulate that the play is an adaptation of a peculiar Greek comedy in the very early or very late stages of New Comedy, or to conclude that the Latin translator has made drastic alterations

McCarthy (2000), 153-154, the text’s conclusion mirrors the tension between morality and farce present throughout the comedy by playing upon a struggle between reconciliation with the pimp and his continued humiliation. *Ludificatio* ultimately triumphs.

332 These are the words of Sagaristio, who highlights this peculiarity of the *Persa* in the opening scene thus: *iam servi hic amant*? (v.25). On this phrase, cf. Lefèvre (2001), 20, with a list of scholars who regard the question “als plautinisch”.

333 Müller (1957), 3 and Woytek (1982), 43-45 both think that this hybrid identity goes back to the Greek author of the *Persa*’s original, whereas in the views of Hofmann (1989), 406 and Lefèvre (2001), 21 Toxilus’ *persona* is a parody of comic stock types to be attributed entirely to the originality of Plautus and constituting an essential aspect of the comedy’s saturnalian flavour. Consonant with his larger thesis that the *Persa* is theatre about theatre, Chiarini (1979) asserts (not entirely convincingly, to my mind) that Toxilus “non è innamorato, ma fa l’innamorato” (p.40). Slater (1985), 53 suggests that the *Persa*’s slave is the ultimate comic hero, uniting the labour and rewards of typical Plautine amatory plot. McCarthy (2000) ch.4 reads Toxilus’ character as containing a series of roles: she argues that the slave goes from lover, to defender of civic values, to master in the course of the play. These various *personae* are never reconciled with one another; as a result, the audience never learns who Toxilus really is as a character. On Toxilus’ portrayal, cf. also Auhagen (2001), Stärk (1991), 143-145, Hofmann (1989), 399-405 and Marshall (1997), 104, who perceptively notes that “Toxilus assumes multiple roles in Plautus’ play – *callidus, amator, poeta* – an opportunity afforded him in part because of the absence of his master.”


335 Judging it to be unlikely that the master of New Comedy would have produced such a plot, various critics have advocated a date before or after the career of Menander for the *Persa*’s Greek original. There are two main camps: the pre-Menandrian hypothesis in Middle Comedy proposed by Wilamowitz (1941), 263 (Dumont (1977), 260 has even suggested a poet of Old Comedy – “un autre Aristophane” – as the author of Plautus’ model), and the post-Menandrian one postulated by Fraenkel (1960), 460, according to whom the Greek play was a parody of conventional New Comedy. Other scholars, however, prefer a date in New Comedy, the era suggested, for instance, by Müller (1957), 89-92 in his monograph on the *Persa*’s original (Müller, however, fixes the setting of the play in an earlier historical era, which, to his mind, is a result of Athenian “Klassizismus” hearkening back to the Persian wars) and originally put forth by Meyer (1907), 191. For a thorough bibliography, cf. Lefèvre (2001), 17-20, who agrees that “[d]ie Welt des Persa steht der Komödie Menanders fern” (p.9). The *Persa*’s model, however, is neither mentioned in the text itself, nor plausibly deducible from another source. All such considerations are, therefore, pure conjecture.
in his adaptation. Much of what has been written on the Persa, then, is limited in scope, endeavouring to prove or disprove Plautus’ independence in translation rather than read the text for its own literary merits. There are, however, important exceptions: the metatheatrical dimension of the Persa has been investigated by Chiarini (1979), Slater (1985) and Marshall (1997), studies that have contributed to a more nuanced appreciation of this comedy. The same may be said of McCarthy (2000), who reads the Persa as a sustained tension between the modes of naturalism and farce. In my discussion, I aim to further our understanding of this piece by a close study of its epistolary motif, which has never been investigated in any detail: Slater touches only briefly on the role of the letter in Toxilus’ incarnation as internal director, and the Persa is conspicuously absent from Jenkins’ 2005 survey of the letter in Plautine comedy.

How, I ask, does the Persa employ and rely upon the epistolary medium? In the first section of my chapter, I explore the plot’s letters in detail, revealing the circumstances in which these texts are conceived of, delivered and received. I begin with a close reading of the preliminary letter exchange between the comedy’s two lovers, suggesting that it serves to introduce epistolarity into the text and to prefigure the duplicitous missive that Toxilus will use to deceive the leno. Next, I analyze the nature of “Timarchides’” letter and the fictive scenario in which it operates. My discussion elucidates how Toxilus cooks up a clever scam, writing a letter from his master to himself. The servus usurps Timarchides’ voice and authority to convince the pimp of the deceitful premise, deftly using the distance implicit in this document arriving (allegedly) all the way from Persia to trick Dordalus into buying the captive. The second part of my chapter is concerned with

336 The perception that the Persa contains elements unlike those (allegedly) characteristic of Greek New Comedy began with Ladewig in 1842; the bibliography of subsequent scholars who share his hypothesis (viz. the majority of critics, although Müller (1957) is a notable exception) is concisely summarized by Lefèvre (2001), 14-16. Lefèvre, too, sees the text as “eine radikale Umarbeitung durch Plautus” (p.20), and his lengthy article is devoted to discerning Greek from Plautine elements. This is also the pursuit of Hofmann (1989).

337 Nevertheless, Chiarini (1979) devotes a significant portion of his discussion to discerning Plautine elements and making conjectural suggestions regarding the Persa’s Greek original. Neither, in fact, is Slater immune to the temptation of reconstructing the play’s Greek original: in the conclusion of his discussion he sets forth his view on p.53 n.18.
unpacking the synergy between performance and text. Here I strive to reveal the metatheatrical dynamic sparked by the Persa’s embedded letter, pursuing the metaphor of theatrical creation implicit in the false missive. I thus lay bare the mise-en-abyme engendered by the Persa’s “play-within-the-play”. Ultimately, I argue that Toxilus has, in fact, reproduced Plautus’ comedy by way of inverted symmetry, an image of replication that might allude to the author’s own aesthetics of adaptation.

I: Letters in action
1. Epistolary preliminaries

The Persa contains no prologue.338 It begins medias in rebus, with Toxilus lamenting his sufferings of love, which, he thinks, outdo even the twelve labours of Hercules.339 The servus amans et egens confides in Sagaristio,240 revealing the love affair in which he has become involved whilst living it up during Timarchides’ travels, indulging in behaviour usually reserved for liberi; as he himself proclaims (v.28): basilice agito eletheria341 (“I’m on a royal vacance”). Toxilus begs Sagaristio to find 600 nummi to lend him so that he might buy his girlfriend’s freedom from the pimp who owns her

338 In the view of Müller (1957), 6 the Persa’s Greek original contained an expository prologue eliminated by Plautus in his adaptation. Müller sets out his own sketch of this hypothetical Greek prologue on pp.82-89, postulating that it would have been situated after the first scene, giving the audience the plot’s background information, including the details of Timarchides’ absence, and an idea of what was to come. Woytek (1982), 18-20, 25 and Slater (1985) 46 n.9 rightly argue against this hypothesis. Danese (2011), 41 remarks that the function of the missing prologue is filled by the “dialogo prologico” between Toxilus and Sagaristio that opens the play.

339 Thus Toxilus’ hybrid persona, which combines the tricky slave with the adulescens amans, is visually evident from the first line of the play, for the actor singing of his love toils would have been wearing a slave’s costume; cf. Chiarini (1979), 35, Slater (1985), 37, Auhagen (2001), 97-98 and Danese (2011), 42-43. Chiarini (1979), 38 further suggests that Toxilus may have in fact worn a slave’s dress but the mask of an adulescens, “per voluto contrasto”. This hypothesis is based on Sagaristio’s comment to Toxilus (v.24): ergo edepol palles, which, in the view of Chiarini, likens Toxilus’ mask to that of the ἀπαλός νεανίς in Pollux’s classification of theatrical masks.

340 In the view of Müller (1957), 10, Sagaristio also has a hybrid persona, representing a combination of the helpful slave and the helpful friend of the adulescens. Woytek (1982), 45 agrees, judging, furthermore, the character to have been a creation not of Plautus, but of the Persadichter.

341 This line is pivotal in Chiarini’s 1979 reading of the Persa. Chiarini sees the play as a saturnalian celebration of theatricality in which slaves play their parts qua “teatranti”: “Io spettatore ha capito, da questo breve sprazzo di gioiosa disponibilità alla festa, dal linguaggio infarcito di grecismi così tipico dei servi callidi plautini...ha capito che Toxilus, al di là delle apparenze, non è affatto un servo fuorischema: che non è innamorato ma fà l’innamorato; e lo fa così bene, dimostra, in questo, un talento teatrale così sicuro, una professionalità così scaltita e sperimentata, da lasciar presagire, per il prosieguo dell’azione, le più stupefacenti trovate, appunto, teatrali” (p.40). On this verse, cf. also Stärk (1991), 145.
(vv.35-36), a sum that he will swiftly repay (v.37). Sagaristio pledges his best efforts to the cause and takes his leave, as does Toxilus, who retreats home to cook up *malam rem aliquam* (v.52) for the evil *leno*. Upon his reemergence at v.81, the tricky slave announces that he has already come up with a plan to make Dordalus pay for Lemniselenis’ manumission himself (vv.81-82), a scheme that will require the participation of Saturio, his faithful parasite. Threatening never again to invite him to dinner if he does not cooperate (vv.139-144), Toxilus persuades Saturio to lend out his daughter to act a part in the ruse, pretending to be an Arabian captive up for sale by a Persian merchant. The parasite is to instruct the *virgo* in the sad story of her character (vv.148-152) and disguise her *lepide in peregrinum modum* (v.158). Saturio assures Toxilus that his daughter is sufficiently *mala* for the role (v.153: *ter tanto peior ipsa est quam illam tu esse vis* - “She herself is three times worse than you want her to be”), as the *virgo* will, in fact, soon show herself to be.

Thus the *Persa’s* intrigue is rapidly conceived of and arranged in the first 167 verses of the play. But Toxilus does not yet reveal his *modus operandi*: we know only that the disguised *virgo* and her supposed seller will act as foreigners to

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342 Although it is never explicitly stated in the text, Toxilus’ ploy must be the means by which he intends to pay Sagaristio back for any money he might be able to procure for Lemniselenis’ purchase. I agree, then, with Chiarini, who perceives that Toxilus prepares the deception in the knowledge that Sagaristio will, in fact, succeed in getting 600 *nummi*. Chiarini (1979), 29 thinks that Toxilus is eager to pay his fellow slave back “per motivi di solidarietà di classe”. Some scholars, however, doubt Toxilus’ intentions to reimburse his fellow slave: Woytek (1982), 23, likewise convinced that Toxilus mounts his scheme “um abhängig von Erfolg der Geldsuche des Sagaristio … eben durch einen Trick Geld zum Freikauf der Geliebten aufzutreiben” (*pace* Ijsendijk, 1884, 85 *et alii*; cf. Woytek p.23 n.s. 86-89), is doubtful, however, that Toxilus intends to pay back his friend, arguing that this promise of reimbursement is a stock element of such situations; so too Richlin (2005), 115.

343 Commentators have remarked upon the peculiarity of these circumstances: Toxilus is the only slave in comedy to have a parasite who is, moreover, a freeborn Athenian citizen; cf. e.g. Lefèvre (2001), 21 and Auhagen (2001), 100. This relationship contributes to the inversion implicit in Toxilus’ *persona* and to the overtly saturnalian flavour of the *Persa*. In the view of Chiarini (1979), 99, Saturio was not a parasite in the *Persa’s* Greek model, but a sycophant – a professional trickster such as is hired in the *Triminnum*.

344 Thus the first two scenes of the play mirror one another, for in each of these scenes Toxilus asks another character (both of which, incidentally, have names beginning with an S) for a loan in order to pull off his ploy.

345 Sagaristio, however, still needs to be informed of his part. This will occur offstage, as Toxilus makes clear in his words to Sagaristio at vv.325-328: *nam iam omnis sycophantias instruxi et comparavi/quod pacto ab lenone auferam hoc argentum.../et mulier ut sit libera atque ipse ullo det argentum./sed sequere me: ad eam rem usus est tua mihi opera.*

118
The servus keeps his devious letter plot up his sleeve for now, only revealing the missive (and therefore his precise strategy) to the audience just before it is “delivered” to Dordalus. The epistolary element of the deception, however, is prefigured in the text by real and sincere epistolary activity that occurs before the ruse is put into action: following the conference between Saturio and Toxilus is a sequence of scenes dedicated to depicting the delivery of letters which the play’s two lovers send to one another, employing their respective servi, Paegnium and Sophoclidisca, as couriers. Although the verbivelitatio that the slave-messengers engage in has attracted comment, the mechanics of the letter exchange between Toxilus and Lemniselenis have not. I propose to unpack the scenario so as to better understand the function of this preliminary epistolary activity in the Persa, and its connection to Toxilus’ letter deception to come.

The Persa’s first epistolary sequence begins with the precocious ancilla Sophoclidisca, on the way to run an errand for her mistress Lemniselenis. The slave-girl emerges as she is speaking back to the meretrix who is inside Dordalus’ house (vv.168-178), sneering at Lemniselenis’ lack of faith in her superior abilities to accomplish the task (vv.172-176):

nam equidem te iam sector quintum hunc annum, quem interea, credo,
ovi[348] si in ludum iret, potuisset iam fieri ut probe litteras sciret.
quom interim tu meum ingenium fans atque infans nondum etiam
edidicisti.

potin ut taceas? potin ne moneas?
memini et scio et calleo et commemini.

For it’s now the fifth year that I’ve been waiting on you, in which time, it seems to me,

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346 As Toxilus tells us at vv.137-138, Dordalus has come to Athens from Megara only six months ago, so he will not recognize either Sagaristio or the young girl.
347 Scholars have observed that the extended comic agon between the two messengers does nothing to advance the plot; cf. Slater (1985), 42-43, who, however, thinks “...the dramatic effect of the play would be far weaker without this “interruption” (p.42). Lefèvre (2001) 40-41, 70-72 likewise observes the delay caused by the Streit-Szene, which he calls feszenninischen Hickhack attributable to Italian oral theatrical genres. Chiarini (1979), 51-64, on the other hand, gives a metatheatrical reading of the verbal duel, seeing the slaves’ exchange as a mini comic performance. Similarly, Marshall (1997), 102 -103 argues that the point of this scene is to “demonstrate Plautus' technical virtuosity” in mirror-staging, a technique that creates two “worlds” onstage between a pair of competing characters.
348 ovis is a widely accepted conjecture made by Bergk, although Lindsay, considers the quis preserved by the MSS to be “possibly correct” (fort. recte). Woytek (1982), 221 makes the case for Bergk’s emendation.
it would have been possible for a sheep, if it were to go to school,
to learn his letters very well,
while you, in the meantime, human or animal, haven't yet learned my
nature.
Can you be quiet? Can you not admonish me?
I remember and I know and I'm clever and I really do remember!

Sophoclidisca's disparagement of Lemniselenis' powers of comprehension, I submit,
is a clever allusion to her own bilingual (and metatheatrical) sprechender Name: the
meretrix is too dull to perceive what the ancilla's very name proclaims, viz. that the
slave girl has learned her role well: her name is a compound of "Sophocles" and,
it seems to me, the Latin verb disce, "to learn". That is, her name 'says' that
Sophoclidisca is "she who learns from the chorodidaskolos Sophocles", and,
therefore, well versed in her dramatic part, although this is something Lemniselenis
has not yet 'learned' (edidicisti from edisco). In fact, Lemniselenis is so vacuous that
a sheep (a proverbially dumb animal) could outdo her intellectual achievements
and learn its litterae, an ironic joke on what Sophoclidisca is holding – the
courtesan's litterae for Toxilus which the serva is out to deliver. As turns out, then,
Lemniselenis does know her letters after all! But besides generating a laugh, it seems
to me that the quip is meant to draw attention to the prop and thereby the
epistolary exchange in action, which is at this point in the text only signaled visually
in performance. It is tempting to imagine the actor using this "writing tablet" to
enhance the comic effect of Sophoclidisca's insult, baaing while "reading" the letter vel sim.

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349 Woytek (1982), 132 follows the original suggestion of Ritschl (1877), 329 in reading the girl’s
name as meaning “little female Sophocles”, and, therefore, a reference to her intelligence, although
Woytek estimates Sophoclidisca’s cunning to be inferior to that of other maids in Plautine comedy (p.59). In her modern translation of the play, Richlin (2005) calls Sophoclidisca “Brain muffin”,
combining the “wise” (σοφός) root of the ancilla’s name with the suffix id-isca which, she notes, is a
“double diminutive” characteristic of prostitute names (p.119). Fontaine (2010), 66 makes the same
observation. It seems to me, however, that a Latin audience would have inevitably heard the word
discere in Sophoclidisca’s name, especially given that the serva puns on the same word in v.174, as I
point out above.

350 I owe this idea to David Sansone, who further points out that Sophocles wrote the Lemniae, a play
about the Lemnian episode of the Argonauts’ journey surviving only in fragments. Might then the
present scenario, I wonder, contain the additional irony that Lemniselenis does not recognize the
name of the tragedian who ‘composed her’, as it were, in Sophoclidisca's name?


352 Sophoclidisca makes no direct reference to the tabellae she bears until v.247: Toxilo has fero
tabellas tuo ero.
But I wonder if we may go yet a step further, reading into the *servas* sheep joke a metatheatrical meaning suggested by the term *ludus* – the Latin word for school, but also the civic festivals at which Roman comedies were performed and the games of deception staged by the characters within the plays themselves. The occurrence of this highly programmatic term with *litterae*, the word for epistle, gestures at a possible *double entendre*: might Sophoclidisca’s character be foreshadowing the plot to come through her implicit connection of *litterae* and *ludus*? These, in fact, are the very tools Toxilus will use to defeat the pimp and bring the text to its happily ever after. In fact, the *servus amans* himself soon comes onstage (v.183), likewise holding a letter. Neatly mirroring the preceding episode between Sophoclidisca and her mistress, Toxilus is in the midst of directing his slave-boy, Paegnium, to deliver his own message to Lemniselenis. He makes the epistolary scenario explicit with a direct reference to the writing tablets he hands over to the messenger (vv.195-196):

*sed has tabellas, Paegnium,*

*ipsi Lemniseleni fac des et quae iussi nuntiato.*

But these tablets, Paegnium,
see to it that you give them to Lemniselenis herself, and announce what I have ordered.

The two slave-couriers meet as they traverse the stage to fulfill their errands, engaging in an extended match of comic *malitia* (vv.200-250) that significantly delays the consignment of the letters. This is interesting in view of the critical observation, frequently made, that the *verbivelitatio* between the two slaves occupies time without advancing the plot. The two delays, dramatic and epistolary, are in fact parallel, both caused by the exchange of insults between Paegnium and Sophoclidisca that goes on for fifty lines. What is more, the textual image generated by the embedded theatrical epistle suggests a further

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354 McCarthy (2000), 137 notes: “The joke of the long scene II.2 (183-250) is that the exchange between the two slaves, repetitive in both style and content, contradicts the stated urgency of their errands and even comes close to derailing the romantic plot”.
355 cf. n.347, *supra*.
356 cf. pp.142-146, *infra*. 
metaphorical correspondence between the two *morae*: if we ‘read’ the letters as standing for the *Persa*’s script, it follows that the action of the play cannot go on until these documents are delivered and realized in the plot.

Thus the verbal duel between the slave messengers considerably extends the element of epistolary time inherent in the lovers’ correspondence, which, in view of the very short distance between them, should be almost instantaneous. In fact, the next-door neighbours’ use of the epistolary medium to communicate is striking *per se*, for letters are usually employed by those for whom dialogue in person is rendered impossible by distance. Something else, then, besides physical separation must be impeding the addressees from communicating face-to-face, for, as Hodkinson and Rosenmeyer observe:

*Epistolary communication is justified by the separation of the writer from the receiver; one writes because one cannot speak... The letter is always a sign or reminder of that absence that engenders and sustains the correspondence.*

It seems most likely that we are to imagine Dordalus as the obstacle separating the lovers and necessitating their use of the epistles to communicate - an ironic detail given that Toxilus will use this very medium to get permanent access to the girl the pimp is (presumably) keeping locked away. Further, these missives exchanged between Toxilus and Lemniselenis from down the street stand in funny contrast to the forged epistle from Timarchides, which will supposedly travel from a great distance to reach Athens (though in reality it comes from just next-door, too).

Another fascinating aspect of the *Persa*’s initial epistolary scenario is the simultaneity of the correspondence, for the two lovers write to one another *in the same moment*. The communication between Toxilus and Lemniselenis is not, then, an exchange but a collision - the correspondents’ missives literally bump into one another in the course of their delivery, a coincidence mirrored by the collision of the two slave-messengers in the crisscross of consignment that occurs onstage. The usual order of epistolary communication (and, indeed, of face-to-face communication), reception followed by reply, is thus derailed. The resulting

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situation is one fraught with potential confusion, for the effect of such concurrent epistles is like that of two voices speaking at the same time: there is no real reciprocal communication, but the transmission of two isolated messages whose relation is unplanned and unpredictable. That is, each letter may contain information that negates the other, or change the circumstances in which its counterpart was written. What is more, the out-of-order correspondence leaves both authors unsure of how their own missive has been received. Instead of a reaction to their news, Lemniselenis and Toxilus get the inverse - a snapshot of their correspondent’s status quo before the arrival of their letter.

Any mayhem due to the delay in delivery or the epistles’ concomitance, however, is averted: as Sophoclidisca tells us at the end of her quarrel with Paegnium, the tabellae are inscribed only with the sweet nothings of the lovers (nisi fortasse blandae verba, v.250). In fact, the epistles’ contents are not revealed, and they slip out of the text after v.250, never again to reappear. Thus these missives are not kinetic, as neither their consignment nor the news they bear affects the development of the comedy’s plot. What, then, is their function? It seems to me that this preliminary epistolary activity serves to introduce epistolarity into the text, subtly announcing the Persa as a letter play in the absence of a prologue. We might call such letters “prefigurative”, for they establish Toxilus as a letter-writer, foreshadowing the slave’s decisive role in this comedy as an author of text. Moreover, these missives set up an exemplum of real epistolary communication which will be perverted by the devious letter-writing later on. That is, these sincere

358 Peter Bing has suggested that these blandae verba may, in fact, be a comment on the conventionality of the couple’s declarations of love. He observes in litteris that “[t]he fact that [Toxilus and Lemniselenis] are in love may set the plot in motion, but it doesn’t matter what they actually say to each other: lovers’ declarations are interchangeable, comically unnecessary, theatrically unproductive”. For this term, cf. also Poen. 136 (nam tuae blanditiae mihi sunt, quod dici solet) and Ov. Ars 1.439-440 on love letters (blanditias ferat illa [= cera] tuas imitateque amantem/verba), 1.467-468 (Sit tibi credibilis sermo consuetaque verba, blandam tamen, praesens ut videare loqui), 3.624 (blandas ... notas).

359 Chiarini (1979), 52 notes this detail. He argues that the messages themselves are of no importance to Plautus, whose main focus is "la dimensione specificamente teatrale". Accordingly, the playwright emphasizes the delivery of the two letters, which is constructed as “una piccola recita”.

360 According to Slater (1985), 43 this sequence serves to demonstrate that “...the two lovers are given to letter-writing”.

361 I make a similar argument for the epistle in the opening scene of the Pseudolus; cf. p.195, infra.
letters, I propose, are a foil against which the Persa’s faked correspondence may be read, acting as a matrix to highlight Toxilus’ mischievous manipulation of epistolary conventions in the trick he plots for the leno. The epistolary leitmotif is, as we shall see, the first in a series of the Persa’s elements that will be replicated within Toxilus’ internal production with a twist, mirrored back upon the text in farcical form.

After the warring slave-messengers finally end their comic bickering to deliver their masters’ tabellae, a triumphant Sagaristio comes onstage, singing a hymn of thanks to Jupiter. Fortuitously sent by his master to buy oxen at Eretria, the servus amicus will use the cash to help Toxilus instead, accepting the inevitable punishment from his master with the brazen indifference characteristic of Plautine slaves (v.264: *tuxtax tergo erit meo. non curo* “It’ll be ‘bang bang’ for my back, but I don’t care.”). After a tussle with Paegnium (who has just delivered Toxilus’ letter to Lemniselenis), Sagaristio encounters the servus amans as he gives Sophoclidisca a message to be reported back to Lemniselenis (vv.302-304):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{paratum iam esse dicit unde argentum sit futurum,} \\
\text{iubeto habere animum bonum, dic me illam amare multum;} \\
\text{ubi se adivat, ibi me adivat, quae dixi ut nuntiares,} \\
\text{satia ea tenes?}
\end{align*}
\]

Say that it has now been arranged where the money will come from, order her to take heart, and tell her that I love her a lot; she helps me by helping herself. Do you have a good enough handle on what I’ve told you to report?

This is, in fact, Toxilus’ reply to the courtesan’s letter for, as I have argued, the missives sent between the two lovers fail to achieve any significant dialogue by

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363 Sagaristio scoffs at the fact that his master has entrusted money to him for an errand (v.261: *stultus, qui hoc mihi daret argentum, quos ingenium noverat*), an interesting reversal of the previous scene in which Sophoclidisca complains that her mistress Lemniselenis does not have faith in the ancilla’s ingenium to get the job done (cf. p.120, *supra*). Sagaristio’s dominus, then, ‘hears’ his speaking name – *sagax*, “keen” or “sharp” as Richlin (2005), 188 notes, which might also be a bilingual pun on the Greek word σάγωρικ, an axe used by foreign peoples including the Persians – but gives the servus a crumina filled with cash anyway. The cheap old man, then, deserves what he will get (vv.266-267): *nam id demum lepidumst, triparcos homines, vetulos, avidos, ardos/bene admordere*. Woytek (1982), 131-132 thinks that the name “steht ohne Zweifel in Verbindung mit (klein-) asiatischen Stadt- und Flußnamen” like Sagara, Sangaros, Sagaris etc.
364 Cf. also vv.269-270: *verberibus caedi iusserit, compedis impingi. vapulet./ne sibi me credat supplicem fore: vae illi.*
365 If Paegnium is bringing back with him word to Toxilus, as Sophoclidisca is (cf. pp.124-125, *infra*), this comic duel once again postpones the message’s delivery.
virtue of their synchrony. Toxilus now remedies the epistolary collision, using Lemniselenis’ messenger as his own. The servus dictates the response to his girlfriend as a memorandum, one that the astute learner Sophoclidisca will doubtlessly remember. Thus the previous doublet of mirrored scenes featuring masters giving epistolary instructions to their respective slaves - Lemniselenis (offstage)/Sophoclidisca and Toxilus/Paegnium - culminates in this exchange between Toxilus and his girlfriend’s ancilla, in which reciprocal communication between the two lovers is finally achieved.

Upon Sophoclidisca’s departure (not, however, without another proclamation of her calliditas in v.305), Sagaristio announces the lucky task he has been assigned, introducing in a brief comic routine the crumina full of money entrusted to him for the purchase of oxen at Eretria. Elated, Toxilus reassures his fellow slave that he has already devised the sycopantiae to ensure that Dordalus will pay back every cent of Lemniselenis’ purchase price that will be borrowed from this cash (vv.324-326). The schemer now leads Sagaristio offstage to apprise him of the ploy and the important part he is to play in it.

2. Cue the letter

Succeeding the pair of slaves onstage is a pair of liberi, the parasite Saturio and his daughter, already dressed for her part as Arabian captive (v.335). In this scene, the parasite fills his daughter in on the status quo: the virgo must pretend to be sold

366 For brief analyses of this mini-skit, cf. Chiarini (1979), 77-87, Slater (1985), 44 and Danese (2011), 55-57. In the view of Lefèvre (2001), 43, the comic routine reflects the influence of improvisational theatre and is thoroughly Plautine.
367 Slater (1985), 42-43 and Marshall (1997), 102 see Toxilus and Sagaristio as rivals for the position of servus callidus in the Persa, for each slave obtains money for the purchase of Lemniselenis via deception. Both see Toxilus as the winner in the agon.
368 Thus the Persa contains two Geldquellen – the cash secured by Sagaristio and that stolen by Toxilus from Dordalus. This detail has troubled some scholars, who have, for this reason, suggested that the Latin play represents the combination of two separate plots. Ijsendijk (1884), 88 first proposed a contaminatio hypothesis, surmising that Plautus may have fused a “Boaria” (viz. Sagaristio’s theft of money destined for the purchase of oxen) with a “Persa” (Toxilus’ deception of the pimp using a Persian premise). This idea is supported by Stark (1991), 154-158, who, however, sees Sagaristio’s mischief as an invention of Plautus.
369 Manuwald (2001), 159 makes the interesting observation that in her first appearance onstage, the virgo is already dressed the part. This shows that the girl is obedient to her father’s will, despite her protestations against his plan that follow.

125
as a slave in the interest of her father's insatiable appetite, for Toxilus has refused to invite Saturio to dinner if he does not force his daughter to participate in the ruse.\textsuperscript{370} The scene has attracted comment for the admirable fight the girl puts up against the will of her father, and the contrast between her virtuous portrayal here and the duplicitous skill she will later manifest in acting to deceive the leno.\textsuperscript{371} Despite the \textit{virgo}'s noble protests, she ultimately yields to the authority of her father, agreeing to lend her cleverness to Toxilus' ruse (v.382): \textit{necessitate me mala ut fiarem facis} ("You're forcing me to become wicked."). Just as the father-daughter pair exit, Dordalus appears onstage for the first time at v.400. The comic victim to be is swiftly followed by Toxilus. After a brief exchange of insults (vv.406-427), Lemniselenis’ freedom is purchased when the slave hands the pimp 600 \textit{nummi}. Dordalus is quickly off again to his brothel in order to send the girl to her new home, leaving the scheming \textit{servus} alone onstage to launch his production. Contemplating his

\textsuperscript{370} In a paper, I discuss the resemblance of this scenario to the myth of Erysichthon of Thessaly, who sells his daughter Mestra into marriage in order to satisfy his voracious appetite. I argue that Plautus has created a composite of imitation and inversion of this Greek story, directly engaging with the account of the myth in the Hesiodic \textit{Ehoiai} (fr.43a Merkelbach and West, 1967) and signaling his engagement via a bilingual pun. Further, I propose that the \textit{Persa}'s parody of the Erysichthon myth may have, in turn, influenced Ovid’s version in the \textit{Metamorphoses} at 8.738-878. On the dynamics of the \textit{Persa}'s staged slave-sale, cf. Stewart (2012), 37-47, in whose view the scene “allowed the Roman audience to imagine participating at a slave sale and hearing a female’s response to her experience of enslavement” (p.44). In her analysis of the \textit{virgo}'s characterization \textit{qua serva} in the staged transaction, Stewart concludes that "Plautus seems to have recognized the objectification inherent in slavery as a system of domination and especially in the slave market” (p.47).

\textsuperscript{371} In the view of Chiarini (1979), 95-114, the \textit{virgo} (transformed from a \textit{fidicina} in the Greek original) is a thoroughly Plautine actress capable of portraying the innocent maiden and the \textit{femina callida} as the circumstances demand. The inconsistencies in the portrayal of her character are attributable, then, to her ultimate vocation as a versatile theatrical \textit{persona}. Manuwald (2001) also asserts that the girl’s character is consistent. She reads the decent \textit{virgo}'s participation in the intrigue as a necessity of her social inferiority to men, which forces her to bend to the will of Saturio and Toxilus. Lowe (1989) disagrees, seeing the \textit{virgo}’s ‘inconsistent’ character as a mishmash of Greek and Roman elements: in his view, the girl’s moral \textit{persona} is a vestige from the Greek original and her \textit{calliditas} is a Plautine innovation. Cf. also Woytek (1982), 47-53 and the bibliography \textit{ad loc}. Woytek himself thinks that the \textit{virgo} is a hybrid character much like Toxilus, and the original creation of the anonymous Greek \textit{Persadichter}. On the \textit{virgo}'s moralizing in the discussion with Saturio and the dynamic between them, cf. Slater (1985), 44-45, Stårk (1991), 147-148, Marshall (1997), 104-105, Lefèvre (2001), 22-23, 45, 74-76, McCarthy (2000), 142-143, Sherberg (2001) and Pasetti (2011), 85-91. For the view that the \textit{virgo}'s performance in the scene with her father contains elements of paratragedy, cf. Müller (1957) 12-15, Woytek (1982), 50-51 and Hardy (2005), who makes the questionable suggestion that the \textit{virgo} may have in fact been wearing a tragic costume and mask in performance (pp.26-30).
imminent success (vv.449-458), Toxilus calls out his actors, revealing the praxis of his deceit (459-461):

*Sagaristio, heus, exi atque educe virginem
et istas tabellas quas consignavi tibi,
quas tu attulisti mi ab ero meo usque e Persia.*

Hey, Sagaristio, come on out and bring the girl with you as well as those writing tablets which I sealed up for you, the ones you “brought” to me from my master all the way from Persia.

The slave announces that he will render Dordalus *intricatus* (v.457) – an image Slater has rightly identified as a “plot-weaving metaphor”\(^{373}\) by means of a letter, the *Persa*’s first explicit reference to the epistolary deceit that will serve as its linchpin. Toxilus has already composed this tricky text and delivered it to Sagaristio, who, we are told, then “delivered” it back to Toxilus.\(^{374}\) The details of this puzzling epistolary back-and-forth and double consignment are not yet revealed,\(^{375}\) though the supposed point of the letter’s departure is: it has allegedly come to Athens all the way from remote Persia, where Timarchides is away on business. The distant travels of the epistle stand in comic contrast to its true provenance, for, in reality, Toxilus just handed the *tabellae* over to Sagaristio. What is more, this play upon epistolary distance recalls, I think, the *Persa*’s first letters, which were likewise exchanged at very close quarters, between next-door neighbours.\(^{376}\) The exotic origin of “Timarchides”’ missive will, in fact, play an important role in convincing Dordalus to step into Toxilus’ epistolary trap.

\(^{372}\) In the view of Chiarini (1979), 125 these words are a “lapsus” on the part of an almost-whispering Toxilus, whereby the slave “accidentally” reveals the real *status quo* in order to keep the audience informed of what has been occurring “dietro le quinte”.

\(^{373}\) Slater (1985), 45.

\(^{374}\) It seems likely that the actor playing Toxilus would have signaled the false delivery using his body language or tone of voice somehow – perhaps doing the ancient equivalent of “ersatz quotes”.

\(^{375}\) This seemingly superfluous detail has generated some discussion amongst critics: why does Toxilus “deliver” the *tabellae* to Sagaristio, only to have Sagaristio hand them right back over? Cf. Woytek (1982), 319, who rejects the notion that this is a “nachträglicher Einschub”, observing that “[f]ür den Ablauf der Betrugsszene erscheint es von Vorteil, wenn Toxilus den Brief schon jetzt erhält und nicht erst...in Gegenwart des Dordalus”. Likewise Danese (2011), 60, argues that as is, the delivery sequence is dramatically effective: “[Tossilo] si fa poi portare fuori le *tabellae* in questo momento perchè la lettera risulti evidentemente percepibile e memorabile a ridosso dell’attuazione dell’inganno, per la cui riuscita sarÀ uno strumento fondamentale.”

\(^{376}\) Cf. pp.119-125, *supra*. 
Proclaiming his good fortune in having transacted a favourable deal for Lemniselenis, Dordalus returns on stage.\textsuperscript{377} Having first ensured that his girlfriend is \textit{libera} and has been safely deposited in Timarchides’ house (vv.483-491), Toxilus embarks on his \textit{insidiae}, claiming that he will reveal some information to the \textit{leno} from which he might richly benefit (vv.493-495). It will not be Toxilus, however, to reveal the precise details of this potential \textit{pergrande lucrum} (v.494) – or, at least, not on the face of it; rather, the particulars will come from a text, which the \textit{servus} hands over to the \textit{leno} for his perusal (vv.497-500):

\begin{quote}
\textbf{TO:} tabellas tene has, pellege! \textbf{DO:} hae quid a me? \textbf{TO:} immo ad te attinent et tua re fert, nam ex Persia ad med adlatae modo sunt istaec a meo ero. \textbf{DO:} quando? \textbf{TO:} hau dudum.

\textbf{DO:} quid istae narrant? \textbf{TO:} percontare ex ipsis: ipsae tibi narrabunt. \\
\textbf{DO:} cedo sane mihi. \textbf{TO:} at clare recitato. \textbf{DO:} tace, dum pellelo. \textbf{TO:} recita: hau verbum faciam.

\textbf{TO:} Take these tablets, read them through! \textbf{DO:} What are they to me? \textbf{TO:} Really they do apply to you, and the matter is in your interest, for they were just brought to me out of Persia from my master. \\
\textbf{DO:} When? \textbf{TO:} Not long ago.

\textbf{DO:} What do they say? \textbf{TO:} Ask them; they themselves will tell you. \\
\textbf{DO:} Just give them to me. \textbf{TO:} But recite clearly. \textbf{DO:} Quiet, while I read them through. \textbf{TO:} Recite: I won’t make a peep.
\end{quote}

Toxilus’ comment at v.500 (\textit{hau verbum faciam}) is highly ironic, since, as Slater perceives, “...every word Dordalus will utter is a fiction of Toxilus.”\textsuperscript{378} The document the \textit{leno} has been handed contains, in fact, Toxilus’ own \textit{verba}, for the slave is the true author of “Timarchides’” epistle. He can remain silent, then, because Dordalus is about to say his words for him. Interestingly, the \textit{tabellae} are also portrayed as speakers (v.499), for both Dordalus and Toxilus use \textit{narrare} to characterize the epistle’s provision of information,\textsuperscript{379} and the slave urges the \textit{leno} to ask his questions of the tablets. The \textit{tabellae} are thus personified, and rather than

\textsuperscript{377} Upon his reentry, Dordalus announces, tongue-in-cheek, that the successful deal with Toxilus has turned him \textit{benignus} (v.476): he now trusts everyone. Chiarini (1979), 133 argues that the \textit{leno}’s repeated use of the verb \textit{credere} in these lines is a hint at his forthcoming deception, for the pimp will believe all the lies that are about to come his way. Slater (1985), 47 adds that Dordalus’ emphasis on the verb upon his reentry is the \textit{leno}’s fruitless attempt to “... soothe Toxilus’ anger at his earlier lack of trust”.

\textsuperscript{378} Slater (1985), 47.

