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At Play with Writing: Letters and Readers in Plautus

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SUMMARY: The essay takes its cue from Sharrock's *CQ* article on Plautus and "the nature of reading." In Sharrock's definition all interaction with a text constitutes a reading. My article examines Plautine reading in a narrower sense: the instances in four plays (*Ps.*, *Trin.*, *Bac.*, *Cur.*) in which characters read or write, the only times in these plays that the underlying text is presented "as written." The article then offers some general remarks about the reading of Plautus: how do the hermeneutics of writing play out in Plautus' dramas, and how do they affect our reading of his texts as written?

WHY DOES PLAUTUS SO OFTEN INCLUDE LETTERS as devices in his plays? A short answer—like most short answers to pressing Plautine questions—is easy to formulate: to set up a joke. A longer, more complex answer, however, engages us at the intersection of performance and script in Plautus, and ultimately in Plautine metatheater. As a technology dedicated to the extension and transformation of the human voice, writing is both a rival to oral expression and paradoxically dependent upon it; in Plautus, writing remains inconspicuous so long as it is considered a "true" extension of a character's oral voice. When, however, writing is involved in the creation of fiction—as it so often is in Plautus—its metatheatrical properties come to the fore, as letters mimic and steal the voices of the characters around them. In so doing, letters become metaphors for the process of script-writing itself. By exploiting writing's potential for comic mayhem, Plautus transforms a pedestrian plot-device into a more extended rumination on the circulation of signs within texts, and of reading within writing.[1]

[1] Whitmarsh's review of Rosenmeyer's *Ancient Epistolary Fictions: The Letter in Greek Literature* takes the author to task for not including an extended analysis of Plautine letters as an exemplar of New Comedy letters (see especially his first footnote). Though I,

A recent volume of the ScriptOralia series focuses attention on the element of improvisation in Plautus, on the techniques Plautus employs to produce the illusion of "script-less," text-less performances, seemingly unmoored from the technology of writing that produced them. In his article on "improvisatory" scenes in Plautus, for example, Barsby 66 argues that the exchange of insults between Pseudolus, Calidorus, and Ballio (*Ps.* 357–69) draws on Roman oral traditions of amoebic abuse and "is clearly a scene which could be improvised"; Barsby continues on to type-scenes with a strong improvisatory element, including running-slave scenes, question-and-answer routines, and even dramatic monologues. Oral tradition does not, of course, preclude considerable sophistication: Barsby 67 detects a regular formal pattern of AA(A)BA in many of the stock routines, a type of comic leitmotif. Tellingly, the same volume contains a warning against reading any Plautine scene as *true* improvisation (Goldberg 36–37):

> Plautus' plays were not themselves improvised in any technical sense. They were performed according to scripts that have not only survived, but declare by their very existence the primacy of the author's role in the theatrical life of his time … . The improvisational quality to which we appeal is in fact an illusion of the play's construction.

It is that "illusion" of improvisation—of scenes seemingly constructed without script—that has drawn the interest of scholars working on Plautine metatheater. A script without a playwright is particularly striking when the selfsame script boast characters who act like comic playwrights. On Slater's metatheatrical reading, Pseudolus acts as his own author and director, and the messiness of the play's plot is the *materia* from which Pseudolus improvises his own comic version and vision of the world. Plautus, as playwright, displays his linguistic and dramatic virtuosity by creating a character, Pseudolus, who "directs" his own narrative as if a play (1985: 147–67). Frangoulidis 3 expands this formulation by identifying Plautine characters "who 'grow' as poets in parallel with or in contrast to the play's poet"; such characters invariably hatch plots that either coincide with the arc of the main plot ("factual subplots") or that remain firmly based on a misinterpretation of the main plot ("fictional subplots").

For the metatheatricalists, such improvisatory plots (paradoxically) implicate writing as the dominant metaphor for constructing and altering reality, as Pseudolus' famous *nunc ego poeta fiam* (*Ps.* 404) speech so aptly indi-

like Rosenmeyer, resist the conflation of Plautus and New Comedy, the present analysis fills this perceived "gap" in the history of Greek epistolarity.

cates (see further below). It is striking then, that there has been no extended examination of writing *within* Plautus' plays, the ways in which Plautus introduces text as an important plot device even as he hides evidence of the play's textuality. Within this corpus of "improvised" plays there are four intriguing instances of text that has not and cannot be improvised, texts that are (seemingly) fixed and unchanging, as much written in stone as on wax. Rosenmeyer 66 has argued how writing (principally in letters) in Athenian tragedy "freezes" and reveals the moment of the play's composition: even as the tragedy unfolds in real time, the letter presents a snapshot of the primal, textual level of the play. This formula works well for Plautus, too. Writing within Plautus constitutes a type of palimpsest, the only time within a play that the underlying textual script is presented exactly "as written." All else is presented as improvised drama, verbal banter, and zany farce.

Sharrock's recent metaliterary reading of *Pseudolus* includes some important, even disconcerting, observations about reading Plautus—and, by implication, about reading the readers *within* Plautus. For Sharrock, the structure of *Pseudolus* is *intentionally* misleading, as Pseudolus the Slave and Plautus the Playwright deceive not only the audience within the play but the spectators (and modern readers) as well. For Sharrock, this is the hermeneutic function of *Pseudolus*, and indeed of literature in general: to deceive by "reading"—for every act of reading involves the audience's pleasure in self-deception (152). "Reading" Plautus, then, constitutes an act of willful suspension of knowledge by readers, as characters, costumes, and plot shift and change before our eyes. To read Plautus is to misread Plautus: getting lost is all the fun. Sharrock's definition of Plautine reading is writ large (so to speak): all interaction with a text constitutes a (mis)reading.

This paper examines four instances in which we can argue for the effectiveness of Plautus' comic manipulation of reading-within-writing, a symbolic scheme carefully modulated through inventive stagecraft, poetic resonances, and playful etymology. For Sharrock, the solution to *Pseudolus*' structural problems hinges on Plautus' quest to be misread; by closely examining instances of "misreading" in four Plautine plays, I hope to demonstrate that misreading is a key element of Plautus' poetics of performance. In order to succeed as farce, Plautus' plays must present the façade of improvisatory performance even when (pre)written by Plautus in intricate verse. When seemingly *ex tempore* characters confront an authentically fixed, written text—like a letter—the viewer is able to glimpse the manic, (pre)fabricated world of Plautine farce as it examines (and usually misapprehends) the basis for its own existence. In other words, Plautine characters are duped by their own ontology. For the most part, the written characters of the drama never realize that they are written, even when they collide with writing that acts like a char-

acter: stealing their voices, entering and exiting from scene to scene, and fanning as many half-truths and plot twists as the characters themselves.

My focus on letters in Plautus is not accidental. Epistles, by their nature, make problematic many of the key facets of language, including issues of authority, the function and method of interpretation, the possibility of non-reception, and the lability of the written sign. Isocrates, in his first *Epistle*, laments that the epistle is a poor medium for the transmission of data (*Ep.* 1.3): ἐν δὲ τοῖς ἐπιστελλομένοις καὶ γεγραμμένοις, ἤν τι συμβῇ τοιοῦτον, οὐκ ἔστιν ὁ διορθώσων· ἀπόντος γὰρ τοῦ γράψαντος ἔρημα τοῦ βοηθήσοντός ἐστιν, "in letters and writing, if something [confusing] should happen, there is no corrector. Without the original author, there is no help." In fact, Isocrates takes it as self evident that everybody trusts the spoken word more than the written (1.2 πάντες τοῖς λεγομένοις μᾶλλον ἢ τοῖς γεγραμμένοις πιστεύουσιν), an axiom that might surprise the modern attorney, and that demonstrates the cultural factors at work in the construction of writing. An investigation of epistolarity in Plautus is also an investigation of how writing is conceived by that author.

Before launching into the plays, I should mention here the caveat that applies to all Plautine criticism: it is impossible to separate Plautus definitively from his New Comedy predecessors.[2] New Comedy seems to have employed writing as a plot device with some frequency, and there is evidence that letters and writing could fulfill a crucial narrative function. For instance, the entry under Euthycles in the *Suda*, citing Athenaeus' *Deipnosophists* (124B), notes that this fourth-century playwright composed a play entitled "Spendthrifts" or "The Letter"; it is probable that Euthycles' play, although it featured spendthrifts (ἄσωτοι) as protagonists, became known by the name of its main plot device, a wayward or intercepted letter. This sort of letter seems to have been an occasional leitmotiv for comic plays; fragments of other dramas entitled "Letter" or "Letters" received performances, whether as later imitations or independent plays that also featured writing prominently in their plots.[3] One might expect the more extensive texts of Menander to feature some letters, but writing remains a remarkably scarce phenomenon there.[4] Scafuro

[2] The relationship between New Comedy and Plautus is a conundrum that Halporn 191 wittily dubbed "the Homeric Question of Latin studies." It will not be solved here.

[3] Macho's play Ἐπιστολή survives in one passage (Kassel/Austin [henceforth K-A] 2), dealing not, unfortunately, with matters epistolary, but culinary. Timocles' play Ἐπιστολαί has been transmitted only in a similarly tattered state (K-A 9, 10). For a brief survey of letters in New and Middle Comedy see Rosenmeyer 64–65.

