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**Confusing the Audience in Plautus' *Poenulus***

Plautus' *Poenulus* has not been well received by critics. Duckworth (1994, 154), Arnott (*RhM* 1959, 252), and Maurach (*Philologus* 1964, 247) all deem it, at least in some respect, a bad Plautine play. The play is criticized for its two deception plots, which are almost wholly without overlap. *Retractio* in the text only adds to our confusion, making it difficult to ascertain what is the work of Plautus and what should be attributed to a later hand. However, I shall argue that the treatment and characterization of the pimp Lycus connects and unifies the disparate sections of the play's complicated plots, and that the complications and confusions associated with the pimp's character are intentional. Sharrock (*CQ* 1996, 152-74) reads *Pseudolus* as a complicated layering of relationships of audience, actor, character and playwright, and argues that the deception of the audience is crucial to the play's success. This type of relationship between playwright and audience underscores the *Poenulus* as well. With this fact in mind, the play, interpreted through Lycus's character, is in fact quite artfully constructed.

The first plot against Lycus, an arcane deception based on exploiting legal loopholes, is almost brought to completion by the middle of the play. We expect Lycus to be hauled to the magistrates for judgment, but this intrigue is unceremoniously abandoned. Instead, Milphio and Syncerastus plot a fraudulent recognition of the young girls as free-born, without *mancupium* or their real father present. Hanno's entrance further complicates the recognition and brings the confusion of the plot tangibly onstage with his Punic speech. Both plots are different from conventional comic intrigues. It is difficult to argue *ex silentio* that these deceptions were unique on the Plautine stage; however, the repeated explanations of the workings of the intrigue suggest that the playwright and the actors expect the audience to be confused by the action. Even when the deception plots have seen their fair share of twists and turns, the audience still has more information to consider. To the very end of the play, Lycus' actions and the presentation of his character require that the audience reexamine and reconsider its understanding of the pimp. Lycus' fair and respectable handling of the recognition implies that there is far more substance to the pimp's character than first impressions and audience expectations would permit.

These factors contribute to the audience confusion that is crucial to the appreciation of the play. Indeed, Plautus does not want his audience to rest comfortably on its expectations of a standard comic plot of love, intrigue, recognition, and happy resolution. Those elements are present in this play, to be sure, but the playwright has taken a novel approach to them by defying audience expectations at almost every turn. From this analysis of the role of Lycus within the complicated plot of *Poenulus* and the way in which his character's presence ties together the various subplots, I shall argue that the allegedly-flawed construction of *Poenulus* is quite intentional. The audience is meant to sit at the edge of their seats, confused but eager to learn what will happen next. I shall discuss briefly what further implications an understanding of this Plautine technique has for our appreciation of *Poenulus* as a finely crafted play.