\textsuperscript{379} This, of course, is not unlike the modern English idiom, for one might ask, just like Dordalus does at v.499, “What does the letter say?” For this epistolary \textit{topos}, which already occurs in Euripides’ \textit{Hippolytus} at vv.865 and 877; cf. Monaco (1965), 350.
Timarchides speaking through them, they communicate on their own. What is more, this image of the talking epistle implies that there will be two speakers in the reading scene that follows - Dordalus' recital of the text, and the letter's own voice, creating a clash of voices similar to the synchronic epistles between Toxilus and Lemniselenis earlier in the text. I wonder whether this might be read as symbolic for the deception that is about to occur, in which the audience will hear two "voices" in their perception of two layers of fiction - the fictive premise of the virgo's sale on the one hand, and Toxilus' theatrical deception on the other. Dordalus, of course, will only "hear" the first of these two voices, represented, ironically, by his own as he reads through "Timarchides'" letter, as follows (vv.501-512):

```
salutem dicit Toxilo Timarchides
et familiae omni. si valetis, gaudeo.
ego valeo recte et rem gero et facio lucrum
neque istoc redire his octo possum mensibus
itaque hic est quod me detinet negotium.
Chrysopolim Persae cepere urbec in Arabia
plenam bonarum rerum atque antiquom oppidum:
ea comportatur praeda, ut fiat auctio
publicitus; ea res me domo expertem facit.
operam atque hospitium ego isti praehiberi volo
qui tibi tabellas ad fret. cura quae is volet.
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380 As Chiarini (1979), 138 and Slater (1985), 48 have noted, this invented name is a subtle nod to the theme of lucrum that pervades this scene. Woytek (1982) 333 agrees, noting "[d]er rein fiktive Stadtname evoziert die bei den Römern in Verbindung mit Arabien ja sprichwörtliche Vorstellung großen Reichtums [...], eines „Eldorado“ für Käuferleute". However, as Michael Dewar has pointed out to me, there really was a Greek city called Chrysopolis across the Bosphorus from the city that was to be Byzantium. According to tradition (Hyginus, Fab.121), this city had been founded by Chryses, son of Agamemnon and Chryseis. In fact, David Sansone has observed that the name might be an allusion to Chryseis: just as the Arabian captive of Toxilus’ res, Chryseis’ father attempts to ransom her from her abductor, and just like Agamemnon, Dordalus will lose the girl! Further, I wonder whether “Chrysopolis” might not also refer to another of Plautus’ letter schemers, Chrysalus. This is suggested particularly by the metatextual joke implicit in such a reference. The Bacchides’ “epistolary golden boy” is modeled on Menander’s slave Syros – “Syrian”. The geography invented in “Timarchides’” letter makes out of “Chrysalus” an ethnic name just like his Greek doppelgänger, creating for the Bacchides’ slave a hometown, likewise, in the East. Although we can say nothing definite about the chronological order of these two texts (as is the case for all of Plautus’ corpus, with the exception of the Stichus and the Pseudolus - datable to 200 and 191 BC, respectively, based upon surviving didascalic references), this epistolary link between them is remarkable.

381 As mentioned above (cf. n.335), critics, on the assumption that the text of “Timarchides’” epistle goes back to the Greek model, have attempted to use this verse along with other perceived topical references in order to date the Persa’s original; cf. Woytek (1982), 12-17 for a summary of the relevant scholarship. Charniri (1979), 138-140 argues against this critical approach.

382 This verse is a double entendre, for it may be read as referring not only to the foreign courier who bears the tabellae in the invented scenario, but also to the messenger who brought the letter to Sagaristio and then subsequently to Dordalus – that is, Toxilus. Thus on the fictional level, the text instructs Timarchides’ familia how to treat the Persian merchant; outside the premise of the deceit,
Timarchides greets Toxilus
and the entire household. If you all are well, I’m glad of it.
I’m really well – carrying on my business and making a profit.
I won’t be able to return from this place for eight months
because there are affairs here that detain me.
The Persians have taken the city of Chrysopolis in Arabia,
an ancient city full of good things:
Booty is being amassed so that there might be a public auction;
that’s what’s keeping me away from home.
I want you to give your attention and hospitality to this guy here,
the one who brings to you the tablets. Take care of what he wants,
for he hosted me at his house with the greatest honour.

At this point, Dordalus interrupts his reading, unsure how the Persian affairs of
Toxilus’ master pertain to him (vv.513-514). The slave urges the leno to return to his
reading to find out (vv.520-527):

\[
\text{ist’ qui tabellas adfert adduxit simul}
\text{forma expetenda liberalem virginem,}
\text{furtivam, abductam ex Arabia penitissuma;}
\text{eam te volo curare ut istic veneat.}
\text{ac suo periculo is emat qui eam mercabitur:}
\text{mancupio neque promittet neque quisquam dabit.}
\text{probum et numeratum argentum ut accipiat face.}
\text{haec cura et hospes cura ut curetur. vale.}
\]

This guy who delivers the tablets has brought along with him
a girl freeborn, of desirable appearance,
stolen – kidnapped, she was, from deepest Arabia;
I want you to take care that she is sold here.
But he who shall buy her does so at his own risk:
neither shall anyone promise or give a warranty.
Make sure that he gets good money, counted out.
Take care of these things and take care that the guest is taken care of.
Farewell.

By the end of Dordalus’ recital, the audience finally has the full picture of Toxilus’
plan. The slave is once again capitalizing on his master’s absence to indulge in
mischief. This time, however, Toxilus’ misbehaviour involves writing his master into
the text, invoking Timarchides through forgery. The pimp’s voice “becomes” that of
Timarchides, momentarily evoking the absent dominus onstage by reading out ‘his’
letter. Timarchides does, then, make an appearance in the Persa, present via his
faked epistolary παρουσία, entirely created and controlled by the authorship of

however, the text instructs the actors to do as the internal playwright wishes, following his
instructions to the “letter”.

nam is mihi honores suae domi habuit maximos.
Toxilus. Unlike Charmides in the *Trinummus*, however, this master will not
materialize in the flesh to speak against the words he is alleged to have written.

Similar to Chrysalus’ *modus operandi* in the *Bacchides*, Toxilus’ plan works to
usurp Timarchides’ voice in order to exploit the *dominus’* credibility. The *leno* would
never ‘buy into’ the scenario if Toxilus were to present the Persian merchant and his
captive himself, so, instead, the cunning *servus* hands Dordalus a letter setting out
the premise of the ruse in the voice of someone else. But the duplicitous text is
not, in fact, ostensibly addressed to the pimp: “Timarchides” has allegedly written to
Toxilus and the rest of his household *familia*, as is stated in the formulaic greeting at
the beginning of the letter (vv.500-501). Not only is the author of this missive faked,
its addressee is, too! When the *tabellae* are handed over to Dordalus, then,
“Timarchides’” epistle is subjected (supposedly) to a secondary reading and to the
eyes of an unintended addressee, who is (thanks to Toxilus’ “beneficence” privy
to information not originally conceived for his consumption. Thus the *leno* is invited
to ‘eavesdrop’ on the conversation between Timarchides and his *familia*, and the
letter upon which it is inscribed thus passes from the private domain into the public,
to use the terminology of Altman. This intrusion (albeit a faked one) into the
intimate space of epistolary communication replicates, I submit, that of the external
audience, whose presence at the forged missive’s recitation is akin to reading over
Dordalus’ shoulder. Hodkinson and Rosenmeyer discuss this element of
eavesdropping implicit in literary letters, calling it “one of the most seductive
aspects of epistolary narrative”. They observe as follows:

> A large part of the form’s appeal is the stage-managed eavesdropping by the external reader
> on a private, often highly personal conversation between the internal writer and reader, and
> the illicit pleasure of ‘discovering’ their secret lives. This sets up a “triangulation” which is
> always present [...] in epistolary literature between the author, the internal correspondents,
> and the external reader.

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383 Chiarini (1979), 125 observes that the forged letter is “...indispensabile, se non a vincere, almeno
ad ammondirc le collaudata mancanza di fiducia di Dordalus nei confronti del suo prossimo”.
384 On the fake friendship between the slave and the *leno*, cf. p.144, *infra*.
385 Altman (1982), 106.
386 Hodkinson and Rosenmeyer (2013), 14.
Thus in the *Persa*, the pimp gets to read “Toxilus’” letter, just as the spectators get to “read” Dordalus’, a doubled eavesdropping scenario that blurs the distinction between internal and external readers.\(^{387}\)

The *servus*’ sneaky rerouting of “Timarchides’” epistle means that it is *twice* delivered: Toxilus “addressee” becomes “messenger” when, upon his “reception” of his “*dominus*” message from the “Persian courier”, he passes the text on to the *leno*. As a result, Dordalus reads the text allegedly borne by the foreign “merchant” before he meets the messenger himself, an interesting reversal of customary epistolary sequence.\(^{388}\) Outside the fictional premise, however, the *tabellae* are, in fact, *thrice* delivered, for as was revealed at vv.460-461, Toxilus composes the missive, which he then hands over to the “Persian courier”, Sagaristio. Sagaristio subsequently “delivers” the document back to Toxilus, its supposed addressee. The *servus*, in turn, couriers the text to its real recipient; that is, the person for whom it was written – Dordalus. Toxilus has thus deftly manipulated the epistle’s route as a means of disguising its true origin: by directing the letter to himself as its primary addressee, the schemer masks his authorship by posing as addressee - precisely the opposite of his true authorial role. Further, it is remarkable that as the “first” epistolary recipient, Toxilus hands “Timarchides’” letter over to Dordalus once he has already opened and unsealed it.\(^{389}\) This broken *signum* is suggestive of the epistolary mischief afoot, for a letter’s authorship and the inviolacy of its contents are guaranteed *only* by the integrity of its seal. Despite this ‘sign’ of potential

\(^{387}\) Altman (1982) explores the circulation of private letters within epistolary literature, arguing as follows: “[t]he effect of such an internal publication, within the world of the narrative, is to blur the distinction between external and internal reader. Between the internal addressee and the external eavesdropper lie the internal eavesdroppers. The path from internal private reader to internal public to external public appears a continuous unbroken one. We pass almost imperceptibly from the fictional to the real, historical world in narrative that portrays the story of its own publication” (p.111).

\(^{388}\) This is emphasized by Toxilus’ lines, spoken when the “Persian” and “captive” first appear at vv.543-544: *sed optume eccum ipse adventit/hospes ille qui has tabellae attulit*.

\(^{389}\) The slave himself tells us that he handed the *tabellae* over to Sagaristio *opsignatae* - v.460: *istas tabellas quas consignavi tibi*. Thus Toxilus seals the letter only to immediately *unseal* it, a physical manifestation of his role as both author and recipient of Timarchides’ epistle. Compare Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Aulis* at vv.38-39, where Agamemnon seals and unseals his own letter as he agonizes over whether to send the text to his wife taking back his earlier instructions to send Iphigenia to Aulis. Jenkins (2006), 89 observes that “[t]hrough this act of unbinding, he [Agamemnon] has in effect sent the letter to himself: the sender becomes the recipient”.
misconduct, the gullible Dordalus never questions the missive’s suspicious physical condition upon delivery or its method of transmission, believing everything *quod erat cerea creditum* (v.528).³⁹¹

Toxilus, then, goes through a dizzying series of epistolary parts in the setup and execution of the *Persa’s* letter deceit, moving from author to messenger to “addressee” to “messenger”. I wonder, in fact, whether the slave’s speaking name, “Bowman” from the Greek noun τὸξον³⁹² may be read as a clever pun on his manifold epistolary roles: an archer is both “author” and “courier” of the “message” implicit in the arrow he projects. The archer might also, however, potentially become a recipient of the same “letter” he sends out, as the target of arrows arriving from the opposite side.³⁹³ What is more, Toxilus’ all-in-one epistolary identity reflects, I think, his hybrid theatrical *persona*: just as his character appears as both purveyor and the beneficiary of deceit by embodying *both* tricky slave and young man in love in the comedy, he is omnipresent throughout the epistolary process, although he is on opposite ends of it within and without the fictive scenario of his plan. Here is an illustration of this reversal:

³⁹⁰ Rosenmeyer (2013) discusses epistolary physicality, exploring how a letter’s form and method of transmission can mean something before the missive is opened and read. She analyses the delivery of Phaedra’s epistle in the *Hippolytus*, remarking that Theseus *should* be wary of a letter delivered by a corpse, but fails to heed this sign of epistolary treachery (p.63). Similarly, Dordalus, it seems to me, *should* smell a rat when handed an opened letter, but, of course, the pimp falls right into Toxilus’ trap. ³⁹¹ Toxilus speaks this line once Dordalus finishes his reading, asking the *leno* if he believes in the situation now that he has read the words inscribed on the *tabellae*. The slave’s question is a sly *double entendre*, implying that what has been *entrusted* to the wax ought to be *believed*. Of course, it is precisely the opposite, for every word in the letter Dordalus has read is forged. Slater (1985), 48 notes the play upon belief at this point in the text, observing, “[w]hat can be trusted? What is delusion? On this the whole action of the play centers, and it is through his control of the illusion, outside of which he stands, that Toxilus will make both the play and Lemniselenis his own”. ³⁹² This etymology for ‘Toxilus’ was originally the idea of Gurlitt (1921), 325. *Alter* Schmidt (1902), 211, who considers the name to be an ethnic appellation revealing the slave’s origins in Taxila. Woytek (1982), 131 agrees with Schmidt (rejecting, however, Schmidt’s argument that the name *Toxilus* goes back to the Greek model for the *Persa*), although he does not entirely dismiss Gurlitt’s suggestion. Auhagen (2001), 95 n.2 connects Toxilus’ speaking name to his character’s flexibility in the intrigue. Richlin (2005), 118 calls her Toxilus “Bowman”, considering it likely that the Roman audience would have understood the Greek word implicit in the slave’s name. ³⁹³ In fact, arrows were employed in antiquity as a secretive means of delivering messages. At Herodotus 8.128.1, we hear of such a letter exchange by arrow between Artabazos and the would-be traitor Timoxeinos during the siege of Potidaia. The story is repeated by Aeneas Tacticus in his treatise on siege warfare at 31.25-27; cf. Jenkins (2006), 55-56 and Bowie (2007), 217.
INVENTED SCENARIO: Timarchides author, Toxilus addressee
REAL SCENARIO: Toxilus author, Dordalus addressee

Thus Toxilus’ role qua epistolary participant in the “play-within-the-play” is an inverted image of his real actions, creating a chiastic inversion in the constellation of roles which also contains a reversal of status: whereas in the pretend situation the author is free, in the real scenario he is a slave.

Beyond the complex maneuvering involved in writing and delivering “Timarchides’” letter, the contents of these tabellae are also worthy of attention. The text alleges to transmit Timarchides’ will, instructing his familia to receive and help the Persian in making a profitable sale of the Arabian captive on his behalf. The forged epistle, then, also poses as a letter of introduction, for it recommends the messenger as someone worthy of good treatment in view of the hospitality Timarchides supposedly enjoyed at the Persian’s hands. The dominus cannot help the Persian hospes himself, for he is tied up abroad with the lucrative business surrounding the spoils of captured Chrysopolis. In fact, Timarchides even “tells” his household that he will not be back for eight months – a seemingly gratuitous detail presumably invented by Toxilus, which, however, sheds light on the trickster’s modus operandi. The slave is firmly convinced that his master will not be homebound for a while yet; he will be gone long enough, at least, for Toxilus to pull off his duplicitous scheme without Timarchides appearing to bear witness against his own forged παρουσία and reveal the deception. In the Trinummus, the senes, who likewise invent epistles arriving from an old man travelling abroad, make the very same assumption. The plan of the old schemers goes terribly awry as it is sabotaged by epistolary time - the lapse between Erzählzeit and delivery.

394 Besides the words inscribed on the tablets, “Timarchides’” epistle also has literal contents: the beauty abducted from deepest Arabia that the letter describes accompanies it, like a package of sorts.
395 Letters of recommendation are one of the major categories of ancient epistolography; cf. White (1986), 194.
396 In the opinion of Chiarini (1979), 137 n.153, the predicted date of Timarchides’ reentry should be understood as a hyperbolic value; viz. a very long time, and not actually eight months per se.
397 Chiarini (1979), 122 notes of the slave that “…egli, in armonia col proprio ruolo di ‘poeta’ della commedia, sa perfettamente che il padrone non tornerà affatto dal suo giro d’affari e non ha perciò alcuna ragione d’ordine logico per temere una simile eventualità”.
398 The similarity between the two plots has been noticed by Chiarini (1979), 140-141.
although the tablets are inscribed when the “author” Charmides is yet absent, the status quo is critically different upon their delivery. Toxilus' dolus, on the other hand, will enjoy the “liberating lack of human interaction” that Rosenmeyer has pointed out as so essential to successful epistolary scheming.\footnote{Rosenmeyer (2001), 95.} for the real Timarchides will not make an appearance in the play to spoil the premise of his faked presence. The letter plots in the Persa and the Trinummus, then, are identical, although their outcomes are opposite. This suggests some kind of play upon audience expectation, for spectators who have seen (or read) Toxilus capitalize upon Timarchides’ Eastern travels to make epistolary trouble will be surprised at the failure of Callicles and Megaronides to do the same, or vice versa.\footnote{Significantly, neither the Persa nor the Trinummus contains a prologue with prolepsis to reveal the plot’s conclusion, increasing the element of surprise inherent in the development of their storylines. Given the fact that there is no secure way to date Plautus’ comedies, it is impossible to postulate a chronological relationship between these two letter texts. Their similarities are, however, remarkable, and it is interesting to note that both comedies also feature a young girl known in the play only as virgo. In the Trinummus the maiden’s dowry is at stake thanks to the spendthrift ways of her brother; the dos of the Persa’s virgo is likewise in peril, though this is due to the lowly status of her parasite father.} In the Persa, the distance separating the letter-writer from Athens is enough when the trick is performed to keep Timarchides from making a real appearance onstage; in fact, the remoteness of the dominus’ location is invoked, I submit, to lure Dordalus into this epistolary trap.

An important detail of the deceit’s invented premise is the caveat emptor emphasized in “Timarchides’” letter: the captive Arabian girl for sale comes with no guarantee of ownership to the purchaser (vv.524-525).\footnote{In the view of Lefèvre (2001), 29, Plautus has incorporated this detail to avoid the complications of a Greek law, according to which a seller was obligated to reimburse the buyer should a sold slave subsequently be revealed as free.} This warning is preceded, however, by the epistle’s description of her as “from furthest Arabia” - ex Arabia penitissuma (v.522). Thus the text implicitly suggests that the prospect of someone appearing to reclaim the “merchandise” for sale is rendered slim by virtue of the girl’s far-away patria (and pater).\footnote{A detail noted by Chiarini (1979), 142-143.} The great distance that the missive bearing the information has allegedly travelled to arrive at Athens, and the absence of the author that it invokes by its very existence (as the letter says in v.509, Timarchides

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is *expers domo*) reinforce this notion.\textsuperscript{404} After all, the missive’s alleged composer is in the same exotic East that is allegedly the homeland of the captive girl\textsuperscript{405} – a location so remote that his slave is indulging in the behaviour of a *liber* with complete impunity. This point, crucial to the trick’s execution, is underlined by Toxilus in response to Dordalus’ initial trepidations surrounding the purchase (vv.534-536, 540-541):

DO: *metuo hercle vero. sensi ego iam compluriens, neque mi haud inperito eveniet tali ut in luto haeream.*
TO: *nihil pericli mihi videatur.* DO: *scio istuc, sed metuo mihi [...]*
TO: *ne quis vero ex Arabia penitissuma persequatur....*

DO: But by Hercules I’m afraid. I’ve experienced this now several times, and it won’t happen that I’ll be up shit’s creek without a clue.
TO: As it seems to me, there isn’t any danger. DO: I know that, but I’m scared for myself.
TO: Really now – no one is going to come pursuing her out of deepest Arabia...\textsuperscript{406}

Upon witnessing the girl’s impressive performance *qua* wretched captive, Dordalus is thoroughly convinced that the beautiful and sharp-tongued “Lucris” (a false name the *virgo* cunningly invents to prove her worth - literally)\textsuperscript{407} will make a profitable addition to his brothel. He seals the deal, buying the “Arabian captive” for 600 *minae* (v.667).\textsuperscript{408} Toxilus’ plan has worked: the foreign origin of the girl for sale discounts

\textsuperscript{404} This sense of distance is also highlighted by the foreign costumes worn by the “Persian messenger” and the “Arabian captive”; cf. p.142, *infra* on these ethnic costumes.

\textsuperscript{405} In fact, the homeland of the “Arabian captive” is never revealed in the course of the deception. The *virgo* cunningly equivocates on this point in her performance, dodging the *leno’s* questions about her *patria* by giving cleverly evasive answers (on which, cf. Moore, 1998, 187 and n.27 and Fontaine 2010, 92-97), thus preserving her *nobilitas* (vv.630-642). As it turns out, the girl’s homeland, it seems, is Athens itself! (cf. n.411, *infra*).

\textsuperscript{406} For the irony of Toxilus’ statement, cf. p.137, *infra*.

\textsuperscript{407} Chiarini (1979), 159 remarks upon the pertinence of this *"nomen-omen"* to the scheme in motion. Further, he argues that the *virgo* remains anonymous previous to the ruse scene in deference to her theatrical *persona,* “...quasi a significare che per lei, l’unico nome che contasse non era quello della banale realtà di tutti giorni, bensì quello che di volta in volta fosse chiamata ad assegnarsi ‘salendo sul palcoscenico’”. On “Lucris” and the *virgo’s* namelessness, cf. further Manuwald (2001), 169-170 and the relevant bibliography in n.47. Fontaine (2010), 92-94, following an idea of Koenig (1883), 9, argues that in the Latin play the girl really gives her name as *Locris* – the Locrian woman, playing upon the historical tradition that parents in Locri had once prostituted their daughters. This point is part of Fontaine’s reading of the Persa’s entrapment scene, in which, Fontaine argues, Dordalus is comically prone to mishearing words (“mondegreens” – misinterpretation due to near homophony of two words) to the advantage of the deception.

\textsuperscript{408} The “Persian merchant” asks Dordalus to hang the wallet containing the 600 *minae* around his neck. Slater (1985), 49-50 has astutely observed that this gesture, replicated from earlier in the text when Sagaristio brought Toxilus the wallet containing 600 nummi for Lemniseleenis’ freedom in the
the possibility in the mind of the *leno* that her father will emerge from the far reaches of the East to reclaim her. This is confirmed by what the pimp proclaims upon the hasty retreat of the “Persian”\(^{409}\) regarding the prospect of having to pursue the merchant for a refund should the deal go sour\(^{410}\) (vv.714-718):

\begin{verbatim}
ille quidem iam scit quid negoti gesserit qui mihi furtivam meo periclo vendidit argentum accepit, abiit. qui ego nunc scio an iam adseratur haec manu? quo illum sequar? in Persas? nugas!
\end{verbatim}

That guy really knows what he was doing, he who sold me a captive at my own risk. He took the money and beat it. How do I now know if this girl will be claimed? Where shall I follow him? To Persia? Nonsense!

The *leno* dismisses the idea of having to travel all the way to Persia, implicitly invoking its remoteness as the reason for which the girl will, probably, *not* be reclaimed from her new master. The joke, however, is on Dordalus. As the audience knows, the *virgo*’s father does not have to emerge from *Arabia penitissima* to reclaim her; he is on the spot at Athens, waiting just offstage for his daughter’s illicit purchase to emerge. Just as the epistle’s faked far-off provenance stands in funny contrast to its true point of origin, then, so too does Saturio’s real location act as an ironic foil to the *leno*’s reckoning. The girl’s father quickly appears at v.738 once the cash has changed hands and the deceit has been successfully concluded. Saturio…

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same way, ”...summarizes the interrelation of the two money schemes of the *Persa*...We see here that the money Sagaristio brought in the pouch around his neck in II.iii has now been replaced, with ample interest.” In the *Persa* (like elsewhere in Plautus), *mina* and *nummi* seem to be used interchangeably. Whereas a *mina* is a specific silver denomination from the East (the Greek μνᾶ), a *nummus* is a generic term like “bucks”: cf. Richlin (2005), 44. Thus the *virgo*’s 600 silver *mina* price tag is (very conveniently) equivalent to the 600 “bucks” paid out for Lemmiselenis’ freedom. For a concise explanation of the monetary denominations used in Plautus, cf. Richlin (2005), 44.

\(^{409}\) Interestingly, the “Persian merchant” claims that he must be off to deliver yet more letters (vv.693-694): *ita negotiumst; mandatae quae sunt, volo deferre epistulas.* He also mentions that he must be off to search for his twin brother, who, he has heard, was sold into slavery and now resides at Athens (vv.695-696). Remarkably, his excuses multiply several elements in the plot: Timarchides’ letter is matched by other *epistulae,* and the Persian courier now suddenly has a double. What is more, the story replicates the *anagnorisis* motif faked in Toxilus’ ruse: just as is about to happen with the *virgo,* the Persian will (supposedly) find and ‘recognize’ his brother, freeing him from his unjust servile condition.

\(^{410}\) Cf. Woytek (1982), 393.
furiously drags the pimp in ius (v.745) to face the consequences for illegal trafficking of a citizen girl.\footnote{The text is not explicit about the precise setup behind the virgo’s “anagnorisis”. We are, however, most likely to imagine that (within the context of Toxilus’ ruse) the virgo’s original patria was Athens and that her father “recognizes” his long-lost daughter upon her fortuitous return to the city. Such a coincidence is typical of comic plots, so it seems safe to assume as much for the Persa’s internal intrigue. This is the view of Danese (2011), 49. On the conventionality of Toxilus’ “play-within-the-play”, cf. pp.142-146, infra.}

II: The dynamics of text

1. A written plot

The document created by Toxilus and recited by Dordalus contains, as it were, the details of the ruse, for the story of the Persian merchant and the merchandise he hopes to sell, which will serve as its basis, is literally inscribed on these tablets. Thus, the plot of the Persa’s “play-within-the-play” is explicitly portrayed as written: theatre, synonymous with dolus, is depicted as anchored to writing, fabricated and controlled by the author who puts stylus to wax.\footnote{Toxilus, in fact, alludes to the crucial function of the letter in defining his fictional premise as the actors arrive onstage to begin the show, remarking upon the girl’s disguise by using the polyvalent adverb graphice: (v.464): tum hanc hospitam autem crepidula ut graphice decet! Although this word’s primary definition in Latin is “thoroughly” or “vividly”, it is suggestive of text and writing by virtue of its derivation from the Greek verb γραφεῖν – to paint and to write. Toxilus’ lines, then, might be read as implying that the virgo’s sandals match her role as he has envisioned it and inscribed it in the tabellae; that is, this costume will complement her transformation into the “Arabian captive” described within the letter. This occurrence of graphice and that at v.396 (likewise a theatrical scenario) are listed in the TLL under the definition sensu strictiore fere ‘quasi in pictura’ de eis quae figura atque coloribus oculus delectant. This meaning of the adverb seems derived principally from the explanation of Fraenkel (1960), 185 n.1 (cited, in fact, in the TLL entry), in whose view the adverb in both instances has a literal sense referring to physical description, “a pennello”. Woytek (1982), 274 agrees, noting, “[d]ie Verwendung an unserer Stelle zeigt deutlich, daß auch bei intensivierender Funktion des Wortes...dessen ursprüngliche Bedeutung (so unten 464) fühlbar sein kann”. On graphice in vv.306 and 464, cf. also Chiarini (1979), 74-76, according to whom graphice refers to theatrical performance, designating the persona who intends to fulfill his or her dramatic vocation “alla perfezione” (p.76). On this term and its relevance to Plautus’ epistolary plots, cf. pp.46-47, supra.}

Slater has observed that this scenario likens “Timarchides” epistle to a script, composed by the comedy’s internal playwright\footnote{Although he does not explicitly associate Toxilus’ playwriting abilities with the slave’s authorship of “Timarchides” letter, Chiarini (1979) passim equates the servus with creative dramaturgical power within the Persa: “...è necessario chiamare alla mente, ancora una volta, la natura del tutto particolare di Toxilus, la sua, già ampiamente collaudata, funzione poetica, e cioè, alla lettera, ‘di poeta’: nel Persa non vi è parola, non vi è atto o, più generalmente, evento che non sembri in qualche modo presagito,} and entrusted to an actor for realization.\footnote{413} It seems to me that this
metatheatrical dynamic is achieved by the focalization of the narrative in “Timarchides” letter. As the author of the kinetic epistle that will move forward the comedy’s plot, Toxilus is the focalizer, for he determines how the Persian story is presented to its various audiences.\textsuperscript{415} In other words, by virtue of his epistolary authorship, the clever servus has control of the \textit{Persa}’s internal plot. The onstage reading of the mischievous letter, then, is a powerful metatheatrical moment that contemplates the nature of dramatic performance by mirroring its production onstage, creating a double vision in which Toxilus’ plot is inserted within Plautus’. In fact, the positioning of “Timarchides” letter at the very outset of the micro-plot constitutes a boundary of sorts between the external and internal texts, framing the embedded production by means of an image that represents its genesis. In light of this, it seems to me that we might go a step further than Slater in unpacking the symbolism of the \textit{Persa}’s epistle, identifying in it a more specific metaphorical valence.

The forged missive, I submit, functions as the prologue for the comedy’s internal production,\textsuperscript{416} depicting the following deception as a theatrical performance literally originating in writing. Just like a prologue, “Timarchides” letter opens the play, giving the plot’s back-story (the external \textit{analepsis})\textsuperscript{417} and easing the audience into the theatrical world by signaling the beginning of the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[414] Cf. Slater (1985), 47.
\item[415] This is particularly the case at v.513 -518 when Dordalus stops reading “Timarchides” letter and Toxilus urges him to continue.
\item[416] This role of the embedded theatrical epistle in Plautine comedy has been identified by Monaco (1965), who suggests that the letter from Phoenicium to Calidorus that opens the \textit{Pseudolus} has “quasi il carattere di un prologo informativo” (p.338). Although this missive occurs outside the comedy’s internal deception, Phoenicium’s letter, like “Timarchides”’, apprises the audience of the action’s \textit{Vorgeschichte} and the current \textit{status quo} (p.334). Sharrock (2009), 45-46, seemingly independently of Monaco, also suggests the opening epistle of the \textit{Pseudolus} as a prologue. Sharrock offers a thorough and complex assessment of the prologue in Roman comedy (pp.27-63). As she points out on p.28, prologues in Plautus are the rule, with 65% of the extant texts beginning (like Toxilus’ “play”) with a prologue opening.
\item[417] Cf. Raffaelli (2009), 104: “...la funzione essenziale del prologo in generale, e di quello plautino in particolare, è naturalmente quella di narrare l’\textit{argumentum} della commedia”. However, as Sharrock (2009), 29 points out, the exposition of the \textit{argumentum} does not always occur in Plautine prologues.
\end{footnotes}
Its reader, Dordalus, is thus made into the unwitting prologus of the “play-within-the-play”, encouraged by Toxilus to reveal the argumentum inscribed on the wax (v.518): ex tabellis nosce rem (“Get to know the story from the tablets”). In fact, like a conventional prologue-speaker the leno repeatedly calls his audience to remain quiet during his recitation: at v.500, tace dum pellemo (“Quiet while I read them through”) and again at v.518, fac silentium (“Be silent”). But, as Monaco has identified, pleas for silence during an epistolary reading reoccur throughout Plautus’ letter plays, a “concezione comico-realistica” that serves to underline the status of the letter in the ancient world qua “operazione importante e difficile” requiring the close attention of the reader and those present. In this scene, then, Plautus has neatly conflated the convention of epistolary reading with a characteristic of dramatic prologues to imbue Dordalus’ recitation of the missive with a binary valence: it functions at once as an epistolary reading and as the

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418 Raffaelli (2009), 13 observes: “Il prologo, quando c’è e quando è all’inizio, non è ancora commedia e tuttavia già lo è. Per mezzo del prologo gli spettatori, dove più e dove meno, sono comunque presi per mano e in qualche modo introdotti nella mimesi del dramma”. For the “fuzziness” of beginnings in dramatic performance, cf. Sharrock (2009), 26. This equation between text and prologue is also suggested, I think, by an exchange between the leno and the servus in the course of the epistle’s recital. When Dordalus pauses his reading to wonder how the epistle pertains to him, Toxilus claims that divine intervention is at work (vv.513-516): DO: quid id ad me aut ad meam rem referre Persae quid rerum gerant/aut quid eru’tuo’?TO: tace, stultiloque; nescis quid te instet boni/neque quam tibi Fortuna faculum luciferam adlucere volt. As Segal (1987), 86 has rightly pointed out, the slave cleverly invokes the goddess Fortune as a complement to the scenario he has invented, which, he alleges, will be of great profit to Dordalus’ pocket. It seems to me, however, that this reference to Fortuna might also recall Τύχη, the ubiquitous goddess of New Comedy, whose workings are often responsible for the events in the play (cf. Hunter, 1983, 141-144). Toxilus’ playful divine invocation not only recalls divine prologues but, further, implies Fortune’s hand in arranging the supposed transaction, and, therefore, her agency in the plot of the “play-within-the-play”.

419 On the calls to attention and silence typical of dramatic prologi, Raffaelli (2009), 106 notes that “...nei prologhi plautini (ma anche, con qualche differenza, in quelli terenziani) sono molto frequenti i richiami all’attenzione rivolti agli spettatori e, soprattutto, importanti per noi, gli avvertimenti che, da quel determinato momento, l’attenzione deve aumentare, perché inizia l’esposizione del vero e proprio argumentum. Questi richiami all’attenzione in Plauto si trovano sempre all’inizio della narrazione degli antefatti, raramente in firma indiretta e attenuata...” Sharrock (2009), 57-63 suggests a link between comedy and ritual, hinted at by such requests for quiet: “When the prologue calls for silence, he is using the metaphor of the ritual “silence” or “good speaking” which necessarily accompanies religious observance: favete linguis” (p.57). Sharrock connects this with the prayers for victories also often found in Plautine prologues and the ludic context in which these plays were performed to submit that prologues may function as a prayer of sorts to introduce the ritual implicit in the dramatic performance. On the prologue’s calls for silence, cf. also Moore (1998), 12.

420 Such a plea already occurs in Euripides’ Iphigenia Among the Taurians: Iphigenia says the following to Orestes who interrupts the recital of her epistle from memory to its would-be messenger, Pylades at v.773: ἢδ’ ἦν ὀρὰς, σὺ· μὴ λόγοις ἐκπλησσέ με...<br>421 Monaco (1965), 350.
pronouncement of the internal production’s prologue. This double vision engendered by the letter reflects, in turn, the double theatrical vision of the present scenario, in which a play embedded inside the Persa is just now beginning. But there is a funny irony implicit in Dordalus’ investiture as persona proloquens, for theatrical prologues can also contain prolepses, information revealing what is to come in the performance in addition to an exposition of the action that has preceded it.422 The pimp, however, is anything but omniscient. The clueless Dordalus cannot decipher the very conventional comedic storyline he himself sets out, although its conclusion might be intuited by any theatre-goer: a merchant comes to town hawking a kidnapped girl – a pseudo-meretrix whose free identity will undoubtedly be revealed before the end of the performance. Of course, this is because the epistle’s primary function is to dupe the leno, transforming him into an evil trafficker of citizen girls in the “play-within-the-play” and, thereby, the Persa’s comic victim.

The introduction of the Persa’s internal ruse by means of a dramatic prologue ultimately intensifies the mise-en-abyme produced by the internal production: a text within a text begets a performance within a performance. The striking mirror effect between the inner and outer plays persists throughout the duration of the ruse, for the plot acted out by the characters is explicitly metatheatrical, composed of conventionally comic scenarios. The generic self-referentiality of Toxilus’ plot is exemplified by the scene in which he and Dordalus “eavesdrop” upon the dialogue in course between the two “foreigners”. The girl, asked her impression of Athens, waxes philosophical about the ten vices that assail a city, impressing Dordalus with her intelligence and Toxilus with her performance. Both men exclaim upon her abilities in asides “unheard” by the Persian pair (vv.551-552) and engage in an extended conversation while the “merchant” and his ware remain “oblivious” to their presence (vv.561-575).423 This situation highlights the layering of fiction implicit in the embedded performance, for the dramaturge has fabricated a scene in

422 Sharrock (2009), 31 n.30 catalogues all the instances of prologue prolepses in Plautine comedy, counting five in the extant corpus (not including the fragmentary Vidularia which does seem to have had a prologue, though of what nature is unclear. Sharrock explores these fragments on pp.32-33).
423 This staging resembles the scene in the Bacchides where Nicobulus remains unhearing onstage while Chrysalus engages in a lengthy song at vv.925-979; cf. n.273, supra.
which the pimp thinks he is observing the “Persian” and the “Arabian captive” unseen. Thus the “play-within-the-play” recreates the structure of comic power, reconfiguring it so that Dordalus may believe that he has the upper hand over the “foreigners” he “overhears”. The reality, however, is precisely the reverse, for the leno is the intended victim of this sophisticated deceit, and is the only character that stands outside of the fictional premise. This rearrangement of the comic hierarchy within the mini-skit echoes the schemer’s reordering of the true series of roles in the epistolary process. That is, Toxilus manipulates the delivery and realization of his plot to mask its lying premise, inverting in each case the scenario’s true alignment through his deft management of text and the theatrical performance it sets in motion.

2. Inversione speculare

The Persa’s internal deceit, then, is unambiguously portrayed as a dramatic production: a highly conventional plot featuring an anagnorisis is composed by a dramaturge, introduced by a prologue and acted out in typically comic scenes. The players even wear theatrical costumes, dressed as Persians in foreign garb obtained from the choragus who has been hired by the aediles for the job (vv.159-160). Thus Toxilus has also heightened the ethnic element of Roman comedy, whereby the Latin-speaking actors are styled as “Greeks”, by costuming his “Greek” actors as “Persians”, self-referentially reproducing onstage the process of dressing the actors as foreigners from the East. Such imitation engenders a series of twins -

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424 Slater (1985), 48-49 has noted the “multiple play of fictions” here, remarking upon the various layers at work: at the centre of the illusion stands Dordalus, then the two actors who realize his theatrical deception. Furthest outside is Toxilus, “...a ringmaster controlling Dordalus (currently), Sagaristio and the girl (through previous instructions), and the audience (through asides...which guide and reinforce audience response to Dordalus)” (p.49).

425 Lefèvre (2001), 60-62 sees the element of disguise in the Persa as attributable to the influence of the Stegreifspiel on Plautine comedy.


427 Marshall (1997), 105-106 observes, “[t]he Roman actor’s disguise is doubled, and takes him further and further East” (p.106); cf. also Woytek (1982), 27, who compares the actors’ disguise qua peregrini to the plot of the Trinummus, in which the sycophant is disguised as if arriving from Seleucia. Thanks to the perceptive comments of David Sansone on an earlier draft of this chapter, it
two dramaturges (Plautus and Toxilus), two texts (the script and the letter) and two comedies (the *Persa* and its “play-within-the-play”). This internal mimicry even extends to the plots of the two productions, for, as it seems to me, Toxilus’ play is a replica of the *Persa*: both the external and the internal storyline feature the sale of a young girl, whose status is transformed as a result of a financial transaction. The slave’s adaptation, in fact, contains a series of elements that mirror the larger plot, although they have been reproduced in inverted form. That is, the internal performance emulates the *Persa* by reversing its motifs, turning them around to generate an “inversione specularis”428 of the external play in which it is embedded.

As I have already pointed out, both the *Persa* and its internal production centre upon a young maiden’s transformation in status through an exchange of money; these reversals, however, are opposite, for Lemniselenis goes from slave to free when Toxilus *purchases* her freedom, whereas the *virgo* goes from free to “slave” to take up her part as “Arabian captive” to be sold to Dordalus.429 The “enslaved” *virgo* subsequently becomes a *libera* once more when she is reclaimed by her father in the bogus *anagnorisis*, a motif that duplicates Lemniselenis’ manumission within the secondary theatrical level.430 Dordalus is directly involved in both of these girl-sales, as a seller outside the internal production, then as the buyer within it. In the first instance, the pimp gets a good deal (in fact, he even says

428 I am employing the terminology of Perutelli (1978), whose analysis of the *ekphrases* in Moschos’ *Europe* and Catullus’ c.64 demonstrates how the internal picture reflects the external poem by way of inversion.

429 The *virgo*’s transformed status within the context of the theatrical premise inverts that of her acting partner Sagaristio, who goes from *servus* to free merchant in the assumption of his role.

430 McCarthy (2000), 125 observes that the theatrical device of *anagnorisis* is thus displaced from the representational to the metatheatrical level. She argues that the agency of Tyche in revealing the true identity of girls in comedy is “usurped and manipulated for a typical slavish trick, creating misunderstanding rather than dispelling it”.

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so himself\textsuperscript{431}, whereas in the second he gets a very bad one indeed. Toxilus, on the other hand, is the buyer in the \textit{Persa} and the real seller in his own micro-plot.\textsuperscript{432} Once again, the clever slave is ubiquitous in the processes implicated in the ruse. Although Toxilus pretends to be on the side of the buyer, negotiating with the vendor to facilitate the sale in fulfillment of “Timarchides’” order, he is, in fact, on the opposite side of this sale:

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{l l}
BUYING & SELLING \\
"Toxilus" + Dordalus & Toxilus + “Sagaristio” \\
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

On each side of the equation then, are friendships, a motif crucial to both of these financial arrangements: Sagaristio is prevailed upon to find the money for Lemniselenis’ purchase and participate in the deceit based upon his bond with Toxilus,\textsuperscript{433} and Toxilus claims to offer Dordalus the \textit{beneficium} of sole access to the “Persian merchant”’s deal based upon their “friendship”, newly formed upon the successful purchase of Lemniselenis (vv.581, 595, 718-721).\textsuperscript{434} In the first instance, the bond is real and sincere; in the second, however, it is faked, invented as a means by which Toxilus may seduce Dordalus into falling for his trick. What is more, each of these situations features the command of a master to his slave: Sagaristio gets the money Toxilus needs to buy Lemniselenis because his \textit{dominus} has ordered him to travel abroad to purchase oxen at Eretria. The internal playwright forges these same circumstances within his ruse by way of inverted symmetry, pretending that his own master, Timarchides, has sent him epistolary instructions \textit{from} abroad, using

\textsuperscript{431} \textit{quoi homini di propitii sunt, aliquid obiciunt luceri;/nam ego Hodie compendi feci binos panis in dies./ita ancilla mea quae fuit hodie, sua nunc est: argento vicit (vv.470-472).

\textsuperscript{432} I have designated Toxilus as the \textit{virgo}’s vendor because he is the party to benefit from her proceeds. The slave’s role is made clear in the initial exchange between him and Saturio regarding the ruse (vv.134-135): TO: \textit{tum tu me sine illam vendere}/SAT: \textit{tun illam vendas?}

\textsuperscript{433} Cf. Woytek (1982), 45-46. Woytek reads a sexual undertone in the bond between the two friends, arguing that Toxilus demonstrates a tendency towards “Knabenliebe” (p.46); on the friendship between Sagaristio and Toxilus, cf. also Hofmann (1989), 400 and Burton (2004), 229-230.

\textsuperscript{434} This detail also figures in the complicated maneuvering invented by Toxilus for the delivery of “Timarchides’” letter, for Toxilus does Dordalus the “favour” of making the \textit{leno} privy to a missive purportedly addressed to him. For the “friendship” between the pimp and the slave, cf. Chiarini (1979), 151-152, 157 and Woytek (1982), 22, who compares the slave’s insincerity in befriending the enemy to similar scenarios in the \textit{Miles Gloriosus}, the \textit{Poenulus} and the \textit{Épificus}. McCarthy (2000), 147-148 notes that the success of the deceit is largely dependent upon Toxilus’ employment of the language of gratitude and friendship.
the letter as a pretext to sell the young “Arabian captive” at Athens. The outer and inner plots also each contain an epistolary exchange, juxtaposing the genuine communication by letter in the Persa with a counterfeit missive in Toxilus’ res. This invented epistolary scenario, in fact, reverses the circumstances of the sincere “prefigurative” epistles from earlier in the play, for a supposedly long-travelling text from a remote location contrasts the lovers’ letter exchange from just down the street.

Toxilus, then, has composed his plot with the same motifs employed by Plautus in the Persa, although each of these reproduced elements is slightly askew: sincere relationships and actual occurrences are transformed in the micro-plot into falsified versions of the same, generating a highly self-conscious depiction of the dramatic process by revealing the fictitious nature of all the events depicted onstage – inside the central deception and without. That is, the virgo’s feigned sale and recognition remind us that Lemniselenis’ purchase and manumission exist only on the stage.

Significantly, Toxilus’ power to appropriate the materia of Plautus’ comedy pivots upon his control of text: “Timarchides’” missive functions like a mirror, taking in and reflecting back a distorted image of the play in which it is embedded. I wonder whether this metaliterary portrait of the epistle might function as a representation of Plautus’ own literary translation. That is, by depicting his clever slave as replicating the larger plot of the comedy he inhabits, the playwright may, I submit, be reproducing his own likeness - Plautus imitator sui. This reading is evinced particularly by the dramaturge’s own characterization of his creative adaptation, for in the Asinaria and the Trinummus, the Latin translator tells his audience what he has done with his Greek models: Plautus vortit barbarae.\(^4\) This phrase occurs in the Asinaria v.11, and Trinummus v.19.

\[^4\] Vortere, “to turn” or “invent”, is, in fact, precisely what Toxilus does with the Persa in his overtly comical micro-skit through inverted symmetry, reversing elements of the Persa’s plot to forge his own dramatic creation as a mise-en-abyme. Could this be a metaphor for the translator’s own creative mode? Unfortunately, the limits imposed
by the meagre evidence of Greek New Comedy, as well as the unknown and (as it stands now) unknowable model of this comedy, confine my idea to pure hypothesis. But whether or not it is meant to reflect Plautus’ own authorial tendencies, it is clear that the *Persa* does contain a metaphor for dramatic creation, performance and, I submit, literary adaptation in its polyvalent epistle and epistolary deceit.
4. Hunger is the Handmaid of Genius:
The Curculio’s epistolary parasite

Introduction
Like the Persa, the Curculio features an epistle allegedly arriving from the East, forged and delivered by the comedy’s eponymous parasite from a soldier in Caria. This letter play is the shortest text in the Plautine corpus, totaling only 729 lines.\(^{436}\) Despite its brevity, the Curculio is action-packed - a “ripostiglio di quasi tutti i τόποι più convenzionali della palliata”, to quote Paratore,\(^{437}\) containing a theatrical deception along with an anagnorisis, and inhabited by a vast array of familiar comic characters. Its scene is set in Epidaurus. The penniless adulescens Phaedromus is desperately in love with Planesium, a young girl owned by a pimp named Cappadox. In the hopes of scraping together the money necessary to purchase his beloved, Phaedromus has sent his parasite Curculio\(^ {438}\) to Caria to request a loan from a friend. Though this mission is unsuccessful, the cunning parasite returns home from his errand with another plan to get the cash. While abroad, Curculio happened to meet Therapontigonus, a soldier who had previously deposited money at Epidaurus with a banker for the purchase of none other than Planesium. Lyco, a trapezita, will pay out the miles’ retainer to the leno upon receipt of a letter sealed with Therapontigonus’ signet ring. The bearer will, in turn, obtain the girl from Cappadox. Naturally the sneaky parasite purloins this ring, which he uses to forge the requisite document for Planesium’s release. Curculio’s epistolary plan is a success, though the blustering soldier soon arrives at Epidaurus and discovers the mischief. All is resolved when the pseudo-meretrix recognizes the miles’ ring and reveals herself to

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\(^{436}\) The Curculio’s shortness (although not unprecedented in the Plautine corpus; Epidicus has 733 lines, for instance) has attracted comment, inducing some scholars to posit the hand of an interpolator in cutting down what was originally a longer text (cf. Lefèvre 1991, 72 and 97-98 for bibliography), or to suggest that the Latin adaptor has significantly compressed the Greek text that served as Curculio’s model (cf. Fantham, 1965).

\(^{437}\) Paratore (2003), 92.

\(^{438}\) Fontaine (2010), 62-68 argues that the name ‘Curculio’ (and therefore the title of the play) results from a mistake in the Latin play’s transmission. In his view, Plautus’ parasite originally had a Greek name and was called Gorgylio (Γόργυλιος) from γόργυς, “energetic” or “spirited”. While I find Fontaine’s suggestion persuasive, it remains speculative without other evidence to support it.
be Therapontigonus’ long-lost sister. The two lovers are engaged to be married and the play ends happily ever after.

Beyond traditional studies of the play’s Greek model and the translator’s method of adapting it, scholarship on the *Curculio* has paid most of its attention to two scenes: the *paraklausithyron* of the opening tableau, in which Phaedromus serenades the brothel door and seduces its *multibiba ianitrix* into letting out his girlfriend by sprinkling wine on the threshold, and the metatheatrical *excursus* of

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439 Plautus neither names the *Curculio*’s Greek original nor is it knowable from another source. Scholars have, nevertheless, speculated on its author, date and content. Reading the parasite’s reference to a battle with Sicyon in vv.394-396 as alluding to Demetrius Poliorcetes’ capture of the city, Wilamowitz (1886), 37 n.8 proposed a date of 304/303 for this hypothetical Greek text. Elderkin (1934), who reads the entire play as a parody of Demetrius’ career, argues for a date of 303/302 instead, for during this time the general was in the vicinity of Epidaurus (p.35). Paratore (2003), 88 agrees. Further, Elderkin suggests Philippides as the playwright of the *Curculio*’s model (p.36), whereas Grimal (1965) proposes Poseidippos and dates the Greek play to 245 BC, based upon perceived references in the Latin play to Hellenistic history. Lefèvre (1991) takes a slightly different approach, postulating that the *Curculio* is loosely based on the same model as the *Pseudolus*, though translated with greater liberty in the tradition of Italic farce and improvisational genres (on the *Curculio*’s resemblance to the *Pseudolus*, cf. also Fantham, 1965 and Lanciotti, 2005, 47-48). Based on this assumption, he concludes (p.92) that Plautus wrote the *Pseudolus* before the *Curculio*, making 191 BC a *terminus post quem* for the latter’s composition. Lefèvre reviews the various dates suggested by other scholars for the Latin play’s production (most frequently 193 BC, first proposed by Naudet, 1845, 242, who read the reference to Sicyon as an allusion to Flamininus’ campaign against Nabis of Sparta). To my mind, the only convincing chronological evidence we have for this play’s date is thanks to Gratwick’s (1981) emendation of *gurgulio* in the *Trinummus* v.1016 to *Curculio*, which almost certainly demonstrates that the *Trinummus* comes after the *Curculio* (Gratwick accepts 188/187 for the later play, but does not posit a precise date for our comedy). Given that the *Trinummus*’ *terminus post quem* appears to be 194 BC (cf. n.159, *supra*), the *Curculio*, it seems, was written at some point before that.


442 The *Curculio*’s famous *paraklausithyron*, which Laplace (1997) argues is based upon P.Köln 203 (= 1148 Kassel-Austin), a Greek fragment featuring an *exclusus amator* and his slave, has engendered a wide range of interpretations. Copley (1956), 34-42 is the first to have discussed the scene, which is our earliest extant *paraklausithyron* in Latin. Although Copley thinks that Plautus is elaborating a shut-out lover’s serenade from his model text, he points out that the Latin playwright innovates upon the Greek *exempla*, foreshadowing the door-serenades of later Latin poets. Plautus’ most important change is his reorientation of the song towards the door that excludes the lover rather than the girl behind it (p.36), an influence, Copley maintains, of the “native Italian door song”. To this novelty he adds the theme of *furtivus amor* (pp.37-38), the presence of a *duenna* (pp.38-39), and an element of violence (pp.40-42). Collart (1962), 25, Deschamps (1980/1981), 169-173, Suárez (2001) and Moore (2005) see this *pompa* as a parody of a religious ritual, particularly in view of the scene’s deification of the door. Moore’s discussion is not limited to Cappadox’s *ianua*, but explores all of the *Curculio*’s doors and their role in the plot. Arnott (1995) has perceptively analyzed this scene’s potential for improvisation and the “coded instructions for comic business” (p.190) in the text. Ketterer (1986), 196-200 explores the *Curculio*’s *paraklausithyron* by reviewing the various props carried and passed around by the characters. His perceptive analysis convincingly demonstrates that objects such as Phaedromus’ torch and the wine bowl are an integral element as “visual symbols” of the scene’s metaphors. Finally, Sharrock (2008), 3-6 offers an interesting discussion of the door-serenade with a
vv.462-486 featuring the choragus, who gives the spectators a ‘tour’ of the Roman forum.\textsuperscript{442} The \textit{Curculio}'s epistolary motif, which will be the focus of my analysis, has been briefly treated by Jenkins. Investigating the juxtaposition of truth and falsehood implicit in the parasite’s letter scheme, he argues that Lyco is persuaded to put his trust in the faked missive by the medium of the message; that is, the\textit{trapezita} reckons that because both public and private affairs are regularly transacted by means of text, letters are an authorized vessel of officialdom which contain truth and not lies.\textsuperscript{443} Jenkins goes on to explore the epistle’s ability to introduce a fictional narrative into the plot, arguing that writing in the \textit{Curculio} works as “an essential tool of metatheatre”.\textsuperscript{444}

It seems to me, however, that much more remains to be said about letters in this pithy play, for Jenkins’ study fails to perceive the full extent of the \textit{Curculio}'s epistolary plot device and the complicated mechanics underlying it. First, I will demonstrate that the parasite’s mischievous ploy is not the comedy’s only missive: his textual trick is set up by another \textit{quasi}-epistolary scenario that occurs in the play’s \textit{Vorgeschichte}. These two epistolary situations, in fact, form a doublet, for the \textit{Curculio}'s letter ruse at once imitates and inverts the circumstances that engender it. I examine this deceit in detail, revealing how Curculio’s plan is a unique configuration of fact and fraud: by theft and by forgery the parasite successfully inserts himself into a pre-established epistolary framework, capitalizing upon Lyco’s expectation of a letter from Therapontigonus to pull off his caper and make his patron, Phaedromus, the ultimate recipient of the girl. My discussion then moves on to consider the \textit{miles}' ring, a powerful signifier that both guarantees the authenticity of the parasite’s forgery and serves to reveal Planesium’s true identity, thereby

\footnote{Fraenkel (1912), 98-99 originally argued that this \textit{excursus} replaces a parabasis in the Greek model. His hypothesis is followed by Deschamps (1980/1981), 151-153, Paratore (1958), 19 and Lefèvre (1991), 99-101. Wright (1993), 70 rightly asserts that the scene is “reminiscent of, though not descended from, the parabasis of Attic old comedy”. Indeed, the \textit{parabasis} had fallen out of comedy long before the Hellenistic age of New Comedy, and is, in fact, absent from Aristophanes’ later plays. On this section of the play, cf. pp.179-182, \textit{infra}.}

\footnote{Jenkins (2005), 382.}

\footnote{Jenkins (2005), 383.
linking the Curculio’s letter deception to its anagnorisis. As we shall see, the anulus changes ‘hands’ throughout the play, adding a new thread to Plautus’ multi-strand comedy as it passes from character to character. This observation will lead me into the final part of my analysis, in which I offer some thoughts on the Curculio’s personae and objects in motion, revealing the series of transfers that propel the plot forward, as well as the travels of the characters into and out of the theatrical world. My chapter concludes with some remarks about the Curculio’s play upon place, ultimately suggesting that this comedy has a doubled dramatic setting that may mirror the slippage between Epidaurus and Rome in the performance space engendered by the choragus’ metatheatrical appearance.

I: Success from failure: More letters in the background

The Curculio starts with a charming comic scene as Phaedromus arrives at the brothel door by night445 accompanied by a retinue of attendants for a clandestine meeting with Planesium. The adulescens sets forth the status quo for the audience in a dialogue with his sharp-tongued slave, Palinurus.446 He is desperately in love with this girl, whom he has been able to secretly encounter as of late thanks to her pimp’s bloated gut: the leno Cappadox has been sleeping inside the temple of Aesculapius447 next-door to his house448 (vv.61-62), tied up in seeking divine relief from his

445 Ketterer (1986), 96-97 discusses the nighttime setting of this opening scene, ‘elucidating’ how the torches carried by Phaedromus’ retinue create a theatrical night. He gives an interesting review of the dramatic “daylight convention” on p.212 n.10. In the view of Moore (2005), 14, these torches borne by Phaedromus and his crew give the tableau a ritualistic flavour.

446 Richlin (2005), 62-63 connects Palinurus’ name to urine (and Martial’s later joke in 3.78 on mingere and ‘Palinurus’ – οὕρειν πόλιν ) but claims that Plautus “doesn’t go there”. Papaioannou (2008/2009), however, has convincingly demonstrated that he does. She explores Palinurus’ character, arguing that he shares the role of servus callidus with the parasite Curculio, dropping out of the text once the parasite appears. Papaioannou supports her argument by suggesting an interesting etymological pun associating Palinurus’ name with that of Curculio’s pseudonym Summanus: mānus in archaic Latin means “good” or “favourable”, which might allude to the Greek synonym in Palinurus’ name, ωρος, “favourable wind of homecoming”. What is more, both “Palinurus” and “Summanus” relate to urination: Curculio explains his pseudonym to Lyco by claiming that it is derived from the bearer’s tendency to wet himself when he has fallen asleep drunk (vv.415-416), which may be seen as a play upon the Greek for urine in Palinurus’ name.

447 Deschamps (1980/1981), 146 and Lefèvre (1991), 104 argue that this detail in the Curculio is a parody of the real religious practice.

448 Scholars have noted the discrepancy of this positioning, for Epidaurus’ famed shrine to Aesculapius was located several kilometres outside of the town proper; cf. Deschamps (1980/1981),
ailments rather than pursuing the business of his establishment. Saved thus by Cappadox's illness from serving clients, Planesium has remained chaste, including in her relationship with Phaedromus, for the two lovers never indulge in anything more than kissing (vv.51-52). The *adulescens* tells Palinurus that he has come up with a plan to get his hands on some money to purchase the girl, seeking a resolution to his lover's dilemma and the play's *crux* by reaching outside of the theatrical *scaena* at Epidaurus to procure a loan in Caria (vv.67-70):

\[
\begin{align*}
nunc hinc parasitum in Cariam misi meum \\
petitum argentum a meo sodali mutuom. \\
quod si non adfert, quo me vortam nescio.
\end{align*}
\]

Just now I've sent my parasite from here to Caria to ask for a loan of money from a friend of mine. If he doesn't bring it back, I don't know where I'll turn to.

The young patron expects Curculio to return from his mission on this very day (vv.143, 207), and has accordingly ordered the cook to prepare a meal for his homecoming (vv.251-253). This background scenario, it seems to me, is manifestly epistolary, although this has gone unnoticed by previous criticism. Curculio, I propose, acts as Phaedromus' courier by delivering his patron's *mandatum* to the addressee in Caria. The *adulescens* conveys a message to this friend through his!

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153, who suggests that Plautus was influenced by the positioning of the temple to Asclepius at Rome within the city proper (on the *isola Tiberina*, and Lefèvre (1991), 89. As Richlin (2005), 60 rightly points out, however, this is an effective 'comic juxtaposition': the evil pimp lives right beside the divine temple (convenient for the hypochondriac *leno*!).

449 Aliter Sharrock (2008), 9, who argues that pseudo-meretrices are kept *pudicae* in other plays "quite easily in other ways". She reads the pimp's ailment as "simply cruel humour in the face of suffering and disability", and a loose thread of the plot that is deliberately left hanging. That is, the audience expects the pimp's sick gut to be somehow important in the course of the play, but it is not: the motif is "its own farcical point – to be farce". The *Curculo* is, in fact, a play with several unfollowed plotlines (on such 'false starts' in New Comedy, cf. Ireland (1983) and my discussion at pp.25-26 an n.76). Goldberg (1995) explores these 'unfollowed' directions (including Cappadox's sickness, p.38), arguing that they provide the opportunity for improvisation and comic *lazzi*. The *leno*'s sick belly may have untapped potential for a whole other storyline, but it is, nevertheless, significant in maintaining Planesium's chastity, as the text itself suggests. At the end of the play, Therapontigonus refutes the maiden's claim that Cappadox had kept her *bene et pudice domi* (v.698), proclaiming thus (v.698-700): *hau voluntate id sua:/Aesculpio huic habeto, quom pudica es, gratiam;/nam si is valuisset, iam pridem quoquo posset mitteret.*

450 Commentators have taken issue with the portrayal of Curculio's trip abroad, arguing that it would, in reality, take much longer than four days to travel from Epidaurus to Caria and back, and that the parasite's return could not be expected with such precision; cf. Deschamps (1980/1981), 147, Lefèvre (1991), 77 and Lanciotti (2005), 41 n.9. The expectation of such strict adherence to 'real time' in drama, however, seems unreasonable; in the *Acharnians*, Dikaiopolis' messenger travels from Athens to Sparta and back in ten minutes or so!
courier: “Send money!” We are not told whether Curculio brought an actual letter or epistle-like symbolus with him authenticating his errand, though this seems to be a reasonable assumption; it is unlikely to imagine that the parasite would be dispatched on such a mission without a document or token legitimizing his role as Phaedromus’ delegate, and therefore, the authorized recipient of the cash being requested. This quasi-epistolary communication in the Vorgeschichte closely resembles the back-story of the Bacchides, although the objectives of the two couriers’ errands are reversed: whereas Mnesilochus is sent to Ephesus by his father Nicobulus to collect on a debt owed to the senex, Curculio is discharged to Caria to obtain a loan for his patron. What is more, the outcome of the two missions are also opposites, for the Ephesian debtor in the Bacchides pays back what he owes, but, as we are about to discover, the Carian to whom the parasite reports Phaedromus’ plea is unable to lend the adulescens any money at all.451

The lovers’ moonlit meeting is brought to an abrupt end by the creaking of the temple doors452 indicating the forthcoming entrance of the sickly Cappadox, who complains at length about his bad health (vv.236-238) and seeks a coniector to interpret last night’s dream. Although Palinurus initially agrees to do the job, the slave swiftly delegates the coniectura453 to Phaedromus’ cook, who happens just now to be passing through.454 Upon the coquos’ advice to seek the goodwill of Aesculapius, Cappadox exits back into the shrine, disappearing in the nick of time for Curculio’s grand entrance. The returning parasite storms onstage in search of Phaedromus, performing a hysterical servus currens monologue as he comes (vv.280-298). Warning everyone to get out of his way, he devotes special reflection

451 Mnesilochus, however, pretends that his epistolary mission has been, like Curculio’s, unsuccessful, thus following the ingenious plan of his slave Chrysalus; cf. pp.66-67, supra.
452 Sharrock (2008), 4 analyses the creaking door motif in the Curculio’s opening scene, observing that Phaedromus serenades Cappadox’s door precisely because it does not fulfill its proper theatrical role, remaining silent (rather than creaking) when Planesium emerges for their secret rendez-vous.
453 Traill (2004), 123-124 considers this scene evidence of amateur dream interpretation at Rome, concluding that coniecturae were not the sole domain of professionals.
(and, potentially, his barley-induced flatulence,\textsuperscript{455} v.295) to \textit{isti Graeci palliati}, runaway slaves who walk the streets stuffed with books and baskets \textit{cum suis sententiiis}, drunk and stealing everything in sight (vv.288-295).\textsuperscript{456} Once he encounters Phaedromus and has been assured of a sumptuous meal to come (vv.320-327), the eagerly awaited parasite reveals the outcome of the \textit{adulescens}' appeal to his Carian friend (v.327): \textit{nil \textit{iltu}l\textit{ili}} ("I got nothing"). Curculio, however, quickly reassures his downcast patron (v.328):

PH: \textit{perdisti me}. CV: \textit{invenire possum, si mi operam datis.}

PH: You've led me astray! CV: I can find you again,\textsuperscript{457} if you give me your attention.

The parasite, it seems, has something else up his sleeve.

Curculio launches into a chronicle of his travels, describing his unsuccessful mission to Phaedromus' \textit{sodalis}. The courier recounts the consignment of his patron's message and the addressee's reply, which is cited in indirect speech (vv.329-334):

\begin{quote}
\textit{postquam tuo iussu profectus sum, perveni in Cariam,}
\textit{video tuom sodalem, argentii rogo uti faciat copiam.}
\textit{scires velle gratiam tuam, noluit frustrarier,}
\textit{ut decet velle hominem amicum amico atque opitulier:}
\textit{respondit mihi paucis verbis, atque adeo fideliter,}
\textit{quod tibi est item sibi esse, magnam argentii – inopiam.}
\end{quote}

After I departed at your command, I arrived in Caria.
I see your friend, and I ask him to give a supply of money.

\textsuperscript{455} In the view of Petrone (1983), 171-172, Curculio’s gas is specifically Italian, for \textit{polenta}, the food to cause it, was seen as a particularly Roman dish. She concludes thus: “Mi sembra poterne dedurre che questo «rumore di polenta» sia allora un rumore «italico», che interviene a sconfessare la mistificante posa ellenofila dei \textit{Grci palliati}, le arie grecomani, cui si contrappone come castigo ultimo, in perfetta coerenza con i destinari”.

\textsuperscript{456} Fraenkel (1960), 123-127, elaborating the observations of Leo, first judged the \textit{servus currens} motif, and in particular the present scene in the \textit{Curculo}, to be a Plautine invention. For this view, cf. Deschamps (1980/1981), 166-168, who reads this speech as a “critique plus ou moins voilée du philhellénisme qui régnait dans certains milieux Romains avec cette présentation tendancieuse des intellectuels Grecs”, Lefèvre (1991), 101-102 and Petrone (1983), 170-175. According to Petrone’s persuasive reading of the scene, the \textit{Graeci palliati} and \textit{servi scurrarum} threatened by Curculio are, in fact, actors playing their parts in the street. \textit{Alter} Csapo (1989), who argues against attributing the \textit{servus currens} routine to Plautine originality. Richlin (2005), 59 perceptively observes that the parasite’s complaints about Greeks constitute a funny self-reflexive joke, for the characters of the play are all Greeks themselves. Slater (1987), 268 n.19 also points this irony out.

\textsuperscript{457} Wright (1993), 66 notes the joke: ‘Phaedromus means, ‘You have destroyed me’, but Curculio takes the words literally. As Regina Höschele has pointed out to me, one might also read the parasite’s reply as referring to the money he can find to solve the \textit{adulescens}' dilemma, if only Phaedromus will lend him his attention.”
You should know that he wants your goodwill; he didn't want to deceive you; rightly, he wishes, as a man who is a friend, to help a friend out. He replied to me in a few words, and very faithfully indeed, what you have, he has the same: of money a huge – deficit.

Thus Curculio has conveyed the Carian man’s words back with him to Epidaurus just as he bore Phaedromus’ message to Caria: like a living writing tablet, the parasite serves as the vehicle for a dialogue by proxy between the separated correspondents. The friend sends back his reply as an oral message including his regrets, assuring Phaedromus through the nuntius that he truly wishes he could help, and is aggrieved to have to disappoint him.

The young lover’s attempt to solve his dilemma, then, is a flop. Phaedromus has sent a courier all the way to Caria only to hear back that his friend is equally impoverished, as Curculio observes in the continuation of his narrative (vv.336-337):

\[
\text{postquam mihi responsumst, abeo ab illo maestus ad forum}
\]
\[
\text{med illo frustra advenisse.}
\]

After I received the reply, I went away from him to the forum, crushed that I had gone there in vain.

But rather than hurry home to relate this bad news to his patron, who is anxiously awaiting him, the parasite shows himself to be a less-than-reliable messenger: Curculio significantly postpones the delivery of the message entrusted to him by lingering in Caria, hanging around the forum.\textsuperscript{458} There, the parasite recounts to Phaedromus, he met the miles Therapontigonus. This soldier took the traveler into his confidence, relating to him his own connection with Epidaurus:\textsuperscript{459} he had previously deposited money with Lyco for the purchase of a girl owned by Cappadox. Lyco will pay the pimp, who will release the meretrix once Therapontigonus sends his legate to Epidaurus with a letter, sealed with his own signet ring. The miles subsequently asked Curculio to have dinner with him,

\textsuperscript{458} Although Curculio never explains his extended stay at Caria, it seems to me that we are to imagine the epistolary author’s worst nightmare: cf. Iphigenia in Aulis vv.141-143, where Agamemnon exhorts his courier to hurry to Argos with the letter for Clytemnestra without procrastinating along the way. I offer some remarks about the parallels between the epistolary scenarios in \textit{IA} and the \textit{Curculio} below.

\textsuperscript{459} With Langen (1886), 134, Lefèvre (1991), 84-85 sees Therapontigonus’ unlikely disclosure of such crucial information as a sign of the carelessness of the \textit{Curculio}'s plot.
extending the courier’s delay in delivering his message to Phaedromus ad absurdum. Curculio obligingly pauses to party,\(^{460}\) further putting off his departure for Epidaurus. This invitation, however, will prove fortunate: when Therapontigonous invoked Planesium’s name for good luck as he was casting the tali in a game of dice (v.356), Curculio discovered that the virgo at Epidaurus which the soldier had made arrangements to purchase is the very same girl Phaedromus loves. Mindful of what the miles had recounted to him earlier in the day, Curculio seized the chance to seize his anulus when its drunken owner fell asleep. Now safely back home in possession of the ring, Curculio explains that he will forge Therapontigonous’ epistle to the banker to get the girl for Phaedromus. Eager to eat up his reward and get the show on the road, he urges swift action (v.365): eamus nunc intro ut tabellas consignemus (“Let’s now go inside to seal the tablets”).

Thus the quick-thinking parasite has capitalized upon this chance meeting with Planesium’s buyer to turn around his bungled mission to Caria. In this way, the text’s first, failed epistolary scenario engenders a second, and ultimately successful one, when its eponymous trickster obtains the necessary token to perpetrate a letter forgery while acting as courier of Phaedromus’ fruitless message. This situation once again bears comparison with the Bacchides, for Mnesilochus’ epistolary errand in that play’s Vorgeschichte likewise precipitates a second letter when the adulescens meets Bacchis abroad and writes to his friend Pistoclerus about her. Just like Mnesilochus, the parasite leaves Epidaurus a messenger and returns an author, though the Curculio’s epistolary transformation is not effected by a love connection but by the financial agreement put in place by Therapontigonous. For by ordering his acquisition of Planesium to be fulfilled once Lyco receives his word by sealed letter, the miles has created a suspended transaction - an Erwartung whose Aufschluss will be activated by an epistle bearing the mark of the signet ring. Whoever is in possession of this anulus has the ability to initiate these proceedings, as its stamp both represents the παρουσία of the miles and identifies the emissary as his

\(^{460}\) Curculio, in fact, offers an apology of sorts for his loitering in Caria to Phaedromus, explaining that Therapontigonous made him an offer he (as a parasite, naturally) could not refuse (v.350): religio fuit, denegare nolui. Wright (1993), 66 notes: “again, the convention is that the parasite is always hungry”. 
authorized legate – a role Curculio slips into by means of his clever theft. Further, Therapontigonus’ arrangement has created the expectation of an epistolary exchange between the banker and himself, a detail that will be key to the success of the parasite’s trick.

Thus the Curculio’s plot is set in motion by an epistolary situation in the Vorgeschichte that brings about a letter deceit by virtue of its deficiency. Phaedromus’ urgent message to Caria ends up being futile, and his parasite-courier decides to make a stopover to indulge his voracious appetite, unreasonably extending epistolary time by delaying the consignment of his message. Curculio’s incompetence as a messenger, however, leads to the solution to the play’s crux (and, indeed, the comedy itself!) where the adulescens’ plan had failed. Let us now turn to this letter-ploy and explore in detail how Lyco is tricked into falling for Curculio’s textual deception.

II: Epistolary expectations

Once he has laid out the providential coincidence that will serve as the play’s new direction, Curculio takes the reins of the plot and instructs Phaedromus and Palinurus to assist him in the forgery (vv.369-370):

\[
\begin{align*}
& tu tabellas consignato, hic ministrabit, ego edam. \\
& dicam quem ad modum conscribas. sequere me hac intro. \\
& (to Phaedromus) You, seal the letter, (to Palinurus) this guy will help, I’ll eat. \\
& I’ll tell you how to write it up. Follow me this way inside.
\end{align*}
\]

In what seems like an ancient version of the modern ‘Lightbulb joke’, no fewer than three people are needed to create the faked letter from Therapontigonus: in a typical comedic inversion,\(^\text{461}\) Phaedromus will write and seal the tablets, Palinurus will assist\(^\text{462}\) and Curculio will dictate the text (with his mouth full!).\(^\text{463}\) This

\(^{461}\) Noted by Ketterer (1986), 201. \(^{462}\) Richlin (2005), 80 takes ministrabit as referring specifically to Palinurus’ role as a waiter, serving Curculio his sumptuous feast while Phaedromus acts the scribe. Likewise, both the TLL (2a) and the OLD list this instance of the verb under ministrare’s definition “to serve food”. Given, however, that the verb has a general meaning of servire, famulari, praesto esse (TLL 1), I wonder whether we might not take Palinurus’ assistance as applying to both of the parallel activities – writing and eating – that are about to happen offstage. This reading is strengthened, I think, by the fact that the Bacchides contains a similar three-way writing scene (cf. p.157, infra).
triangular configuration of epistolary composition has a *comparandum*, once again in the *Bacchides*: at vv.714-748 the first deceitful missive to Nicobulus is created in a dictation scene that requires the agency of three *personae* - Pistoclerus lends a hand by fetching the writing utensils, Mnesilochus inscribes the tablets, and Chrysalus dictates the contents. In the *Curculio*, however, the actual writing takes place behind closed doors, and our knowledge of the missive’s precise wording (though not its message) will come only with its onstage reading in the following scene.

Nevertheless, the parasite’s instructions to his assistants reveal the constellation of epistolary roles, and underline his agency as the author, if not the actual scribe, of the letter’s message. As is typical of Plautine letter deceptions, Curculio plays a double epistolary part in the ruse, acting as composer and messenger of the tricky text. He will perform the part of a courier named Summanus, a freedman of Therapontigonus who has just arrived at Epidaurus from the soldier’s side in Caria. Interestingly, this fake scenario is a doublet of the epistolary context in the *Vorgeschichte* that engendered it, presenting a set of similarities to, and inversions of, Curculio’s initial mission to Caria. The parasite is twice a courier, sent on voyages by two men (both his patrons) to procure money to pay Cappadox for the very

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463 This is noted by Lefèvre (1991), 94-95, who also remarks: “man denkt an Chrysalus, der seinem jungen Herrn Mnesilochus ebenfalls einen Brief diktiert” (p.95).

464 cf. p.166, infra. *Aliter* Jenkins (2005), 380. He comments: “…the audience does not see the forgery; it knows the path of the letter but not its contents”.

465 Curculio is the only parasite-author in the Plautine corpus: besides the *Trinummus*’ freeborn letter-writers, all other epistolary composers are slaves; cf. p.239, infra.

466 Summanus is an obscure Sabine god who came to be associated with Jupiter; cf. Collart (1962), 77, Grimal (1966), 1738 and Deschamps (1980/1981), 145, 153. As Curculio reveals in the report of his conversation with Therapontigonus in Caria at vv.340-342, he knows Lyco (*ibi me interrogat/ecuem in Epidauru Lyconem trapezitam noverim./dico me novisse*). Why, then, does Lyco not recognize the parasite in this scene? The same problem presents itself when Curculio encounters Cappadox a few lines later, at v.455 ff. Either, then, the audience is expected to suspend belief, or the parasite is in full costume for his performance, dressed in traveler’s clothes. This hypothesis gains probability from the fact that Curculio has, in fact, just returned from Caria himself (cf. pp.167-168, infra). Might the parasite’s eye-patch (which indicates that ‘Summanus’ is *unoculus*, v.392 *et cetera*) be part of his disguise? This is the assumption of Collart (1962), 77, Fantham (1965), 90, Slater (1987), 266, Wright (1993), 68 and Fontaine (2010), 72. *Aliter* Sharrock (2008), 8-9, who seems to think that the parasite character is actually *unoculus*: she classes Curculio’s missing eye with other ‘potential missing body parts’ in the play (cf. n.498, infra).

467 ‘Summanus’ is, allegedly, Therapontigonus’ freedman, which makes the soldier his *patronus* Lyco, in fact, says as much at v.524. Admittedly, the relationship between Phaedromus and Curculio and that between Therapontigonus and ‘Summanus’ (although fictive) are distinct, for the parasite is a *liber* not a *libertus*, as he himself makes clear at vv.624-625.
same girl. These two messages travel in opposite directions between Epidaurus and Caria, and have reverse effects, for whereas the first exchange is true and a failure, the second one is lying and effective. Here is an illustration of this epistolary doublet (the real status quo is in brackets):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Exchange in Vorgeschichte:</strong></th>
<th><strong>Epistolary ruse</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Epidaurus \rightarrow Caria</td>
<td>“Caria \rightarrow Epidaurus” (Epidaurus-Epidaurus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>author: Phaedromus</td>
<td>author: “Therapontigonus” (Curculio)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>messenger: Curculio</td>
<td>messenger: “Summanus” (Curculio)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recipient: Carian friend</td>
<td>recipient: banker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>message: Give money for the girl!</td>
<td>message: Give money for the girl!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRUE</td>
<td>FALSE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the forged missive is being prepared behind the scenes, its addressee Lyco wanders onstage. The trapezita performs a brief monologue until the schemer reappears as travelling messenger, *tabellae* in hand. Pretending not to recognize the very man he seeks (v.391), Curculio approaches the “stranger”, inquiring if he knows of Lyco’s whereabouts. Proclaiming that he has been sent to Epidaurus on the orders of Therapontigonus Platagidorus (v.408), the courier explains the purpose of his search for the *trapezita*, announcing his epistolary errand thus (vv.411-412): *mandatumst mihi/ut has tabellas ad eum ferrem* (“I was ordered to bring these writing tablets to him”). Lyco replies with suspicion (v.412): *quis tu homo’s?* (“What man are you?”). Interestingly, the banker demands information neither about the author nor the tablets’ contents; instead, he questions the courier – the one unknown quantity in the present epistolary scenario. Since he already anticipates a letter from Therapontigonus instructing him to carry through his acquisition of Planesium, the banker has no doubts about the sender or the document.\(^{468}\) The letter-carrier’s identity is the sole ambiguous variant and, therefore, the transaction’s potential pitfall, especially since this courier will also become the interim recipient of the *miles’* purchase. Lyco, it seems, is aware of the manifold dangers associated with a text travelling apart from its author, and is suspicious that