[4] Confusion over tokens (341 γνωρίσματα) in Menander's *Epitrepontes* is finally banished from the play when one of the tokens proves to be the creation of Kleostratos (389):

has usefully catalogued all instances of writing—both letters and contracts—in Plautus, and considers three of the letters to be Plautine creations.[5] For the purposes of investigating Plautine "reading," I shall assume that though Plautus may take his cue from New Comedy, the expansion and manipulation of reading as a plot device depended upon his own dramatic and literary talents.

PSEUDOLUS

The act of reading is central to the success of *Pseudolus* both as plot and as literature. Plautus foregrounds reading by beginning the play with an epistolary "reading" scene in place of the more usual prologue.[6] This is an important change; the *function* of the initial scene remains the same—to introduce the characters and the general situation—but by altering the dramatic *form*, Plautus calls attention to writing as a medium of communication.

The opening of *Pseudolus* is convoluted. Instead of directly informing the audience that the slave-girl Phoenicium is to be sold to the dastardly Polymachaeroplagides over the objections of the lovelorn (but penniless) *adulescens* Calidorus, Plautus doles out the information over the course of some eighty lines, mostly through an exchange concerning a letter.[7]

Our play begins with an evocation of silence. Pseudolus notes that his unhappy master has been unusually quiet, *tacens*, and says that if he could, he would try to discover the reason for Calidorus' distress *without* speech (3–6[8]):

Κλεόστρατος δέ τις / (ἐσ)τὶν ὁ ποήσας, ὡς λέγει τὰ γράμματα. In this instance, writing reinforces the authenticity of the token, but does not spin off into an independent plot device. A complicated scene in Menander's *Sikyonios* (141–44) appears to involve both a letter (γραμματείδιον) and birth-tokens, but the meaning of the scene as a whole is a vexed question (for some conjectures see Oguse 623 as well as the commentary ad loc. in Gomme and Sandbach). See Scafuro 2–5 for an extended analysis.

[5] Scafuro 8: "[F]our of the letters are Plautus' work (two in *Bacchides* and two in *Pseudolus*); only one of these four Plautine letters might possibly replace a letter in the Greek original (the second letter in *Bacchides*). We way suspect Plautine alterations in the letters in *Curculio* and *Persa*—but not their wholesale invention by the Roman poet." For a catalogue of all letters—onstage and off—in Plautus see Scafuro's appendix.

[6] See Slater 1985: 119: "The letter, though often interrupted, functions as an internal prologue, providing us all the background details of the impending sale of Calidorus' *amica* to a Macedonian soldier of fortune." Monaco 334–51catalogues epistolary motifs in Plautus and Euripides, and draws especial parallels between the openings of *Pseudolus* and Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*.

[7] *Pseudolus* might instead have begun in a manner similar to *Mercator*, in whose prologue the *adulescens* Charinus describes how he lost his heart to a woman more beautiful than any other (101 *mulier, qua mulier alia nullast pulchrior*).

[8] The text of Plautus is Leo's.

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;

If I were able to learn from you in your silence,
Master, what miseries now so miserably torment you,
Happily would I save the work of two men—
Of me asking and of you responding.

Unhappily, speech seems the only alternative, and Pseudolus persists in his badgering. He again asks Calidorus the reason for the young man's reticence, and introduces, crucially, a new "character"—and a new voice—into the scene: the *tabellae* (10) from his girlfriend Phoenicium that Calidorus clutches in his hand. In the space of a few lines, the play segues from silence to speech to writing.

At first, Calidorus keeps his tablets and his troubles to himself. Pseudolus' curiosity has been piqued, however, and he asks his master's son about his strange behavior (9–12):

quid est quod tu exanimatus iam hos multos dies
gestas tabellas tecum, eas lacrumis lavis,
neque tui participem consili quemquam facis?
eloquere, ut quod ego nescio id tecum sciam.

Why is that, sick these past many days,
You carry around these tablets with you and wash them with your tears,
And you do not make anyone privy to your thoughts?
Speak, so I may know with you what I do not know.

The tablets are obviously meant to be private. Calidorus carries them around everywhere (*gestas tabellas tecum*) and they wring from him tears and lamentation (*eas lacrumis lavis*). Yet, with the letter reserved for his eyes only, Calidorus can only wretchedly complain in general terms how wretched he is (13 *misere miser sum, Pseudole*). Pseudolus eventually gets the letter from Calidorus, but the obscurity of the script surprises him (23–30):

Ps. Ut opinor, quaerunt litterae hae sibi liberos;
alia aliam scandit.
Ca. Ludis iam ludo tuo?
Ps. Has quidem pol credo nisi Sibulla legerit,
interpretari alium posse neminem.
Ca. Cur inclementer dicis lepidis litteris
lepidis tabellis lepida conscriptis manu?

Ps. An, opsecro hercle, habent quas gallinae manus?
nam has quidem gallina scripsit.

Ps. It's my opinion that these letters are trying to beget children:
One letter is mounting another.
Ca. Are you making fun of me with your games?
Ps. By god, I don't think anybody but a Sybil
Would be able to make sense of this.
Ca. Why are you being so insulting, when such pretty tablets
Have been written with such pretty letters—by such a pretty hand!
Ps. By Hercules, can it be that chickens have hands?
For a chicken certainly wrote this!

Pseudolus does not at first read the letter. Instead, he cracks three jokes, each with more to it than at first meets the eye (or ear). The first joke is a lewd one (23): the letters are so jumbled that they seem to be copulating.[9] This introduces into the scene an erotic element appropriate to the letter's content: sex is, after all, the subtext to the piece.

Pseudolus' second comment is more self-consciously literary-critical. He believes that no one other than a Sybil could interpret (*interpretari*) the letter. The metaphor is striking: writing as oracular, something requiring inspiration to decipher. This is a warning not so much to Calidorus as to the audience to beware the power of the written word in Plautus. It may be tricky and untrue. As Calidorus protests that Pseudolus is *misreading* the letter—this is pretty writing, from a pretty hand—Pseudolus flatly contradicts him: "Do chickens have hands? For a chicken certainly wrote this." It is a silly joke, on the surface (though one that transfers surprisingly well to English in the form of "chicken scratch"). But the joke does bring to the foreground an idea crucial to this play: the same text may have multiple readers, and multiple "takes." Textual beauty (and textual treachery) is in the eye of the beholder.

[9] This might be an allusion to a curious riddle in Antiphanes' lost comedy *Sappho*, which also features a joke about letters giving birth to letters. A character is asked what female carries her children within her, children that those distant may hear, but those nearby may not. One solution (perhaps proffered by Sappho) is (K-A 194):

Θήλεια μὲν νυν ἐστὶ φύσις ἐπιστολή
βρέφη δ᾽ ἐν αὐτῇ περιφέρει τὰ γράμματα·

For an epistle is certainly feminine by nature,
And carries around, within her, her children: letters (= writing).

In the case of Phoenicium's letter, the metaphor of childbirth has been applied to the writing itself: not only does a letter engender writing, the letters engender other letters.

The introduction of this letter at the beginning of the play foregrounds both the power and the vulnerability of epistolary discourse. A letter constitutes speech ripped from the original time and place of its composition: in Plautus, it's the Word made wax. The hero Palamedes, in Euripides' eponymous play, boasts that, having invented letters, he has conquered the barrier of distance (fr. 578 Nauck); we have seen, however, in Isocrates, that epistles may in fact stifle discourse, since they cannot engage in sustained dialogue and cannot therefore "help" the reader with problems of interpretation. The opening scene shows both aspects of epistolary discourse—positive and negative—as the absent Phoenicium makes herself "present" via the medium of the letter, but remains absent for the purposes of answering the questions that would help Pseudolus decipher her chicken scratch.

Phoenicium's letter constitutes the *only* feminine voice in the play; when Phoenicium makes her entrance at the end of the play, it is as a silent character. The letter has, in effect, usurped her voice: she speaks *only* through writing. Even when directly addressed by Simio later in the play (1038 *Ne plora, nescis ut res sit, Phoenicium*), Phoenicium remains reticent, at least in the transmitted script. *Ne plora* ("do not despair!") suggests that Phoenicium is weeping, but she does not speak her concerns—however eloquent her letter, on stage Phoenicium is inarticulate. In fact, her voice and her body cannot exist on the stage at the same time. In the first scene, Pseudolus cries out *Tuam amicam video, Calidore!* "I see your girlfriend, Calidorus!" (35), only to follow up the exclamation by explaining that Phoenicium is *in tabellis porrectam; in cera cubat* (36) "she's spread out on the tablets; she's lying in the wax." Pseudolus' wordplay pokes fun at the conventions of epistolarity, the means by which writing substitutes for the presence of the author. In this case, Pseudolus, for an instant, transforms this metonymical connection into one real and actual: the author is *there*—but spread out on the wax (one assumes here as well a sexual *double-entendre*: she's ready for a tryst for Calidorus).[10] When the author *does* appear, at the end of the play, we find that the situation has been reversed: Phoenicium's epistolary voice may embrace her body, but her body, touchingly, lacks a voice.

Furthermore, Phoenicium's feminine voice does not speak uninterrupted, but is instead sliced throughout the scene by the ramblings and jokes of the two men. Pseudolus continues his reading of the missive, vocalizing Phoenicium's own voice (41–44):

[10] For *cubare* used in the sense of "to sleep with" see *Am.* 112: *et meus pater nunc intus cum illa cubat*.

"Phoenicium Calidoro amatori suo
per ceram et lignum litterasque interpretes
salutem mittit et salutem abs te expetit
lacrumans titubanti animo, corde et pectore."

