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**Sumbolast in epistula: Making Identity in Plautus**

Issues of identity are central to Plautine New Comedy. Misrecognitions, impersonations, and doubling all figure prominently in Plautus's plots. In more than one-third of the plays, the epistle provides the dramatic space for enacting the vulnerability of selfhood. This paper examines how letters both give rise to new identities and permit the usurpation of already established subjectivities in Plautus. Conventions of epistolary form and the concomitant materialization of identity render the subjectivity of both author and addressee particularly susceptible to violation. At the same time, letter-writing affords the epistolographer the opportunity to "write himself", or invent a new identity *ex nihilo*. In the fictional world of Plautine comedy, however, female characters are denied access to letters and, consequently, to a mode of self-invention.

The formal features of epistles—a written "I" circulating outside the control of its author, the separation of author and addressee—make them paradoxically an ideal means of creating and disseminating selfhood but vulnerable to forgery/impersonation. An epistle is the material representation of a speaking self, authenticated by the image of that self in the personal seal. Yet the very materiality which defines it can threaten its integrity. Letters and letter-writers go to great lengths to protect against interception and forgery: formal salutations, handwriting, trusted messengers, coded language, personal seals (cf. John Nicholson, "The Delivery and Confidentiality of Cicero's Letters," *CJ* 90 (1994): 33-63). Nevertheless, signet rings could be stolen, handwriting could be forged.

From the perspective of the forger/impersonator characters, however, the epistolary medium is a fruitful place for inventing and usurping identities. N. Slater locates the creation and performance of alternate, slave-authored plots in, among other places, epistolography (Plautus in *Performance*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985.) The slave/playwright either writes letters/scripts for other characters to perform (Bacchides, Persa, Trinummus) or he disrupts the reception of an authentic letter, thereby altering the progression of the plot (Pseudolus). Slater, like Pseudolus (667ff), views the letter in narrative terms, as a sort of plot-generator par excellence (cf. G. Monaco "L'epistola nel teatro antico," *Dioniso* 38 (1964): 334-51). Slater's observations can be productively extended to the realm of character. In other words, a part of writing alternate plots is inventing new characters to enact those plots.

In Plautus's topsy-turvy fictional world, however, letter-writing is restricted to male characters (including slaves). The courtesan Phoenicium is the single apparent exception. The *Pseudolus* opens with Caliodorus mooning over a letter she has written to him. Caliodorus hands the letter to Pseudolus and demands that he read it aloud. In so doing, Pseudolus effectively appropriates Phoenicium's identity and (not coincidentally) assumes control of the plot. That Pseudolus "becomes" Phoenicium is evident when Caliodorus says during the reading "nam mihi videor cum ea fabularier." Despite Pseudolus's impersonation of Phoenicium, one could still argue that Phoenicium's letter sets the stage for the action of the play; she appears to retain some degree of narrative control. Such an argument nonetheless ignores the improvisation introduced by

Pseudolus when he happens upon Harpax (*nova res subito mi haec obiectast*). From this point on (602ff), another letter and Pseudolus's manipulation of it to take on new identities dictates the course of the plot. By the end of the play Phoenicium has gone from active author of her own rescue to passive object of Pseudolus's machinations.

*Asinaria* 756ff likewise raises the issue of female access to letter-writing, but only to banish it as a threat to male control. Under the terms of a contract drawn up by Parasitus for his client Diabolus, the courtesan Philaenium is denied access to letters and all writing materials. This prohibition follows a number of others, all of which ensure that Philaenium remains under the control of Diabolus and is deprived of any control over her subjectivity. In context, the banishment of epistolography is intended to prevent Philaenium from writing letters to other men; more broadly, though, it implies that if Philaenium were to have access to wax and a stylus, she might be able to write her way out of bondage and in the process assert herself as an active, desiring subject. Just as male letter-writers exploit epistolary space to invent new selves, so might Philaenium if given the opportunity.

As the example of Philaenium aptly demonstrates, the carnivalesque atmosphere of Plautine drama did not necessarily include women. Clever slaves could hijack plots, sons could deceive fathers, but female characters were largely omitted from the revelry of the social order turned upside down. This distinction is well-illustrated by the depiction of male characters exploiting the vulnerability of letters to take on new identities while female characters are either not depicted writing letters or specifically denied access to them.