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\(^{468}\) Aliter Jenkins (2005), 380, who argues that Lyco “appears confused by the missive”, prompting Curculio to help him through his reading by directing the addressee’s attention to the epistolary seal et cetera. I offer my own interpretation of this crucial delivery scene below; cf. pp.160-169, *infra*. 

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the soldier’s epistle may be wayward, intercepted or stolen on its voyage to Epidaurus. The addressee is rightly wary, for should he accept Therapontigonus’ orders from the wrong person, Planesium will, in turn, be put into the wrong hands. To pull off the ruse, then, the parasite must prove his own legitimacy.

The Curculio thus presents a fascinating set-up: the veracity of the courier is problematized rather than the authenticity of the letter or of the epistolary scenario itself, a premise unlike the other letter plays examined thus far. For the Trinummus, the Bacchides and the Persa feature missives conjured up ex nihilo. As a result, their schemers must convince the addressee-victims of an invented situation, introducing fiction into the play by means of their forgery. The Curculio’s missive, on the other hand, already exists in principle, for the miles has previously apprised the banker (and Curculio) of his epistolary intent. Thus the parasite’s deception is based on a true scenario, constituting a faked version of what was to be a genuine epistolary exchange. In this way, it is not the letter per se underlying the Curculio’s scheme (in fact, as we will see, what has been inscribed on the wax will scarcely matter as long as it is consonant with the details of the transaction); rather, it seems to me that it is the banker’s epistolary expectation, predicated upon an authentic situation previously defined by the victims themselves, that does the trick in this play (so to speak). The parasite is able to fulfill Lyco’s expectation and slip into Therapontigonus’ real and predetermined authorial role thanks to his providential encounter in the Vorgeschichte, when the soldier provided all the material necessary to commit epistolary fraud. The miles’ convenient drunken stupor afforded the schemer an opportunity to pilfer the ring which authenticates the document for Planesium’s purchase, but first Therapontigonus imprudently let the parasite in on the details of the pending transaction. That is, the miles gave Curculio the epistolary content, obliviously dictating, one might say, precisely what the forger will inscribe on the wax once back at Epidaurus (vv.343-347). The faked missive’s text, then, does, in fact, represent the soldier’s own voice, making the Curculio’s epistolary forgery an interesting blend of fact and fiction. The transaction, content and seal are all real. The actor, however, is an interloper who has intercepted an epistolary exchange (and the purchase it transacts) before it has been realized. But how will
Curculio persuade Lyco of his own authenticity as Therapontigonus’ legate? This is the thorny problem that the epistolary scammer cunningly solves.

Once Lyco admits that he is the very banker “Summanus” is looking for, the parasite loses no time launching into his delivery: (vv.420-422):

CV: multam me tibi
salutem iussit Therapontigonus dicere,
et has tabellae dare me iussit. LV: mihin? CV: ita.

CV: Therapontigonus ordered me to speak many greetings to you; he also ordered me to hand over these tablets. LV: To me? CV: That’s it.

The messenger begins by relaying Therapontigonus’ greetings to the trapezita in indirect speech, using the typical epistolary formula salutem dicere. Interestingly, Curculio is repeating the first line of the miles’ letter almost verbatim, for, as the audience will shortly hear, this very phrase is inscribed on the tabellae, with a change only in the adjective qualifying the noun salus – multam becomes plurimam (vv.429-431; quoted below). The words of Therapontigonus’ epistle, then, have been transferred from the wax to the voice of the courier who bears the document, jumping from writing into speech. This is, in fact, the text’s second such transformation in medium, for as we know from Curculio’s instructions to his fellow forgers at vv.368-370 (quoted above), the epistolary contents originally came into being orally, dictated by the parasite (having first heard them at Caria from Therapontigonus) to Phaedromus, who subsequently transcribed the words onto the tablets. Shifting from spoken word into writing and then back again into speech, the faked letter’s text becomes an oral message before it is opened and read by the addressee.469

The parasite now hands the document over, drawing Lyco’s attention to the emblem that seals it as he does so (vv.423-424):

CV: cape, signum nosce. nostin? LV: quidni noverim?
clupeatus elephantum ubi machaera diliget.470

CV: Take it, and recognize the seal. Do you recognize it? LV: Why wouldn’t I recognize it? A man with a shield is cleaving an elephant in half with his sword.471

469 Curculio relays Therapontigonus’ message to Lyco in indirect speech, just as he reported the Carian friend’s reply to Phaedromus earlier in the play.
470 The MSS give dissicit, though most editors (with the exception of Collart 1962 and Monaco 1969) print Nonius’ diliget, a rare usage of diligere for dividere.
Soliciting the banker’s recognition of Therapontigonus’ unmistakable (and authentic) stamp, the parasite affirms the ‘veracity’ of the epistle’s authorship. In fact, the mark of the soldier’s ring signifies even more than this to Lyco, for the epistolary arrangement that precedes the letter makes its contents manifest to the addressee. That is, the tabellae sealed with Therapontigonus’ anulus “speak” without being unsealed, appealing to the banker’s epistolary expectation and “saying” to him, “Complete the transaction with Cappadox!”.

Rosenmeyer has elucidated the intriguing communicative ability of unread letters, demonstrating how a missive’s materiality, implicit in its transmission, delivery and physical appearance, has the power to connote meaning even before the text itself is read. So is the nature of the Curculio’s missive, which is capable of broadcasting its message without being unsealed. In fact, it seems to me that the false courier plays upon this by quoting the letter’s greeting and revealing its author before Lyco has opened the letter. Not only does this represent an inversion of the regular epistolary sequence of reception (the recitation of an epistle’s salutation ordinarily comes after the document has been handed over and unsealed, and is usually performed by the addressee), but it also reenacts the ability of Therapontigonus’ letter to ‘speak’ without being opened. One might say, then, that the text of the soldier’s letter is contained both on the wax and in the messenger’s memory. This is a common epistolary topos: in two of Euripides’ letter plays,

471 Ketterer (1986), 202-203 argues of the sword depicted on the seal that it is a “visual leitmotif for Therapontigonus” as an “appropriate hyperbole for the boastful soldier type”. Given however, that the miles consistently fails to impress anyone with his threats of violence, Ketterer concludes that “the saber is good only for chopping up elephants, and ironically, it becomes a symbol of the soldier’s inability to force his will upon anyone”.

472 The demand that an addressee recognize the seal reoccurs throughout the Plautine letter plays, pointing to the signum’s importance in epistolary communication qua guarantor of authenticity and, therefore, a significant obstacle to epistolary forgery. Therapontigonus’ seal has generated discussion, prompting suggestions that the image might be a reference to the exploits of a Hellenistic king from a Greek original (Grimal 1966, 1738) or an offensive jab at Scipio Africanus (Scullard 1974, 267). Sharrock (2008), 8 thinks it possible that the signum’s depiction is a topical allusion, though she argues against a specific political reading, suggesting instead that “…the effect might be to confound Greek and Roman politics, culture and theatre, in such a way as to not only create incidental humour, but also to bring opposing worlds into congruence”.

473 Aliter Jenkins (2005), 380; cf. n.468, supra.

474 Rosenmeyer (2013), 64.
*Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, the authors (Agamemnon and Iphigenia) recite their missives to the appointed couriers (Pylades and Agamemnon’s old servant). In fact, it seems to me that the *IA* offers an especially fitting *comparandum* to the present scene in the *Curculio*.

The tragedy opens with Agamemnon. He is fretting over a letter, sealing it, opening it back up, and resealing it again (vv.34-41). agonizing over his decision to dispatch this δέλτος to Clytemnestra in Argos. He has written the epistle to emend one composed and sent in the *Vorgeschichte*, in which the Greek hero ordered his wife to send Iphigenia along to Aulis so that the young maiden might be married to Achilles, though in truth Agamemnon has summoned his daughter to be slaughtered as a sacrifice to Artemis. The King now means to take his previous instructions back, and has penned a missive directing Clytemnestra to keep their daughter at home, for, as he alleges, the “wedding” with Achilles will be celebrated another time. Agamemnon recites the contents of the writing tablets to the loyal πρέσβυς who will deliver them. The servant urges on his master’s reading thus (vv.115-116):

λέγε καὶ σήμαιν’, ἵνα καὶ γλώσσῃ
cantas τόις σοίς γράμμασιν αὐδῷ.

Talk and explain yourself, so that I may speak
with my tongue in harmony with your words.

The old man seeks to ensure that his speech is consonant with the text inscribed by Agamemnon on the δέλτος. But why is it necessary for the author to record the message *both* on the tablet and in the courier’s memory? In *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, the epistolary author recites her missive to Pylades in order to save the message should the physical document somehow get lost (vv.755-765); in

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476 These lines come from *Iphigenia in Aulis*’ problematic prologue. The tragedy’s first 150 lines or so have frequently been athetized by scholars who judge them to be either non-Euripidean, or the conflation of two separate prologues; cf. Jenkins (2006), 87 n.13 for a review of the question and relevant scholarship. Jenkins himself thinks that the verses demonstrate a “Euripidean sophistication” that bespeaks their authenticity.

477 Interestingly, Iphigenia recites the epistolary contents from memory, for she is illiterate and unable to inscribe or read the letter herself.
Iphigenia in Aulis, the situation is quite different. The King, I submit, reads his text to the courier so that the old man may authenticate himself as πιστος – Agamemnon’s true courier – by orally relating the epistolary contents to the addressee before the σφραγις that fastens it has been broken. This reading of the scenario, I think, is borne out by the old man’s query to his master at vv.153-156:

Πρ. πιστος δε φρασας ταδε πως έσομαι,
λεγε παιδι σεθεν τη οη τ’αλοχω;
Αγ. σφραγιδα φυλασσεν επι δελτω
τηνδε κομιζεις. 478

OLD MAN: Tell me, once I’ve said these things, how shall I seem truthful to your child and to your wife?
AG.: Guard the seal upon the tablet which you carry.

Orality, then, precedes the written word, as is pointedly suggested by aorist tense of the participle in v.153: the πρεσβυς will recite the letter he bears from memory before letting the text ‘speak’ for itself, a written confirmation of the courier’s speech (which is, in turn, originally that of Agamemnon).479 The two media, oral and scripted, dovetail in the messenger’s consignment to authenticate a scenario and a missive which might otherwise seem rather suspect: if the letter had travelled to Argos (the δελτως will, in fact, never even leave Aulis, for it is intercepted by Menelaus in the following scene at vv.303-413), its text seeking to undo that of Agamemnon’s previous message would have created an epistolary doublet of contradictory information (“Send Iphigenia to Aulis!”/”Don’t send Iphigenia to

478 Jenkins (2006), 93 gets it half right when he observes that “[t]he seal guarantees that the letter is genuine correspondence with which no interceptor has tampered”. Thus also Rosenmeyer (2001), 85 and (2013), 56. Indeed, the σφραγις acts as a tangible assurance that Agamemnon’s letter has not been opened but, as I argue above, it also proves that the messenger, who is privy to the words inscribed on the δελτως underneath the pristine seal, has been dispatched by the author himself. 479 Cf. Rosenmeyer (2001), 82: “Agamemnon wants his letter to be verified by the oral testimony of his loyal servant”. Rosenmeyer adds that dramatic necessity demands that Agamemnon read his epistle aloud, for the audience must be informed of its contents to appreciate the action to come; cf. my observations on the Pseudolus’ opening scene at pp.186-200, infra.

480 Rosenmeyer (2001), 83 observes: “We can imagine the oral and written versions functioning together as a kind of symbolon, the two parts fitting together at the break. The oral and written messages coexist on stage and are represented as mutually reinforcing”. 

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Aulis!

potentially making Clytemnestra wary of treachery: which letter contains the true message? As other critics have noted, the courier’s knowledge of Agamemnon’s communiqué also means that the addressee can ask of him the questions that would inevitably arise as a result of the conflicting information.

The Curculio, it seems to me, offers a funny variation on Euripides’ tragic epistolary scenario: just as Agamemnon’s loyal slave was set to do, the comedy’s schemer shows himself to be equipped with the essentials of the epistolary exchange he presents to Lyco, thus “proving” his own true status as Therapontigonus’ nuntius and “demonstrating” that the letter he bears has not been purloined or intercepted: “Summanus” is the missive’s rightful courier, for he knows the text’s author and preempts the epistolary greeting by conveying the soldier’s greetings himself, privy to what the yet-folded tabellae contain before their demonstrably authentic seal has been broken.

The Rudens offers yet another illuminating parallel to Curculio’s tricky modus operandi, this time within the Plautine corpus. In this play, the piscator Gripus has fished a trunk out of the sea off Cyrene. The owner of the chest is the pimp Labrax who lost it as he was trying to steal away to Sicily with the girl Palaestra, a pseudomeretrix already sold to a youth in Cyrene. Within the vidulus is yet another wicker basket, this one belonging to the maiden herself. Though Gripus desperately wishes to keep the chest and its valuable contents for himself, Palaestra begs for it to be

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481 Jenkins (2006), 88 notes that “the two letters cancel each other out, each the anti-letter of the other”.

482 Noted by Rosenmeyer (2001), 82-83: “Given the precedent of the first, deceitful letter, which may or may not have had an oral message to support it, Agamemnon is rightly concerned about the potential reception of the second, in spite of its honesty”. In fact, Agamemnon’s second letter is also lying, for it claims that the faked wedding between Achilles and Iphigenia will be postponed (vv.122-123).


484 Thus Knox (1972), 256. David Sansone has suggested to me that it was probably “standard procedure” to inform the courier of the epistolary content upon sending a letter – like Agamemnon’s missive – that might raise some doubts, for the messenger might then act in the author’s stead by fielding the recipient’s questions. One might compare the passage in Xenophon’s Cyropaedia where Cyrus sends a letter to Cyaxares containing some rather unwelcome advice to the elder King (4.5.26). Upon handing the document over to the messenger, the Persian King is reported as having said the following: ἄναγγέωμαι δὲ σοι καὶ τὰ ἐπιστελλόμενα, ἐφι, βούλομαι, ἵνα εἴδως αὐτὰ ὀμολογής, ἀν τί σε πρὸς ταῦτα ἐρωτᾷ.
returned to her, for it contains tokens identifying her long-lost Athenian parents. The *vidulus* and vessel within it are turned over to an arbitrator, the old man Daemones (Palaestra’s father, as it will soon be revealed), so that the dispute over its possession may be resolved. The maiden comes up with a clever plan to prove her rightful ownership of the *cistella*, presenting it to Gripus and Daemones as follows (vv.1132-1137):

> Faciam ego hanc rem <ex proclivi pla>nam tibi. 
> cistellam isti inesse oportet caudeam in isto vidulo. 
> ibi ego dicam quidquid inerit nominatim: tu mihi 
> nullum ostenderis; si falsa dicam, frustra dixero, 
> vos tamen istae, quidquid istic inerit, vobis habebitis; 
> sed si erunt vera, tum opsecro te, ut mea mi reddantur.

I shall easily make this matter plain to you. There ought to be a basket there inside this chest of yours. I’ll tell you whatever is inside, one by one: you shall show me nothing. If I list the wrong things, I shall have spoken in vain, and you, whatever is in there, shall keep all such things for yourselves. But if they’re right, then I beg you, let them be given back to me.

Without looking, the girl goes on to list the *crepundia* within the basket: a small knife and axe engraved with the names of her parents (vv.1156-1164), along with some Sicilian coins and a golden charm (vv.1169-1171). She correctly identifies the names of both her mother and father, “reading” the inscriptions on the weapons without laying her eyes on the *litterae* themselves. Daemones realizes that Palaestra is his lost daughter, and the maiden is restored to her family and her birth status. The *Rudens’ pseudo-mereatrix* and the *Curculio’s pseudo-messenger*, it seems to me, do precisely the same thing to corroborate their stories: both Palaestra and the parasite demonstrate knowledge of a sealed container’s contents, each orally relaying a written text from memory to prove the veracity of the role they claim as their own. The order of these two scenarios, however, is reversed: whereas Palaestra correctly identifies the *cistella* as it is opened by Daemones, Curculio ‘validates’ himself as Therapontigonus’ courier before the epistolary *signum* has been broken. This change comes out of the necessity of the circumstances: “Summanus”’ foreknowledge of the epistolary text only counts as proof because the seal of the *tabellae* is yet intact. The ‘authenticity’ of the schemer’s assertion, then, will be confirmed once the addressee unseals the letter, as the parasite himself duly emphasizes.
Lyco finally opens the tablets and reads them aloud. The banker thus reveals the missive’s precise text to the audience for the first time, though like the addressee himself, we have already heard its greeting, and know the gist of its message\(^{485}\) (vv.429-431):

\[
\begin{align*}
&miles\ Lyconi\ in\ Epidaur\ hospit\^{486} \\
&su\ Therapontigon\us\ Platagid\orous\^{487}\ plur\ula\ s \\
&salutem\ dict\^{488}.
\end{align*}
\]

‘The soldier, Therapontigonus Platagidorus, speaks very many greetings to his Epidaurean friend, Lyco.’

At this point, Curculio interrupts with an aside directed at the audience (v.431): \(meus\ hic\ est,\ hamum\ vortat\) (“This guy is mine, he swallows the hook”).\(^{489}\) The parasite declares his epistolary victory even before the reader has reached the soldier’s instructions, barging in on Lyco’s reading with an interjection that bespeaks his plan: the \(trapezita\) re-recites “Therapontigonus” greeting, now reading in direct speech the same information “Summanus” provided before the \(tabellae\) were unsealed. As Curculio underlines, his status as rightful messenger \(and\) interim recipient of the girl is thus confirmed.\(^{490}\) The banker continues, finally now getting to the \(miles’\) orders (vv.432-436):

\[
\begin{align*}
&‘\ tecum\ oro\ et\ quaeso,\ qui\ has\ tabellas\ adferet
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{485}\) Whereas Jenkins (2005), 380 argues that the reading scene is entertaining because “…the audience, like Lyco, has never seen or heard the letter; this is our, as well as Lyco’s, first ‘reading’”, Sharrock (2008), 7 rightly notes that the audience already knows the contents of this forged missive.

\(^{486}\) Wright (1993), 69 suggests that the reoccurring hiatus in this verse might be meant to produce “Lyco’s halting reading”.

\(^{487}\) The soldier’s name takes up the majority of the verse, which, I think, is a joke on what the \(trapezita\) said earlier of his name (vv.409-410): \(novi\ epedol\ nomen,\ nam\ mihi\ istoc\ nomine,/dum\ scribo,\ explevi\ totas\ ceras\ quattuor.\)

\(^{488}\) Lyco’s recitation repeats Curculio’s memorandum in direct speech. The \(miles\), then, greets his banker twice - once orally through his messenger, and once in writing, via the text of his missive. I wonder whether this might be alluded to in the change in the adjective modifying \(salutem\): when the epistolary salutation is pronounced for a second time, \(salus\) is modified by \(plurimus\), the superlative of \(multus\), perhaps hinting at its repetition.

\(^{489}\) Given this scene’s parallels with that in the \(Rudens\), Curculio’s use of fishing imagery to describe his deception is, to my mind, a very interesting coincidence. Wright (1993), 69 notes that \(meus\ hic\ est\) is a “traditional phrase employed when a comic trickster has caught his victim.”

\(^{490}\) Aliter Jenkins (2005), 381. In his view, the letter’s conventional and, therefore, inconspicuous form is an important element underlying the forgery’s success and the explanation of Curculio’s outburst: “The forgery convinces, in part, because it follows the form of an ‘ideal’ letter…For starters, it offers a sender, a receiver, and a formal salutation. Just having Lyco read that bit of information buoyed Curculio’s spirits, for the parasite realizes that the letter’s introductory elements have convinced Lyco”.
tibi, ut ei detur quam istic emi virginem,
quod te praesente isti egi teque interprete,
et aurum et vestem. iam scis ut convenerit:
argentum des lenoni, huic des virginem.’

‘I ask you, please, that the virgin I bought there
be given to the man who bears these tablets to you,
as I arranged for with you present and acting as agent,
so too for the gold and the dress. You already know the agreement:
you give the money to the pimp, and the girl to this guy.’

The simple message Curculio has devised outlines the details of a transaction that
the banker himself was directly involved with, reiterating – as is pointed out in the
text - what Lyco already knows: *iam scis ut convenerit*. The forger is aware, it seems,
that his deception hinges upon a *real* scenario and what was to be a *real* epistolary
exchange, and reminds the addressee of these pre-established circumstances. What
is more, the (supposedly) absent author appeals to the recipient’s presence at the
deal’s settlement (v.434), highlighting the interesting contrast of presence and
absence between the transaction’s arrangement and its fulfillment: Lyco was ‘there’
when Therapontigonus made provisions for Planesium’s purchase, and now the
banker must act on their agreement even though the soldier is not ‘here’ to act for
himself.

The addressee has only one question for the miles’ messenger upon the
completion of his reading (v.437): *ubi ipsus? cur non venit?* (“Where is the man
himself? Why hasn’t he come?”). Curculio invents an apt justification for the
author’s absence, brilliantly playing upon the forged author’s stock character by
alleging that the braggart soldier is busy glorifying himself, erecting a statue to

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491 Collart (1962), 83 calls the epistolary text “une parodie amusante du style administratif”.
492 Lefèvre (1991), 83 takes issue with this line. To his mind, the prearranged epistolary transaction
between Therapontigonus and Lyco makes it a given that the soldier cannot come in person to
Epidaurus. For this reason, the banker’s question regarding the motivation of Therapontigonus’
absence is, in Lefèvre’s view, an inconsistency. According to Jenkins (2005), Lyco questions
“Summanus” about Therapontigonus’ absence because his suspicions have been aroused by the word
*interpres* in the letter (v.432): “…interpretari means not only to shuffle between two entities but also
to figure out actively the relationship between two events or two objects. …Ironically [the word’s
occurrence] is [Lyco’s] one chance to interpret in its metaphorical sense, to navigate the divide
between meaning and text. He suspects that the path of the letter might not be as straightforward as
it appears” (p.381). How Jenkins draws this conclusion based upon the word *interpres* is unclear to
me. As I suggest below, Lyco’s question seems to me to be the addressee’s final attempt to confirm
the authenticity of this epistolary scenario’s one unknown quantity – the messenger and his true
provenance from Therapontigonus.
commemorate his vast foreign triumphs (vv.442-448). This epistolary excuse completely convinces Lyco of “Summanus’” story, banishing his suspicions surrounding the messenger’s authenticity (v.452): *credo hercle te esse ab illo, nam ita nugas blatis* (“By Hercules, I do believe you’ve come from that man, since you blabber on about such nonsense”). As much as this exchange demonstrates Curculio’s metatheatrical familiarity with the type-characters of the very genre he inhabits, it simultaneously reveals Lyco to be a typically clueless victim:

“Summanus” need have no personal acquaintance with the soldier to know that he is *gloriosus*, for this is a comic given of Therapontigonus’ *persona*. It is remarkable, moreover, that the scammer is not lying: Curculio does, in fact, know the *miles*. Unlike the sycophant deliveryman in the *Trinummus*, who dresses up as if just ‘off the boat’ from Seleucia to consign the letters of a man he has never set eyes on, the parasite really *is* a traveler freshly arrived from the company of Therapontigonus in Caria. His pose *qua* travelling messenger is, like the epistolary scenario itself, a slippery mix of truth and falsehood.

In this way, Lyco is thoroughly deceived. The *trapezita* duly puts his trust in Curculio as Therapontigonus’ legate, pledging to act on the soldier’s instructions right away (v.454): *sequere hac, te absolvam qua advenisti gratia* (“Follow this way, I’ll finish off what you came to do”). Concentrating his doubts exclusively on the messenger, Lyco has the wool pulled over his eyes because he is oblivious to the possibility of a forgery. The banker has been persuaded of the *tabellae*’s authorial authenticity by the soldier’s *signum* that seals them: to his mind, the *anulus*’ possessor must be the letter’s composer, which is, in fact, the case. The ‘trick’ is that Therapontigonus is no longer the owner of this tool that produces the distinctive

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493 The list of Therapontigonus’ foreign conquests, which includes real peoples and locations as well as fantastic ones (such as the *classia unomammia*), and the *miles*’ self-gloration have been read as parodic allusions to various Roman and Hellenistic generals; cf. Elderkin (1934) *passim* and Deschamps (1980/1981), 162-166 (who sees Therapontigonus’ portrayal as evocative particularly of Flamininus).

494 Cf. Wright (1993), 71: “Note the use of comic convention here: though the audience has never seen the warrior, they “know” that he is a bragart; Lyco uses that “knowledge” as the basis for his joke”.

495 *Alter* Jenkins (2005), 381-382, who argues that Lyco “proves too clever by half...the story of why Therapontigonus is absent is so absurd that Lyco claims, by a sort of twisted logic, that Therapontigonus *must* be the absent sender”.

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mark of authenticity. Rather, the *anulus* is in the hands of Curculio, allowing the parasite to deceptively conflate the roles of author and courier. Unbeknownst to Lyco, this messenger is privy to what is inscribed beneath the soldier’s seal because he wrote the text himself.

The *Curculio’s* eponymous parasite, then, successfully appropriates the pending epistolary communication between the soldier and the banker, intercepting the exchange before it even begins to, in turn, activate Therapontigonus’ suspended transaction. He reroutes the letter’s point of departure from Caria to Epidaurus and replaces himself as its author *and* messenger, to make his patron Phaedromus the ultimate recipient of Planesium rather than the *miles*. For the girl, one might say, represents Lyco’s affirmative reply to “Therapontigonus”’ epistle,496 which “Summanus” will deliver back to the soldier in Caria. This response at once mirrors and reverses that in the *Vorgeschichte’s* quasi-epistolary exchange between Phaedromus and his Carian friend, producing yet another set of inverted doublets. Here is an illustration, with the true scenario in brackets:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Reply in <em>Vorgeschichte</em></strong>:</th>
<th><strong>Reply in epistolary ruse</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caria → Epidaurus</td>
<td>“Epidaurus → Caria” (Epidaurus-Epidaurus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>author: Carian friend</td>
<td>author: Lyco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>messenger: Curculio</td>
<td>messenger: “Summanus” (Curculio)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recipient: Phaedromus</td>
<td>recipient: “Therapontigonus” (Phaedromus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>message: I have no money! = no girl</td>
<td>message: Money transferred to Cappadox = girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRUE</td>
<td>FALSE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The link between this comedy’s two analogous epistolary scenarios is the *miles’* ring. Discovered on the parasite’s first mission, its possession turns Curculio into an author and enables his second, deceptive role as courier. A guarantor of epistolary authenticity, the *anulus* ironically ends up clinching the deception by blinding the addressee to the possibility of an authorial forgery when it falls into the

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496 Lyco, in fact, *does* send word back to Cappadox with “Summanus” as he departs for Caria (v.524): LV: *salutem multam dicito patrono*. CV: *nuntiabo*. This replicates Curculio’s real role in the *Vorgeschichte* as the bearer of Phaedromus’ oral message to his Carian friend.
wrong hands (so to speak). It is to a closer consideration of this all-important ring that I will now turn.

**III: The Ring is the ‘Thing’**

Immediately following the successful conclusion of Curculio’s epistolary ploy, the thundering Therapontigonus shows up at Epidaurus. The forged author’s appearance achieves yet another neat juxtaposition of presence and absence in this text: supposedly too busy to travel to Epidaurus himself, the soldier is conspicuously absent in the first part of the play, embodied only via his (alleged) epistolary presence. Now, upon the withdrawal of “his” letter from the stage, the *miles* arrives in the flesh. Therapontigonus threatens to exterminate Lyco unless he gets back his deposit of 30 *minae*, a demand the banker flatly refuses. Lyco insists that he has already paid the soldier’s deposit, having transferred it at the behest of the messenger who bore the sealed tablets (vv.543-545):

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lusco⁴⁹⁸ liberto tuo,
is Summanum se vocari dixit, ei reddidi.⁴⁹⁹
qui has tabellas opsignatas attulit, quas tu mihi -
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Your one-eyed freedman-

he said he was called ‘Summanus’ – I gave [the money] back to him.
He who brought these sealed tablets to me, which you [sent] to me -

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⁴⁹⁷ Lefèvre (1991), 79 observes that the *miles’* appearance at Epidaurus on this very day occurs “in ungewöhnlicher Verkürzung der Zeit” (though he notes that Therapontigonus’ sudden arrival is consonant with the expectations of the audience). What is more, Lefèvre (p.84-86), with Langen (1886), 136-137, sees an inconsistency here with the details of the transaction between Therapontigonus and Lyco. The plan to communicate via letter assumes the soldier’s inability to come to Epidaurus himself; why, then, does Therapontigonus now show up in person? Seeing this detail as exemplary of Plautus’ sloppiness in plotting out the details of the intrigue, Lefèvre concludes the *miles* must have come to Epidaurus to change the terms of his contract somehow.

⁴⁹⁸ Sharrock (2008), 8-9 offers some interesting observations on what is, in her view, Curculio’s *really* missing eye (cf. n.466, *supra*), reading it as an “absent presence which epitomizes the physicality of the play”. She posits that it may be a topical reference, suggesting one-eyed political figures of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds such as Antigonus Monophthalmos, Philip II or Hannibal. Critics have long posited an allusion to one of the many one-eyed political figures of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds; cf. Elderkin (1934), 32, Grimal (1966), 1734-1735 and Deschamps (1980/1981), 161.

⁴⁹⁹ Lyco’s words are puzzling: why does the banker say that he gave the soldier’s deposit to “Summanus” when, as we know, he in fact transferred the money to Cappadox? Interestingly, Cappadox makes the same mistake; cf. vv.581-582 and p.172 *infra*. Both instances have gone unnoticed by commentators of the play.
Therapontigonus interrupts the banker, proclaiming that he has no freedman at all (vv. 546-547), and berates Lyco for having believed that letter (v. 551): stultior stulto fuisti, qui is tabellis crederes (“You have been more foolish than a fool, you who put credit in those tablets.”). The trapezita defends himself by pointing out that such are the terms of business, public and private alike (v. 552): quis res publica et privata geritur, nonne is crederem? (“Oughtn’t I trust those instruments, by which matters public and private are managed?”). According to Jenkins, Lyco here is referring to the epistolary medium, upon the credibility of which the entire trick, as he sees it, revolves:

Lyco has put his finger on the crux of the matter: how can he not trust that medium by which all public and private affairs are conducted?...But Plautus' scene between Curculio and Lyco only works because the element of writing is written into the performance; there is no reason for Lyco to trust Curculio except for the written document.500

Like Therapontigonus, Jenkins misses the point: Lyco did not uncritically act on the word of just any tabellae simply because the soldier’s orders appeared as a written document. Rather, the trapezita acted according to an arrangement he knew to be true on the word of an anticipated epistle - one opsignata, critically, with the requisite emblem of authenticity. In fact, as Lyco himself points out, he did not put his trust in the letter per se, but, rather, the mark of the soldier’s signet ring representing his obligation to Therapontigonus (vv. 549-550):

quod mandasti feci, tui honoris gratia

tuom qui signum ad me attulisset, nuntium ne spernerem.

I did what you ordered, for the sake of your honour, lest I scorn a messenger who brought your sign to me.

Dismissed thus by Lyco, Therapontigonus approaches the pimp next in his search for justice, now demanding the return of his meretrix. But Cappadox is no more sympathetic to the soldier’s predicament than was the banker before him: the leno maintains that he has upheld his obligation (v. 566: quod fui iuratus,501 feci: “I have

500 Jenkins (2005), 382.
501 Critics have puzzled over Cappadox’s reference to an oath. To whom did he swear what? Cf. Fantham (1965), 90-93 and Lefèvre (1991), 78. Lefèvre himself is untroubled by this unexplained detail of the play, considering it a regular feature of Plautine dramaturgy in the tradition of the Stegreifspiel.
done what I swore to do.", having given the *mercimonium* over to the soldier’s legate (vv.581-582):

CA: *ego illam reddidi qui argentum a te attulit.*
TH: *quis is est homo?*
CA: *tuum libertum sese aiebat esse Summanum.*

CA: I handed her over to him who brought the money from you. TH: Who is this man?
CA: He said that he was your freedman Summanus.

Making the connection between the transaction gone awry and Curculio’s recent theft of his signet ring, the truth finally dawns on Therapontigonus (vv.583-584):

*attat! Curculio hercle verba mihi dedit, quom cogito.*
*is mihi anulum surrupuit.*

Aha! By Hercules, Curculio has tricked me, when I think it over.
He stole my ring.

The *miles*’ words ironically pun upon the method of the parasite’s trick: Curculio has literally given Therapontigonus words, - *verba mihi dedit* – successfully faking his authorship in the letter to Lyco.

Thus the soldier’s ring stands at the very centre of the *Curculio*’s letter plot. As the *signum* representing Therapontigonus’ command to complete the transaction, it is the cornerstone of the arrangement between the banker and his customer, of which the parasite’s ruse is an adept imitation. Rather than a wayward letter, then, the *Curculio* features a wayward *seal*: when the *anulus* passes from the soldier to the parasite, so, too, does the authorship of the crucial document. That is, whoever has the ring can ‘become’ an epistolary Therapontigonus, for it is, as Sharrock has observed, a “true and authoritative indicator of identity". This is an exceptional circumstance, for a signet ring is usually separable from its owner only with great difficulty. Once with this crucial seal and the details of the deal

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502 Like Lyco before him, Cappadox ignores the banker’s role in the transaction and claims that he received the money directly from “Summanus”.
503 Welsh (2006) elucidates a dirty pun in Cappadox’s reply to Therapontigonus in vv.584-585 (perdidistin tu anulum?/miles pulchre centuriatus est expuncto in manipulo). The pimp has turned the soldier’s proclamation about the loss of his signet ring into a joke about the loss of his anal virginity, dependent upon a secondary, metaphorical meaning of *anulus* as “anus”.
504 Wright (1993), 78 misses the joke when he comments that the soldier uses “a very appropriate idiom, when we consider that a comic trickster’s main weapon is his ability to manipulate language”. Sharrock (2008), 7.
505 As we shall see, Planesium has held on to her own ring throughout all of her vicissitudes since her abduction.
conveniently divulged by the foolhardy *miles* himself, Curculio cannot fail to pull off
his caper and get the girl for his patron. But upon the successful completion of this
forgery, we are not yet at the end of the play, for the *anulus* yet has work to do in the
plot. Sharrock has elucidated the potency of this theatrical sign in the *Curculio*,
observing as follows:

*A theatrical ring is not the ordinary ring such as audience members wear...but the theatrical
signifier of a plot device. So strong is its signifying power, that even a mention of the ring is
inclined to make us expect from it a significant role in the plot, most commonly either in the
trick or as a token in a recognition scene.*\(^{507}\)

As Sharrock points out, Therapontigonus’ ring acts out both of these roles, morphing
from an epistolary seal into a token of recognition.\(^{508}\) In the remainder of my
discussion, I will build upon her perceptive analysis, tracing the various
transformations and plot developments which occur as the *anulus* changes hands,
now moving from the possession of the parasite to that of Planesium and ushering
in along with its new status a new thread in the plot. This travelling ring will lead me
to consider the *Curculio*'s other objects and characters in motion, and I will offer
some final observations upon these transfers and the text’s play upon place to
conclude this chapter.

**IV: Anagnorisis**

A raging Therapontigonus exits in search of the schemer, just missing Curculio
(again!) as he returns to the stage, once more his ‘weevilish’ self after having so
successfully played the part of Summanus. Citing the authority of an *antiquos poeta*
(v.591),\(^{509}\) Curculio laments the ruinousness of women, none worse than Planesium
herself. He complains that the *virgo* has stolen the soldier’s ring from him, biting his
hand like a dog (v.597: *caniculam*)\(^{510}\) to get at it. Planesium now enters, Phaedromus

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\(^{507}\) Sharrock (2008), 6.

\(^{508}\) Goldberg (1995), 37 also remarks upon the double role of Therapontigonus’ ring.

\(^{509}\) According to Deschamps (1980/1981), 169 n.120 this ancient poet may have been Euripides, in
which case he concludes that the reference would probably go back to Plautus’ Greek model.

\(^{510}\) Bianco (2005) connects Curculio’s comment to other canine comparisons of women in Plautus,
ultimately tracing this motif to Euripides’ *Hecuba*, familiar to Romans via Ennius’ translation. This
observation builds upon that of Petrone (1983), 183-184, who suggests that the portrayal of the
*iatrix* Leaena, who sniffs around the stage like a dog for the wine sprinkled by Phaedromus in the
play’s opening *paraklausithyron*, is a parody of the Hecuba myth.
at her heels. The *anulus*’ latest thief insists that her boyfriend discover its origins from the parasite, for she recognizes it as the one her father used to wear (v.602): Planesium was, it is revealed, born free (v.607). As Ketterer observes, the ring has now become a birth token, one of New Comedy’s stock props, and a symbol of the *meretrix*’s birthright. In fact, the ring’s shift in role is also reflected in its manifestation: as the linchpin of Curculio’s epistolary plan, the *anulus* was needed for its impression to mark *tabellae* allegedly sent by Therapontigonus. Now, as a recognition token, the ring must actually appear ‘in the flesh’.

After some mischief, Curculio finally relents and reminds his forgetful patron where he got the ring (vv.608-609):

*dixi equidem tibi unde ad me hic pervenerit. quotiens dicendum est? elusi militem, inquam, in alea.*

For my part, I’ve told you whence this ring came into my possession. How many times does it need to be said? I tricked the soldier, I say, in a game of dice.

The victim of Curculio’s *ludi* reenters, right on cue. Having demanded his money from the banker (v.535) and the girl from the pimp (v.566), he now demands one or the other from the parasite (v.612): *redde etiam argentum aut virginem* (“Really, give back the money or the girl.”). Phaedromus interrupts the furious soldier’s tirade by revealing Planesium’s true identity, threatening legal action against Therapontigonus for trafficking in *furtivae atque ingenuae virgines* (vv.620-621). The situation threatens to turn into a brawl when Curculio volunteers to act as a witness and the soldier responds by beating him (v.626). But Planesium cries out, reminding Phaedromus of the real issue ‘at hand’ – the question of the ring (v.628-631):

*PL:* *Phaedrome, obsecro, serva me!* *PH:* *tamquam me et genium meum. miles, quaeso uti mihi dicas unde illum habeas anulum, quem parasitus hic te elusit. PL:* *per genua te obsecro.*

*PL:* *Phaedromus, I beg you, save me!* *PH:* *Just as myself and my spirit.*

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511 Ketterer (1986), 204.
512 To me, Curculio’s words sound like an ironic pun on the theatrical convention of repeating important details of the plot for the benefit of the audience’s comprehension. That is, Phaedromus’ inability to retain this bit of information is parallel to that of less astute spectators, who are the target of the parasite’s metatheatrical complaint.
Soldier, I ask that you tell me whence you have that ring there, which this parasite here weaseled away from you. PL: By your knees, I beg you.

After some resistance, Therapontigonus finally agrees to reveal the story of his ring (vv.635-639):

\[\text{hanc rem agite atque animum advortite.}\]
\[\text{pater meus habuit Periplanes} \uparrow \text{Planesium} \uparrow \text{is prius quam moritur mihi dedit tamquam suo,}\]
\[\text{ut aequom fuerat, filio} – \text{PL: pro Iuppiter!} – \]
\[\text{TH: et istae me heredem fecit.}\]

Listen to this story, and give me your attention.
My father Periplanes had it...
Before he died, he gave it to me, as was appropriate for I'm his son... – PL: By Jupiter!
...and thereby made me his heir.

The logical conclusion of Therapontigonus' account registers immediately with Planesium, as is clear from her exclamation in v.638. Having recognized in the miles her own brother, the girl greets him accordingly (v.641): \textit{frater mi, salve} (“Greetings, my brother.”). The soldier, however, is suspicious (v.641: \textit{qui credam ego istuc?} “How shall I believe this?”) and quizzes Planesium on the names of her mother and nurse (v.643). To verify her claim, the maiden tells her own story, recalling how she came to be separated from her family (vv.644-650):

\[\text{ea me spectatum tulerat per Dionysia.}\]
\[\text{postquam illo ventum est, iam ut me conlocaverat,}\]
\[\text{exoritur ventus turbo, spectacula ibi ruunt,}\]
\[\text{ego pertimesco: [tum] ibi nescioquis arripit}\]
\[\text{timidam atque pavidam, nec vivam nec mortuam.}\]
\[\text{nec quo me pacto abstulerit possum dicere.}\]

She [the nurse] had taken me to watch the games at the Dionysia. After we got there, as soon as she had put me down, a wind arose in a whirlwind, and the seats in the theatre tumbled down. I'm terrified: someone or other snatches me up there, timid and scared as I was, neither dead or alive. Nor can I say how he took me away.

Recounting the history of the ring and the series of events that led to Planesium's enslavement in flashbacks, brother and sister thus give what is essentially the \textit{Curculio's Vorgeschichte}. In fact, their narratives are evocative, I propose, of a dramatic prologue, as is suggested particularly by Therapontigonus' calls for attention in v.635, which frame the narrative. This two-part 'prologue', however, is
more like an epilogue, for these accounts of the plot’s background have been displaced from the beginning of the text to its end. As a result, the dramatic anagnorisis occurs before the story of Planesium’s vicissitudes is told – an inversion of the ordinary sequence whereby the saga of the lost child is given by the prologus at the very outset of the comedy. But despite the girl’s testimony, Therapontigonus remains skeptical of her claim until Planesium reveals her own anulus, which was lost along with her (v.654 cum hoc olim perii - “At the time I was lost along with this.”). The soldier finally returns his sister’s greeting when he recognizes the ring that he sent to her, long ago, on her birthday. He repeats the same exclamation Planesium uttered upon realizing the truth (v.638, quoted above), neatly marking this doubled moment of sibling recognition (vv.655-657):

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{pro} \text{ luppiter!} \\
&\text{hic est quem ego tibi misi natali die.} \\
&\text{tam facile novi quam me. salve, mea soror.}
\end{align*}
\]

By Jupiter!
This is what I sent to you on your birthday.
I’d know it anywhere, just as I know myself. Greetings, my sister.

The anulus discovers its doublet (an image perhaps reflected in the portrait on Therapontigonus’ ring, which features an elephant being cleaved in half) and Therapontigonus his long-missing sister. The girl who disappeared in the crowds at the games is now found again in the course of this comedy, which, likewise, takes place at the ludi, performed on the occasion of a civic festival at Rome. This is a metatheatrical coincidence of setting, for the circumstances of Planesium’s disappearance within the plot are reproduced outside the context of the play in the occasion of her recovery. Theatrical games thus cause familial separation and lost

\footnotesize{513} The chronological order of the two accounts is also reversed: Planesium’s abduction must precede the death of her father, for the virgo was not aware that Periplanes’ ring had passed on to her brother.
\footnotesize{514} Cf. Plautus’ Casina, Rudens and Menaechmi and Euripides’ Ion. The play’s surprise anagnorisis (as well as the rather late announcement of its setting at Epidaurus) has led scholars to postulate the existence of a prologue which has either been left out of the Latin adaptation or became detached from our inherited text of the Curculio; cf. Lanciotti (2005), 40 n.7 for bibliography ad loc.
\footnotesize{515} Cf. Sharrock (2008), 7.
\footnotesize{516} I owe this observation to David Sansone.
\footnotesize{517} The same happens in the Menaechmi: the original Menaechmus is lost during the ludi at Tarentum (vv.29-31).
identities to bring about reunion and recognition in their turn. That is to say, the stuff of comedy is inextricably linked to the instantiation of its performance; the ludi both make plots and resolve them.

In this way, the signet-ring links the Curculio’s letter ruse to its anagnorisis, serving both to deceive and to reveal the truth. In so doing, this signifier effects a twofold change in the virgo’s standing, first transferring her from the possession of Cappadox to that of the tricksters parading as Therapontigonus, only to then reunite Planesium with her brother. Interestingly, the maiden’s recognition qua libera puts her into the possession of the soldier after all (her brother is now Planesium’s legal guardian in the absence of the siblings’ father), an ironic twist that undoes all of the parasite’s scheming efforts to intercept the girl’s transfer into his ownership. The Curculio’s schemer and his patron, then, remarkably end up petitioning the forged author to resolve the play’s crux! But given the mechanics of the plot, Therapontigonus is not the Curculio’s real loser after all: the soldier may have forfeited the meretrix he had arranged to purchase, but he has gained a sister. The ultimate loser is the pimp Cappadox, who is forced to pay up Planesium’s price (30 minae) according to his guarantee of a refund to the purchaser should any one reclaim her as free.518 Given the turn of fate that concludes the play, the very party to declare her so is the purchaser himself! Therapontigonus agrees to the proposed match, finally settling the virgo into the ownership of Phaedromus and ending the Curculio ‘happily ever after’.

518 This is noted by Lefèvre (1991), 88.
V: Characters and objects in motion

The *Curculio*’s sequence of events is activated as this play’s most important signifier and kinetic object, the signet-ring, passes through a series of hands: the *anulus*, given to Therapontigonus and Planesium’s father, Periplanes, by their mother (v. 603), and passed on to the miles upon his death, is stolen twice in the course of the play - first at Caria from the soldier by Curculio, and then from Curculio at Epidaurus by Planesium. As Sharrock has observed, it takes on a new role each time, going from “an authorizer of official and financial business” in the possession of the soldier to Curculio’s tool of epistolary forgery. Finally, it acts as the token that triggers Planesium’s *anagnorisis* when the *virgo* gets it. The maiden subsequently produces the travelling ring’s twin (*sent* to her by Therapontigonus on her birthday, as the soldier proclaims in v.656, quoted above) which, in contrast to her brother’s ring, has not ever left Planesium’s possession (v.653): *verum hunc servavi semper mecum una anulum* (“Truly, I’ve kept this ring always with me.”).

Transfer and movement – real and alleged, of both people and things – are, in fact, prominent themes in the *Curculio*. The forged epistle, for instance, is a device that *should* be in motion according to the fictive premise of the ruse, but is, in fact stationary. The letter from “Therapontigonus” to Lyco allegedly travels from Caria to Epidaurus, though in reality it is delivered to the leno from just next door. The ‘transmitted’ epistle precipitates a transfer of money which, in turn, effects that of the girl: on the word of “Therapontigonus”, Lyco hands his deposit over to Cappadox. The pimp gives Planesium to “Summanus”, who will supposedly deliver her to the soldier. Below, I offer an illustration of these elements in motion, a circle of transposition beginning and ending with “Therapontigonus”- that is, Curculio.

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519 Sharrock (2008), 6-7. Her analysis identifies even more roles for the ring in the course of the plot, positing it as a “financial pledge” with a “symbolic, almost magical, effect” when Therapontigonus uses it in his game of dice with Curculio, simultaneously invoking Planesium’s name. Sharrock also suggests that the *anulus* is a symbol of the parasite’s genius when presented to Phaedromus as the solution to his lover’s dilemma.
LETTER: "Therapontigonus" → Lyco

MONEY: (Vorgeschichte: Therapontigonus →) Lyco → Cappadox

GIRL: Cappadox → Summanus ("at Caria → Therapontigonus")

These objects in circulation are matched (and moved) by the Curculio's travelling characters. The play's finale features the happy ending of Planesium's wandering, a defining quality of the virgo's persona aptly reflected in her sprechender Name, which she inherited from her father, Periplanes. Planesium roams both geographically and in terms of her ownership and status:
in her short lifetime as a kore, the girl goes from a libera in the possession of her parents, to a slave in that of her abductor. The maiden is subsequently purchased by Cappadox and brought to Epidaurus, where she is sold to Therapontigonus and soon to be shipped to Caria. But before she is sent for, Planesium is appropriated by Phaedromus (kidnapped a second time, one might say) through the deceptive agency of Curculio. Finally the purloined ring restores the virgo's true and original status, putting her under the power of the soldier who then weds her to the adulescens. Planesium, however, is not the only wanderer in this text. Before the comedy even begins, Curculio travels from Epidaurus to Caria and back again as messenger, a voyage replicated by Therapontigonus during the play itself when he arrives after the letter-deceit has been successfully accomplished. Remarkably, the arrival of these two pivotal characters at Epidaurus precipitates a new direction in the plot: Curculio gives rise to the epistolary scenario when he comes home with the

520 So Wright (1993), 47. Deschamps (1980/1981), 171-172 reads Planesium's name as an allusion to alternative names of Aphrodite, which he connects to sacrifice to Venus which opens the play: "Ce serait une allusion à l'aspect cosmique que prenait parfois l'Aphrodite greque par syncrétisme avec d'autres divinités méditerranéennes. Certaines monnaies représentent la déesse associée à une étoile et à un croissant ou à une étoile seule...Le nom de «petit astre, petite planète» convient tout à fait à la bien-aimée que Phédrome vient voir dans la nuit".

521 It is unclear where Planesium was born and abducted. It is tempting to place these events in Caria, since much of the play's plot unfolds in this secondary setting, but I can find no evidence to support this hypothesis.

522 Cappadox was not Planesium's original abductor. The pimp himself informs us that he purchased her from someone else (vv.528-529) and the girl herself states that a nescioquis kidnapped her when interrogated by her brother (v.649).
soldier’s ring in tow, whereas Therapontigonus’ sudden presence in the city introduces an anagnorisis.

Travel, then, literally drives the plot as characters move into the theatrical world, bringing into Epidaurus (and, thereby, the play) storylines from the East. Thus the Curculio unfolds on two fronts, its events transpiring ‘here’ and ‘there’. In fact, the crucial meeting between the parasite and Therapontigonus that initiates the entire plot occurs not in Epidaurus but in Caria. Upon his return home, Curculio reenacts the scene for Phaedromus and Palinurus in a dramatic flashback of sorts (vv.337-347):

forte aspicio militem.
adgreudor hominem, saluto adveniens. ’salve’ inquit mihi,
prendit dexteram, seducit, rogat quid veniam Cariam;
dico me illo advenisse animi causa. ibi me interrogat, 
ec quem in Epidauro Lyconem trapezitam noverim.
dico me novisse. ’quid? lenonem Cappodocem?’ adnuo
visitasse. ’sed quid eum vis?’ ’quia de illo emi virginem
triginta minis, vestem, aurum; et pro is decem eo accedunt minae.’
’dedisti tu argentum?’ inquam. ’immo apud trapezitam situm est
illum quem dixi Lyconem, atque ei mandavi, qui anulo
meo tabellas obsignatas attulisset, ut daret
operam, ut mulierem a lenone cum auro et veste abduceret.’

By chance I see a soldier.
I approach the man, greeting him as I go. “Hello” he says to me, 
he takes my right hand, brings me aside and asks why I’ve come to Caria: 
I say I came there because it suited me. Then he questioned me, 
asking if I know some banker in Epidaurus named Lyco. 
I say I know him. “What? How about the pimp Cappadox?” I confirm that 
I’ve often seen him. “But what do you want with him?” “[I’m asking] because I 
bought a virgin from that guy, 
for 30 minae, as well as her dress and gold; for those I added on 10 minae.”
“Have you paid?” I say. “Yes, I’ve deposited the money with a banker, that one 
I said is named Lyco, and I instructed him to make sure that whoever brings 
to him a letter sealed with my ring should lead the woman away from the 
pimp along with the gold and her dress.”

Just as he transmits messages between the two cities, announcing Phaedromus’ nuntium and the reply of his friend, Curculio brings the words of his encounter abroad to Epidaurus in a mini-performance, “re-staging” his meeting with Therapontigonus in Caria. Similarly, the forged letter connects these two theatrical locales, acting as a bridge between them by (allegedly) introducing the words of a character in Caria to get things going at Epidaurus. That is, by his recitation of the
epistolary text, Lyco realizes the “miles” voice onstage, bringing Caria (and the soldier) for a moment to Epidaurus.

This doubled backdrop on the level of the plot is metatheatrically reflected, I propose, in the Curculio’s famous excursus at vv.462-486. In this fascinating inset, the production’s choragus makes an appearance onstage, remarking upon the deceitfulness of the parasite and worrying that this nugator might steal the costumes he has rented out for the performance (vv.462-465). He proceeds to give the spectators a “tour” of the Roman forum, indicating where they might find different types of men, virtuous and depraved, in its various parts. The short section has attracted much comment. Scholars have mined the verses for evidence of the forum’s topography in the middle republican period, and it has been convincingly shown that the Curculio was probably performed in the forum, the spectators perhaps even sitting in the sections highlighted by the choragus. Moore has elucidated how this speech thus blurs the lines between the world on stage and that which the audience inhabits. He argues that the choragus’ “incongruous position” qua member of the backstage crew and now, by virtue of his appearance onstage in performance, qua character in the play, suggests that Epidaurus and Rome are one and the same, connected via performance. Likewise, Richlin observes that the play’s location ‘floats’: ...though it is set in Epidaurus, in Greece, at several key points

523 Sommella (2005) reviews the evidence and scholarly discourse; cf. also Moore (1991), n.2 for bibliography.
524 Thus Gagliotti (1985), 60, Moore (1991), 358-360 and Wright (1993), 71. Marshall (2006), 40-42 suggests, rather, that the original audience would have been positioned in such a way so that the spectators were not sitting in the locales identified by the choragus, but were able to easily spot them without ‘craning their necks’.
525 Moore (1991), 344-354. Moore’s discussion aims to demonstrate that this metatheatrical excursus ultimately likens the citizens of Rome to the stock inhabitants of comedy by eliminating the distinction between them. He concludes: “To an audience with even the slightest perceptiveness, the speech must have been as disconcerting as it was amusing, for it suggests in a far from subtle way that the separation the Romans liked to assume between themselves and the ‘Greeks’ they laughed at in comedies was in fact nonexistent, and that even with respect to the all-important Roman quality of fides, many in the very presence of the audience were no different from the Graeculi on stage” (p.362). Cf. also Marshall (2006), 197 who rightly, I think, argues that the choragus character would have been unmasked to mark his provenance from the ‘real world’ outside the dramatic illusion.
[the *Curculio*] is explicitly in Rome, and has more explicit things to say about Rome than any of Plautus’ other plays.”

This juxtaposition of theatrical and physical location, I propose, is replicated in the *Curculio’s* dual setting. That is to say, the slippage between Rome and Epidaurus achieved by the choragus' monologue reflects that occurring between Caria and Epidaurus onstage. Although the *scaena* is located in Epidaurus, conjured up on a stage in Rome, Caria is always in the background (so to speak). This foreign location serves not only as a source of action in the plot, both in the *Vorgeschichte* and during the course of the comedy, but the city is evoked onstage throughout the play when characters located ‘there’ make an appearance ‘here’ through their words. In the same way, then, that Epidaurus is made ‘present’ in Italy via performance, so too is Caria theatrically evoked at Epidaurus within the context of the *Curculio’s* plot.

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526 Richlin (2005), 57. Deschamps (1980/1981) also explores the question of the *Curculio’s* setting in an article entitled, “Epidaure ou Rome?”. Deschamps, however, is concerned with discerning references to Rome and weighing these against Greek elements to conclude whether the *Curculio’s* backdrop is more ‘Roman’ or ‘Greek’. At the end of an exhaustive (and imaginative) catalogue of possible Roman allusions, Deschamps concludes that “l’atmosphère est bien celle de la ville de Romulus” (p.176). I have cited Deschamps’ observations throughout where relevant.
5. Opportunity Makes a Thief: 
Epistolarity and Epistolary Mischief in the Pseudolus

Introduction
The final text in my exploration of letters in Plautus is the Pseudolus, the rip-roaring comedy featuring the corpus’ only epistolary theft. Its premise is the genre’s most familiar. The adulescens Calidorus is in love with Phoenicium, a courtesan owned by the pimp Ballio. The leno, however, has already sold the meretrix to Polymachaeroplagides, a Macedonian soldier who has paid a deposit of 15 minae for the girl’s purchase. The miles’ emissary is due at Athens ‘today’ to pay the balance of Phoenicium’s price and take her away to her new owner, bearing a letter signed and sealed by his master to identify him as the soldier’s legitimate deputy. Pseudolus promises his despondent erus minor a solution to this crux, and makes good on his pledge magnificently when he, ‘by chance’, runs into Polymachaeroplagides’ dull-witted messenger. The slave mounts an impromptu attack, temporarily assuming a new character as Ballio’s slave to outmaneuver the nuntius and steal from him his epistolary charge. Once in possession of the crucial text, Pseudolus contrives yet another theatrical ruse to get his hands on the girl. A second trickster slave, Simia, is dressed up as the soldier’s messenger and sent forth to deliver the missive as if coming directly from Polymachaeroplagides himself. This imposter adroitly pulls off the faked delivery, and is entrusted with Phoenicium to (supposedly) transport her back to the miles, though she is really conveyed into the arms of her beloved. The victorious tricksters celebrate their triumph in a comic debauch as the audience savours the defeat of the performance’s losers.

Since scholarship first turned its attention to discerning the playful self-consciousness of Plautine comedy, the Pseudolus has been a perennial favourite of critics, singled out, to quote Feeney, as the text “most flamboyantly intent upon

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527 This development began with Barchiesi’s revolutionary 1970 article (cf. pp. 127-129), followed by Wright (1975) and Petrone (1983), who analyses the play’s metatheatricality through the slave-hero’s monologues (pp. 64-74). Slater’s groundbreaking 1985 study devotes a chapter to the Pseudolus entitled “Words, Words, Words”, heavily indebted to Wright (pp.118-146). On metatheatre in Plautus, cf. also Chiariini (1979) and on that in the Pseudolus, Barsby (1995), Marshall (1996), Sharrock (1996) and Feeney (2010).
reminding the audience that the stage event is a staged event”. The eponymous servus stars as the fabula’s playwright, masterminding two “plays-within-the-play” to carry through his comic duty of getting the girl. Throughout, Pseudolus manifests an unparalleled awareness of his own theatricality and his role as the text’s internal author, referring to the external audience and the comedy in course, even likening his scheming to the creative activity of a poet. Thus the Pseudolus has been held up as the “gold standard” of Plautine metatheatrere, even likening his scheming to the creative activity of a poet. Thus the Pseudolus has been held up as the “gold standard” of Plautine meta

Before the Pseudolus was universally admired for its employment of metatheatre, the comedy attracted comment for its manifold ‘problems’ - perceived inconsistencies in its structure and storyline. Wright observes that “…though Plautus has been accused of careless construction in many plays, in no Plautine comedy does this putative carelessness seem so glaring as in the Pseudolus”. Indeed, this stop-and-go comedy is filled with teasers and false leads. Strands of the plot are left dangling, never to be woven back into the action and leaving the spectators guessing right until the play’s very end. These ‘difficulties’ have been traditionally blamed on the playwright’s inept dramaturgy, seen as a sign of Plautus’ clumsy handling of a (pristine) Greek original or his awkward combination of two

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[528] Feeney (2010), 282. The Pseudolus, it seems, was also beloved by Plautus himself: Cicero informs us that the playwright took delight in the play as an old man: quid in levioribus studiis, sed tamen acutis? quam gaudebat bello suo Punico Naevius! quam Truculento Plautus, quam Pseudolo! (de Sen. 14.50).


[535] Willcock (1987), 15-17 succinctly summarizes the four main “logical difficulties” in the text. I address these and the relevant critical discourse below as appropriate.

[536] The analytical approach dominated Plautine criticism from the late 19th century all the way into the 1970s. For a recent exemplum and extensive bibliography on these problems in Plautus’ construction, cf. Lefèvre (1997), especially pp.12-92. Lefèvre’s work is aimed at proving the translator’s independence by discerning the playwright’s deviation from his (speculatively
model texts. More recently, such hypotheses have been discarded in favour of a more sophisticated appreciation of the *Pseudolus*’ construction. Of particular importance to this rehabilitation of the text is Sharrock’s 1996 article, which persuasively explains the *Pseudolus*’ alleged structural inconsistencies as a deliberate pose of artlessness: the clever slave *pretends* not to know what he is doing next by emphasizing his uncertainty and plotting false directions in the storyline. This, Sharrock argues, is all part of the fun as the spectators allow themselves to be deceived into believing that the performance unfolding on stage does not originate in a fixed text but is an improvised, ragtag show. Further, Sharrock has productively reformulated traditional Plautine Quellenforschung by suggesting that we read *contaminatio* as a form of intertextuality. Instead of hunting for the signs and sutures of Plautus’ (allegedly poor) adaptation to reconstruct his lost models, we ought to be reading for hints of the playwright’s independence from the Greek original.

The great insight yielded into this complex text by studies of its metatheatricality and pose of improvisation will play an important part in my own analysis of the *Pseudolus*’ epistolary motif. Its two embedded missives have been investigated by Jenkins, and briefly touched upon in the analyses of Slater and Sharrock. These discussions provide a solid base for what follows, although the motif’s extensive employment in the *Pseudolus* means that much remains to be said. I begin with an in-depth analysis of the play’s opening scene, which features a missive written from Phoenicium to her boyfriend. I offer a close analysis of *Pseudolus*’ funny (and naughty) introduction to this text (a routine that does the double duty of foregrounding the epistolarity of the comedy to follow), and the

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537 This *contaminatio* hypothesis originated with Ladewig (1842), 23. For discussion and a thorough review of relevant bibliography, cf. Lefèvre (1997), 14-20.
538 This critical trend began with Wright (1975).
540 Slater (1985), 119-121, 133-134, 141.
541 Sharrock (1996), 159-162.
missive’s contents, elucidating Plautus’ sophisticated manipulation of this plot device and the intricate dynamics it entails. Through a linear reading of the play, I proceed to unpack the mechanics of Pseudolus’ interception and his subsequent reconsignment of Polymachaeroplagides’ missive at the hands of an imposter-messenger, an inverted doublet of epistolary transactions whose details also mirror and reverse those of the Pseudolus’ first letter. Further, I compare these two deliveries, one real and one false, to demonstrate the calliditas of the slave tag-team in invoking and abusing epistolary conventions to pull off their deceit.

I: From Phoenicium, with love
This mischievous epistolary text begins with a letter. After a two-line prologue advising the spectators to stretch their legs in preparation for a plautina longa fabula (v.2) to come,542 the Pseudolus opens with a hysterical letter scene. The eponymous slave begs Calidorus to reveal the source of his misery and let him in on the message inscribed upon the tabellae that the youth has been carrying around and crying over (literally) for several days543 (vv.8-12).

responde mihi:
quid est quod tu exanimatus iam hos multos dies
gestas tabellas tecum, eas lacrumis lavis
nec tui participem consili quemquam facis?
eloque, ut quod ego nescio id tecum sciam.

Answer me:
Why is it that for many days now you lifelessly
carry these writing tablets with you, that you wash them with your tears

542 Some scholars have argued that the Pseudolus’ short prologue does not belong to the play's original performance, but to a later revival. So Önnerfors (1957) 21-25, Lefèvre (1997), 39, Willcock (1987), 96 (who thinks that Plautus’ original text may have contained a prologue that has been lost in transmission), and Zwierlein (1991), 48. Aliter Abel (1955), 15-17. Specifically, Willcock argues against reading these two lines as a “throw-away, self-deprecating kind of humour” for, in his view, such comedy is “modern, not ancient”. This position seems to me not to take into account other instances of “self-deprecating” jokes in Plautine prologues, such as the mischievous statement that the playwright has translated his model barbarè (cf. As. v.11, Trin. v.19). Sharrock (1996), 158 rightly reads the “delightfully incongruous” verses as a tongue-in-cheek comment on the play to come: “The prologue ‘tells’ us that this will be a long play, a play with pretensions, but based on very little substance – just like its hero: it tells that it is a play posing as being artless”. Marshall (1996), 37 also argues for the authenticity of the prologue based on its ironic self-awareness of the play’s length, a motif that Marshall reveals to be pervasive throughout the text.
543 Monaco (1965), 336 observes that “l’epistola è presentata come oggetto e simbolo, nello stesso tempo, delle preoccupazioni di Calidoro manifestatesi ormai da un pezzo”.

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and don’t make anyone at all privy to your plan?
Speak, so that I might know, along with you, what I don’t know.

From his very first lines, Pseudolus is the text’s prime mover (after all, this is his play\textsuperscript{544}), coaxing Calidorus to divulge the contents of the missive that will set the stage, so to speak, for the comedy to follow. That is, the slave is endeavouring to initiate the \textit{Pseudolus}: the document that the \textit{adulescens} has kept squirreled away for ‘many days’ is a kinetic plot device, and the slave \textit{must} read it for the action to get rolling.\textsuperscript{545} Further, it is essential that the external audience discover, along with Pseudolus himself, what has been inscribed on these \textit{tabellae}, for they give the background information essential for comprehending the storyline to unfold. Thus the \textit{servus} speaks on behalf of the entire audience when he implores Calidorus to publicize the knowledge he has been keeping to himself (v.12). This introductory scenario, it seems to me, self-consciously plays upon one of the necessities of epistolary drama, a letter’s disclosure and passage from private document to public performance. Rosenmeyer remarks upon this dynamic as follows:

\begin{quote}
One of the most important points of conflict in the transition from epistolary private exchange to dramatic presentation is that a written letter is actually an obstacle to communication on stage. In order for it to function effectively, it must be passed around to the rest of the characters on stage (in which case the audience remains in the dark), “overheard” by other characters and the audience, or read out loud for all (onstage and offstage) to hear.\textsuperscript{546}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{544} The \textit{Pseudolus} is one of only three comedies in the Plautine corpus to be called after its resident schemer. The others are the \textit{Curculio} and \textit{Epidicus}. There are remarkable similarities between the two letter plays, which I note throughout my discussion. On this resemblance, cf. n.439, \textit{supra}.

\textsuperscript{545} Marshall (1996), 35-36: “Calidorus has waited days to show his letter to Pseudolus; it seems the play was in danger of not even starting!” Sharrock (1996) gives a similar reading of the comedy’s opening scenario, remarking that “...Pseudolus takes control of the situation and exposes the plot by exposing Calidorus” (p.158). She observes that the slave ‘forces’ this expository scene “by claiming not to know the situation, but at the metacompositional level he clearly does know, for what are young men in comedy ever upset about? Love is a fixity of the comic text” (p.159). It occurs to me that Calidorus’ epistolary retention might be a funny reversal of the scenarios in which an addressee holds on to a letter \textit{without reading it}, usually to his great downfall. Cf., for instance, the story of the Theban polemarch Archias in Plutarch’s \textit{Life of Pelopidas} 10.3-4, who delays reading reading a letter telling of a conspiracy against him and pays for this \textit{mora} with his life. Likewise, in Shakespeare’s \textit{Julius Caesar} at III.i, Artemidorus hands Caesar a letter as he is on his way to his final Senate meeting. Fatefully, the dictator puts off reading the text, which reveals the plot to assassinate him. As Michael Dewar has pointed out to me, Shakespeare did not himself invent the scene; the English playwright was probably working from a translation of Plutarch’s \textit{Caesar} (65.1).

\textsuperscript{546} Rosenmeyer (2001), 66.
An unread letter, then, acts as a barrier to the plot’s progression, causing a stagnation of the action that is represented, I suggest, by Calidorus’ unproductive epistolary retention in the days leading up to that of the play: the youth’s reception and reading of the letter in the *Vorgeschichte* was ineffectual, and brought no progress towards the resolution of his wretched love troubles. In fact, one might see a subtly ironic reference to Calidorus’ inaction in Pseudolus’ words: in v.11, the slave asks to become a part of the youth’s *consilium* (*nec tui participem consili quemquam facis?*), but we know that Calidorus, as a pathetic *adulescens amans*, has no plan at all. The letter outlining the *Pseudolus*’ *crux* has to be read onstage by the comic hero; only then can the action move forward with an appropriately clever *consilium*.

Calidorus consents to Pseudolus’ cajoling, ceding possession of the text to the slave so that the *Pseudolus* can begin, the kinetic power of the letter now finally to be released. He hands the tablets over, instructing the slave to discover the *status quo* himself (vv.20-21):

*cape has tabellas, tute hinc narrato tibi
quaes me miseria et cura contabefacit.*

Take these writing tablets, and from here recount to yourself what misery and anxiety is wearing me down.

The slave ironically agrees (v.22: *mos tibi geretur* “Your will shall be done” – as if this were Calidorus’ idea from the start!), taking the missive from his younger master. But he does not actually read the inscribed text for another 19 lines. The urgency of his desire to know the root of Calidorus’ suffering and get the plot rolling is suddenly forgotten, and Pseudolus delays his epistolary reading by making a series of very funny letter jokes. First, the slave comments on the poor quality of the penmanship: he quips that the messy letters appear to be humping each other in the pursuit of *liberi*, and that no one else but the Sibyl herself is capable of interpreting what they spell out (vv 23-26). So illegible is the text, Pseudolus declares, a chicken must have composed it (vv.27-28).\textsuperscript{547} Finally, the slave crowns Calidorus’ torture by

\textsuperscript{547} This appears to be the first equation of messy handwriting to ‘chicken scratch’; cf. Clark (2001-2002).
claiming to have caught sight of his girlfriend (the epistle’s author, as we will soon discover): she is in the letter, lying on the wax (v.34: *eccam in tabellis porrectam: in cera cubat* “There she is, spread out on the writing tablets: She lies on the wax”).

This epistolary stand-up routine is an unicum in the Plautine corpus, and an appropriate introduction for what is going to be a very funny letter play. Pseudolus mocks the conventions of the written medium that will serve as the *materia* for his trick to come; after all, making comedy with letters is precisely what the clever slave is going to do in the performance to follow.\textsuperscript{548} His main complaint is that the missive has been poorly inscribed,\textsuperscript{549} and Sharrock rightly proposes that Pseudolus’ funny image of the crowded letters as engaging in intercourse foregrounds some ‘erotic naughtiness’ in his next joke about seeing Phoenicium *ipsissima* in the letter, suggested by a sexy *double entendre* in the youth’s paratragic reaction\textsuperscript{550} to the mention of his beloved\textsuperscript{551} (vv.38-39):

\begin{quote}
*quasi solstitialis herba paulisper fui:*
*repente exortus sum, repentino occidi*
\end{quote}

I was, for a moment, just like the summer grass:
Suddenly I rose up, and suddenly I fell.

Jenkins has, moreover, pointed out that the slave-jokester is playing here upon the epistolary concept of the letter *qua* substitute for its absent author: “…Pseudolus, for an instant, transforms this metonymical connection into one real and actual: the author is *there* – but spread out on the wax.”\textsuperscript{552} I wonder whether we might not push the naughtiness in this scene further still, connecting Pseudolus’ salacious wisecracks to the content of the letter itself. As the spectators will discover once the slave actually gets down to his reading, Phoenicium has composed a racy note to her

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\textsuperscript{548} Sharrock (2005), 159 notes that the audience is encouraged to appreciate “Pseudolus’ own manipulation of the text into material for humour”.

\textsuperscript{549} For a metatheatrical interpretation of this letter *misere scriptum* as a “piece of hack writing”, cf. Slater (1985), 120.

\textsuperscript{550} Slater (1985), 119.

\textsuperscript{551} Sharrock (1996), 159. Jenkins (2005), 365 also reads an erotic undertone here, pointing out “sex is, after all, the subtext to the piece”. In a note, Jenkins makes the interesting suggestion that the joke might be an allusion to a fragment of Antiphanes’ *Sappho* (Kassel-Austin 194) in which letters give birth to letters (p.365 n.9).

\textsuperscript{552} Jenkins (2005), 368. Jenkins suggests a racy *double entendre* here, arguing that implicit in Pseudolus’ comment is the idea that the courtesan is ‘ready for a tryst for (sic) Calidorus’.
boyfriend, in which she describes all of their kisses, love-nips and breast-squeezing in lusty detail (vv.62-69). I suggest, then, that the joke here is not only on the simulated presence of the author, but also on the sexual arousal by proxy that the missive achieves. The lovers cannot be together physically (hence the necessity to communicate via letter\textsuperscript{553}), so Phoenicium pens Calidorus a missive to reenact the physical pleasure the pair enjoys when they are together (an ancient version of ‘sexting’, one might say). That is, epistolary communication becomes sex in absentia: the adulescens can pleasure himself using his girlfriend’s letter and delicious narrative as his stimulus – a second best to the real thing. Further, I wonder if ‘epistolary masturbation’ might be the image lurking behind Pseudolus’ claim that Calidorus has been constantly washing the tabellae with his ‘tears’ (v.10: gestas tabellae, eas lacrumis lavis)\textsuperscript{554}

At v.40, the servus finally turns his attention to reading, and begins to reveal Phoenicium’s words (and the plot of the Pseudolus) to the audience (vv.41-44):

‘Phoenicium Calidoro amatori suo
per ceram et lignum\textsuperscript{555} litterasque interpretet\textsuperscript{556}
salutem mittit et salutem abs te expetit,
lacrumans titubanti animo, corde et pectore.’

‘Phoenicium to Calidorus, her lover,
by wax and wood and letters as her agents,
delivers greeting and seeks deliverance from you,
crying with a faltering spirit, heart and soul.’

Interestingly, the meretrix begins by emphasizing the physicality of her missive: she sends her greeting by means of wax, wood and letters.\textsuperscript{557} The materials of epistolary exchange are personified in their capacity as the deputies of Phoenicium’s thoughts, privy to the private conversation inscribed beneath the seal. The author tells Calidorus that she wept (lacrumans) as she composed the text, vividly evoking her

\textsuperscript{553} For more on the lovers’ separation, cf. pp.196-199, infra.
\textsuperscript{554} For lacrimae as an image for semen, cf. Lucilius 307 (at laeva lacrimas muttoni absterget amica) and Adams (1982), 62, 142. Cf. also AP 12.232.5 (Δακρυος) with Obermayer (1998), 298-299. Aliter Monaco (1965), 336-337, in whose view the verse is paratragic. He connects the image of washing tears to fragments of republican tragedy.
\textsuperscript{555} lignum is an emendation of linum widely accepted by editors; cf. Willcock (1987), 98.
\textsuperscript{556} Monaco (1965), 337 rightly points out that interpretetis is appositive to ceram and lignam as well as litteras.
\textsuperscript{557} In the view of Jenkins (2005), 367-368, interpretetis in v.42 looks back to Pseudolus’ comment about the illegibility of the letter which only the Sibyl can comprehend (interpretari).
emotional state in the Erzählzeit and, thereby, recreating the sense perception of a dialogue conducted di persona.\textsuperscript{558} That is, the epistolary conversation between Calidorus and his girlfriend comes closer to face-to-face communication as the recipient is encouraged to reconstruct the absent author’s actions and mood in the moment of composition. What is more, Phoenicium’s tearful reaction to writing neatly mirrors that of Calidorus to reading the same document (cf. v.10), though the correspondents’ impassioned responses to this epistolary exchange are presented in reverse order, for we learn of the addressee’s sentiments prior to those of the sender.

But before Phoenicium’s letter can get on to explaining the cause of the lovers’ mutual misery, Calidorus blurts it out to Pseudolus, interrupting the epistolary text and revealing his woe (he is in desperate need of money), though this is a job he had initially delegated to the missive (vv.45-49):

\begin{verbatim}
PS: pro lignean salute\textsuperscript{559} vis argenteam remittere illi? vide sis quam tu rem geras.
CA: I’m done for! Nowhere, Pseudolus, will I find deliverance to send back to her. PS: What deliverance? CA: A silvery one. PS: For wooden delivery you want to send back to her one made of silver? Watch what you’re doing.
\end{verbatim}

The adulescens’ sudden loquacity stands in funny contrast to his previously persistent silence in refusing to reveal his trouble, lamented by Pseudolus in the very first line of the play proper (v.3).\textsuperscript{560} Once the letter starts talking about the plot,

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{558} Such references to the physicality of the epistolary medium are common in fictional letters, as Rosenmeyer (2001), 22 observes: “Epistolary fictions frequently allude to the physical nature of the letter itself, and the difficulties of ensuring a safe delivery, as if such references could invest their letters with the sort of concreteness found only in the material world. Thus writers of fictional letters apologize for their shaky handwriting, mention tears shed on the page, or worry about the next boat leaving for Athens”. Jenkins (2005), 367, in commenting upon the ‘unremarkable’ conventionality of the epistolary text, notes that the letter contains a “general reflection on the mood of the sender”.

\textsuperscript{559} From the interpres of Phoenicium’s greeting, the wood of the tablet has become, via Pseudolus’ joke, the greeting itself.

\textsuperscript{560} \textit{si ex te tacente fieri possem certior,/ere, quae miseriae te tam misere macerent,/duorum labori ego hominum parsissem lubens,/mei te rogandi et tis respondendi mihi (vv.3-6).} Jenkins (2005), 363-364 points out that the play thus begins “with an evocation of silence”. On the introduction of
\end{footnotesize}
Calidorus cannot seem to hold his tongue. He now directs Pseudolus back to the text to discover the one detail of the circumstances he has not revealed - the urgent timeline of his pecuniary necessity. Obligingly, the slave resumes reading (vv.51-59):