Phoenicium sends to her lover Calidorus wishes for his safety,
Through wax, and wood, and letters as intermediaries:
She seeks safety from you as well,
For she is weeping in her quivering soul, heart, and breast.

The form of the letter is unremarkable: it is exactly what one *would* expect from a letter. It includes an addressee, Calidorus; an appellation, "lover"; a greeting, "to your health!"; and a general reflection on the mood of the sender. Curiously, the second line of the letter emphasizes the *medium* of the communication, that Phoenicium speaks not orally but through wax, wood, and letters. *Interpretes* picks up on Pseudolus' observation that nobody but the Sybil could interpret (*interpretari*) the letter in the first place.[11]

Why does Plautus twice stress—in the space of a few lines—the connection between writing and interpretation? It is not enough merely to read, it appears. *Interpretari* encompasses two related but not identical ideas. An *interpres* may be a go-between between two entities, and in this sense function like *nuntius*, a conduit of information or even objects.[12] But *interpres* can also be the person (or object) that explicates or processes meaning, that *explains* the relationship between X and Y. A clever pun by Cicero exploits both senses (*Ver*. 2.3.84): *Valentius est in Sicilia interpres, quo iste interprete non ad linguam Graecam, sed ad furta et flagitia uti solebat*, "Valentius is an interpreter in Sicily whom Verres used not as an *interpres* for Greek but as an *interpres* for stolen goods and wickedness."

In this initial scene of *Pseudolus* the two characters most concerned with *interpretation* are slaves: Phoenicium the slave girl and Pseudolus the cunning

[11] Monaco 337 notes that *interpretes* is in apposition to the whole phrase and not just *litteras*.

[12] See for instance *Cur.* 434 *quod te praesente isti egi, teque interprete*, "a thing that I did with you there, and with you as go-between"; *Mil.* 798 *quasi ego <ei> rei sim interpres*, "I must be as if a go-between in this affair." The etymology of *interpres* may provide additional clues for its employment in Plautus. Though the issue is a vexed one, the most probable formulation is from *inter- and *preti-ios, root of *pretium*. This is the solution proposed in Ernout/Meillet, noting that both *pretium* and *interpres* "se rattacheraient à l'idée de 'trafiquer.'" That is to say, the original meaning of *interpres* is one who transfers *pretium*, property, from one place to another; in its metaphorical contexts, it is anyone—or thing—that transfers meaning from one site to another.

slave. The character who has in effect acted as a literal *interpres* between Phoenicium and Pseudolus—that is to say, Calidorus, who hands the letter to Pseudolus—proves himself a woefully ineffective interpreter in any other sense. Segal 13 has argued that a staple technique of Plautine comedy is to emphasize the element of "saturnalian chaos," how the Roman matrix of power and authority is turned inside out for the performance-space of the comedy. The initial scene exhibits just this tendency: the empowered class (Calidorus') loses face, while Pseudolus takes charge of the play. Moreover, what is at stake is precisely an act of commercial or mercantile *interpretation*: Phoenicium explains, through writing, that she will be exchanged for twenty *minae* (53–54).[13] The audience then discovers that the sale has *already* happened (51–52) and all that remains is the actual act of transfer. The legitimacy of the exchange will be secured through an *imago* stamped (like writing itself) in wax, *cera* (56); whoever bears a similar likeness—with the remaining *minae*, of course—wins the girl.

What happens next is crucial for the understanding of both the plot and Plautus' construction of reading and readers. 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, Calidorus, and launches the play into its vagaries. That Phoenicium never anticipated another reader of the letter is made certain by its delicious catalogue of amatory adventures, including close embraces (*compressiones artae*), hickies (*morsiunculae*), love nips (*osculatiunculae*), and the occasional squeezing of breasts (*papillarum oppressiunculae*, 65–68). (A good actor would be certain to express Calidorus' consternation—and perhaps titillation—as Pseudolus reads out the letter.) The letter concludes by emphasizing that Phoenicium supposes Calidorus will be the one who comes to her rescue, if anyone does; their affair is at an end *nisi quae mihi in test est aut tibist in me salus*, "unless there is salvation for me in you, or for you in me" (71). The chiasmus of 1st- and 2nd-person pronouns (*mihi/te/tibi/me*) emphasizes the epistolary contract between sender and receiver: this is a letter—and a rescue—meant for Calidorus.

Pseudolus, by reading the letter, becomes a substitute for both Phoenicium and Calidorus. As Pseudolus reads the letter, Calidorus remarks that he seems to be conversing with Phoenicium herself (62): *nam mihi videor cum ea fabularier*. His observation neatly dovetails with the anthropological research of Svenbro, who stresses that ancient conceptions of reading view the activ-

[13] Smadja 249–58 briefly discusses the equivalence of slave women and silver in the context both of Plautine comedy and slavery in the middle Republic.

ity as one that triggers, or re-enacts, the voice of the original author (44–63). Epistles by their nature emphasize the distance between audience and author; in the present scene, the distance is collapsed as Pseudolus "becomes" Phoenicium. At the same time, however, Pseudolus transforms himself into Calidorus, the intended recipient of the letter. In the same way that Phoenicium appeals to Calidorus for help, Calidorus appeals to Pseudolus (60–61): *prope adest exitium mihi, / nisi quid mihi in te est auxili*, "my destruction is near, unless there's some help for me in you." In essence, Pseudolus cuts out the middleman—the *interpres*—and becomes the reader and the rescuer that the letter so urgently demands. It is Pseudolus—and not Calidorus—who obeys the language of the letter (99 *litterarum ego harum sermonem audio*) and who acts on its appeals.[14] Pseudolus accordingly promises twenty *minae* to Calidorus (in a goofy contract scene, 114–20), and ends the scene with a final warning to everybody that he is not for a moment to be trusted (128). It is excellent advice.

After the initial scene's extended meditation on reading, Pseudolus' machinations remain focused on the elements of reading, writing, and literacy; even when he is unsure, exactly, how to procure the required *minae*, Pseudolus' language abounds in textual metaphors (401–4):

> sed quasi poeta, tabulas cum cepit sibi,
> quaerit quod nusquamst gentium, reperit tamen,
> facit illud veri simile, quod mendacium est,
> nunc ego poeta fiam.
>
> But just as a poet, once he has taken up his tablets,
> Seeks something nowhere in the world, and finds it nonetheless,
> He makes similar to truth what is false;
> I am becoming a poet.

The link between composition and mendacity is, of course, an ancient one. Hesiod's Muses sing that they make false things (ψευδέα) seem like true ones and Plato often draws a link between the technology of writing and the cre-

[14] This usurpation of the rôle of recipient fits what Anderson 79 terms "the upstaged lover," a recurrent feature of Plautine farce. Anderson explains that in ceding the rescue to Pseudolus, Calidorus has allowed himself to be upstaged: "Calidorus has subordinated himself to Pseudolus, and at the end of this scene (line 758), he disappears from the comedy. Although the play is hardly half-finished, Plautus insists on so upstaging the lover as to remove him from the stage, so that the intrigue can have his and the audience's undivided attention." I add only that the mechanism by which the lover is upstaged is precisely that of the wayward epistle, which appoints Pseudolus rescuer and which grants the slave—not Calidorus—the title role.

ation of fiction.[15] Though the strict meaning of this passage is that Pseudolus will conjure into existence (from nothing) twenty *minae* (405), the passage resonates with the plot of the play as a whole. As Slater observes, it is self-consciously metatheatrical, with Pseudolus here asserting his role as "author" within the play: Pseudolus as pseudo-Plautus—or Plautus as pseudo-Pseudolus (126–27). Either way, the act of writing on a tablet (*tabulae*) is crucial to the production of the fiction. In terms of Plautine metaphor, Pseudolus himself becomes a playwright, an artist, and the link between writing and theatricality is made explicit: it is by his manipulation of *others*' voices—including written voices (*tabulae*)—that Pseudolus creates his own, "improvised," comic world.

In the subsequent swindle scene with Callipho, Pseudolus continues his metatheatrical composition. In fact, the old man exclaims *edepol mortalem graphicum, si servat fidem* (519), "by Pollux, that is a *graphicus* guy, if he keeps his word." It is tempting to discover here, as Fitzgerald does, a wordplay on *graphicus*, meaning "exquisite, masterly" but punning as well on the Greek cognate and root, γραφ-, "write, draw."[16] The word neatly traverses active and passive: *graphicus* describes someone as pretty as a picture, but γραφικός denotes the artist himself.[17] The next scene exploits both meanings of the word.

It turns out that Pseudolus, in brainstorming a solution to his master's problems, is in luck—or, rather, he writes his own luck. The dimwitted messenger Harpax trudges through Athens with a letter, *symbolus*, and money intended for the pimp Ballio; these are the elements required to effect the commercial transfer of Phoenicium. Pseudolus badgers Harpax for the letter and the money, asserting that he is in fact the slave of Ballio. In so doing, he re-writes himself as a different character: Syrus (637). Harpax is deceived, but suspicious; he clings to the silver, but hands the letter over to Syrus (*né* Pseudolus) (647–48): *tu epistulam hanc a me accipe atque illi dato / nam istic sumbolust inter erum meum et tuom de muliere*, "Take this letter from me and give it to him (*sc*. Ballio), for within it is the token agreed upon by my master

[15] Hes. *Th.* 27; Pl. *Phdr.* 275d–e examines the link between writing, memory, and fiction.

[16] A point made (in the course of a different argument) by Fitzgerald 47: "Having earlier compared himself to a playwright, tablets in hand, pondering a new device, Pseudolus now reassures his audience as to who has the ultimate power to write the script. If he is a *graphicus* to be admired, he is also the surface on which the free can write at will. The pen is in the other hand."

[17] For γραφικός of a creative artist see Pl. *Tht.* 144e, "Now if we are concerned, as I suppose, about the likeness of our faces, it must be pondered whether it is an artist (γραφικός) who is speaking, or not."

and yours concerning the woman." For the second time in the play, Pseudolus, taking a letter, proves himself an *interpres* in its physical sense: he will now be the one to transfer the data to its intended recipient (or so Harpax believes).

Harpax quits the stage and Pseudolus launches into a symphony of self-congratulation, all centered around the letter (669–73):

> nam ipsa mi Opportunitas non potuit opportunius
> advenire quam haec allatast mi opportune epistula.
> nam haec allata cornu copiaest, ubi inest quidquid volo:
> hic doli, hic fallaciae omnes, hic sunt sycophantiae,
> hic argentum, hic amica amanti erili ero.
>
> Opportunity could not have arrived more opportunely
> Than having this letter delivered opportunely to me.
> For this is brought as a cornucopia, whatever I wish for is in it:
> Here are lies and all types of deceit, here are schemes,
> Here's the money, here's the girlfriend for my master in love.

The first two lines link opportunity and chance: intercepted writing as an accident. Once in the slave's hands, however, the letter appears a cornucopia, an emblem of plenty. What Pseudolus wishes for, however, are plentiful lies and copious tricks: this is a jaded, eminently comic view of writing. The letter (*epistula*) makes possible *mis*communication and *mis*apprehension; instead of streamlining the plot, it in fact causes plots to multiply. When Calidorus again appears on the stage, he compliments Pseudolus as a *mortalis graphicus* (700), an echo of 519. In the meantime, Pseudolus has presented himself as both writer and written: as "text," he rewrote himself as Syrus, as if a *poeta* pulling characters from thin air. As author, he is now in charge of a piece of writing, to do with as he wishes—and he wishes for a lot (690–91): *nunc ego hac epistula / tris deludam, erum et lenonem et qui hanc dedit mi epistulam*, "now I will deceive three people with this letter: master, pimp, and the man who gave me this letter." 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.

The element of play bursts forth in the paratragic speech that accompanies Pseudolus' flourishing of the letter to Calidorus and Charinus. Taking up the element of "three" from his original plot formulation at 691, Pseudolus

seems at first simply to play with the sound of *tria* (704–5): *ter trina triplicia, tribus modis, tria gaudia, / artibus tribus, tris demeritas dem laetitias*, *de tribus*, and so forth. The catalogue climaxes appropriately with a trilogy of fraud: *malitiam*, *dolum*, and *fallaciam*. *These* are the three delights locked away in the sealed book (706 *libello ... obsignato*), and through this wedding of treachery and writing Pseudolus rides to the rescue.

Or nearly. The second "letter-reading" scene constitutes a calque on the play's initial lines. In the first scene, Pseudolus gradually took hold of the plot by reading the letter and assuming the identity of the recipient. He does this as well in the second scene, but through bald-faced treachery (716): *Epistulam modo hanc intercepi et sumbolum*. He has intercepted the letter and is prepared to weave a plot based on this interception: a perfect example of (in Rosenmeyer's formulation) kinetic epistolarity, in which the locomotion of a letter drives the plot forward.[18] Rather than remaining static, or describing a mental state-of-being, the letter takes on a life, and a trajectory, of its own. It becomes an agent in its own right. Pseudolus finds himself a kindred spirit in the slave Simia, whom he compels to impersonate the original messenger, Harpax (another instance of re-writing). What Pseudolus ignores, at this moment, is that letters have a safeguard designed to circumvent the confusion inherent in letters, namely, the seal. The thieves, unable to peer inside without compromising the integrity of both the letter and their scheme, lack vital information about the letter's contents. When the accomplice Simia attempts to masquerade as the messenger, one smartly placed query from Ballio jeopardizes the entire operation (982–84):

Si. Erus meus tibi me salutem multam voluit dicere.
hanc epistulam accipe a me, hanc me tibi iussit dare.
Ba. Quis is homost qui iussit?

Si. My master wished me to bid you many salutations.
Accept this letter from me; he ordered me to give it to you.
Ba. Who is the man who gave the order?

Ballio's unexpected inquiry concerning the epistolary author elicits from Pseudolus a string of typically Plautine expressions of desperation—and for good reason. The slave, hitherto a master of epistolary mayhem, seems beaten at his own game. Having exploited the peculiar spatial qualities of epistles—the physical separation of author and reader—Pseudolus finds himself at the wrong end of the epistolary transfer. He does not know the author.

[18] See Rosenmeyer 65–66. Her formulation is indebted to Jost 397–427.

The quick-witted Simia talks his way out of possible discovery. Ballio demands the letter, but Simia will only give it to him if he recognizes the seal: *accipe et cognosce signum.* When Ballio responds *Oh, Polymachaeroplagides / purus putus est ipsus*, "Oh, Polymachaeroplagides, that's the sterling lad himself" (988–89), he inadvertently loses his advantage. The interceptors have acquired another piece of knowledge, the sender of the letter, and with that their plan is complete—except for the reading of the letter itself. Simia, with Plautine wit, urges the pimp to read the letter through, *pellegere* (the prefix is pointed: "per-lego" is to read *thoroughly*). He knows that Ballio will be duped by the writing. It is worth citing the letter in full (997–1014):[19]

Si. Propera pellegere epistulam ergo.
Ba. Id ago, si taceas modo.
"miles lenoni Ballioni epistulam
conscriptam mittit Polymachaeroplagides
imagine obsignatam quae inter nos duo
convenit olim." sumbolust in epistula.
"Harpax calator meus est, ad te qui venit—"
tun es is Harpax?
Si. Ego sum, atque ipse ἅρπαξ quidem.
Ba. "Qui epistulam istam fert; ab eo argentum accipi,
cum eo simitu mulierem mitti volo.
salutem scriptam dignum est dignis mittere:
te si arbitrarem dignum, misissem tibi."

Si. Go on, then: read the letter all the way through.
Ba. I'll do it, if only you shut up!
"The soldier Polymachaeroplagides sends
to the pimp Ballio a written letter
sealed with an image agreed upon by the two of us."
(*Looking*) The token is in the letter. "Harpax is my servant, who comes to you …"
Are you that Harpax?
Si. That's me—and I am certainly "snatchy."
Ba. "Who brings that letter to you. I wish for you
To take the money from him and that you
Send back the woman together with him.
It is right to send a written salutation to the worthy;
If I had deemed you worthy, I would have sent it."

Just as with the letter of Phoenicium, the epistolary voice—in this case that of Polymachaeroplagides—is interrupted by its readers and auditors. At first

[19] Lines 1002–8 are deemed inauthentic by Leo.

Ballio calls for silence (*taceas modo*), only to interrupt himself as he reads the letter. The information about a seal seems to prompt Ballio's interest, and he confirms the authenticity of the letter by exclaiming to his apparent satisfaction: *sumbolust in epistula*. The next two lines—again, interrupted by Ballio's ruminations—mirror the verses about the seal. As the letter identifies Harpax, Ballio again stops the reading, and attempts to verify the accuracy of the theatrical world "outside" the letter, this time by interrogation: "are you Harpax?" Harpax (*né* Simia) substitutes the *meaning* of Harpax for the identification itself ("I am certainly 'snatchy'!") and allows Ballio to continue in his misapprehension.

One of the aspects of letters most cunningly manipulated by Plautus in *Pseudolus* is the salutation. In the first scene, *Pseudolus*' plot launches into gear when the salutation in Phoenicium's letter catalogues the girl's lamentation in body, soul, and mind (41–44 *Phoenicium … salutem mittit et salutem abs te expetit, / lacrumans titubanti animo, corde et pectore*). The key word for a salutation, *salus*, is mentioned twice, once in its quotidian sense of a greeting, and the other as an earnest appeal for help. This second letter, from Polymachaeroplagides to Ballio, is a reverse image of the first, omitting the salutation and substituting a malediction: "it is right to send a written salutation to the worthy; if I had deemed you worthy, I would have sent it." It is a brutal, though comic, way to end the letter, one that subverts the expectations of everyone listening: Ballio, Simia (who responds tactfully with just *quid nunc?* 1015), and particularly the audience, which has not (and will not) experience the personality or voice of Polymachaeroplagides outside of this letter. He is the only character in the play whose presence is entirely "epistolary."

Even when Simo later warns the pimp to beware of treachery concerning the letter, Ballio smoothly replies (1097): *Epistula atque imago me certum facit*.[20] In fact, the seal and the letter are so convincing that when Ballio later meets the *real* Harpax, he refuses to lend credence to *oral* proclamations of identity (1151–52):

Ba. Erus tuos—
Ha. Ita dico.
Ba. Miles—
Ha. Ita loquor.

[20] Slater 1985: 141 points out that Ballio's confidence is misplaced. In this instance, Pseudolus has proven his mastery over plot by appropriating the medium of the letter: "Pseudolus has taken words, the words of others in the form of letters, and made them into his own play through his command of theatricality."