```
'leno me peregre militi Macedonio
minis viginti vendidit, voluptas mea.
et prius quam hinc abit quindecim miles minas
dederat; nunc unae quinque remorantur minae.
ea causa miles hic reliquit symbolum,
expressam in cera ex anulo suam imaginem,
ut qui huc adferret eius similem symbolum
cum eo simul me mitteret. ei rei dies
haec præstituta est, proxuma Dionysia.561
```

"The pimp has sold me abroad, to a Macedonian soldier, at the price of twenty minae, my sweet. And before he left here, the soldier had given fifteen minae; now only five minae remain [to be paid]. For this reason the soldier left a token here, his portrait stamped in wax from his ring, so that he who brings a like token here might take me away with him. For this transaction this day has been set, that before the Festival of Dionysus."

We are finally getting somewhere: Phoenicium’s text explains that she has been purchased by a Macedonian soldier, and will be brought to him, far away (peregre v.51), when the miles’ henchman comes with the balance of her price (5 minae) and the soldier’s symbolus.563 But once again, Calidorus interrupts the letter, further delaying its presentation.564 This time, the youth points out that the day he must buy the girl referred to in the letter is today, for tomorrow is the Dionysia (vv.60-61):

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cras ea quidem sunt: prope adest exitium mihi,
nisi quid mi in ted est auxili.565
```