Ba. Macedonius—
Ha. Admodum, inquam.

Ba. Your master?
Ha. Thus I say!
Ba. A soldier?
Ha. Thus I speak!
Ba. Macedonian?
Ha. Absolutely, I answer.

This is Plautus at his most playful: every aspect of the previous exchange is here re-interrogated by Ballio, with the information this time correctly presented: orally. With each reply, Harpax offers a different *verbum dicendi*, as if the medium of transmission—speaking—reinforces the validity of the answer. By this time, however, Ballio has been taken in by the promise of writing: he assumes that it is the scout that is counterfeit (1167 *suppositicium*), not the letter. The scene therefore devolves into a display of mockery and insult (including some aspersions on Harpax's sexual-moral character), ending only when Harpax exasperatedly asks what happened to the signed letter (1202 *obsignatam epistulam*) that he had given to Syrus. Invoked in its absence, this symbol of writing—employed solely to deceive when present—leads finally to revelation, culminating in Simo's heartfelt cry "(sc. *Pseudolus*) *perdidit me!*" (1227).

In the concluding scenes the epistolary metaphors, plentiful in the previous acts, are dropped; it seems that the narrative purpose of the letter was to incite chaos—a goal achieved in spades. In the play's dénouement, however, Pseudolus must accomplish the delicate task of repairing relations with his master; this is no time for tomfoolery, epistolary or otherwise. The *rapprochement* between slave and master is mediated through spoken dialogue, and the two men do not refer to the previous escapades with the letters. The play ends drunkenly and happily; writing has been—for the moment—banished from the Pseudolean world.

Pseudolus demonstrates Plautus' genius for mimicking script-less "improvisation" while also exploiting writing as a literary symbol: seemingly, a paradox. And yet, the manipulations of writing in *Pseudolus* in fact show writing as an inherently "theatrical" device; it is by turns a prop, a character, and a red herring. Two characters—Phoenicium and Polymachaeroplagides—*only* speak through writing; their voices reach the stage exclusively in written form, to be activated in and by performance. In this sense, Phoenicium and Polymachaeroplagides are metaphors for *all* Plautine characters—including Pseudolus—whose written voices come to life on the stage. When Plautine

characters encounter epistles, therefore, they are peering at the very technology that created them. Some characters learn quickly to adapt to the underlying rules of representational writing: Pseudolus proves adept at interpretation, at manipulation, at figuring (or subverting) the relationship between author and voice. Likewise, Simio manages to establish an "identity" by pointing to a letter (1006). Most characters, however, are less sophisticated in their approaches to writing: Calidorus is practically paralyzed by his *inamorata*'s written entreaty; Harpax decides that forfeiting a letter is less dangerous than forfeiting silver (a big mistake); Ballio trusts writing absolutely and disastrously.

Pseudolus features the most extensive treatment of epistolarity in the Plautine corpus, but other plays too exploit epistolarity for its dramaturgical and comic value. In a sense, the analysis of the following three plays (*Trinummus*, *Curculio*, and *Bacchides*) demonstrates variations on a theme, since these play share with *Pseudolus* an emphasis on the often vexed relationship between text and voice, author and reader.

TRINUMMUS

Trinummus, a text that has received comparatively little critical attention, invites a metaliterary reading of its own internal readings and writings.[21] The most interesting facet of its plot—in terms of Plautine reading and writing—is the literary feint utilized by Plautus, as a letter is not only (as in *Pseudolus*) misinterpreted but forged *ex nihilo* in order to deceive.

A brief summary of the plot: the elderly gentleman Charmides entrusts his son, daughter, and house to his friend Callicles while he undertakes a long sea voyage. Charmides' son, Lesbonicus, squanders his inheritance and eventually loses the house to Callicles, who purchases it out of kindness; a concurrent secondary plot involves the attempt by Lesbonicus to arrange a dowry for his sister, who is being wooed by the love-struck *adulescens*, Lysiteles. Megaronides, a well-intentioned if rather nosey old gentleman of Athens, formulates a plot in which money for a dowry may be sent to Lysiteles without providing a chance for Lesbonicus to squander it. It is decided that money

[21] *Trinummus* was originally adapted, as Luxury explains in the prologue, from the *Thesaurus* of Philemon (19). Luxury further explains that Plautus has translated the piece into a barbaric tongue (19 *vortit barbare*), a statement that neatly mixes the vocabulary of Latin (*vortit*) and Greek (*barbare*), even as the play itself will be a hybrid between the two cultures. Anderson 41–45 explores the complicated relationship between the two plays. On Anderson's reading, Plautus' adaptation de-emphasizes the play's sentimental features (particularly the role of *amicitia*) and instead expands the elements of roguishness and playfulness (particularly in the famous "three-penny scene").

appearing to arrive from the absent Charmides will arouse the least suspicion, and to this end Megaronides hatches a plan to forge letters and to engage a willing "messenger," noted in the manuscripts solely as *Sycophant*.

Megaronides reasons that the messenger himself will have to be a liar (769 *mendacilocum aliquem*) and a cheat (770 *falsidicum*). Both adjectives implicate speech (*-locum* and *-dicum*) as the messenger's primary means of deceit. Intriguingly, this verbally deceitful character will need, however, to be *written*: he will have to be (like Pseudolus) reinscribed as a new character (767): *Is homo exornetur graphice in peregrinum modum*. Again, we find the root γραφ- as the marker of writing within writing, and again, this writing takes one further from, rather than nearer to, "true" identities. Megaronides then elaborates this plot to Callicles (774–77):

> ferat epistulas
> duas, eas nos consignemus, quasi sint a patre:
> det alteram illi, alteram dicat tibi
> dare sese velle.
>
> Let him carry two
> Epistles, and let us seal them as if from the father—
> Let him give the one to him, and say that he
> Wishes to give the other one to you.

The preparations for the ruse are elaborate. Not just one but two letters will be forged, one for Lesbonicus and another for Callicles himself. Every attempt will be made to give the appearance of authenticity; the forgers will not only draft the letters but will also seal them (*consignemus*) as if coming from Charmides—an indicator of truthfulness. Callicles objects that the son will recognize that the seal is not his father's; he is worried, in essence, that the son will not recognize the validity of the reading. A frustrated Megaronides replies that there are hundreds of reasons why the seal may be different, or broken, or otherwise tampered with: the father may have replaced his seal with a new one (792), or, more ominously, the letters may have been unsealed by customs-guards (794 *portitorem*), who have already made an inspection of their contents (795 *inspectas*). In order for his ruse to work, Megaronides is prepared to forge not only letters but also readers.

The joke, as it turns out, is on Megaronides—and the audience. In elaborating at length the preparations made for the epistolary ruse, Plautus has prepared us for an elaborate "reading" scene such as the ones found in *Pseudolus* and (as we shall see) *Bacchides*. We could expect, for instance, an episode in which the son reads and interprets his "father's" letter; we could also expect, I think, a very funny scene in which Callicles feigns surprise at a

letter that he sent to himself. Instead, Plautus turns the situation on its head, as the absentee "author" accidentally collides with his own text. It is an epistolary nightmare for the hapless messenger, Sycophant, who had never imagined meeting the author (849–50): *ego qui sit homo nescio / neque novi, neque natus necne is fuerit id solide scio*, "I don't know who this man is, I've never met him, and I'm not even sure whether he was ever born." Sycophant seems almost proud of his ignorance of the author—until confronted with the prospect of encountering him. Plautus here invokes a juxtaposition of presence and absence, the spatial separation demanded by epistles. As we saw in *Pseudolus*, writing *replaces* the absent author: body and text cannot coexist peacefully in the same performative space. When the absent (926 *apsenti*) "author" (that is to say, Charmides) asks for his own name (906), the problems multiply: Sycophant stammers that he had the name on the tip of his tongue, but swallowed it. A Plautine catalogue of gastronomic puns follows, followed again by an emphasis on the *written* to create meaning—or even people. Sycophant, desperate to discover the name, turns to the letter itself for help (915): *litteris recomminiscar: <C> est principium nomini*, "I will be reminded by the letters—the name begins with C." Even now we witness the *failure* of the written sign (*litteris*) to confirm presence: Charmides proffers an abundance of possibilities (Callias, Callippus, Callidemides, and the like) but it is only when the "author" tosses out his own name that Sycophant recognizes the word—but still not, of course, the author.

The scene continues for an astonishing length when one considers its lack of narrative thrust. The sole purpose of the scene, in terms of plot, is for Charmides to learn about his son's problems and the proposed transfer of money (1003). Plautus continues, however, to emphasize textual metaphors. Caught in a lie, Sycophant fabricates an elaborate provenance for the absent author, including a journey to Arabia, redolent with absinth and wormwood; this earns the rebuke of Charmides (936): *nimium graphicum hunc nugatorem.* Both meanings of *graphicus* are again evoked here: Sycophant is a *nugator*, but the Sycophant is also an active creator of new fictions, desperate to invent an author. In fact, everything in this scene inhabits a never-never land between written and real: Sycophant is re-written (*graphicus*) as a foreigner, Charmides as absent author is rewritten out of the country, and even the thousand gold pieces that Sycophant carries (as he lamely confesses) "exist only on the page" (982 *scriptum quidem*). Only after Charmides proclaims firmly his identity (988 *ipsus, inquam, Charmides sum!*) do the two characters stop squabbling over the route and provenance of the letters (985 *epistulas*) that are, after all, the root of the fuss.

Sycophant, convinced at last of Charmides' identity, in disgust prepares to quit the stage. Here, Plautus pulls his surprise: Sycophant takes the letters with him. For all of the hubbub of the preceding two hundred lines, and for all of the consternation about reading and forgery and writing and seals, Charmides, triumphant, never gets the chance to read the letters, and neither do we. That's the joke. Sycophant scurries off the stage with the main plot device and Charmides can do nothing but bewail his misfortunes in a peculiar interlude (1002–5):

> nam epistula illa mihi concenturiat metum
> in corde et illud mille nummum quam rem agat.
> numquam edepol temere tinnit tintinnabulum:
> nisi qui illud tractat aut movet, mutumst, tacet.
>
> For that epistle marches an army of fear through
> My heart—and that 1000 *nummi*, what an affair it has caused!
> By Pollux, never does a bell ring without cause—
> Unless someone drags or moves it, it is mute, it is silent.

The central plot device, the epistle, is compared to a bell that, absent a person to touch or move it, remains mute. I return to Rosenmeyer's formulation of the *kinetic* letter, written words that have within them the energy to modify or transform a narrative. Sycophant's letters were kinetic in this sense: once touched by the Sycophant, their kinetic potential was awakened and they seemed destined to provoke another Plautine reading scene. The banishment of the messenger from the play snuffs out this potential; like the bell, the letters are now *mutae*, *et tacent*.

Trinummus' epistolary motif, though less involved than that of *Pseudolus*, nevertheless displays considerable literary sophistication. Charmides' collision with his own voice emphasizes that "Charmides" is twice written, once by Plautus and again by Megaronides. The comic ramifications of this complicated scheme are suffered by the hapless Sycophant, who must negotiate in small compass a postmodern search for an author (and quick escape).

CURCULIO

The pithy *Curculio* features an outright epistolary forgery in addition to other lesser deceptions. The main plot begins as follows: the parasite Curculio is sent to Caria to fetch a sum of money so that his *adulescens* friend can purchase the slave girl Planesium before a rival can. Curculio fails to acquire the money, but he does encounter the rival, Therapontigonus, whose seal-ring he steals. Back in Athens, Curculio approaches Lyco, the banker, with a forged letter, putatively from Therapontigonus and stamped with his seal. With this

he intends to swindle Lyco of the money for the slave girl Planesium—before Therapontigonus can arrive to take her away.

Part of the pleasure of the ensuing "letter-reading" scene is that the audience, like Lyco, has never heard or seen the letter: this is our, as well as Lyco's, first "reading." There was, of course, an earlier reference to Curculio's intentions: he tells his friend Phaedromus, *eamus nunc intro, ut tabellas consignemus*, "Now let us go in to seal the letters" (365). Yet the audience does not see the forgery; it knows the path of the letter but not its contents. When Curculio greets Lyco with the letter, explaining that he was ordered to give a letter to the moneylender (411–12), the audience recognizes the letter as a plot device. Lyco wants the information that the audience already has. He demands the identity of Curculio, who promptly lies (413): *quem omnes Summanum vocant*. As do Pseudolus and Sycophant, Curculio rewrites himself into a new character, one named after a cult aspect of Jupiter.[22]

But what makes for excellent stagecraft is the bald effrontery of having the forger help the reader through the letter; when Lyco appears confused by the missive, Curculio gently directs his attention to the seal and to his "master's" orders (425–26): *quod istic scriptum est, id* (sc. *Therapontigonus*) *te orare iusserat / profecto ut faceres, suam si velles gratiam*, "What is written there he ordered me to ask you to do immediately, if you wished his thanks." By reiterating that the letter has been written (*scriptum*), Curculio emphasizes the supposed veracity of the instructions. As the letter is read out, the audience may thrill to a perfect, entertaining forgery (429–36):

Ly. "Miles Lyconi in Epidauro hospiti[23]
suo Therapontigonus Platagidorus plurimam
salutem dicit."
Cu. Meus hic est, hamum vorat.
Ly. "Tecum oro et quaeso, qui has tabellas adferet
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, is huic det virginem."

Ly. "The soldier Therapontingonus Platagidorus
Sends many greetings to his guest-friend Lyco
in Epidaurus."

[22] Collart *ad loc.*

[23] Wright *ad loc.* notes the double hiatus in this line (after *Lyconi* and *Epidauro*): "The hiatus ... perhaps reflects Lyco's halting reading."

Cu. The man is mine, he swallows the hook!
Ly. "I beg you and seek that that girl whom I bought there
Be given to the man who will bring these tablets—
A thing that I negotiated with you present and with you as
Middleman (*interpres*)—as well as the gold and vestments. Now you
Know how it has been arranged: give the silver to the pimp, who will give
to this guy the girl."

The forgery convinces, in part, because it follows the form of an "ideal" letter; it's inconspicuous. For starters, it offers a sender, a receiver, and a formal salutation.[24] Just having Lyco read that bit of information buoys Curculio's spirits, for the parasite realizes that the letter's introductory elements have convinced Lyco. The letter then launches into its request, that Lyco hand over money to the pimp, who in turn should give the courtesan to the messenger. Within the body of the text, Plautus again plants an *interpres*. On the surface, the passage must refer to the business that "I conducted with you present, and with you as a go-between (*interpres*)." But as we have seen in *Pseudolus*, *interpretari* means not only to shuffle between two entities but also to figure out actively the relationship between two events or two objects.

In fact, Lyco's one moment of suspicion is triggered by *interpres*. Ironically, it is his 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. Abruptly, he asks about the author (437): *ubi ipsus? cur non venit?* Curculio's reply is purposefully absurd; he avers that Therapontigonus is too busy erecting a golden statue of himself, proud that he has subdued some dozen Eastern tribes in less than twenty days. Lyco, as interpreter, proves too clever by half (449–52):

Ly. Vah.
Cu. Quid mirare?
Ly. Quia enim in cavea si forent
conclusi, itidem ut pulli gallinacei,
ita non potuere uno anno circumirier.
credo hercle te esse ab illo, ita nugas blatis.

Ly. Bah!
Cu. Why do you marvel?

[24] Collart 83 notes that the forgery, in straining to appear a business letter, nearly overdoes it: "... pour éviter toute équivoque préjudiciable à son entreprise, il (*sc.* Curculio) multiplie les pronoms et adverbes issus de pronoms. Il y a là, à la fois, une intention comique de circonstance et une parodie amusante du style administratif." Plautus here pokes fun at Curculio's own cleverness.

Ly. Because even if they were
Penned in closely as chickens,
They would not be able to be encompassed in even a year.
By Hercules, I believe you have come from him, you utter such nonsense.

For Lyco, the story of why Therapontigus is absent is so absurd that Lyco claims, by a sort of twisted logic, that Therapontigus *must* be the absent sender. In so believing, Lyco has proved himself a clumsy interpreter of letters; he suspects oral nonsense of a superficial sort, *nugae*, while unaware of the written mischief here perpetrated. Clumsily interpreting the letter, he bids the physical *interpres*, Curculio, to take the woman away with him (454): *sequere hac, te absolvam qua advenisti gratia*. The ruse of the letter has succeeded.

When Therapontigonus discovers the forgery, he is naturally infuriated. He confronts Lyco and berates him for his gullibility (549–51):

Th. ‡Quid feci?‡
Ly. Quod mandasti feci, tui honoris gratia,
tuom qui signum ad me attulisset, nuntium ne spernerem.
Th. Stultior stulto fuisti, qui tabellis crederes.

Th. What have I done?
Ly. I did what you ordered, in your honor,
So as not to spurn the messenger who brought your seal to me.
Th. You were more foolish than a fool—you who trusted a letter!

For Lyco, it seemed impossible to suspect what the letter ordered, that Lyco should hand over the money to the pimp. For Therapontigonus (seemingly a *very* suspicious interpreter of writing), tablets should *never* be trusted: only a fool would do that. Lyco's impassioned defense is no less impressive for its brevity (552): *Quis res publica et privata geritur, nonne eis crederem?* Lyco has put his finger on the crux of the matter: how can he not trust that medium by which all public and all private affairs are conducted?

It is too much to impute to Plautus' *Curculio* some kind of overarching indictment of writing as a medium of the propertied classes, or as a basis for legal or civil affairs; obviously, writing needs to be afforded *some* level of trust. But Plautus' scene between Lyco and Curculio 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. In both *Pseudolus* and *Trinummus* we have seen the technology of writing staged as a medium that creates—or steals—voices. In *Curculio*, this opposition between truth and fiction is most nakedly expressed when a creature of the sword, the soldier Therapontigonus, informs a creature of *tabellae* and ledgers, the banker Lyco,

that only an idiot trusts writing. In such a way, Plautus figures writing as an essential tool of metatheater, a means by which illusions may be created but rarely dispelled. It takes the practical wisdom of a soldier to see through the sophisticated epistolary ruse of Curculio.

BACCHIDES

The case of *Bacchides* is particularly complex and offers a fine concluding study for the ways in which Plautus figures reading and writing. The plot is launched with an epistle sent from the *adulescens* Mnesilochus in Ephesus to his Athenian chum Pistoclerus. In this letter, Mnesilochus asked his friend to locate and guard for him a *meretrix* named Bacchis; he promises to return soon and free her from the 200 *nummi* bond with which she is tied to her current owner. This opening letter takes place "off-stage," so to speak, as an epistle successfully composed and delivered outside the action of the play (it is referred to in a later exchange at 561–62). Plautus sets up a perfectly commonplace epistolary situation only to subvert such epistolarity later in the play, when author, messenger, and occasionally reader are rolled into one. It takes a straightforward letter, then, to initiate a plot (and a goal) that can only be completed through highly dramatic comic misreadings, called into play by the misapprehension of authorial presence and absence.