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561 There has been some discussion about how to precisely translate these lines. In my translation, I follow the explanation of Willcock (1987), 99, who reads proxuma as going with dies and governing the accusative plural Dionysia.

562 Thus Willcock (1987), 99.

563 Lefèvre (1997), 32 notes, there is some ambiguity in the use of the word symbolus throughout the play, for it designates both the signum sealing the tabellae and the text itself.

564 These delays in the onstage reading of Phoenicium’s letter are parallel, I suggest, to the mora involved in getting it onstage and into the plot from Calidorus’ secretive possession.

565 Interestingly, Calidorus here is repeating the text of Phoenicium’s missive in v.71 (quoted below) almost verbatim.
That's tomorrow, in fact: my downfall is imminent, unless there is any salvation for me in you.

The tone here is firmly tongue-in-cheek: of course the deadline for paying up is ‘today’\(^566\) - we are in a comedy, after all. Pseudolus, who is eager to finally finish going through the letter, silences Calidorus’ latest interjection (v.61: *sine pellegram* “Let me read it through”), and the youth is all too willing to obey, for he is enthralled by this epistolary performance of his sweetheart’s letter (vv.62-63):

\[
\begin{align*}
sino, nam mihi videor cum ea fabularier. \\
lege, dulce amarumque una nunc misces mihi.
\end{align*}
\]

I allow it, for it seems to me that I am conversing with her. Read, and you shall, as it now stands, mix for me sweet and bitterness.

Jenkins has noted the continuation of the epistolary *absens/praesens* motif here, arguing that Pseudolus has ‘become’ the courtesan, re-enacting her *persona* by reading her letter, and in so doing, eliminating the distance between the two lovers.\(^567\) I would add that the slave’s invocation of Phoenicium has a metatheatrical valence underscored by Calidorus’ comment. Pseudolus, I propose, is depicted as playing a role, turned into the pretty young *meretrix* by his recital of her epistle, perhaps even reading Phoenicium’s words in a ‘female’ voice. In fact, the gender inversion implicit in Pseudolus’ *qua* Phoenicium might play upon the convention of ancient theatre, according to which males acted out female roles. Thus the letter is

\(^566\) Rambelli (1957), 95-96 has noted a chronological inconsistency in the text of Phoenicium’s missive: Calidorus, we are told, has been holding on to Phoenicium’s letter for many days now (v.9: *hos multos dies*). The *meretrix*, then, did not compose the text ‘today’, but several days before that in which the comedy takes place. Why, then, does her letter identify the Dionysia as ‘tomorrow’, if ‘tomorrow’, from the chronological perspective of her epistolary composition, could not have been the day of the Dionysia? He argues that this information is “in opposizione netta, assoluta, stridentissima con le prime battute del dialogo all’inizio della commedia” (p.95). In the view of Lefèvre (1997), 40, however, the letter’s apparent glitch is ‘noch eine kleine plautinische Unachtsamkeit’. To my mind, Plautus has simply postdated the chronological reference in the girl’s note to correspond with its performance time rather than the natural Erzählzeit. That is to say, the playwright has realigned the time of narration with the text’s second reading, so that when Pseudolus recites the letter onstage, it (correctly, though anachronistically) ‘says’ that the payment deadline is *today*.

\(^567\) Jenkins (2005), 369. He observes further that the courtesan’s voice in the play is entirely epistolary: when she appears later on in the text after having been smuggled away from Ballio by Simia, Phoenicium does not say a word. Thus Jenkins concludes that “[t]he letter has, in effect, usurped her voice: she speaks only through writing...however eloquent her letter, on stage Phoenicium is inarticulate” (p.366).
likened to a theatrical script in its capacity to conjure up a new identity for the reader.

Pseudolus finally gets to the juicy bits of Phoenicium’s epistle that have
Calidorus all hot and bothered\(^{568}\) (vv.64-73):

\[
'nunc nostri amores mores consuetudines, 
iocus ludus sermo suavisaviatio 
compressiones artae amantium corporum, 
teneris labellis molles morsiunculae, 
nostrorum orgiorum * iunculae 
papillarum horridularum oppressiunculae, 
harunc voluptatum mi omnium atque itidem tibi 
distractio discidium vastities venit, 
nisi quae mihi in test aut tibist in me salus. 
haec quae ego scivi ut scires curavi omnia; 
nunc ego te experiar quid ames, quid simules. vale.'^{569}
\]

Now our love affairs habits ways
romping frisking talking sweet-kissing
close embraces of lovers’ bodies
sweet nips on tender lips
*** of our orgies\(^{570}\)
squeezing of protruding nipples –
of all these pleasures mine and in the same way yours
comes the division divorce death,
unless there is for me in you or for you in me deliverance.
I’ve taken care so that you might know everything that I know;
now I’ll test what you love, and what you fake. Farewell.’

Jenkins observes that the “delicious catalogue of amatory adventures” proves
Phoenicium meant her note for Calidorus’ eyes only.\(^{571}\) The youth, however, shows
the intimate document to Pseudolus, effecting a transformation of epistolary roles
that is essential for the plot. Jenkins argues as follows:

\textit{Pseudolus here undergoes his first metamorphosis, from 'accidental' or secondary reader of a letter to its primary recipient: he usurps the identity (and the agency) of the intended recipient,}

\(^{568}\) Since Calidorus has just proclaimed that he ‘sees’ Phoenicium in Pseudolus thanks to the slave’s recitation of her letter, the list of all these sexy details would be effectively (and hysterically) accomplished in performance by Calidorus acting them out ‘by proxy’ on his slave as he reads them. In any case, all the lurid details provide an opportunity to actors for some funny (and bawdy) improvisation – which doubly emphasizes its equation to the script, as was first suggested by Slater (1985), 119. Jenkins (2005), 368 notes, “A good actor would be certain to express Calidorus’ consternation- and perhaps titillation – as Pseudolus reads out the letter.”

\(^{569}\) Monaco (1965), 338-340 offers a detailed stylistic analysis of this section of Phoenicium’s letter.

\(^{570}\) \textit{Aliter} Willcock (1987), 100, who translates \textit{orgiorum} as “mystic rites”, though he admits “the two may tend to be confused”.

\(^{571}\) Jenkins (2005), 368.
Calidorus, and launches the play into its vagaries...It is Pseudolus – and not Calidorus – who obeys the language of the letter and who acts on its appeals.\textsuperscript{572}

Phoenicium’s missive, then, is twice delivered – first to Calidorus, and then to Pseudolus. The \textit{adulescens}, who is the original epistolary addressee, turns into a messenger when he hands the text over to Pseudolus. His retention of the letter, as I argue above, reproduces the chronological lapse of epistolary time, and strengthens the image of his epistolary transmission \textit{qua} delivery. This doubled consignment, I propose, foreshadows that later in the play, when 'Harpax' will deliver Polymachaeroplagides' letter for the second time (unbeknownst both to its true messenger - the real Harpax - and its recipient, Ballio).

Like that in the \textit{Persa}, then, this missive exchanged between the \textit{Pseudolus'} lovers might be called “prefigurative”, for it announces the epistolarity of the comedy to come,\textsuperscript{573} and contains, as I will demonstrate below, a series of parallels to and inversions of the text’s second, tricky letter. In fact, Phoenicium’s message explicitly refers to the soldier’s missive that will feature so prominently later in the comedy and enable the accomplishment of the \textit{servus}' ruse. Her text, one might then say, contains its own embedded epistle – just like the \textit{Pseudolus} itself. This ties in with the observations of Monaco, who first remarked upon the similarity of Phoenicium’s letter to the dramatic prologue, for it sets out the plot’s \textit{Vorgeschichte} and establishes the problem that will occupy the \textit{servus} for the remainder of the play: the possession of the girl.\textsuperscript{574} Going a bit further, we might say that this text not

\textsuperscript{572} Jenkins (2005), 368-369. Jenkins thus suggests that in addition to assuming the \textit{persona} of Phoenicium through his epistolary recitation, Pseudolus also ‘becomes’ Calidorus by acting as the \textit{adulescens’} substitute recipient. Peter Bing has suggested to me that this doubling of the epistolary subject might be hysterically played out in performance, with Pseudolus accompanying his reading of the racy note with sexual gestures and noises. He observes as follows, \textit{in litteris}: “In finding the text prurient (as his master obviously does), he [Pseudolus] would further be modeling the response that might also be expected of the play’s audience.”

\textsuperscript{573} Jenkins (2005), 363 observes of Phoenicium’s letter that Plautus thus “foregrounds reading [as a prominent motif in the following comedy] by beginning the play with an epistolary ‘reading’ scene”. Later on, he argues that this scene introduces into the text “both the power and the vulnerability of epistolary discourse” (p.366). On the \textit{Persa}’s “prefigurative” letters, cf. p.123, \textit{supra}.

\textsuperscript{574} Monaco (1965). So too Wright (1975), 408 n.10, Arnott (1982), 134, Slater (1985), 199, Jenkins (2005), 363, Sharrock (2009), 45-46 and Danese (2013), 19. In Monaco’s view, the unknown author of the \textit{Pseudolus}’ Greek model (who, he argues, originally composed this epistolary opening subsequently adapted by Plautus) patterned the scenario upon the opening tableau of the \textit{Iphigenia at Aulis}. 

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only foregrounds the content of the plot, but also the type of comedy the *Pseudolus* will be - a letter play, like four others in the Plautine corpus.

A final point of interest in the *meretrix’s* letter is the fact of epistolary communication *per se*. Why does Phoenicium write Calidorus a *letter* in the first place?\(^{575}\) As I have remarked several times throughout the course of this study, epistolary communication implies *absence*\(^{576}\) - but Calidorus and his beloved are next-door neighbours, and, therefore, geographically very close.\(^{577}\) It seems to me, then, that we are to imagine Phoenicium’s mean pimp Ballio as the force keeping her and the *adulescens* apart, compelling them to communicate secretly by letter.\(^{578}\) After all, Calidorus has no more money left to pay for the girl’s affections and the *Pseudolus*’ exceptionally cruel *leno* will not let out his property for free, as he himself belabours in the following scenes.\(^{579}\)

If Ballio has, in fact, forbidden any contact between the two lovers because of the *adulescens*’ empty pockets, one of the *Pseudolus*’ most puzzling ‘problems’ in construction disappears entirely. This detail occurs in the elaborate sequence following the opening epistolary scene, when the spectators are introduced to Ballio, whom Feeney aptly labels “Plautus’ pimp to beat all pimps, a hyperpimp of phenomenal outrageousness and zest”.\(^{580}\) The *leno* shows off his cruelty by singing

\(^{575}\) It is somewhat surprising that in the considerable body of scholarship on the *Pseudolus*, much of which is concerned with discerning ‘inconsistencies’ in the plot, like characters in the same city and on the same street writing each other letters (i.e. Lefèvre (2011), 46, 55 on Mnesilochus’ letter to his father Nicobulus in the *Bacchides*), this question has never been asked. However, as Hodkinson (2007) has demonstrated, physical separation is *not*, in fact, always a necessary condition of epistolary communication. Considering a letter in Alciphron’s epistolary collection in which an unwed daughter writes to her own mother (who, presumably, lives in the same house as the girl) about love troubles (1.11), Hodkinson argues thus: “One reason for writing a letter is to express a sentiment or report a fact which one either *could not*, or would *rather* not, say in person. That is to say, rather than being motivated by absence, a letter can be used deliberately to *ensure* this absence at the crucial moment” (p.291).

\(^{576}\) See, for instance, Toxilus’ invocation of the distance implicit in epistolary communication to trick Dordalus at pp.135-137, *supra*.

\(^{577}\) In this light, it is ironic that Phoenicium should communicate with Calidorus by letter when she is just next door to tell him that if he does not act soon, she will soon be *peregre* (v.51) at the side of her new master, Polymachaeroalagides.

\(^{578}\) I make a similar argument for the *Persa*; cf. p.122, *supra*.

\(^{579}\) Cf. vv.274, 281-282, 310-314.

\(^{580}\) Feeney (2010), 282. According to Cicero (*Pro Roscio Comoedo* 7.2), Ballio was the favoured role of the late-republican actor Roscius, an anecdote that testifies to the power of the part. Slater (1985), 122 calls Ballio’s singing entrance “one of the strongest in all Roman comedy”.

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an extensive *canticum*, in which he orders the servile members of his household to prepare for the evening’s feast (Ballio’s own birthday party), threatening and even inflicting corporal punishment.\(^{581}\) Safely concealed, Pseudolus and Calidorus watch the song in awe, and then assail the pimp,\(^{582}\) trying to persuade him to wait a little longer yet for payment. Pseudolus advocates his young master’s position thus, simultaneously explaining Calidorus’ previous agreement with the *leno* to the spectators\(^{583}\) (v.279-280, 283):

\[
\begin{align*}
hunc pudet, quod tibi promisit quaque id promisit die, 
quia tibi minas viginti pro amica etiam non dedit. 
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{... at dabit, parabit: aliquot hos dies manta modo.}
\end{align*}
\]

He’s ashamed, because he promised it to you, and because, on the day he promised it, he has not yet given you the 20 *minae* for his girlfriend.

The slave’s words recall his earlier description of the youth’s fruitless possession of Phoenicium’s letter (v.9), for he now requests that Ballio, likewise, hold off selling the girl to someone else for a few days (*hos dies manta modo* “Just wait these few days”) so that the *adulescens* can scrape together the money to buy her. Of course, we know (as does the self-conscious *servus*) that this solution is nonviable in the world of comedy: *multi dies* may have elapsed in the *Vorgeschichte* as Calidorus sluggishly sat on the *meretrix*’s epistolary cry for help, but now, in performance, the *crux* must be resolved ‘today’ – that is, before the end of the play. Accordingly, Ballio refuses to show any pity for the young lover’s plight, finally revealing that Phoenicium is not for sale at all; in fact, she has already been *sold* to a Macedonian soldier for twenty *minae* (v.342-346). Calidorus expresses surprise at this bit of information, exclaiming in response (v.347): *quid ex te audio?* (“What is it that I hear from you?”). But the youth has already been apprised of Phoenicium’s sale to the

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\(^{581}\) I am following the reading of Slater (1985), 122, who discerns the strike of Ballio’s whip in the *em* of v.155: *quid nunc? doletne? em sic datur…*  
\(^{582}\) On this *Verfolgungsszene* as a type-scene with parallels elsewhere in Plautine comedy, cf. Monda (2013).  
\(^{583}\) Noted by Willcock (1987), 109. Marshall (1996), 34 argues that this scene “functions very much like a delayed prologue, providing certain details that are not expounded in the two-line prologue...”.  

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Macedonian captain, having read about it in his beloved’s letter. How to explain this wrinkle in the *Pseudolus*’s plot?

The perceived discrepancy has attracted much comment. As Rambelli puts it, a “contraddizione più patente non potrebbe immaginarsi”. Critics in the analytical tradition have seized upon this ‘loose end’ as proof of Plautus’ dramaturgical inconsistency, and to discern the alleged sutures joining the (messy) Latin translation to the (perfect) Greek original. Other scholars have preferred to exonerate the play from such dramatic coherence, arguing that Plautus tends to emphasize the entertaining effect of Calidorus’ shock rather than maintain strict logic in the storyline. But it seems to me that the *adulescens*’ distress is perfectly explicable at the level of the plot. Wright has suggested that Calidorus and Pseudolus, who follows in his master’s lead, are *acting*, feigning surprise in reaction to the ‘news’ in the disclosure of which Ballio takes so much nasty pleasure. This hypothesis gains credibility if we accept that Calidorus and Phoenicium are forced to communicate furtively via letter because of the *leno*’s opposition. That is,

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584 Rambelli (1957), 93.
585 Ladewig (1842) originally argued that the inconsistency is the result of Plautus’ *contaminatio* of two Greek models, whereas Karsten (1903), 159 sees the problem as residing solely in Phoenicium’s letter, which he attributes to Plautine invention; so too Lefèvre (1997), 40-41, 52-53. Williams (1956), 429 also thinks that the contradiction is caused by the playwright’s changes to his model, positing that the contract between Ballio and Calidorus for Phoenicium’s purchase (cf. vv.279-280) has been invented by Plautus, who then “had inevitably to present Calidorus in the third scene as ignorant of Phoenicium’s sale”. Rambelli (1957) suggests that Phoenicium’s epistolary account of her sale does not ‘register’ with the actual characters, and serves only to inform the external spectators of the *status quo*, “senza aver nessuna funzione capace di far progredire l’intreccio della commedia” (p.99). It is his view that vv.51-59, in which the soldier’s deal with Ballio is explained via the *meretrix*’s letter, has been displaced by Plautus from its position in the Greek play’s prologue.
586 Arnott (1982), 138-143. Adding similar instances from Greek New Comedy and Attic tragedy, Arnott asserts that the “technique of this repeated or double exposition of difficult but important background material” is, in fact, unproblematic: Calidorus simply exclaims upon Phoenicium’s sale to remind the spectators that his beloved has been sold; *viz.* to underline the comedy’s *crux*. Further, Arnott attributes this detail to Plautus’ Greek model, which the translator faithfully adapts in the *Pseudolus*’ opening scene. Willcock (1987), 111 and Danese (2013), 27 n.30 agree with Arnott’s theatrical explanation.
587 Wright (1975), 405 n.11. His reading of the scene is endorsed by Slater (1985), 124.
588 Ballio deliberately draws out this revelation to torture the *adulescens*, first telling Calidorus that Phoenicium is not for sale (v.325: *quia enim non venalem iam habeo Phoenicium*) to then reveal almost 20 lines later that this is the case because the girl has already been *sold* (vv.341-342: [CA] *non habes venalem amicam tu meam Phoenicium? BA: non edepol habeo profecto, nam iam pridem vendidi*). In the view of Danese (2013), 26-27, this is “una delle battute comiche più potenti di tutto il teatro antico"
Ballio cannot know that Phoenicium has defied his authority and been in contact with her boyfriend, so the slave-master pair pretends that her sale to the soldier is news to them.

Finally, after a protracted exchange including a ferocious *flagitatio*\(^589\) between the slave and the pimp\(^590\) Ballio offers a compromise to the stricken lover: should Polymachaeroplagides’ agent *not* show up with the balance owed on Phoenicium’s purchase today, the pimp will break his oath to the soldier and sell the girl to Calidorus - *if* the youth can come up with the cash (vv.372-377). Upon Ballio’s departure, Pseudolus promises that he will make short shrift of him (vv.381-382: *illic homo meus est, nisi omnes di me atque homines deserunt. / exossabo ego illum simulter itidem ut murenam coquos* - “That man is mine, unless all gods and men desert me. I’ll debone him just as a cook does an eel”),\(^591\) and commands the youth to bring him a clever accomplice to pull off his forthcoming caper (vv.385-386).\(^592\) Refusing to elaborate lest he lengthen the play (v.388),\(^593\) Pseudolus dismisses Calidorus from the stage.

Thus the *Pseudolus’* first letter - sent and received in the *Vorgeschichte*, then redelivered and reread onstage - is a rich repository of epistolary *topoi* and, perhaps, the greatest testament to Plautus’ highly self-conscious employment of the theatrical letter. Through Phoenicium’s text, the dramaturge invokes various epistolary conventions, cleverly playing upon the letter as *sermo* (and not only)

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\(^589\) Usener (1901), 24 is to first critic to have connected this scene of abuse with the *flagitatio*, a form of ‘Italische Volkjustiz’. Cf. Catullus’ *flagitatio* in c.42 against his *moexa putida* who refuses to return the poet’s *codicilli*.

\(^590\) For the power dynamics in this verbal duel between Pseudolus/Calidorus and Ballio, cf. Wright (1975), 409 and Slater (1985), 124-125.

\(^591\) According to Wright (1975), 410, these lines signal Pseudolus’ entrance into the ‘world of comedy’: Pseudolus is verbally impotent prior to this point in the text, allowing himself to be repeatedly outdone by the fast-talking Ballio. The proclamation in vv.381-382 marks the slave’s first metaphorical metamorphosis (he turns himself into a cook) of many to come in the comedy, a transformative power of words that will, in turn, transform Pseudolus into a poet (v.401) (p.410), the Delphic oracle (vv.479-488) (p.411), a military commander (v.572) (p.412) *et cetera*, ultimately guaranteeing the slave’s comic victory.

\(^592\) *ad eam rem usus hominem astutum, doctum, cautum et callidum,/qui imperata ecfecta reddat, non qui vigilans dormiat.* There must, I think, be a joke here at Calidorus’ expense, the implication being that the *adulescens* is none of these things.

\(^593\) Marshall (1996) explores Pseudolus’ repeated references to the length of the present performance (including this one at v.388), concluding that “[t]his metatheatrical play is internally and externally aware of its length and pacing”.

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absentium, epistolary chronology and roles, delivery, and even the dynamics of the plot device itself. Further, the courtesan’s love letter foreshadows the content and form of the comedy to follow: it anticipates, I suggest, the Pseudolus’ second letter, acting as an exemplar of sincere epistolary exchange and, therefore, a foil against which to ‘read’ the mischief with missives to come.\textsuperscript{594}

II: Between letters

After the exchange with Ballio about the meretrix’s sale, we get a sequence of action that begins and ends with (who else?) Pseudolus. Immediately following Calidorus’ exit, the tricky slave performs his famous ‘poeta’ monologue (vv.394-414).\textsuperscript{595} Revealing his course of action as yet unsure, Pseudolus proclaims that, like a poet, he will seek and find a plot that does not yet exist, forging lies that are similar to the truth (vv. 401-405). His soliloquizing is interrupted by the arrival of Calidorus’ father, Simo, and the senex’s friend Callipho, whose conversation the slave secretly listens in on. Simo reveals that he has gotten wind of his son’s romance and search for the cash necessary to free his beloved, for their illicit affair is the talk of Athens (vv.418-422). This, we discover, puts a wrench in Pseudolus’ plans (vv.422-426), although we never do find out what, exactly, this consilium entails; the servus does not let the audience in on his first intrigue, which is prevented entirely by Simo’s knowledge.\textsuperscript{596}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{594} Monaco (1965), 340 incorrectly asserts that Phoenicium’s letter is the only epistle in Plautus that is “nell stesso tempo autentica, veridica e usata per il fine per cui è stata scritta, vale a dire la sola che non costituisca nell’azione scenica uno strumento di inganno”. The missives exchanged between Toxilus and Lemniseles in the Persa (cf. pp.119-125, supra) have escaped Monaco’s attention (in fact, he does not even list these letters among the minor epistles in the Plautine corpus on p.341). Both of these love notes in the Persa are authentic, and neither is used for mischief. In fact, much as I argue for Phoenicium’s letter in the Pseudolus, they provide a foil of ‘straight’ epistolary communication against which to read the deviousness later in the text; cf. pp.123-124, supra.

\textsuperscript{595} Slater (1985), 126-127 reads the monologue as Pseudolus talking himself into the role of internal playwright, exhorting himself to come up with poetry (viz. the play itself) as the solution to Calidorus’ love woes. Scholars have frequently interpreted the poeta simile as conflating Pseudolus with Plautus himself, an idea that originated with Petrone (1983), 64; so Hallett (1993), 24-26, Lefèvre (1997), 111, Feeney (2010), 286-288. Sharrock (1996) rightly sees this soliloquy as engaging in the “tradition of lying poets and deceptive realism”, which starts with Hesiod’s muses (Jenkins (2005), 369-370 makes the same observation). She reads Pseudolus as a stand-in for Plautus and “the perfect paradigm for comic deception” (p.155).

\textsuperscript{596} It seems reasonable to assume on these grounds that the trick involved robbing the money to purchase Phoenicium from the unsuspecting senex.
\end{footnotesize}
The old man finally notices the presence of Pseudolus, the *sclerum caput* who has corrupted his son (vv.445-446). Simo questions him about the circulating rumours, and Pseudolus, a self-styled Delphic oracle (v.480: *quod scibo Delphis tibi responsum dicito* “What I know, consider it a reply from Delphi”), confesses, enthusiastically replying to his master’s questions with an ironic νοι γάρ φά εστι (vv.479-489).597 The triumphant *senex* thinks he has forestalled Pseudolus’ scheming, and vows to warn ‘everyone’ (he will soon specifically warn Ballio himself) not to entrust a dime to the tricky slave598 so that he and Calidorus will never get their hands on the girl599 (vv.504-506):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{quid nunc agetis? nam hinc quidem a me non potest argentum auferri, qui praeasertim sensorim.} \\
\text{ne quisquam credat nummum iam edicam omnibus.}
\end{align*}
\]

Now what will you do? For you cannot, in fact, take the money away from here (points to his pocket) and from me, I who have especially sniffed you out.

Now I’ll tell everyone not to lend you a *nummus*.

Pseudolus, however, is undaunted: neatly turning Simo’s words on their head, he advises his master to beware (v.511: *iam dico ut a me caveas* “Now I’m telling you to

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597 Barsby (1995), 66-67 considers this scene one probably improvised by the players, arguing that it “creates the feeling that we are listening not to a real-life master and slave but to a pair of actors having fun with a routine”. To my mind, Pseudolus’ switch into Greek is also in response to Simo’s comment at vv.464-465 that speaking with the clever slave is like conversing with Socrates. Fontaine (2010), 129 observes that the philosophical reference “should alert us to beware of any sophistic hairsplitting or philosophical prestidigitations in anything the slave says”. He argues that Pseudolus’ νοι γάρ code-switching may be simultaneously heard by the audience as the Latin verb *negare*, enabling the clever *servus* to achieve “the impossible feat of simultaneously affirming and denying a proposition” (p.132).

598 Simo’s vow to warn all and sundry from extending any credit to Pseudolus echoes the slave’s own words from earlier in the text, when he cautions the audience against believing him, as noted by Sharrock (1996), 164 (vv.125-128): *nunc, ne quis dictum sibi neget, dico omnibus,/pube praeasenti in contione, omni poplo,/omnibus amicis notisque edico meis/in hunc diem a me ut caveant, ne credant mihi*. Feeney (2010) has explored the leitmotif of credit in the text, arguing that the references to financial credit refer to theatrical credit as well as the belief a spectator places in the characters and events played out on stage: Pseudolus paradoxically makes himself *more* believable and ‘characterful’ by exposing the dramatic illusion and his own theatricality. Feeney connects the *Pseudolus’* special interest in *fides* to a financial crisis of 193 BC reported by Livy involving the collapse of credit.

599 Arguing that part of the fun of Plautine comedy lies in the audience’s amusement from a point of superior knowledge, Sharrock (1996), 157 observes as follows of the forewarned *senex* and *leno*: “The point of these knowing dupes is partly to enhance the triumph of the trickster, and also perhaps subliminally to increase the link between the dupes on stage and those in the auditorium (or study...)."
beware of me”), proclaiming that none other than the old man himself will give him the money on this day (vv.507-518). The slave, in fact, pledges to pull off two feats (v.530: utrumque) by evening: he will steal away Simo’s gold, and snatch the meretrix from under the cruel leno’s nose (vv.524-529). His plan is sealed with a bet. If the slave fails, his erus maior will commit him to the dreaded mill; if he is successful, Simo will cough up the sum of Phoenicium’s price, to be paid to the leno as compensation for his loss (vv.534-537). But the senex is leery of mischief: what if the pimp and the slave are in collusion to rob him of his cash (vv.538-541)?

Pseudolus calms Simo’s fears thus (vv.541-545):

```plaintext
quis me audacior
sit, si istuc facinus audeam? immo sic, Simo:
si sumu’compecti seu consilium umquam iniimus
aut si de istac re umquam inter nos convenimus,
quasi in libro quom scribuntur calamo litterae,
stilis me totum usque ulmeis conscribito.
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Who would be bolder than me
if I dared to commit that kind of crime? Here’s what’s up, Simo:

If we are in cahoots, or have ever gone in on a plan,
or if we’ve ever come together amongst ourselves about this matter,
even as letters are written in a book with a reed,
so write me all up with elm nibs.

The simile is devilishly ironic. If a conspiracy is discovered, Pseudolus promises to let Simo turn him into a ‘text’ by beating him with elm rods, as letters are written into a book. Of course, it is exactly by means of a text that the senex will be defeated and forced to pony up the twenty minae he has wagered. Pseudolus, then, by saying ‘write me’ is really saying ‘bite me’: Simo thinks it is impossible for the slave to carry

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600 Slater (1985), 129 notes that this “cave echoes the caveant of Pseudolus’ earlier warning to us in the audience” (vv.125-128), adding that “Simo becomes an audience here for Pseudolus’ poetic creation and, what is more, a paying audience”. In this way, Pseudolus’ original warning bounces around three times: first directed at the spectators by the clever slave (vv.125-128), it is passed on to Simo, who swears to caution omnes against Pseudolus (v.506) – ironic, for “we all” have all been warned by the slave himself! The advisory then returns back to the servus when Pseudolus levels it here at the senex. Simo will soon pass the warning on to Ballio, as the leno tells us at vv.897-900.

601 Pseudolus’ vow to Simo resembles that of Chrysalus in the Bacchides, who likewise declares to his master, Nicobulus, his intention to cheat, and proclaims that the senex himself will voluntarily hand over the money (vv.824-827), as noted by Williams (1956), 448. For more on the similarities between these two comedies, cf. pp.230-232.

602 Willcock (1987), 117 notes: “The implication of this is important for the plot of the play. The theft of the music girl from the leno will not mean that they can keep possession of her; she will still eventually have to be paid for”.

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off his caper with all parties forewarned (the old man will soon put Ballio on the alert, too), but the metatheatrical Pseudolus here hints that, thanks to writing, precisely the opposite is true.603

‘Reassured’ by Pseudolus and urged on by his friend Callipho (vv.537-538), the senex agrees to the wager, and is thus locked into Pseudolus’ scheme. For as Willcock points out, Simo has, in reality, been tricked: “by sleight of hand, as it were, the two tricks become one; and Simo allows himself to be talked into paying the cost of the girl (twenty minae) if Pseudolus manages to extricate her from Ballio’s house.”604 That is, the slave’s possession of Phoenicium is tantamount to his theft from Simo, because the old man will pay out the money himself once Pseudolus gets his hands on the girl. It will be, then, just as the servus declares to the senex at v.518: em istis mihi tu hodie manibus argentum dabis (“Look here – you’ll give me the money today with these very hands of yours”). Simo declares the opening of Pseudolus’ games (v.546: indice ludos nunciam, quando lubet “Proclaim the games now, as you will”), and Callipho pledges to stick around Athens rather than travel to the country as planned so that he can watch the entertainment unfold (v.552): lubidost ludos tuos spectare, Pseudole (“It’s a pleasure to watch your games, Pseudolus”).605

603 Slater (1985), 130 interprets Pseudolus’ simile as hinting, via inversion, at the lack of a ‘script’ for the deception to follow: “there is no written (scribuntur calamo litterae) plot, but only the one Pseudolus will improvise”. Likewise, Feeney (2010), 288 posits that the “bizarre writing simile” relates to “[t]he importance of writing in imagining the work of Plautine dramaturgy” which poses as improvisation but, in fact, originates in a fixed script”. Feeney further reads Pseudolus’ textual joke as suggesting that if the slave were to lose this bet (and therefore fail in his role as comic hero), he would become the “object of writing”, for Simo would thus become the author of the play. My own interpretation of these verses in no way excludes either of these readings. Nevertheless, it seems to me that at the most basic level Pseudolus’ vow is funny, because the punishment promised to Simo will be the very method of Pseudolus’ deception. Thus the trickster ironically foreshadows his textual modus operandi (although the character does not yet ‘know’ that this will be the praxis of his deceit). The joke becomes even funnier if the audience had some sense that the Pseudolus is a letter play. Given the comedy’s epistolary ‘opener’, I think that this is a distinct possibility.


605 Despite this promise to stay, Callipho does not reappear in the text. This detail has puzzled critics, who consider it one of the comedy’s major problems (cf. Willcock (1987), 15-16). For a thorough review of the relevant scholarship, cf. Lefèvre (1997), 33-36. Following the hypothesis of Williams (1956), 444, Lefèvre thinks that Callipho’s disappearance represents a Plautine intervention. Aliter Barsby (1995), 63, who connects this “loose end” to Plautus’ pose as an improviser: “just as when he asked Calidorus to find a tricky friend in the earlier scene, he is simply setting up possible tactics and...
With the departure of the two old men, Pseudolus is once again left alone on stage. He addresses the spectators, accusing them of suspecting him of bluffing for the sake of their amusement (vv.562-565):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{It is a suspicion of mine that you now suspect} \\
\text{that I'm promising these great deeds on this account,} \\
\text{so that I might amuse you, while I perform this play,} \\
\text{and that I'm not going to do what I had said I would do.}
\end{align*}
\]

Confessing that he yet does not have a precise idea of how, nevertheless Pseudolus promises that he is certain he will pull off his ruse (vv. 567-568).\(^{606}\) The clever slave leaves the tibicen to engage the spectators in the meantime (v.573),\(^{607}\) and departs to “marshall”\(^{608}\) his sycophantiae (v.572) backstage. He is off to cook up something new: in his departing words, Pseudolus stresses the importance of novelty onstage (vv.568-570):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{strategies in a situation where in fact he still has no plan". The most convincing explanation, as it seems to me, is that of Sharrock (1996), 164-165, who develops the hypothesis of Theiler (1938), 275 that Callipho represents the external audience. Much as a prologue might, Pseudolus asks this lepidus senex for his attention (v.547), persuading him to choose pleasure over business (the city over the countryside) by sticking around to watch the ludus to come. Of the same view is Danese (2013), 31-32, who thinks that this entire scene between Pseudolus and the two senes is aimed at the slave-hero’s glorification, for Pseudolus deliberately makes his task more difficult (and therefore his accomplishment more impressive) by, among other things, warning Simo of the impending trick, and encouraging Callipho to stay and watch his facinus.}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{606}\) As Petrone (1983), 68-69 has perceived, Pseudolus’ proclamation of uncertainty here echoes his words at vv.106-107 (atque id futurum unde unde dicam nescio,/nisi quia futurumst: ita supercilium salit). Petrone likens Pseudolus’ ‘oracular expressions’ to prophecy in tragedy, suggesting that the slave “si rifà parodisticamente a quei comportamenti” (pp.65-66). On these lines, see also Sharrock (1996), 167. She suggests Pseudolus’ speech “plays cunningly with the dramatic illusion”, for the slave’s declaration of uncertainty is “undercut by the very overt metatheatricality of the scene. Of course he knows”. So too Danese (2013), 22.

\(^{607}\) Slater (1985), 132 n. 19 rightly observes that “Pseudolus calls attention to the flute-player once again to emphasize the theatricality of his actions”. This passage has attracted the attention of scholars, for it explicitly refers to a musical interlude whose existence in Roman comedy has been hotly disputed; cf. Willcock (1987), 188 for a brief review of the question and the relevant scholarship. For a reading of this musical interlude as a comic routine, cf. Marshall (1996), 36-37.

\(^{608}\) Willcock (1987), 118.
For he who comes forth on stage
ought to bring on something newly contrived in a new way;
if he can’t do it, let him give way to he who can.

The slave's words, I suggest, are a hint at what is to come. Ever the metatheatrical trickster, Pseudolus tells us to expect the unexpected: this comedy is going to give us something entirely new.609

III: A new letter and a new plan (again)

A confident Pseudolus struts back on the scene at v. 575, congratulating himself on a job well done. Through his offstage brainstorming, the comic hero has formulated a second plan that is certain (he thinks) to bring him success. He describes his forthcoming assault on Ballio by means of an extended military metaphor: the leno, a common foe of Pseudolus and the audience (v.584: nunc inimicum ego hunc communem meum atque vostrorum omnium/Ballionem exballistabo lepide "Now this common enemy of both me and all of you - Ballio, I’ll batter him down nicely"),610 is compared to an enemy town, upon which the slave has proclaimed a siege (v.585).611 This oppidum will be stormed, and the booty shared with the slave-general’s legions, so that Pseudolus’ enemies will know that he was 'born to inspire fear and flight in his adversaries' (vv.586-589). The servus, however, never gets around to revealing the details of his second intrigue, for yet again a new development stops his plan dead in its tracks. In a sequence that mirrors the

609 In my view, this passage works on two levels, referring both to novelty in the plot (another new development is about to crop up with the appearance of Harpax) and, as Sharrock (1996), 169 and Lefèvre (1997), 60 suggest, to novelty vis-à-vis Plautus' model. Sharrock adds the interesting possibility that the text here is making a "self-deprecating joke acknowledging that the plot is not original" given that it is a translation of a Greek play. In a similar vein, Petrone (1983), 69-70 reads the mini-monologue as referring metatheatrically to the novus modus of the Pseudolus vis-à-vis other Plautine comedies, which, in her view "...consiste nel mettere a fuoco le varie possibilità di scioiglimento e confrontare l'invenzione con la realtà". On these lines, cf. also Danese (2013), 33.

610 Danese (2013), 34 observes that Ballio’s characterization as the shared enemy of the slave and the external audience "significa identificarlo, con ottica metascenica, come funzione attanziale di antagonista, configurarlo apertis verbis come ‘il cattivo’ di turno che, canonicamente, il pubblico desidera veder sconfitto”. I would add that Ballio himself hints at his status as ‘common enemy’ in vv.1081-1083 when he reports his conversation with Pseudolus to Simo as follows: SIMO: quid ait? quid narrat? quaeo, quid dicit tibi? /BA: nugas theatri, verba quae in comodiis/solent lenoni dici, quae pueri sciant: malum et scelerum et peiurum aibat esse me.

interruption of his *poeta* monologue by the entrance of Simo and Callipho at v.414 (and, as we shall see, the resulting change in direction), Pseudolus’ exuberant soliloquy is cut short when a new character enters the stage. The slave duly withdraws to spy on him (vv.592-594):

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  sed hunc quem video quis hic est qui oculis meis obviam ignobilis obicitur?
lubet scire quid hic venit cum macchaera et huic quam rem agat hinc dabo
insidias.
```

But who’s this guy I see who throws his unknown self before my eyes? I’d like to know why he’s coming around with a sword, so I'll spy on him to discover what he’s up to.

A travelling messenger now enters the stage, speaking aloud to himself as he comes (vv.594/5-599):

```
ihi loci sunt atque hae regiones quae mi ab ero sunt demonstratae,
ut ego oculis rationem capio quam mi ita dixit eru’ meu’ miles,
septumas esse aedis a porta ubi ille habitet leno quo iussit
symbolum me ferre et hoc argentum. nimis velim
certum qui id mihi faciat Ballio leno ubi hic habitat.
```

This is the place and this the neighbourhood that was explained to me by my master, as with my eyes I take account of what my master, the soldier, told me: that it is the seventh house from the gate where that pimp lives, to whom he ordered me to bear the token and this money. I’d really like it if someone would make it certain for me that Ballio the *leno* lives right here.

We immediately get the sense that this newcomer is a comic loser: the heedless courier reveals himself entirely to Pseudolus by divulging the details of his epistolary errand. He broadcasts the sender (the *miles*) and the addressee (Ballio) to anyone within earshot, as well as the items he bears for delivery - the soldier’s *symbolus* and money. This information matches up exactly with the arrangement for the courtesan’s purchase which she described in her letter, leaving no doubt in

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612 Thus Willcock (1987), 119.
613 In the view of Rambelli (1957), 98 the scene is “impostata con regolarità”; “Harpax proveniente da Sicione...al suo entrare in scena dice quel che è venuto a fare e dà di sé quel tanto di informazioni che è necessario al pubblico perché questi capisca chi sia il nuovo venuto; ma contemporaneamente ci informa dell’esistenza del *symbolum* e di se stesso”. The conventionality of Harpax’s entrance does not, to my mind, exclude my reading of the scenario. For by dumbly acting out this stock messenger entrance and announcing the details of his entrance aloud, the *nuntius* falls right into Pseudolus’ clutches, giving the schemer the information he needs to steal the epistle. Rambelli, in fact, notes that “l’arrivo del *calator* ha illuminato la mente di Pseudolus e...gli fa intravvedere in quale direzione deve ora dirigere i suoi imbrogli”.
Pseudolus’ mind that this is the man dispatched by Polymachaeroplagides to collect his master’s beloved. The messenger’s appearance changes everything, and for the second time in the play, an eavesdropping Pseudolus is compelled by a new development to abandon his previous ploy. Claiming the unsuspecting messenger as his prey (v.600: *st! tace, tace*, *meus hic est homo, ni omnes di atque homines deserunt* “Shhh! Keep it down, keep it down! This guy’s mine, unless all gods and men desert me”), the slave now improvises,615 switching tactic to a *novum consilium* - an epistolary one, as we will soon discover (v.600b-603):

*novo consilio nunc mi opus est,*

*nova res haec subito mi obiectast.*

*hoc praevortar principio; illae omnia missa habeo quae ante agere ocepi.*

*iam pol ego hunc stratioticum nuntium advenientem probe percutiam.*

Now I need a new plan,
this new development has suddenly come my way.
I’ll attend to this first; I’m putting aside all those things that I started doing before.
Now, by Pollux, I’ll really bamboozle this military messenger who’s just coming along.