As in *Pseudolus*, the manipulation of signs—verbal or written—is largely the province of the crafty slave. Even before hatching his scheme to forge letters to help his master's son, the cunning slave Chrysalus calls into question the veracity of signs. Moreover, his disquisition on forgery and authenticity is placed within an elaborate fantasy—in essence, a fib within a fib, a fictional *mise en abyme*. Chrysalus, mixing fact and fantasy, explains (falsely) to his master that his son was accused in Ephesus of forging a *symbolus* (265–66): (sc. *Archimedes*) *Infit dicere / adulterinum et non eum esse symbolum*, "Archimedes began to say that it was counterfeit and not a true token." Nicobulus, the master, flies into a rage that his son should be so accused, and the scene continues from there. But why tell this fiction at all? Chrysalus—or Plautus—has inserted the story to make a thematic point: not all signs are to be trusted.

Chrysalus turns out, in fact, to be a master of semiotic manipulation, an expert forger in a highly specialized sense. In the "military strategy" scene that anchors the center of the play, Chrysalus compares his future battles with the *senex* Nicobulus to an assault on a town, complete with siege engines and shattered turrets. Full of military bravura, the slave therefore commands Pistoclerus to bring him ... (714 *ecfer cito*)—and then pauses in reflection. Pistoclerus, puzzled, prompts the slave to complete his thought (*quid?*) and

only then do we discover the means of assault: ... quill, wax tablets, and a cord (715 *stilum, ceram et tabellas, linum*). For Chrysalus, writing is as effective as any siege engine: why employ a wooden horse when a wooden tablet works just as well (936)?[25] Moreover, forgery is as effective in the theater of Plautus as in the theater of war. The playwright exploits the dramatic possibilities of a "forgery" scene by serving the audience something entirely novel, and, by the same token, entirely entertaining: *metaforgery*. An ordinary, run-of-the-mill forgery, as we saw in *Curculio*, involves the forger writing letters in someone else's hand, or passing off his own work as the product of another. Compared to the scene in *Bacchides*, this is rather ho-hum. Here we have the "forger"—Chrysalus—writing *through* another character, Mnesilochus, who is compelled to surrender his own voice and to adopt that of Chrysalus (729–34)[26]:

Ch. Quod iubebo scribito istic. nam propterea <te> volo
scribere, ut pater cognoscat litteras quando legat.
scribe.
Mn. Quid scribam?
Ch. Salutem tuo patri verbis tuis.
Pi. Quid si potius morbum mortem scribat? id erit rectius.
Ch. Ne interturba.
Mn. Iam imperatum in cera inest.
Ch. Dic quem ad modum.
Mn. "Mnesilochus salutem dicit suo patri."

Ch. Write down there what I order. I want to you do to the writing
So your father recognizes the lettering when he reads it.
Write!
Mn. What shall I write?
Ch. In your own words, wish your father good health.
Pi. What if he wished him a sickly death instead? That'd be more to the point.
Ch. Don't interrupt!
Mn. Your command is already written.
Ch. Tell me how.
Mn. "Mnesilochus wishes his father good health."

The beginning of the scene is highly intricate, featuring on stage a constellation of would-be writers and readers. Chrysalus orders Mnesilochus to do the

[25] Hunter 125–26 notes that Chrysalus' lines of boasting here (932–36) are self-consciously grandiose and tragic, emphasizing the excitement of the slave at his own cleverness.

[26] Slater 1985: 108: "The hands are the hands of Mnesilochus, but the voice is the voice of Chrysalus."

writing so that the father will recognize it (*cognoscat*) as his son's. Chrysalus first commands Mnesilochus to craft a salutation in his own words (*tuis verbis*); Pistoclerus interrupts and says that Mnesilochus should compose a curse instead. Why the interruption? Pistoclerus is, in his joking way, vying for control of the authorial voice forfeited by Mnesilochus. Chrysalus, annoyed that he is beaten at his own game, rebukes Pistoclerus (*ne interturba!*) and is all the more anxious, now, to discover what Mnesilochus wrote: Chrysalus asks him to read back the *incipit*. Mnesilochus acquiesces by reading out what Chrysalus wished and Chrysalus can breathe a sigh of relief. Though written in "his" own words, Mnesilochus is exactly reproducing Chrysalus' voice (and not the joke of Pistoclerus).

Chrysalus does not tolerate any further jesting. From now on, Pistoclerus is allowed only one worried exchange about the speed of transcription (736) while Mnesilochus frantically transforms Chrysalus' voice to text. Plautus neatly juxtaposes the oral and the written in alternating responses (741–42 "*plane adscribito*" / "*Dic modo*" and 745 "*loquere porro*" "*Adscribe dum etiam*"), a structure that finds greatest compression in Mnesilochus' request "*loquere quid scribam modo*" (745). Everything that Chrysalus says will be turned to text; Chrysalus is the author, Mnesilochus the human stylus, supplying the hand but never the voice. This bizarre metaforgery is employed solely to deceive; no matter how expertly educated the old man is (694 *senem ... doctum docte*), 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.

As the letter is about to be sent, Mnesilochus, completely befuddled, asks *obsecro, quid istis ad istunc usust conscriptis modum … ?* "I ask you, what is the point in writing in this fashion?" to which Chrysalus enigmatically replies *quia mi ita lubet*, "because it pleases me" (749, 751). The point here is that the "author," Mnesilochus, cannot even comprehend his *own* text; interpretation, it seems, is a different game from writing. Writing is thereby sundered from reading; the interpretive gap that normally separates author from reader here engulfs even the author. The indeterminacy of the text is itself expounded in the letter. Pseudolus tells others *orally* not to trust him; Chrysalus, by contrast, mediates the thought through the written word (744): "*sed, pater, vide ne* (sc. *Chrysalus*) *tibi hodie verba det: quaeso cave.*" The letter warns Nicobulus to beware a snowjob (*verba dare*) from Chrysalus; by the time Nicobulus reads the letter, however, the warning comes too late. Chrysalus has *already* handed over to Nicobulus a bundle of epistolary deceit, its chaotic, kinetic energy actualized by its movement from one scene to the next.

The following episode plays out the comic effects of having the letter's author be identical to the messenger. Were it not for Chrysalus' stratagem, this would be a completely unreal and indeed paradoxical situation: epistolary writing *substitutes for* the absent author. There is no need for an author to carry a letter around. That would, under ordinary circumstances, defeat the point. Neatly for a farce, Nicobulus immediately wheels around the corner, to be met by the ebullient Chrysalus, who hands him the letter (786–91):

Ch. Nosces tu illum (*sc.* Mnesilochum) actutum qualis sit.
nunc has tabellas ferre me iussit tibi.
orabat, quod istic esset scriptum ut fieret.
Ni. Cedo.
Ch. Nosce signum.
Ni. Novi. ubi ipse est?
Ch. Nescio.
nil iam me oportet scire. oblitus sum omnia.
scio me esse servom. nescio etiam id quod scio.

Ch. You will soon know how what kind of man Mnesilochus is.
Now he has ordered me to bring these tablets to you.
He asked that what was written should be brought to accomplishment.
Ni. Hand it over.
Ch. Look at the seal!
Ni. I recognize it. But where is he?
Ch. I don't know.
I ought to know nothing now. I have forgotten everything.
I know that I am a slave. I don't know even what I do know.

Chrysalus neatly elaborates all the elements of the metaforgery without, of course, revealing the nature of the deceit itself. Chrysalus, as messenger, explains how Nicobulus should do exactly what Chrysalus, as meta-author, has written (*scriptum*). To assuage Nicobulus' doubts about the letter's authenticity (doubts perhaps unwittingly raised by Chrysalus' tale of the counterfeit token in the second scene), Chrysalus seals the point with the seal: *nosce signum*. Nicobulus recognizes his son's seal, and Chrysalus' scheme achieves fruition.

It is here that *our* reading of Plautus must imagine Nicobulus' performance as he performs his own act of Plautine reading. The text indicates only that Nicobulus quits the stage in response to the letter (794); a competent actor would need therefore to demonstrate both Nicobulus' initial shock and his subsequent craftiness as he suppresses a rash reaction and steals into the house to fetch help. There should be no question that Nicobulus' has fallen for the

trap; Chrysalus boasts that his letter is as effective as a thrush's worm or the hangman's noose (792). The response is not long in coming: Nicobulus becomes enraged (just as Chrysalus was hoping) and begins to tie Chrysalus up, as he reveals who informed on Chrysalus (808–9): *nullus homo dicit: hae tabellae te arguont / quas tu attulisti. em hae te vinciri iubent*. Nicobulus does not attribute the order to Mnesilochus (though these are, he believes, the words of his son); in fact, Nicobulus goes out of his way to deny the agency to any author whatsoever: "no man charges you—it's these tablets that do so." We have here a radical separation of the written from the writer: text replaces and displaces its originary voice, and instead argues and barks orders on its own.