This ‘unforeseen’ (and very opportune) appearance of Polymachaeroplagides’ agent is, I suggest, the unexpected *aliquid novom* that Pseudolus alluded to at vv.568-570. But there is a subtle irony implicit in this novelty, for the epistolary arrangement between the soldier and the pimp is not really new at all: in Phoenicium’s love note that begins the comedy, Pseudolus has already heard of the messenger coming to complete the *meretrix*’s purchase by letter. In fact, this foreknowledge is precisely what will enable the slave’s epistolary deception: thanks to the *meretrix*’s message, Pseudolus is apprised of what the soldier’s letter ‘says’ *without having to read it*. Since he knows what has been inscribed beneath the *miles*’ *symbolus*, the *servus* will be able to first intercept the letter as a provisional recipient, and then redeliver it for his own duplicitous purposes without ever breaking its wax seal.

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614 On Pseudolus’ “shushing” of the external spectators, Slater (1985), 132 n.20 observes that “the audience is here treated just like another actor/eavesdropper”.
615 Thus Slater (1985), 133-134 and Barsby (1995), 64. Barsby adds that the “unexpected” appearance of the letter “is also Plautus teasing the audience as to whether Pseudolus really had a plan in the first place".
Pseudolus loses no time in embarking upon his new scheme, and ambushes the messenger just as he is preparing to knock on Ballio’s door. The servus rapidly assumes a new persona for his mini-skit, morphing into the leno’s slave. Mimicking the messenger’s imprudent self-disclosure several lines before, Pseudolus cunningly makes his own (alleged) identity clear, demonstrating his recognition of the nuntius and acquaintance with the epistolary deal that he has come to carry out (vv.616-619):

```
esne tu an non es ab illo militi Macedonio
servos eius qui hinc a nobis est mercatus mulierem
qui argenti meo lenoni quindecim dederat minas,
quinque debet?
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Are you or are you not from that Macedonian soldier, the slave of him who bought a woman from here (points to the brothel) from us, who had given 15 bucks of silver to my master, the pimp, and owes 5?

The dimwitted courier expresses surprise at this familiar reception, for, he tells us, this is his first time in Athens (vv.619-621):

```
sum. sed ubi tu me novisti gentium
aut vidisti aut conlocutu’s? nam equidem Athenas antidhac
numquam adveni neque te vidi ante hunc diem unquam oculis meis.
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That’s me. But where in the world did you meet me or see me or talk with me? As for me, I’ve never come to Athens before now nor have I ever seen you with my eyes before this day.

Quick on his feet, Pseudolus justifies himself with recourse to the agreement between the pimp and the soldier: the two had fixed ‘today’ as the deadline for payment, and so the pimp’s familia has been expecting the nuntius’ arrival (vv.623-624):

```
quia videre inde esse; nam olim quom abiit, argento haec dies
praestitutast quoad referret nobis, neque dum rettulit.
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It’s because you appear to [be coming] from him; you see, at the time, when he left, this day was established for the silver - that is, for when he would pay it out to us, and he hasn’t paid up as yet.

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616 Jenkins (2005), 370-371 connects Pseudolus’ self-invented character to writing, remarking that the slave ‘re-writes himself as a different character: Syrus’. Pseudolus is, in fact, pilfering a text, but the connection between his assumption of a new persona and writing eludes me.

617 Thus Willcock (1987), 120.
The courier expresses his satisfaction with this reply and confirms the details of the transaction (v.624: *immo adest* "Yes, that’s it"), thereby walking right into a trap. Pseudolus, I propose, is laying the groundwork for his ruse, implicitly informing the messenger that he is privy to the details of the transaction between Ballio and Polymachaeroplagides that has been inscribed on the yet-sealed *tabellae*. By showing that he is informed of the pimp’s business dealings, Pseudolus ‘proves’ that he *really is* Ballio’s trusted slave – a ‘Subballio’ as the trickster proclaims in v.607. This scenario in the *Pseudolus* is the inverse of the parasite’s epistolary scheming in the *Curculio*. In both letter texts, schemers demonstrate knowledge of an epistolary arrangement without having to read the missive outlining it. Whereas Curculio does so in order to legitimate his faked messenger role, Pseudolus is conniving to take on the part of false addressee, making himself into a viable interim recipient for Polymachaeroplagides’ letter, for he is about to pull off an interception – the only such letter-crime in the Plautine corpus. Calling himself ‘Syrus’, the guileful slave claims that his ‘master’ is presently indisposed, and tries to prevail upon the messenger to dispatch the parcel (money + *symbolus*) from the soldier to *him* instead (vv.624-625). The plan is a shrewd one, and appeals to a reasonable principle regularly adhered to by modern shipping companies: ‘Syrus’ is (allegedly) a resident at the delivery address, and in close confidence with Ballio. He *should* be able to ‘sign’ for the package Polymachaeroplagides has sent for the pimp.

Although ‘Syrus’ swears that he is regularly entrusted with all of Ballio’s financial transactions (vv.626-627), the *miles*’ agent will not be entirely persuaded,

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618 With Slater (1985), 133 n.21, I read a racy *double entendre* in ‘Syrus’’s joke that he is Ballio’s second in command. The name ‘under-Ballio’ seems to imply that the slave is sexually submissive to his master.

619 Rambelli (1957), 99: “Pseudolus si mostra bene informato delle vicende contrattuali intercorse fra Ballio ed il miles...esso serve a guadagnare la piena fiducia del messo ed a toglierci qualunque sospetto intorno a Pseudolus. Questi, in effetto spaccianndosi per l’amministratore di Ballio e rivelandosi, agli occhi di Harpax, così addentro negli affari del padrone, riesce facilmente persuasivo”.


621 Delivery couriers customarily leave a package with whoever answers the door at the recipient’s address and signs for the parcel. Significantly, however, Pseudolus is *outside* Ballio’s residence, a subtle signal that he is not on as intimate terms with the *leno* as he would have the messenger believe.
and declares that he will hand over the 5 *minae* to none other than Ballio himself (vv.644). He does, however, entrust the soldier’s epistle and accompanying *symbolus* to ‘Syrus’. Like a relay of messengers, Polymachaeroaplidges’ emissary appoints Ballio’s ‘slave’ to finish delivering the letter (vv.646-648):

> at ego quando eum esse censebo domi,
> rediero. tu epistulam hanc a me accipe atque illi dato.
> nam istic symbolust inter erum meum et tuum de muliere.

But when I reckon he’s home,
I’ll come back. You – take this letter from me and give it to him.
For this here is the sign between my master and yours about the woman.

In reply, Pseudolus once again reassures the courier of his legitimacy as Ballio’s substitute, repeating yet more details of the deal between buyer and seller (vv.649-652):

> PS: scio equidem: ut qui argentum adferret atque expressam imaginem
> suam huc ad nos, cum eo aiebat velle mitti mulierem.
> nam hic quoque exemplum reliquit eius. HA: omnem rem tenes.

PS: Really, *I* know: he who would bring the money and his
[Polymachaeroaplidges’] stamped portrait
here to us – he said that he wanted us to send the woman off with that guy.
In fact, he also left a sample here of his likeness. HA: You’ve got it all.
PS: Well, why shouldn’t I? HA: Then give him this token. PS: Yessir!

Having thus transferred his delivery duties to Ballio’s slave (or so he thinks), the *nuntius* retreats to a nearby *taberna* to rest, where he will (vainly, as we shall see) await word from ‘Syrus’ of Ballio’s return (vv.658-660).

With epistle in hand, Pseudolus is *finally* making solid progress towards resolving the comedy’s *crux*. The *servus* has stolen the crucial letter by masking his interception as a preliminary delivery, having tricked the dull-witted messenger into believing that he is Ballio’s faithful slave and will duly pass the letter sealed with the requisite *symbolus* on to the pimp.\(^{622}\) In reality, Pseudolus will do just the opposite. That is, he *will* deliver the epistle to Ballio, but first he will reroute it,

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\(^{622}\) Ironically, Pseudolus is *no one’s* faithful slave; we know that he was, earlier in the text, preparing to cheat his *erus* Simo out of the money to buy Phoenicium’s freedom. One might say then, that Pseudolus plays the stock character of the ‘good slave’ in this mini-skit (like Messenio in the *Menaechmi*, for instance) who may be trusted to act in the best interests of his master.
pretending that it has come directly from Polymachaeroplagides in Sicyon. Rather than becoming the missive’s secondary messenger (as he has promised to do), Pseudolus will thus become its secondary author, for his possession of the missive enables the slave to impersonate the soldier: now the scheming servus can ‘become’ Ballio’s customer who has already paid 15 minae for the meretrix, and whose prerogative it is to take her away upon payment of another 5.623 This dynamic adds yet another set of ancillary epistolary roles to those played by Pseudolus in the course of the comedy: the slave has already acted as secondary recipient and reader of Phoenicium’s love letter in the Pseudolus’ opening scene.

This clever interception hinges upon the fundamental vulnerability of the epistolary medium that arises from the separation of author and text. Inscribed on wax and sent on a voyage unaccompanied by its true owner, Polymachaeroplagides’ παρουσία becomes susceptible to theft and transfer. In Pseudolus’ hands, the miles’ epistle will do the slave’s duplicitous bidding rather than fulfill its original purpose of completing Phoenicium’s purchase and transporting her back to Sicyon. Appropriated and recontextualized for a new purpose, the letter will now get the girl for Calidorus instead.624 All of this mischief is made possible thanks to the ineptitude of the soldier’s emissary, who falls for the ruse and trusts another slave to fulfill his own errand. This bad messenger’s name, then, revealed once Pseudolus has gained possession of the text (v.653), is highly ironic: Harpax, ‘Snatchy’, has had the important document snatched from him, which sabotages his entire assignment and contributes to Ballio’s defeat.625 He refuses to entrust 5 minae to ‘Syrus’ for fear of theft, but it does not occur to him that the soldier’s epistle is equivalent to three times that amount, for the document acts as a claim upon the 15 minae that Polymachaeroplagides has already paid out.626 All Pseudolus has to do is add another 5, and he gets the girl.

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623 This explains why Pseudolus, at v.673, claims that the epistula is a source of money.
624 Thus Pseudolus will also supplant the recipient of Ballio’s ‘reply’ to Polymachaeroplagides’ orders (Phoenicium herself), replacing the soldier with the adulescens.
625 The joke, then, is on the messenger when Pseudolus makes the following facetious pun on his name: PS: quid est tibi nomen? HA: Harpax. PS: apage te, Harpax, hau places;/huc quidem hercle haud ibis intro, ni quid â παξ feceris.
626 Noted by Slater (1985), 133.
Upon Harpax’s retreat, Pseudolus revels in his unexpected fortune and celebrates the appearance of the letter, which has put his scheming onto a new path (vv.667-670):

\[
\begin{align*}
\textit{di inmortales, conservavit me illic homo adventu suo.} \\
\textit{suoi viatico reddixit me usque ex errore in viam.} \\
\textit{namque ipsa Opportunitas non potuit mi opportunius} \\
\textit{advenire quam haec allatas mi opportune epistula.}\]
\]

Immortal gods! That guy has saved me by his coming. 
By his errand he has led me all the way back to the road from my wandering. 
For Opportunity herself could not have come to me more opportunely than this letter was opportunely delivered to me.

For the slave, this text is a horn of plenty, generating tricks, money and, most importantly, the girl for Calidorus (vv.671-672).\(^{628}\) Pseudolus proclaims that he will accomplish a duplicitous ‘trifecta’ by means of the epistle, deceiving his master, the pimp \(\text{and}\) the messenger. But Simo has vowed to warn ‘everyone’ of the slippery slave’s wiles (v.506) including, as we shall soon discover, Ballio himself.\(^{629}\) Pseudolus, then, cannot act out the delivery scheme on his own, but needs an artful dodger to replace him. Fortuitously, Calidorus is soon along with his friend Charinus, the \(\textit{homo astutus, doctus, cautos et callidus}\) that Pseudolus had requested back at vv.385-386. Given the slave’s new, epistolary plan, however, Charinus himself will no longer do as an accomplice. But Calidorus’ helpful \(\textit{sodalis}\) pledges to provide all that Pseudolus will need to pull off his latest caper: a cunning actor (his slave Simia) and his traveler’s costume (a Greek military cloak, a sword and a hat), as well as the 5 \(\textit{minae}\) required to pay off the balance of Phoenicium’s purchase price (vv.729-73).\(^{630}\) The master schemer explains his ploy as follows (vv.751-754):

\(^{627}\) Jenkins (2005), 371 remarks of these verses that they “link opportunity and chance: intercepted writing [is portrayed] as an accident”. But, as it seems to me, Jenkins gets it the wrong way around: Pseudolus’ textual theft is no accident, but the result of the slave’s clever scheming. Rather, the letter’s \(\textit{appearance}\) is the fortuitous event bestowed by \(\textit{Opportunitas}\), and signaled in the text as an unexpected \(\textit{aliquid novum}\) (cf. p.207, \textit{supra}).

\(^{628}\) Sharrock (1996), 168 n.57 observes that “[t]he girl, who began the play for Pseudolus lying stretched out on the wax, is now to be found in a letter….”

\(^{629}\) Cf. below; vv.896-904.

\(^{630}\) This is another of the \(\textit{Pseudolus}\)’ problems that has troubled scholars: why is Calidorus made to summon his \(\textit{sodalis}\) when it is really the tricky slave Simia who is needed for the ploy? This detail has been variously explained as resulting from \(\textit{contaminatio}\), sloppy translation or general Plautine carelessness; for this view, cf. Williams (1956), 432-3. Slater (1985), 134-135, Willcock (1987), 16 and 122, and Sharrock (1996), 161-162 all rightly perceive that this doubled motif is, in fact,
ubi exornavero,
subditivum fieri ego illum militis servuum volo;
sumbolum hunc ferat lenoni cum quinque argenti minis,
mulierem ab lenone abducat: em tibi omnem fabulam!

When I shall have fitted him out with his costume,
I want that guy to become the sham slave of the soldier.
He'll bring this token to the pimp along with 5 silver minae,
and take the girl away from the pimp! There you have it: the whole play!

Pseudolus will stage a mini-production (his second of the play), which he describes to the two *adulescentes* in explicitly metatheatrical terms. The *fabula* will feature a fraudulent delivery of the soldier’s letter by an actor, costumed for his part as Harpax, the phony slave of Polymachaeroplagides. This ‘courier’ will bring the letter with its (crucially) unbroken *symbolus* and the requisite five *minae* to Ballio as if coming directly from the *miles* in Sicyon. The terms of Phoenicium’s purchase thus fulfilled, ‘Harpax’ will, accordingly, bring away the girl.

This lying epistolary setup that Pseudolus has cooked up reverses the scenario of the comedy’s first letter, written from Phoenicium to her beloved and, as I have argued, twice delivered. The *meretrix*’s missive initially arrives into the hands of Calidorus, its intended recipient, to be then passed on to a secondary, unintended reader when the *adulescens* shows the document to Pseudolus. In both instances, the text travels very short distances, moving next door from the pimp’s house to that of Simo, and then within the very same *domus*. The opposite is true of Polymachaeroplagides’ epistle: the soldier’s letter is initially consigned from far away (Sicyon) to an unintended recipient – Pseudolus again. This scenario is inverted upon the epistle’s second consignment when it is given to its intended addressee (Ballio) allegedly arriving all the way from Sicyon but *really* from the

consistent with the plot, for Pseudolus did not yet have a firm plan in place when he asked Calidorus to bring a friend along to act as his accomplice. Sharrock makes some interesting observations about this ‘inconsistency’ from two additional perspectives. Taking into consideration Calidorus’ mask, she asserts that “...everything Calidorus does has to be useless: if he provided Simia himself - and the original request sounds very like what is actually required and what appears in the form of Simia – that would be far too helpful a role for the *adulescens* to play. Like everything else, he gets it ’wrong’.” Further, Sharrock considers the ‘glitchy’ detail as playing into *Pseudolus*’ ‘metacompositional’ game, and the text’s pose of being ‘made up’ as Pseudolus goes along: “...this ‘false start’ in composition is only unmotivated in so far as to have such an unmotivated character is an integral part of a deliberately shaky plot” (pp.161-162).
neighbouring house, replicating via inversion the next-door delivery of the Pseudolus’ first letter. Here is an illustration of these three epistolary exchanges, and the complex set of parallels and reversals between them:

**LETTER 1**

**DELIVERY 1**

Phoenicium → Calidorus - *intended recipient*

Athens (Ballio’s *domus*) → Athens (Simo’s *domus*)

**DELIVERY 2**

Calidorus → Pseudolus - *unintended recipient*

Athens (Simo’s *domus*) → Athens (Simo’s *domus*)

**LETTER 2**

**DELIVERY 1**

Polymachaeroplagides → “Syrus”/Pseudolus – *unintended recipient*

Messenger: Harpax

Sicyon → Athens

**DELIVERY 2**

“Polymachaeroplagides”/Pseudolus → Ballio - *intended recipient*

Messenger: “Harpax”

“Sicyon”/Athens (Simo’s *domus*) → Athens (Ballio’s *domus*)

Calidorus and Charinus now depart to gather the materials necessary to enact the clever slave’s trick (v.757). Once again left alone on stage to soliloquize, Pseudolus returns to the military image of his last monologue (and his last plan) to pronounce his imminent victory over the pimp (vv. 761-766) – this time for real! Soon, he too exits to prepare: Pseudolus will prime Simia, his slippery assistant, for the role of Harpax, *docte ut hanc ferat fallaciam* “so that he may skillfully bring off this deceit” (v.765). But the audience will have to wait a while to watch Pseudolus’ epistolary ruse. Following are two scenes that delay the action and work up the spectators’ appetite for renewed mischief: first, a *puer* comes forth from Ballio’s brothel. In what Feeney has called “perhaps the weirdest scene in Plautus”,63¹ the boy complains that his ugly looks have prevented him from finding a lover to keep him flush; as a result, he does not have a gift for the cruel pimp’s birthday, and will probably suffer a beating for it. After sharing his troubles with the audience, the anxious *puer* announces the arrival of his master in the company of a hired cook. The *leno* and the *coqus* engage in a lengthy and hysterical exchange that continues for over 100 lines of text (vv.790-892). While Ballio carps on about the dishonesty

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63¹ Feeney (2010), 284.
and proverbial ‘sticky fingers’ of cooks, the coqus comically defends himself and his cuisine. The leno finally dismisses the hireling to concoct his birthday feast, ordering the ugly boy (who now will certainly not be able to come up with a present for his master!) to watch the cook’s every move. Upon the coqus’ exit, Ballio finally brings the plotline back to Pseudolus. The pimp reveals to the audience that Simo has specifically warned him to beware of the guileful slave and his plot aimed at getting the girl (vv.896-904):

```
nam mi hic vicinus apud forum paullo prius
pater Calidori opere edixit maxumo
ut mihi caverem a Pseudolo servo suo
ne fidem ei haberem. nam eum circum ire in hunc diem,
ut me, si posset, muliere intervorteret;
eum promississe fortiter dixit sibi
sese abducturum a me dolis Phoenicium.
nunc ibo intro atque edicam familiaribus
profecto ne quis quicquam credat Pseudolo.
```

But my neighbour here (points to Simo’s house), just a little while ago at the forum,
Calidorus’ father, that is: he proclaimed that I should, with all my might,
guard myself against his slave, Pseudolus,
and not have any faith in him. For he’s on the hunt this day
to steal the girl, if he can;
He [Simo] said that he [Pseudolus] had vigorously promised to him
that he would kidnap Phoenicium from me using his tricks.
Now I’ll go inside and I’ll proclaim the same to my household,
so that for sure no one will trust anything to Pseudolus.

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632 On the connection between the figure of the cook and Pseudolus, cf. Wright (1975), 406-407: “The cook, then, frightens and controls Ballio using no other weapon but language. Here is the connection, made explicit in the speech by Ballio just quoted, between this apparently extraneous character and the hero of the play. For it is language that provides the key for understanding the comic greatness of Pseudolus, and ultimately the comic achievement of Plautus himself”. Slater (1985), 135 takes Wright’s reading a step further by exploring the performance and mythic language of this ‘coqus gloriosus’ as a middle ground between words, which dominate the first part of the play, and self-conscious theatricality, with which the Pseudolus comes to a close when the clever slave solves the crux through his own dramatic activity. He argues that Pseudolus’ character resides in the subtext of the entire coqus scene and speculates that the slave and the cook may have been played by the same actor (so too Slater, 1985, 135), which might “subliminally” suggest a parallel between the two characters to the audience. Further, Slater remarks that “[t]he cook’s mere opposition to Ballio in the scene also pairs him with Pseudolus. Even Ballio’s mind seems to grasp the connection, for after the cook’s exit the warnings of Simo begin to hit home for Ballio (vv.892-904). Indeed, Ballio’s use of cavere (v.898) may draw us back to Pseudolus at v.128” (p.136). Of the same view is Hallett (1993), 24, who suggests that one of the ingredients in the cook’s recipes, maccis (maccidem, v.832) might be a subtle allusion to the playwright’s name, Maccus to “associate the cook with Plautus and hence with Plautus’ self-referential creation Pseudolus”. Hallett ultimately argues that Plautus himself played the parts of the clever slave and the coqus gloriosus (pp.25-26).
From the audience's perspective, the pimp's declaration is funny and ironic. Privy to the details of Pseudolus' epistolary trick, we know that the slave will not execute the ruse himself, though he is the mastermind behind it. Forewarned may be forarmed, but the pimp and his familia's guard against Pseudolus himself is futile. As a letter-writer sends a messenger to enact his will or a general his soldier, so the slave is going to dispatch Simia as his deputy in deception.

IV: Polymachaeroplagides’ epistle, take two

After a lengthy absence of 139 lines, the eponymous servus returns to the stage accompanied by the actor Simia, Charinus’ own wily slave who will play the part of Harpax the messenger.633 As his erus minor explained at vv.730-731, the ancillary trickster has just arrived at Athens from Carystus for the first time the other day, so Ballio will not be able to recognize him as allied with the trickster’s camp. What is more, this detail of Simia’s background adds a dimension of truth to Pseudolus’ lying plan (Simia really is a traveler)634 and makes the servus an apt doublet for the true messenger, who has, likewise, just arrived in the city for the first time. Pseudolus, however, frets about his accomplice’s ability to deceive: will he be sufficiently malus for the job? The fast-talking Simia reassures his jittery director, promising to outdo even his magister in trickery (vv.932-933):

\[
\begin{align*}
t e\ quoque\ etiam\ dolis\ atque\ mendaciis\\qui\ magister\ mihi\ es,\ antidibo,\ ut\ scias.
\end{align*}
\]

In deception and lies you too,
who are my teacher, I'll outdo, so you'll know [what I'm made of].

The actor’s wicked confidence wins Pseudolus over completely (v.944: ut ego ob tuam, Simia, perfidiam te amo et metuo et magni facio “On account, O Simia, of your dishonesty, how I love you and fear you and think you’re a big deal”), leaving no doubt in his mind (or that of the audience) that the imminent ploy will be a

633 This set of adulescentes and servi callidi creates a neat set of doublets in the text. Jenkins (2005), 372 likens Simia’s assumption of the messenger role to Pseudolus’ own role as Syrus, calling it “another instance of re-writing” (cf. n.616, supra).

634 Compare the similar scenario in the Curculio, where the parasite posing as a travelling messenger from Caria really has just arrived at Athens from this very city; cf. p.168, supra.
resounding success. Ballio soon emerges from the brothel, and Pseudolus orders his soldier into the fray (v.959): *ingredere in viam dolose; ego hic in insidiis ero* “March into the street craftily; I'll be here in hiding”.\(^\text{635}\)

The second delivery of Polymachaeroplagides’ letter begins much as its initial consignment did: the messenger enters the stage wondering aloud about Ballio’s precise location (vv.960-962):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{habui numerum sedulo: hoc est sextum a porta proxumum} \\
\text{angiportum, in id angiportum me devorti iusserat;} \\
\text{quotumas aedis dixerit, id ego admodum incerto scio.}
\end{align*}
\]

I’ve carefully kept count:\(^\text{636}\) this is the sixth alley from the gate, and he had ordered me to turn into that very alley; but as for how many houses [into the alley], about that I’m not quite sure.

In fact, the approach of this ‘Harpax’ provokes a 2-line reaction from Ballio that resembles Pseudolus’ words upon catching sight of the genuine man:

**vv.963-964:**

\[
\text{BA: quis hic homo chlamydatus est aut unde est aut quem quaeritat?} \\
\text{peregrina facies videtur hominis atque ignobilis.}
\]

**BA:** Who’s this cloak-wearing guy, or, at least, where’s he from or who is he looking for?
The guy’s face seems foreign and unknown.

**vv.592-594:**

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{PS: sed hunc quem video quis hic est qui oculis meis obviam ignobilis obicitur?} \\
\text{lubet scire quid hic venit cum macchaera et huic quam rem agat hinc dabo} \\
\text{insidias.}
\end{align*}
\]

But who’s this guy I see who throws his unknown\(^\text{637}\) self before my eyes? I’d like to know why he’s coming around with a sword, so I’ll spy on him to discover what he’s up to.

Both eavesdropping recipients describe ‘Snatchy’, the original and his doublet, as *ignobilis*, and remark upon elements of the courier’s costume (his military cloak and

\(^{635}\) As Wright (1975), 414 points out, Pseudolus’ “offstage” position likens him to a theatrical director, a metaphor that the clever slave has been building up throughout the text to this point.

\(^{636}\) Thus Willcock (1987), 128.

\(^{637}\) Thus Willcock (1987), 119; he makes the same observation about the adjective’s use on v.964 on p.129.
sword) that mark him out as a traveler, and point to his status as a newcomer and
source of action in the plot.638 I wonder, then, if Simia’s performance might not be a
deliberate reenactment of the real messenger’s foregoing entrance. After all,
Pseudolus’ “play-within-the-play” is a replica of an earlier scene in the text, for the
slave has taken an episode of the Pseudolus (one he himself took part in!) and
duplicated it, creating a faked version of what is, within the confines of the plot, a
‘real’ event.639 In this way, the schemer’s theatrical ruse mirrors the storyline of the
larger comedy, producing a mise-en-abyme effect that is tinged with irony: Harpax’s
first appearance is explicitly marked in the text as new and unexpected, abruptly
obviating Pseudolus’ second plot and setting the trickster on a new path. Now the
audience gets to watch this aliquid novom unfold again! In fact, the messenger’s
name seems to be clever pun on this doubled scene and doubled nuntius: might
‘Harpax’ suggest ἀ παξ – ‘once’ in Greek?640

But there will be something different about the delivery of the miles’ letter
the second time around, for this doublet “play-within-the-play” both duplicates and
reverses the set-up of the comedy’s first internal performance. The preliminary
internal skit, Pseudolus’ epistolary interception, is a feigned reception: an imposter
addressee pretends to sincerely accept the letter as an authorized substitute for the
recipient, Ballio, by passing himself off as the pimp’s slave. The Pseudolus’ second
production replicates the previous scenario by enacting a consignment of the very
same text, but it is a counterfeit delivery, starring an imposter as the sender’s slave
who hands over the letter to Ballio. In the process, Pseudolus jumps from one end of
the epistolary exchange to another, going from acting as the recipient of the soldier’s

638 Of course, it is true that both scenarios are stock messenger scenes; one might compare the two
episodes in the Pseudolus to the encounter between Charmides and the sycophant in the Trinummus,
which features the wily senex likewise commenting on the alleged courier’s appearance out of
earshot.
639 As Peter Bing aptly put it in litteris, the replicated scene is “art imitating ‘life’ in art!” Petrone
(1983), 70 has perceived this doubled scene in the text, arguing that it is the element of novelty
hinted at in vv.568-570. For rather than a ‘simple’ disguise ploy such as that in Curculio, Petrone
suggests that the Pseudolus’ theatrical ruse is exceptional in its duplication of a previous event as
“una scena parallela e complementare, che propone alla rovescia gli stessi elementi...Il novom
inventum, cioè la novità nella condotta del dolus, è più che altro in questo seconda parte, dove il vero
è scambiato per il finto dopo che il finto era stato creduto vero”.
640 I owe this insight to a suggestion made to me by Regina Höschele.
missive to impersonating its author. Besides this rearrangement of the epistolary scenario, the imposter courier of the letter’s second delivery will differ significantly from his first, true incarnation, for the consummate actor vows to one-up the original messenger by being a better Harpax than Harpax himself (vv.923-925):

\begin{quote}
\textit{ita ille faxit iuppiter,}
\textit{ut ille palam ibidem adsiet,}
\textit{quisquis illest qui adest a milite.}
\textit{numquam edepol erit ill’ potior Harpax quam ego.}
\end{quote}

Let that Jupiter (points to the sky) bring it about so that guy (points offstage to the “inn” where Harpax is napping) might be present at the very same time, whoever he is who’s here from the soldier. Never, I swear, will that guy be a better Harpax than me. 641

Unlike his halfwit model, the replica ‘Snatchy’ will show himself to be craftier than the addressee. In a reversal of the epistle’s first consignment, this second version of the scene features the courier deceiving the recipient instead, a reorientation of the delivery episode’s comic dynamic that is already foreshadowed at its outset. As the courier approaches, Ballio, unlike Pseudolus before him, fails to recognize ‘Harpax’ and wonders aloud about the identity of this foreigner (v.966): \textit{ad me adit recta. unde ego hominem hunc esse dicam gentium?} 642 “He’s coming straight for me. Where in the world might I say this guy’s coming from?” Of course, the imposter has not copied the mistake of his predecessor by foolishly revealing himself and his errand. But as Pseudolus \textit{qua} Syrus points out to the real messenger, ‘today’ is the deadline for Polymachaeroplagides’ payment: just as the trickster pretends to do at vv.622-623, so the pimp and his \textit{familia} should, in fact, naturally expect the soldier’s emissary to appear this very day. That Ballio does not ‘clue in’ to the identity of this

641 Slater (1985), 138 remarks upon the similarity of the present scenario to that in the \textit{Amphitryo}, where Mercury usurps Sosia’s identity, leaving the comic slave unsure of his own identity. He observes as follows: “In the theatre of role-playing it is a real comic possibility that a more powerful player may steal the role and therefore the identity of a less powerful player.” This is precisely what the false Harpax is about to do. In fact, it seems right to me that there may be a subtle joke here on Plautus’ \textit{tragicomedia}. Simia refers to \textit{ille iuppiter}; that is, the king of the gods on Mt. Olympus. But which other Jupiter is there? The slave, I propose, might be distinguishing the god from his theatrical incarnation in the \textit{Amphitryon} who initiates and enables precisely the same kind of doubling and role theft that occurs here in the \textit{Pseudolus}.

642 The dupe-addressee echoes the words of the dupe-messenger at v.619, quoted above on p.208, \textit{supra}. 
traveler, though he is dressed as a *nuntius stratioticus* and holding a letter (!), foregrounds, I propose, the pimp’s imminent defeat and comically inverts the scenario’s first (and ‘real’) instantiation.

Simia’s epistolary performance quickly gets to its point, as there is no time for comic delay: the real Harpax is in Athens right around the corner, and could appear, as Charmides does in the *Trinummus*, at any moment to undo Pseudolus’ carefully orchestrated ruse. As his director lies low to watch, the actor launches straight into his delivery (vv.982-983):

SIMIA: eru’meus tibi me salutem multam voluit dicere.  
    hanc epistulam accipe a me, hanc me tibi iussit dare.

SIMIA: My master wanted me to give you many greetings.  
    Take this letter from me; he ordered me to give it to you.

The messenger’s conventional introduction is met with a question when Ballio asks him for the name of the sender (v.984): *quis is homost qui iussit?* “Who is this man who so commanded?” To judge from Pseudolus’ reaction, this reply is totally unexpected. The distressed slave cries out in an aside to the audience, worried that his ploy is on the brink of disaster: although he knows (thanks to Phoenicum’s missive) the epistolary content, he does not know the author’s actual name – which means that Simia does not have this crucial bit of information either (vv.984-985):

    perii nunc homo in medio lutost;  
    nomen nescit, haeret haec res.

    I’m done for! Now the man is up shit’s creek without a paddle!  
    He doesn’t know the name, this affair is in crisis!

Simia’s silence in response to his query provokes Ballio to repeat it (v.985): *quem hanc misisse ad me autumas?* “Who do you say sent this to me?”. The pimp insists upon learning the sender’s identity from the courier before accepting and reading

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643 Noted by Jenkins (2005), 372. Thus both Wright (1975), 414, in whose view Simia has forgotten his lines, and Slater (1985), 139, who thinks that Pseudolus “has neglected to tell Simia (and *us*) the name of the Macedonian captain” get it wrong. The *miles’* name is not mentioned in the text of Phoenicum’s missive, which is Pseudolus’ sole source of information on the transaction for Phoenicum’s purchase. Slater’s suggestion in n.27 that “Pseudolus’ *failure* is made the basis for an impressive display of Simia’s improvisational power” (my emphasis), then, does not work.
the letter he delivers. But why? There are, it seems to me, two possible explanations.

Ballio’s question may be born from suspicion: like the pre-established transaction between Cappadox and Therapontigonus in the *Curculio*, the identity of the messenger is the one unknown quantity in the *leno’s* agreement with Polymachaeroplégides. Ballio, then, may be testing the courier’s familiarity with the terms of Phoenicium’s purchase (and, therefore, the epistolary content) before accepting the epistle and ‘Harpax’’s role as the *miles* agent. After all, the messenger will be transformed into interim recipient of Phoenicium (much like the role ‘Syrus’ takes on *vis-à-vis* Ballio), and the pimp is, thanks to Simo’s warning, on the *qui vive* against a plot directed at doing just that – getting the girl. On the other hand, it may be that the oblivious pimp is, quite simply, *still* in the dark about the messenger’s identity, despite the fact that he is expecting Polymachaeroplégides’ man ‘today’ to pay off the *meretrix*’s price. Whatever the motivation behind Ballio’s epistolary interrogation, his question once again represents a reversal of the original delivery scene’s orientation: when the real Harpax makes his consignment earlier in the play, the alleged recipient, as I have argued, reveals, *sponte sua*, all the epistolary details, including the identity of the sender (vv.594/5-599, quoted above). In the scene’s replica, the addressee requests this same information from the courier.

Ballio’s unanticipated question that sends Pseudolus into such a panic does not trouble the actor at all. As Willcock observes, the slave-director “underestimates the ingenuity of Simia”.

Proving himself to be master of improvisation, the hireling solves the hiccup by turning the pimp’s question around. Rather than validating his own role *qua* messenger by demonstrating familiarity with the text he carries, the false Harpax forces Ballio into (supposedly) corroborating his own status instead (vv.986-991):

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644 Danese (2013), 19 notes of the *Pseudolus*’ messenger that he is “uno sconosciuto, che avrà bisogno di accreditarsi come inviato del *miles* presso il *lenone*”.
645 Cf. v.375.
646 The text is quite ambiguous, and it seems to me that both scenarios are viable in performance: Ballio could be played as suspicious upon ‘Harpax’’s approach, drilling the messenger to be sure of his identity, or the pimp could be completely dumb and naïve, asking about the epistolary author because he has no clue about who in the world might have written him.
647 Willcock (1987), 129.
648 This is the *modus operandi* of the epistolary trickster in the *Curculio*; cf. pp.160-165, *supra*. 

SIMIA: Inspect the portrait: you yourself tell me the name of this guy, so that I'll know that you are the very Ballio. BA: Give me the letter.
SIMIA: Take it and recognize the token. BA: Oh! It's none other than Polymachaeroplagides himself. I recognize him. ... (silence from Simia)
He-lo? Polymachaeroplagides – that's his name! SIMIA: Now I know I've rightly delivered the letter to you - after you said the name 'Polymachaeroplagides'.

Thus one might say that Simia makes Ballio conform to his part as it is played out in the delivery scene’s first performance: this recipient of the miles' letter is compelled to reveal the name of the epistolary author to verify his identity as the true addressee, as Pseudolus (that is, ‘Syrus’) did before him. As Jenkins has perceived, this moment is tantamount to the leno's downfall. By revealing the epistolary author’s name, Ballio plays right into the trickster’s hands, thus accepting ‘Harpax’ and the letter he carries as the soldier’s legitimate interpres.

Ballio’s identification of the document is precipitated by his recognition of the image on the seal, which matches the exemplar the soldier left with the leno as a comparandum. This remarkable symbolus bears Polymachaeroplagides’ own portrait, a clever play, I suggest, upon the epistolary topos of letter writing as sermo absentium. The act of reading the miles' letter simulates a conversation with the man in person, and a signum bearing the author’s visage makes this imaginative process somewhat more concrete, for it might be said to represent the soldier himself.

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649 Aliter Willcock (1987), 129, who suggests “recognize” for nosce on v.986. Rather, as it seems to me, cognosce in v.988 must be an imperative aimed at getting Ballio to discern the man depicted on the seal, where as the nosce asks him to look closely at it (in order to subsequently recognize it).
650 Jenkins (2005), 373.
651 The two seals, then, are a doublet whose unification symbolizes the completion of the transaction for Phoenicium’s purchase.
652 As Platt (2006), 237 points out, in antiquity, the seal was “a conveyer of multiple meanings, standing for the identity, authority and responsibility of a specific individual or political body”; cf. also Steiner (1994), 114-115, 160-162. Feeney (2010), 297 n.90 connects the “substitutive power” of Polymachaeroplagidges’ token to his larger argument about credit in the Pseudolus, suggesting that the symbolus works in a similar way to the “illusionism of the world of the stage”.

222
Like an ancient form of ‘Facetime’, the reader gets to ‘see’ Polymachaeroplagides as he enters into an epistolary dialogue with the soldier. As Lefèvre translates Ballio’s line, “das sei Polymachaeroplagides, wie er leibt und lebt”. In fact, this is the soldier’s only ‘appearance’ in the play: as Jenkins has pointed out, Polymachaeroplagides is the Pseudolus’ sole persona whose “presence is entirely ‘epistolary’”.

What is more, the seal also authenticates Polymachaeroplagides’ true authorship, for the two men had agreed upon this emblem as the sign of their agreement, which is stated in the epistolary text itself (cf. vv.998-1001). Thus the pimp exclaims that it is the soldier himself and, therefore, his genuine letter upon seeing the image. But the portrait on the signum is highly ironic in the present scenario, for it is not the identity of the author being forged, but that of the messenger. Ballio is easily able to identify Polymachaeroplagides’ countenance as sealing the text and so accepts the miles’ true authorship; but the pimp’s ignorance of the true courier’s appearance is what gets him to fall for this faked delivery. In this light, it would have been much more effective if the real Harpax’s face had graced the crucial seal instead of Polymachaeroplagides!

After having handed over the text, Simia rushes along Ballio’s reading and the termination of the pending transaction, mindful that the real messenger is close at hand and could, at any moment, appear to ruin the deception (vv.993-996):

SIMIA: sed properia hanc pellegere quaeo epistolam (ita negotiumst) atque accipere argentum actum mulieremque emittere. nam nescesse [est] hodie Sicyoni me esse aut cras mortem exsequi, ita eru’meus est imperiosus. BA: novi, notis praedicass.

SIMIA: But hurry up and read through this letter (that’s the deal) and quickly take the money and release the girl. For I need to get back to Sicyon today or face death tomorrow - my boss is that bossy. BA: I know. You’re preaching to the choir.

Simia cleverly justifies his haste with reference to the miles’ stock persona. Polymachaeroplagides, he avers, is a cruel owner who will not tolerate a loitering

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653 Lefèvre (1997), 32.
654 Jenkins (2005), 374.
655 Willcock (1987), 128 notes the unusual active sense of notus.
messenger.\textsuperscript{656} ‘Harpax’ statement is ironic given that the real messenger is doing just that, resting at the neighbourhood tavern while ‘Syrus’ completes his errand in his place (or so he thinks!). Further, Simia’s statement about the soldier’s character is meant to implicitly demonstrate, I propose, his personal acquaintance with Polymachaeroplagides and, thereby, his own legitimacy as the miles’ emissary. Ballio, who has met the bossy man, acknowledges this aspect of the soldier’s disposition as one he himself has experienced, thus falling neatly into Simia’s trap. For of course Polymachaeroplagides is imperiosus. The actor does not need to have met the soldier to know that he is domineering; Simia’s familiarity with the genre of comedy is sufficient, for Polymachaeroplagides’ mask ‘speaks’ volumes about his temperament.\textsuperscript{657} But the oblivious Ballio foolishly accepts Simia’s generic self-consciousness as further ‘proof’ of the messenger’s alleged identity and receives the letter from him as if straight from the soldier’s very hands.

Calling for silence, the pimp obeys the courier’s command and begins going through Polymachaeroplagides’ epistle straightaway (vv.998-1001):

‘miles lenoni Ballioni epistulam
conscriptam mittit Polymachaeroplagides,
imagine opsingatatam quae inter nos duo
convenit olim.’

‘To the pimp Ballio a written letter
the soldier Polymachaeroplagides does send,
sealed with the image which between us two
was once agreed upon.’

Simia promptly interjects the leno’s reading to emphasize the presence of the requisite seal (v.1001: \textit{symbolust in epistula} – “The seal is on the letter”), eager to draw Ballio’s attention to the letter’s authenticity, and away, perhaps, from contemplating other possibilities of epistolary fraud besides forgery (like interception!). The pimp duly confirms his satisfaction with the \textit{signum}, but remarks that something \textit{is} missing from the letter - the customary epistolary greeting\textsuperscript{658} (vv.1002-1003):

\textsuperscript{656} Such is Curculio; cf. pp.154-156, \textit{supra}.
\textsuperscript{657} Cf. the very similar scene in the \textit{Curculio}, on pp.167-168, \textit{supra}.
\textsuperscript{658} Compare Pseudolus’ tongue-in-cheek complaint that Mnesilochus’ letter to his father (which the slave composed) is missing a greeting at \textit{Bacchides} v.1000.
video et cognosco signum. sed in epistula
nullam salutem mittere scriptam solet?

I see and recognize the seal. But in his letters -
does he usually send no greeting at all?

This observation demonstrates that the pimp is conversant with the epistolary medium: the leno has, evidently, received and maybe even composed letters himself, and knows that these texts usually contain a written salutation. His meditation on the conventions of letter writing casts some doubt, I suggest, on the success of Pseudolus' deception: will the dupe 'smell a rat' and decipher the subtle signs pointing to an epistolary fraud? Remarkably, this epistolary failing is a "defect" of Polymachaeroplagides' real letter; it is ironic, then, that the missing greeting should thus provoke the leno's suspicions. The messenger (nervously?) shrugs the absent greeting off as typical of military types (vv.1005-1006), and urges the pimp back to his reading. Obligingly, Ballio picks up where he left off, though he quickly interrupts himself, mirroring Simia's affirmation with one of his own (vv.1009-1010): 659

BA: 'Harpax calator meus est, ad te qui venit –'
   tun es Harpax? SIMIA: ego sum atque ipse ἀρπαξ quidem.

BA: 'Harpax is my attendant, he who has come to you - ’
Are you Harpax? SIMIA: Oh yes I am, and I am 'Snatchy' indeed.

The actor, of course, happily confirms his alleged identity as Harpax, 660 giving to this redender Name a whole new valence. Although 'Snatchy' is ironically inappropriate as the name of Polymachaeroplagides' true courier, who has the important document taken from him, the name fits this accomplice to an epistolary thief perfectly: the imposter Harpax is delivering a snatched text to, in turn, snatch Phoenicium away from her rightful owners. Further, this two-line exchange also serves to comically characterize Ballio as a poor epistolary addressee, and banish any fears that the leno will prove to be a dupe too clever for Pseudolus' letter-trick.

For similar to what the true Harpax does upon the commencement of his delivery, the leno makes Simia privy to crucial epistolary information that has been inscribed

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659 Jenkins (2005), 374 similarly observes that vv.1002-1003 "mirror the verses about the seal".
660 Aliter Jenkins (2005), 374, in whose view Simia does not actually assert his name to be 'Harpax' but, rather "substitutes the meaning of Harpax for the identification itself ("I am certainly 'snatchy'") and allows Ballio to continue in his misapprehension".
confidentially upon the wax. The author, I propose, has included in his text the name of the messenger as a safeguard against precisely the fate that has befallen the letter - interception: should the courier bearing the missive not give his name as Harpax, the recipient should not accept the letter as coming directly from the soldier himself. Instead of using this detail to his advantage in evaluating Simia’s legitimacy, Ballio blurs out the name, first ‘giving’ this authenticating information to the courier and then accepting his confirmation, which is, of course, the wrong way around. What is more, the leno fails to heed Simia’s clever example in requiring verification of epistolary role and demanding yet-undisclosed information from within the yet-unopened missive. But the letter-writer who came up with such a scheme is, perhaps, as vapid as his addressee, for such a precaution is useless in a world where reading aloud is the norm.

Having thus obtained ‘confirmation’ of the messenger’s identity, Ballio picks up his reading once again, finally getting to the end of the text and an explanation for the missing salutation661 - the pimp does not deserve one (vv.1011-1014):

‘qui epistulam istam fert; ab eo argentum accipe; cum eo simitu mulierem mitti volo. salutem scriptam dignum est dignis mittere: te si arbitarem dignum, misissem tibi.’

‘He who bears this letter here: take the money from him; I want the woman to be sent together with him. It is suitable to send a written greeting to those who suit it: if I thought you were suitable, I would have sent you one.

These final lines of Polymachaeroplagides’ missive reveal a funny dissonance between the letter’s text and the messenger’s delivery, for Simia began this fake consignment by imparting his master’s greeting to the pimp (v.982): eru’meus tibi me salutem multam voluit dicere “My master wanted me to give you a great greeting”. Despite his adroit manipulation of the scenario, Simia does not, in fact, know the contents of the miles’ letter and has not taken orders from the author

661 Jenkins (2005), 374 argues that this letter is a “reverse image” of the Pseudolus’ first epistle, for whereas Phoenicium’s missive contains two instances of the word salus, the soldier has deliberately left a greeting out of his text, “omitting the salutation and substituting a malediction”.
himself, a reality belied by his contradiction of the epistolary content. But the oblivious dupe does not suspect a thing.

Upon the letter’s conclusion, Ballio loses no time in acting upon its orders. The pimp asks ‘Harpax’ to follow him inside, so that they may exchange 5 *minae* for the girl. The ruse is a triumph – almost. As the pair transacts Phoenicium’s transfer within the brothel, Pseudolus is left alone on stage to nervously agonize about the manifold dangers threatening his ploy’s successful conclusion (vv.1024-1031):

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nunc in metu sum maxumo triplici modo:
primum omnium iam hunc comparem metuo meum
ne deserat med atque ad hostis transeat;
metuo autem ne erus redeat etiam dum a foro,
ne capta praedae capti praedones fuant.
quom haec metuo ne ille huc Harpax advenat
priu’ quam hinc hic Harpax abierit cum muliere.
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Now I’m overwhelmed by the greatest apprehension in three ways:
First of all, I’m scared that my comrade here
might desert me and cross over to the enemy;
On the other hand, I fear that my master might even now return from the forum,
and, just when the ‘booty’ has been captured, the pirates get captured, too.
Along with these things, I’m terrified lest that Harpax (points to the “inn”) might come along here
before this Harpax (points to the brothel) gets out of here with the girl.

The slave pinpoints the greatest vulnerability of his plan, the doublet Harpax whose true version is resting at an inn just around the corner. For everything else about the deceit’s premise is real: the transaction for Phoenicium’s purchase and the text sent out to complete it are totally authentic. In fact, this comedy presents a novel constellation of epistolary deceit *vis-à-vis* Plautus’ other letter plays, which all contain forged texts. The *Pseudolus* is the only play to feature a realmissive that has been stolen and reused for the deceitful purposes of its thief. This recontextualization of the letter, I suggest, mirrors and is analogous to Pseudolus’ duplication of the delivery scene in his inset production. Thus one might say that the internal playwright’s epistolary theft is emblematic of his creative force within the play.

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662 Admittedly, the type of greeting Polymachaeroplagides denies Ballio is a written one (*salutem scriptam* v.1013), whereas Simia (“Harpax”) delivers an oral greeting at v.982.
663 Slater (1985), 139 makes a similar suggestion.
Once again, Pseudolus’ apprehensions about the plot’s failure prove to be unfounded. The hired actor soon emerges with a weeping Phoenicium, whom he reassures by revealing the true status quo and the new res (vv.1038-1043):

ne plora, nescis ut res sit, Phoenicium,
verum hau multo post faxo scibis accubans.
non ego te ad illum duco dentatum virum
Macedoniensem, qui te nunc flentem facit:
quoiam esse te vis maxume, ad eum ducere:
Calidorum hau multo post faxo amplexabere.

Don’t cry, you don’t know the deal, Phoenicium,
but in no time I’ll make sure that you’ll find out as you’re reclining [at the feast].
I’m not leading you to that man-eating guy,
the Macedonian, who now is making you cry.
He to whom you wish most to belong, you’re being taken to him:
before long I’ll make sure that you’ll be embracing Calidorus.

The courtesan, whose missive apprised Calidorus and Pseudolus (as well as the external audience) of the transaction-by-letter between the pimp and the soldier at the beginning of the play, is now informed that the constellation of epistolary roles in this exchange has shifted by the comedy’s end: Pseudolus’ interception and appropriation of Polymachaeroplagides’ text has turned the slave into its author and, thereby, Calidorus into the new recipient of Ballio’s ‘reply’ – Phoenicium herself. The messenger of the miles’ text, then, will no longer transport the girl to the terrible dentatus vir in Sicyon, but into the arms of her beloved right here at Athens. Simia and Phoenicium join Pseudolus, and the trio scuttles off to celebrate their triumph in epistolary trickery with a drinking party (v.1051). After two false

664 Thus Willcock (1987), 130.
665 Jenkins (2005), 371 argues likewise, though from a metatheatrical perspective. Pointing to vv.690-691 (nunc ego hac epistula/tris deludam, erum et lenonem et qui hanc dedit mi epistulam), he observes that Pseudolus’ possession of the text allows him to deceive whomever he wishes, making the slave its de facto author: “This is the strongest connection yet in Pseudolus between the technology of writing and the promulgation of fiction; “reading” is the act of being duped. The scene also constitutes an instance in which a performance medium slyly comments on the (in)efficacy of written text to establish or promote an objective truth or reality. Writing is very much, Pseudolus implies, a medium of “play”, and he will “play” (de-lud) with (and deceive) his master, and the pimp, and the messenger, all through the written word”.
666 Slater (1985), 144-146 reads the Pseudolus’ closing tableau in light of his larger argument about the clever slave as emblematic for Plautus himself, an interpretation building upon that of Wright (1975): when Pseudolus acts out the drunken dance which he performed at the celebratory feast and his resulting fall, the aged playwright (who, Slater thinks, also acted in his plays) is bidding the theatrical world farewell, and proclaiming an end to his ‘revels’: v.1276a: id fuit naenia ludo. Slater
starts, Pseudolus has finally solved the play’s *crux*, getting the girl for Calidorus before Polymacharoplagides’ courier could claim her. What is more, the slave’s clever machinations, contrived even *before* he knew how he would pull off his triumph, have ensured his impunity: Simo has pledged to forgive Pseudolus if he manages to carry through the *mirum et magnum facinus* (v.515) *and* compensate Ballio for his loss of property (vv.535-536).

**V: Harpax, take three**

At v.1052, an exultant Ballio emerges from his brothel, convinced that he has given Phoenicium over to the real Harpax, and thus avoided Pseudolus’ wiles. He is soon joined onstage by Simo, who has come around to see whether the slave has succeeded in pulling off his *facinus magnum*. Harkening back to Pseudolus’ own image of the pimp as an *oppidum* to be captured (vv.585-589), Simo likens his *servus* to one specifically tricky besieger of cities, comparing Pseudolus to Ulysses and his comic deed to the Greek hero’s theft of the Palladium, which enabled the subsequent fall of Troy (vv.1063-1064):\(^667\)

\[
\text{uisso quid rerum meus Ulixes egerit,}
\text{iamne habeat signum ex arce Ballonia.}
\]

I’ll go see what my Ulisses is up to, that is, whether he has already gotten his hands on the statue from the ‘Ballonian’ citadel.

Unbeknownst to the old man, this analogy is ironically appropriate, for the present situation contains a series of parallels to this mythical paradigm. Pseudolus has indeed pilfered an object that is crucial to the ‘city’’s defeat in a war started precisely over the possession of a woman.\(^668\) In fact, just as the purloined statue of Athena acts as a substitute for the goddess, the stolen letter is a representation that stands

\[^{667}\text{Cf. Willcock (1987), 131.}\]

\[^{668}\text{Sharrock (1996), 171: "What was needed at Troy was to get a woman from the clutches of the enemy. Pseudolus achieves in one day what took Ulysses ten years."}\]
in for the absent persona of Polymachaeroplagicides, a role made explicit by the portrait-bearing symbolus that seals it. Further, both Ulysses and Pseudolus follow their theft with a false delivery of sorts: Sinon is chosen to act the part of hostage and bear the Achaean ‘message’ to the Trojan enemies, just as Simia is hired to hand the letter over to Ballio. Both of these consignments bring ruination to their addressees.

Simo’s Trojan analogy recalls the identical motif in the Bacchides, where Chrysalus compares his own comedy’s scenario to the three fates of Ilium and the Greek sack of the city in an elaborate metaphor, specifically aligning his first, subverted trick to Ulysses’ theft of the Palladium at vv.957-960. The trope’s duplication in two letter plays is interesting, especially since its application is reversed: whereas the slave-schemer in the Bacchides likens his own accomplishments to the legend, here in the Pseudolus it is the master and victim of the servus’ cleverness who draws the comparison. Given the limitations imposed by the scant evidence for the chronology of Plautus’ plays, however, it is impossible to determine with any certainty which text came first and, therefore, where this topos originated. Nevertheless, I think that we might make some speculative observations about a relative chronology for the Pseudolus and the Bacchides based upon the effect created by a certain order of reference to this common thematic trope. Simply put, if we take the Bacchides’ extensive development of the Trojan metaphor as the motif’s first instantiation, Simo’s invocation of this mythical image is funnier and imbued with metatheatrical irony. The old man, I propose, is

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669 Cf. my observations at pp.90-96, supra on Chrysalus’ comparison of the Trojan myth to an epistolary scenario.

670 Thanks to one of two didascalic references in the Plautine corpus (preserved in our oldest MS – the Ambrosianus palimpsest) we do know that the Pseudolus was first performed in 191 BC for the Megalesian games. The Bacchides may well have come before or after this date, although many scholars have placed it in the mid-180s BC based upon perceived references in the text to the Bacchanalian affair of 186 BC. But cf. the chronology suggested by Williams (1956), 447-447, n.671, infra.

671 This is, in fact, the chronological order posited by Williams (1956), 447-448 (albeit for different reasons) in his brief investigation of the similarities between the Pseudolus and the Bacchides. Regarding the Ulysses motif in both plays, he argues that “…it would seem a natural hypothesis that the author who had already written the great canticum of Chrysalus (Bacch. IV 9), containing a detailed working out of the analogy between the deceptions of a slave and the stages and details of the taking of Troy, with special mention of the Wooden Horse and the taking of the Palladium, should,
likening his own scheming slave to the ‘golden boy’ of the Bacchides, who twice declares himself to be Ulixes Laertius (v.940, 946). That is, Simo calls Pseudolus meus Ulixes, “my own Ulysses”, implicitly comparing him to not only the Greek hero of myth (and epic) but also, I think, that self-proclaimed ‘Ulysses’ of Plautine comedy, Nicobulus’ own Chrysalus. Simo, then, ‘knows’ the Bacchides’ Trojan motif and uses it to characterize Pseudolus. But there is a funny contradiction in the senex’s theatrical self-consciousness, for it does not dawn on him that, like Chrysalus (and Ulysses before him), his own slippery servus has, inevitably, succeeded in his plans to Simo’s financial detriment (an especially funny irony given the senex’s behaviour in the following scene). In fact, Ballio soon assures the old man that he has sent Phoenicium away with the true courier, for the emissary had in his possession Polymachaeeroplagides’ letter and symbolus – a fact that made him ‘sure’ of the scenario’s authenticity. Wagering 20 minae and Phoenicium herself as a back-up to his claim, the pimp insists that the courtesan is already on her way to Sicyon – and out of Pseudolus’ reach (vv.1097-1098):

epistula atque imago me certum facit:
quin illam quidem iam in Sicyonem ex urbe adduxit modo.

The letter and the portrait made me certain:
In fact, he has just now led her off to Sicyon and out of the city.

As Jenkins comments, “Ballio trusts writing absolutely and disastrously”,

when he came to write Pseudolus, with a very similar slave to Chrysalus performing the deception, content himself with a neat and simple reference, and immediate identification of the characters”. Slater (1985) gives a similar reading. He remarks that “Simo is coming to see how his own Chrysalus is getting on” (p.140), suggesting that the old man compares Pseudolus to Ulysses “and thereby to Chrysalus in the Bacchides” (p.141).

Wright (1975), 414 points out that Ballio, “with unconscious irony” makes the mistake of repeating Pseudolus’ wager with Simo earlier in the text, “a bit of foolishness that will double his misfortune”. However, in the view of Willcock (1987), 131 Ballio’s double wager is, like Pseudolus’ bet with Simo earlier in the text probably really only one stake. He thinks that Ballio gambles 20 minae with Simo, viz. the girl for free. Lefèvre (1997), 29 agrees. Willcock also offers a second solution, suggesting that these lines might be a “…Plautine addition, intended to lessen the inconsistency of the ending of the play”, for at the comedy’s conclusion, Simo (apparently unacceptably) loses out on 20 minae because of his deal with Pseudolus. These extra 20 minae from the pimp’s purse, then, would even out the score. Sharrock (1996), 162-163, however, persuasively shows that the overly confident leno does, in fact, make a twofold wager: once Ballio has encountered the true Harpax and realizes that he has been swindled, Simo, in vv.1224-1225, insists upon stripping the pimp of both his praemium and his praeda; that is, the cash and Phoenicium.

Jenkins (2005), 376.
When he hears Ballio’s account, the old man is overjoyed. He (ironically) congratulates the pimp on a job well done, and wonders how soon he will be able to commit Pseudolus to the mill (vv.1099-1100). Simo does not suspect any epistolary mischief when he hears the leno mention Polymachaeroplagides’ letter, although he certainly should given the plot of the comedy and the ‘golden boy’ that he has just (potentially) alluded to.

This reading of the senex’s words is reinforced by yet another link between the two letter plays which likewise suggests the chronological priority of the Bacchides. When staging his epistolary interception earlier in the play, Pseudolus calls himself ‘Syrus’ (v.636), taking on as his fake identity the name of Chrysalus’ Greek incarnation in Menander’s Διεξαπατῶν.675 Twice, then, in the course of the comedy Pseudolus takes on an identity associated with Chrysalus in the Bacchides. What is more, in both instances the slave is likened to his ‘golden’ colleague via a reference to another text: allusions to Menander’s Διεξαπατῶν and Homer’s Iliad in the Pseudolus point backwards to the Bacchides in a meta-metaliterary game of sorts. These clever allusions serve, I propose, to call the audience’s attention to similarities between these two epistolary comedies.

Thus the senex and the leno are absolutely sure that Pseudolus’ deception has been subverted by the priority of the soldier’s messenger in claiming Phoenicium. They are, in fact, half right: the true Harpax did ‘get there first’. But like the letter he carries, the courier and his identity are intercepted and stolen by the clever slave under the guise of a preliminary delivery. So when a messenger suddenly turns up, both Simo and Ballio are baffled (vv.1101-1102):

SIMO: sed quis hic homo est chlamydatum? BA: non edepol scio, nisi ut opservemus quo eat aut quam rem gerat.

SIMO: But who’s this cloak-wearing guy? BA: By Pollux, I don’t know, unless we watch where he’s going or what he’s up to.

675 Cf. my argument about the competitive stance Chrysalus takes up against Syros in the Bacchides at vv.649-650 on pp.100-113, supra.
The courier’s entrance is, by now, totally predictable. For the third time in the play, Harpax (or a ‘Harpax’) enters the stage, headed for Ballio’s brothel. For the third time, those on stage withdraw to eavesdrop, commenting on the courier’s foreign costume. In fact, Simo repeats Ballio’s remarks about the emissary’s chlamys from vv.963 almost verbatim (*quis hic homo chlamydatus est aut unde est aut quem quaeritat?). The comedy of this thrice-repeated scenario (one that was, in its first occurrence, signaled as *aliquid novum!*) is marked, especially since the pimp now fails *once again* to recognize Polymachaeroplagides’ messenger, even though he has just participated in a version of this very same episode not even 100 verses ago!

Harpax enters singing a song of ‘self-congratulation’, as Willcock puts it, musing about good-for-nothing and obedient slaves. The unnamed *malus et nequam homo* (v.1102) (measured against Harpax’s own virtuosity) is ‘Syrus’, Ballio’s rotten *servus* who was supposed to deliver Polymachaeroplagides’ letter and summon Harpax from the inn, but never showed up. The courier has now come searching for ‘Syrus’, suspicious that ‘Ballio’s slave’ might be up to some kind of trick (vv.1116-1120). Harpax’s self-righteousness is ironic, for he, in fact, has not been a good slave at all. Polymachaeroplagides’ emissary is a *bad* messenger, having willingly given up his master’s letter to the wrong addressee, and thereby possession of Phoenicium herself (as he shall soon discover). Harpax, the true messenger, thus stands in funny contrast to Simia, his imposter. The false *nuntius* who has just left the stage successfully delivers the *tabellae* and brings away the girl, precisely what Harpax is *supposed* to do but fails to accomplish due to his utter ineptitude.

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676 Noted by Feeney (2010), 285. He observes that “the greatest twist in this brilliant play is the fact that there are three identical moments where a man comes along dressed in nice military rig and heads to Ballio’s door, and twice the man is “real”, while once he is a “fake” (p.288).


678 This is a change from Harpax/Harpax’s two other appearances in the text, where he wonders about the location of Ballio’s brothel. By way of contrast, this time Harpax seeks a messenger (or he who was supposed to act the part of secondary courier) instead of the recipient. Although Ballio and Simo have withdrawn to eavesdrop, they cannot ‘hear’ Harpax’s summary of the foregoing situation, or else the premise of the scene to follow would be ruined. Rather, this recap serves, I think, to remind the audience of this long play’s plot.

679 Cf. Slater (1985), 141: “Harpax enters soliloquizing on the virtues of a faithful slave, enough in this comic world to label him as much a fool as Ballio and Simo”.


Ballio, who has heard only the tail end of Harpax's monologue (v.1122-1123: *leno argentum hoc / volo a me accipiat atque amittat mulierem mecum simul "I want the pimp to take this money here and release the woman together with me"), takes the messenger at first for a customer, and is eager to get his claws into this new source of income (vv.1124-1135). The clueless pimp is happy to accept the 5 *minae* offered by the stranger, until the *chlamydatus* reveals his true purpose, announcing Polymachaeroplagides as the sender of this cash (vv.1149-1151):

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accipe: hic sunt quinque argenti lectae numeratae minae.
hoc tibi eru' iussit ferre Polymachaeroplagides,
quod debet, atque ut mecum mitteres Phoenicum.
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Take this: here are the 5 *minae* of silver, selected and counted out.
My master Polymachaeroplagides ordered me to bring this to you – what he owes – so that you might send Phoenicum with me.

Ballio, convinced that he has already met and done business with the ‘real’ Harpax, takes the true courier for an impersonator commissioned by Pseudolus. He withdraws to inform Simo of their ‘good’ luck in catching the slave’s accomplice red-handed, and the unlikely pair decides to play some tricks of their own on the ‘hired trickster’ (vv.1160-1169). They taunt the ‘imposter’ and revile him with obscenities, refusing to believe that he is Harpax *ipsissimus*. The scene is an interesting reversal of the previous encounter between Ballio and the fake courier, for whereas the pimp expresses no doubt or suspicion whatsoever when Simia presents himself as Polymachaeroplagides’ emissary, the *leno* repeatedly denies the true Harpax’s claims to his own identity. He accuses the *nuntius* of being a *purus*

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680 Pointed out by Willcock (1987), 123.
681 Lefèvre (1997), 83-85 rightly likens Simo here to Charmides, the old man of the *Trinummus* who plays tricks on the trickster hired by Callicles and Megaronides for their ruse. This *comparandum* is especially apt, I think, because the *Trinummus*’ *sycophanta* is pretending to be a messenger. Charmides catches the actor red-handed and subjects the oblivious hireling to a drawn-out *ludus* of his own. Here in the *Pseudolus* Simo and Ballio think that they are in precisely the same scenario, for they assume that the real Harpax is, in fact, Pseudolus’ accomplice. The joke is that they are dead wrong, and so the episode is the opposite of the encounter in the *Trinummus*.
682 Danese (2013), then, gets it wrong when he suggests that Pseudolus’ praxis of deceit consists in essentially diverting the eyes of his adversaries on to himself (cf. n.605, *supra*). For if the *leno* has, as Danese suggests, been tricked into expecting to see Pseudolus *ipse* come along and try to pull off Phoenicum’s abduction, why, then, does Ballio now suspect the true Harpax of being the *servus* accomplice?
683 Bungard (2013) argues that this encounter between the *leno* and the real *nuntius* is one of three instances in the *Pseudolus* in which actors try to ‘improvise’. In his view, Ballio here “mira a scrivere
putus sycophanta (v.1200), ironically echoing his words about Polymachaeandragiades upon seeing the soldier's face on the signum and thereby accepting the veracity of the letter and the delivery scenario (v.989).\(^{684}\) The repetition of this 'recognition' phrase underlines the element crucial to Ballio's belief: the text. The real Harpax presents himself as a messenger without a letter, unaccompanied by the requisite symbolus of authenticity agreed upon between the leno and the miles. It is the presence of this very epistle that makes Ballio 'sure' that he gave Phoenicium over to the right man when he transacts for her purchase with Simia (vv.1097-1098), and it is the missive's absence that makes him so certain that this Harpax is the fake\(^{685}\) (vv.1204-1208):

non confidit sycophanta hic [nequam est] nugis: meditatus malest.
edepol hominem verberonem Pseudolum, ut doce dolum
cummentust! tantundem argenti quantum miles debuit
dedit huic atque hominem exornavit mulierem qui abduceret.

The trickster doesn't rely on nonsense: he has wickedly thought it through. By Pollux, that scourge of a man Pseudolus, how cleverly he has devised his trick. Just as much money as the soldier owed, he has given this guy, and he has costumed a man to lead away the girl. For that letter – the real Harpax himself brought it here to me.

Comically, Ballio has correctly guessed the praxis of Pseudolus' deceit: the cunning slave really did send a man in costume with 5 minae to abduct Phoenicium. But the pimp accuses the wrong man of impersonation, tricked by the presence of a text into believing the wrong Harpax.

The messenger insists upon his story: he gave the missive to Ballio's slave, Syrus (vv.1200-1202). As for this 'Pseudolus', he knows no such character (v.1209/10-1212):

un ruolo per l'avversario", vainly attempting to 'rewrite' the real Harpax into the fake one. Comparing this instance to other, successful moments of improvisation in the Pseudolus (like Pseudolus' assumption of the 'Syrus' role), Bungard concludes that "[a]l contrario degli schiavi estemporanei, Ballione non può scrivere un nuovo copione per cercare di migliorare la sua situazione' (p.137).

\(^{684}\) The repetition of the phrase is noticed by Willcock (1987), 134.

\(^{685}\) Jenkins (2005), 374 rightly observes that "the seal and the letter are so convincing that when Ballio meets the real Harpax, he refuses to lend credence to oral proclamations of identity (vv.1151-1152)". However, Jenkins misses the point when he goes on to argue that Ballio "assumes that it is the scout that is counterfeit (v.1167: suppositicum), not the letter" (p.375), for the missive is not, of course, a fake at all.
Harpax ego vocor, ego servos sum Macedoni militis; 
egno nec sycophantiouse quicquam ago nec malefice 
neque istum Pseudolum mortalis qui sit novi neque scio.

I’m called Harpax, I’m the slave of the Macedonian soldier; 
Neither am I up to any mischief, nor I am up to no good, 
and this mortal Pseudolus – who he is, neither do I understand nor know.

The truth dawns first on Simo, who alerts the leno that he has ‘clearly’ lost the girl (v.1213). Ballio, too, has begun to see the light, his suspicions aroused by ille Syrus alleged to have accepted the tabellae from Harpax (vv.1214-1216). For confirmation, the pimp asks the courier for a description of this slave to whom the letter was entrusted (vv.1217-1221):

[BA:] eho tu, qua facie fuit dudum quoi dedisti symbolum? 
HA: rufus quidam, ventriosus, crassis suris, subniger, 
magnu capite, acutis oculis, ore rubicundo, admodum 
magnis pedibus. BA: perdidisti, postquam dixisti pedes. 
Pseudolus fuit ipsus. actumst de me. iam morior, Simo.

[BA]: Hey, you: what kind of face did he have, the guy to whom you just gave the token? 
HA: He was some ginger, pot-bellied, with thick calves, darkish in colour, 
with a big head, sharp eyes, a reddish face and – yes – 
big feet. BA: You ruined me, as soon as you spoke of his feet. 
It was Pseudolus himself. I’m done for. Now I’m dying, Simo.

Ballio ‘sees’ Pseudolus in Harpax’s oral portrait, and realizes that he has been duped. This farcical anagnorisis is a funny play upon the pimp’s encounter with the false messenger, for in each of his meetings with Harpax, both the true man and his faked doublet, Ballio recognizes someone. In the first instance, the addressee discerns the author on the epistolary seal and, as a result, mistakenly judges the scenario to be genuine. In the second case, the leno recognizes Pseudolus as the false recipient of Harpax’s preliminary delivery, and correctly perceives that this courier, although not in possession of the crucial document, is telling the truth. With the two Harpaxes now finally sorted out, Ballio is made to pay back 20 minae to the true emissary, and yet another 20 to Simo in fulfillment of his wager. The pimp asks the senex to at least let him have Pseudolus (v.1226), intent (presumably) upon having his revenge. But Simo refuses, reminding Ballio that he had repeatedly warned him of Pseudolus’ tricks (v.1227-1228). Protected thus even by his master, who has been himself the victim of the slave’s deceit, Pseudolus has grandly fulfilled his promise to the
audience of a spectacular success. Simo, in fact, proclaims that the *architectus doli*
has outdone even Ulysses and his Trojan trick (vv.1243-1244):

\[ \textit{nimus illic mortalis doctus, nimi’vorsutus, nimi’malus;} \\
\textit{superavit dolum Trojanum atque Ulixem Pseudolus.} \]

That mortal is too clever by half, too crafty and too bad;
he has eclipsed the Trojan trick and Ulixes – that Pseudolus.

Once again, the *senex’s* words, I think, might be read as referring not only to the
Trojan myth,\(^{686}\) but also to the *Bacchides’* slave-hero, who explicitly likens his
duplicitous epistolary ploy to the ruse of the Trojan horse (vv.935-936, 941-942).
Pseudolus has surpassed both Ulysses and Chrysalus in his clever *malitia*.\(^{687}\)

The *Pseudolus*, then, flaunts the ingenuity of its eponymous scammer, pitting
him against the likes of Chrysalus, letter-forger *extraordinaire*. Much like the
*Bacchides*, in fact, this comedy’s epistolary motif is rich and complex:\(^{688}\) the
*Pseudolus* contains both ‘straight’ and mischievous epistolary exchanges that occur
in the *Vorgeschichte* and in the course of the plot, and features an extended (and
very funny) meditation upon epistolary convention. Further, the *Pseudolus* has the
only letter interception in the entire Plautine corpus. Absconding with the missive
sent by his *erus’* rival, Pseudolus succeeds in building a text (a *fabula*, to be precise)
out of someone else’s text, not unlike Plautus himself.

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\(^{686}\) Sharrock (1996), 171 reads Simo’s comparison as not only gesturing towards the play’s military
theme and the similarities between the two scenarios – Trojan and ‘Pseudolean’ – but also as a sort of
*Gattungskreuzung*, to “define the status of the play as comedy by opposition to epic, but as comedy in
epic mode, and comically to bring the epic down – or is it up?—to the level of the play”.

\(^{687}\) Observed by Slater (1985), 142.

\(^{688}\) In fact, these two letter plays are, one might say, an inverted doublet, for whereas Chrysalus
wreaks havoc by forging *false* letters, Pseudolus makes trouble by stealing a *true* text.
Conclusion

The five plays I have explored in the foregoing chapters – *Trinummus, Bacchides, Persa, Curculio* and *Pseudolus* – contain eleven letters\(^\text{689}\) and three letter-like tokens\(^\text{690}\) both real (7) and counterfeit (5). These epistles are used for various purposes: to give orders for the transaction of business\(^\text{691}\) to communicate the *status quo*\(^\text{692}\) and to express love.\(^\text{693}\) Most of all, however, the *personae* in these comedies employ letters to deceive:\(^\text{694}\) epistolary communication is co-opted into the ultimate objective of Plautus’ theatre – *ludere*. Schemers forge documents, modeling their fakes on the exempla of real missives by imitating their form and content.\(^\text{695}\) These texts written up within the text serve to bring fiction into the narrative on the micro-level, for a new premise is conjured up when a letter is composed *ex nihilo*. Outright forgery, however, is not the only *modus operandi* of the Plautine epistolary miscreant. The letter plays also feature the interception of real missives and pre-existing epistolary scenarios.\(^\text{696}\) Tricksters impersonate authors (or would-be authors) by appropriating and recontextualizing their letters, deceptively rearranging the epistolary roles to fit an entirely different purpose than the original one.

This mischief with missives is accomplished by the playwright’s masterful exploitation of epistolary conventions. In Plautus, characters play upon the fundamental mechanisms of communication by letter, feigning and manipulating concepts like *παρουσία, sermo absentium* and epistolary time. They are acutely

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\(^{689}\) *Trinummus*: 2 (both false), *Bacchides*: 3 (2 false, 1 real), *Persa*: 3 (2 real, 1 false), *Curculio*: 1 (false), *Pseudolus*: 2 (both real).

\(^{690}\) *Bacchides*: 2 (1 real, 1 false), *Curculio*: 1 (real).

\(^{691}\) Nicobulus’ message to Archidemides; Mnesilochus’ letter to Pistoclerus; Phaedromus’ message to his friend in Caria; Polymachaeroplagides’ letter to Ballio.

\(^{692}\) Phoenicium’s letter to Calidorus.

\(^{693}\) Phoenicium’s letter to Calidorus; the letters between Toxilus and Lemniselenis.

\(^{694}\) The pair of letters from “Charmides”/Callicles and Megaronides to Callicles and Lesbonicus; “Mnesilochus”/Chrysalus’ missives (2) to Nicobulus; the letter from “Timarchides”/Toxilus to “Toxilus”/Dordalus; “Therapontigongus”/Curculio’s epistle to Lyco.

\(^{695}\) Chrysalus’ counterfeit letters from “Mnesilochus” to Nicobulus; Toxilus’ faked letter from “Timarchides” to himself; Curculio’s phony epistle from “Therapontigonus” to Lyco.

\(^{696}\) The expectation of epistolary exchange between Therapontigonus and Lyco preempted by Curculio; Polymachaeroplagides’ letter to Ballio, which is intercepted by Pseudolus and redelivered by Simia.
aware of the importance of penmanship, greetings and seals, taking scrupulous care to accurately reproduce these elements, or evade trouble arising from them. The letter plays also contain much reflection upon epistolary consignment. This crucial moment in which a text passes from the messenger to the addressee is played out on stage in all five comedies. Authors (both scheming and non) express anxiety about correct and timely delivery, and swindlers go to great lengths to ensure the plausibility of bogus consignments. There is particular focus on the messenger figure, whose competence is of utmost importance to a scheme’s accomplishment. A nuntius must be quick-thinking, quick-talking, and thoroughly rehearsed in the intricacies of the medium. For this reason, epistolary forgers most often make the sham delivery themselves,697 daring to entrust this decisive transfer to no one of less maleficent power than the Pseudoolean Simia. Fake messengers, in fact, are far more effective in Plautus than their real colleagues: true nuntii and deliveries get bungled and fail, whereas phony consignments, with the exception of the one carried out by the slow-witted sycophant in the Trinummus, are always a success.

All of Plautus’ successful epistolary rogues – Chrysalus, Toxilus, Curculio and Pseudolus – are part of the social underclass, and three out of four of them are slaves. These comic heroes are skillful readers and writers (even though they might commandeer their superiors to act as a scribe), using their remarkable textual expertise to cheat their victims and solve the crux. Old men and pimps, on the other hand, are the characters least adept at epistolary communication. These personaes are poor recipients and bad readers, repeatedly duped by letters and their complexities.698 In Plautine comedy only the socially inferior can successfully use and abuse text. This is further suggested by the fact that women in these plays are competent letter-writers, if not schemers: in the Pseudolus, Phoenicium pens a love note to her boyfriend Calidorus, and Lemniselenis sends a letter to Toxilus in the Persa. When other characters try to put writing to their advantage, they invariably fail: the Trinummus’ geriatric rogues, Callicles and Megaronides, are defeated by the difficult dynamics of letters, and Mnesilochus’ missive to Pistoclerus turns into a

697 Chrysalus, Toxilus and Curculo.
698 Callicles and Megaronides, Nicobulus, Dordalus and Ballio.
disastrous case of ‘broken telephone’. The playwright, then, also uses the epistle as a tool of inversion, employing text, *inter alia*, to create the topsy-turviness of his comic universe.

These elements of the embedded epistle – as a tool of mischief and a weapon of comic power, as an image of text and a medium fraught with thorny conventions, come together within the metatheatrical complex of Plautus’ comedy to constitute a potent metaphor. Harnessing the resemblance of epistolary communication to dramatic production, the playwright uses letters to frame his comedies’ deceptive plots *qua* explicitly theatrical performances and their devisers *qua* internal playwrights. Control of text thus becomes theatrical power, and those cunning enough to capitalize on it are transformed into a generative force within the confines of the narrative, empowered to maneuver the plot and the other characters, as they will. This internal image of dramatic invention serves also, I have argued, to mirror the composition of the external playwright. Plautus invokes the metapoetic potential of embedded text to refer to his own dramaturgical activity, playing upon his aesthetic and the status of his comedies as translations.

Thus the epistolary motif is an essential plot device in Plautine comedy. Plautus deftly manages the letter and all of its accompanying dynamics in the service of deception, of comedy, and of his own authorial reflection, turning it into an emblem of theatrical creation. This innovative manipulation of text, both as embedded within another text *and* as a prop on stage, evinces the complexity of Plautus’ oeuvre and the playwright’s own sophisticated self-consciousness.

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699 The only exception to this rule is Nicobulus’ message to Archidemides demanding the repayment of his debt. This epistolary scenario is successful, for Mnesilochus does, in fact, come back to Athens bearing his father’s money. Interestingly, however, Chrysalus perverts the truth of their errand: the *servus callidus* realigns the *senex*’s attempt to use epistolary communication with the norm of Plautine comedy, lying that it has failed; cf. pp.66-69, *supra*. 
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