In a brilliant response, Chrysalus reattaches this headstrong text to writer—but of course to the wrong writer (810–11):

> Aha, Bellerophontem tuos me fecit filius:
> egomet tabellas tetuli ut vincerer. sine.
>
> Aha! Your son has made me a Bellerophon;
> I myself brought the tablets so that I would be bound. Well, so be it.

The allusion is to the notorious σήματα λυγρά, "baleful signs," that Bellerophon bears at *Il.* 6.168, symbols that order his own execution.[27] In 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 and comic collision of messenger and author.

Eventually, the miscomprehended letter does exactly what Chrysalus desires: it indicts Nicobulus' son as a liar and a playboy. Even when matters become most convoluted—Mnesilochus is caught *in flagranti delicto*, and Cleomachus enters stage right as a befuddled extortionist—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 (923–24): *verum lubet etiam mi has perlegere denuo: aequomst tabellis consignatis credere*, "but I've a notion to read through these letters again: it is only right to trust a sealed letter." Nicobulus' second (*denuo*) reading of the letter is, alas, as naïve as his first: he will not consider that signed (*consignatis*) writing could be forged (in this respect, he is as ornery, and as deceived, as *Curculio*'s Lyco). The performance medium of comedy pokes fun at the stubbornness of those who cling to writing as an antidote to the "improvised" world of Plautine farce.

[27] Rosenmeyer 39–46 offers a brief assessment of Homer as "the father of letters," or at least the father of written signs. On Rosenmeyer's reading, these σήματα λυγρά sow the seeds for all later dark representations of epistolary signs.

For Chrysalus' part, the slave crows about his deceitful letters. Just as Pseudolus pompously compares himself to Ulysses, Chrysalus, after dictating (off-stage) another epistle, sings an entire canticum to his own genius, ending with the observation that he is carrying not tablets but the Trojan horse itself (935–36). These lines, comparing the most infamous act of deception in antiquity to the business with the letters, demonstrate just how much Plautus problematizes the use and function of writing within his comedies. The canticum that follows covers dozens of lines, as Chrysalus develops his original "Trojan horse" metaphor into a truly mammoth extended comparison between various acts of Chrysaline deception and events of the Trojan war. Chrysalus notes that three actions were necessary for the fall of Troy: the capture of the Palladium, the death of Troilus, and the breach of the Phrygian gate (954–55). The fib of the gold is compared to the Palladium's seizure, and Chrysalus' later encounter with the *senex* will be compared to the breach in the wall (987). Chrysalus' letter, by contrast, receives an explicit simile (960): *post ubi tabellas ad senem detuli, ibi occidi Troilum*, "Afterwards, when I brought the letter to the old man, then I killed Troilus." This is a puzzling, even disturbing, metaphor. The metaphors of the wooden horse and Palladium designate Chrysalus as a new Ulysses (946), bold and bad (949). The Troilus episode, however, marks Chrysalus as a new *Achilles*, ambushing and then killing the young Trojan prince Troilus at a fountain. Iconography usually emphasizes the *pathos* of the scene, as the young prince lifts his hands in supplication while Achilles runs him through. Chrysalus' final metaphor elides the deception (the ambush) and instead focuses on the outcome: death (*occidi Troilum*). Writing is a serious game: calamity results in the death not of the author but of the reader.

Nicobulus is pathetic because he falls for the same ruse twice. Once again, Chrysalus, having dictated a letter to Mnesilochus, makes certain that Nicobulus recognizes the authenticity and integrity of the seal (984–86):

Ch. tacitus (*sc.* Mnesilochus) conscripsit tabellas, obsignatas mi has dedit.
tibi me iussit dare, sed metuo, ne idem cantent quod priores.
Nosce signum. estne eius?
Ni. Novi. libet perlegere has.

Ch. In silence Mnesilochus wrote and sealed these tablets, then gave them to me.
He ordered me to give them to you, but I fear lest they sing the same as the others.
Take a look at the seal—is it his?
Ni. I recognize it. I should read these through.

The scene repeats, with variations, the original epistolary deception, including the emphasis on authenticity of the epistle. As Nicobulus reads out the letter, we find that the letter shares similarities with its earlier cousin (997–1000):

Ni. "Pater, ducentos Philippos quaeso Chrysalo
da, si esse salvom vis me aut vitalem tibi."
malum quidem hercle magnum.
Ch. Tibi dico.
Ni. Quid est?
Ch. Non prius salutem scripsit?
Ni. Nusquam sentio.

Ni. "Father, I seek that you give 200 Philippeans to Chrysalus
If you wish me to be safe or alive for you."
Well, *this* is certainly a calamity.
Ch. I've something to say to you.
Ni. What is it?
Ch. He didn't write a salutation first?
Ni. Not that I can tell.

This epistolary reading in fact constitutes an inverse of the first scene. In the first scene, we saw the composition/metaforgery of the letter, and next only the (silent) reaction of its reader. Now, however, the situation is reversed: we hear the letter for the first time and must, like Nicobulus, interpret its contents. Chrysalus points out an irregularity in the form of the letter: it begins with no salutation. The *only* part of the first letter actually composed by Mnesilochus was the salutation; now, even this bit of authorial control has been excised. Plautus again toys with the juxtaposition of silence and writing; Mnesilochus is silent (984 *tacitus*) because Chrysalus, as author, has *again* stolen his voice—only this time completely.

In this most complicated of epistolary ruses, Plautus includes a passage that meditates more broadly on the links between vision and interpretation. Nicobulus demands that Chrysalus attend to the reading of the letter; though Chrysalus at first demurs, he is eventually ordered to know what is written on the tablets, *scias quae hic scripta sient*, "so that you may know what's written here" (988). Nicobulus opens the tablets and exclaims that the letters are too small. Chrysalus' arch reply begs for its own interpretation (991–92): *Qui quidem videat parum;/ verum qui satis videat, grandes satis sunt*, "For one who sees very little; but for one who sees well enough they are plenty big." Chrysalus here is *not* speaking of eyesight, at least not on the surface. The second clause puns on *verum*, meaning not only "but" or "however" but "Truth," as a sub-

stantive: "for one who sees the truth (*verum*) enough they are plenty big." The point is that Nicobulus *cannot* see the truth; he has been blinded by the flurry of written words. When the letter speaks highly of Chrysalus, the slave feigns disbelief: *Estne istuc istic scriptum?* "Is that really written there?" To which Nicobulus solemnly replies (1023): *Em specta, tum scies*, "Here, look yourself, then you will know." No matter how often Chrysalus refers to irregularities in the text, Nicobulus refuses to suspect wrongdoing. If he can see it on the wax, it must be true.

When the old man encounters the *miles* offstage and finds that he has been duped, his anger and his verbiage are without end (1086–90):

> Quicumque ubi ubi sunt, qui fuerunt quique futuri sunt posthac
> stulti, stolidi, fatui, fungi, bardi, blenni, buccones,
> solus ego omnis longe antideo
> stultitia et moribus indoctis.
> perii, pudet: hocine me aetatis
> ludos bis factum esse indigne?
>
> Whoever might be in any place—whoever has been and whoever will be in time to come—
> Whether idiots, blockheads, morons, dolts, dullards, simpletons, or fools—
> I alone outstrip them all by far,
> In my idiocy and foolish ways.
> I have perished, and I'm ashamed that at this stage of life
> I have shamefully been made twice a fool.

What so riles Nicobulus is that a letter proved him twice (*bis*) a fool. He refers to his age, *aetas*, as a reason for especial mortification; apparently, his life experience should have guarded against trusting any words too much. In fact, he never *does* link Chrysalus specifically to the letter, but only to the general treachery of his son (1092). One of the curiosities of the play is that Chrysalus disappears shortly before this scene. Throughout the play, the voice of Chrysalus has been linked intimately and exclusively to writing: once the gig is up, Chrysalus' voice—like Chrysalus himself—vanishes.

POSTSCRIPT

The extent to which Plautus inherited writing-as-symbol from his New Comedy forebears is impossible to guess, and it is a commonplace of literary critics to impute to their subjects a special status or significance. But in the case of Plautus, I think we can in fact argue for a real originality in Plautus' treatment of epistolarity as a stage device. By surrounding each epistle with multiple opportunities for comic mayhem—including forgery, "metaforgery,"

interception, and just plain misreading—Plautus shows reading as an activity fraught with peril. He also calls attention to epistolarity's many similarities with the production of stage drama, including the construction of a character's voice and identity, the transformation from symbol to sound, and the necessity for voices to make the proper stage entrance and exit. In essence, epistolary writing mimics the creation of every character's dramatic voice.

Therefore, when a Plautine character (mis)reads a text, he puts himself at the mercy of the technology that created him. As we have seen, a few characters are able to turn the complexity of this situation to their advantage. Such characters, written by Plautus as deceitful, naturally understand the deceptive properties of writing; Pseudolus is merely the most vocal in his declaration that as a *poeta* he will deceive his master, his messenger, and his pimp with a letter (*Ps.* 690–91). Part of the joke—or part of the pleasure—in watching a Plautine comedy, then, is seeing the most self-consciously theatrical characters succeed both as masters of improvisatory techniques (pratfalls, double-takes, insults, and the like) *and* as masters of text, able to turn the script against their opponents. For Sharrock, *Pseudolus*, like much of Plautus, works as a play because the audience enjoys being misled by a text. I suggest that we, the audience, are inscribed by Plautus as the hapless Nicobuluses and Lycos of the world: a little gullible, a little laughable, and just a little literate.[28]

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