

Review

EMILIA A. BARBIERO, *LETTERS IN PLAUTUS: WRITING BETWEEN THE LINES*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. xii + 229. ISBN 9781009168519. £75.00.

Emilia Barbiero's consideration of epistolary writing in the plays of Plautus sheds new light on the place of letters in the middle Republic, marshalling evidence from the plays themselves to indicate that comic audiences took it for granted that many enslaved persons were literate, since 'not just elite men but also slaves (both male and female) as well as gods, soldiers, parasites, bankers, fishermen and pimps read and write' within the plays (203). The book's contribution to scholarship on comedy is both more extensive and subtly elaborated. B. undertakes to demonstrate the fundamental similarities of epistolary and comic-dramatic writing, the reverberations when they intersect, and the exploitation of these complementary forms by Plautus via close readings of six plays (*Bacchides*, *Persa*, *Pseudolus*, *Curculio*, *Epidicus* and *Trinummus*). But B.'s main claims about letters on stage within comedy and letters at Rome outside the theatre are fundamentally related. In short, if the enslaved and other non-elite characters within comedy are plausible representations of persons of the same status in the real world, then the characterisation in performance criticism of Plautine comedy as 'slave theatre' (as in the title of Richlin's influential study, discussed in B.'s introduction on pp. 11–12) cannot be taken to mean automatically that the plays of Plautus originated in collaborative improvisation by unlettered players rather than as texts. In contrast, B. contends that the authorial practice of Plautus was highly self-conscious, and that the plays were composed as texts by an individual author from the start.

To make this case, B. analyses plays in which epistolary writing and the exchange of letters precipitate, complicate or double the comic plot, often by multi-layered repetition and inversion in which letters prescribe or enact plays within the plays to demonstrate how the comic poet exploits the capacity to conjure presence from absence, a generic trait that letters and dramatic scripts share. Using letters within the plays as 'emblems' of the scripts that 'manifest [their] written origins' (206), B. shows that such letters act as a means for the playwright to dramatise and comment on his own ostensibly humble role as a mere translator of Greek plays into Latin. Ch. 1 considers *Bacchides*, in which even a truth-telling letter is misunderstood — by design — in a way that renders its reader's deception hilarious (35), and the capacity for letters to generate not only isolated jokes but also full-blown metatheatrical plots is already on display. B. demonstrates that '*Bacchides*' set of forged epistles functions as a complete portrait of the theatrical process' (50) and along the way accomplishes a neat bit of generic self-aggrandisement. When a fraudulent letter is figured as the Trojan Horse, this heroic feat of comedy solicits comparisons to epic. In the *Persa*, discussed in ch. 2, the letter's capacity to act as both bridge and barrier is especially prominent; the letters in this play create distance between correspondents as well as erasing it, and epistolary conventions of authenticity abet in forging authority to keep the metatheatre coming. As B. writes, 'in *Persa* we watch as *Persa* is conceived' (81). The chapter closes by foregrounding the animating paradox of the genre: claims of novelty are comedy's stock in trade, but 'How can a playwright make something original in a genre whose very essence is repetition?' (83). B.'s readings show that the kernel of comedy is a confidence trick. The assertion of novelty substitutes for actual innovation, and repetitions of patently untrue claims for newness, the brasher the better, only multiply their power.

There is an especially rich discussion of this dynamic in ch. 3, on the *Pseudolus*, in which Pseudolus steals a letter whose contents supply a script he adopts as his own scheme in order to bring about the fulfillment of the play's comic plot. In *Pseudolus* B. sees a double for Plautus, a trickster who promises novelty but substitutes theft for invention. The boldness of Pseudolus is accompanied by anxiety, however. He enlists the assistance of another enslaved person to impersonate the letter's original delivery person, but worries that his proxy will go too far, exceeding the script he has been handed and substituting his own invention for faithful performance of his instructions. In *Curculio*, the subject of B.'s ch. 4, we encounter yet again 'a forgery followed by a fake delivery in which the dupe is made to read out a missive that both contains and enacts the plot' (128). So far, so similar to *Bacchides* and *Persa*. But the *Curculio* enables a consideration of how epistolary writing conjures up not only missing persons, but also 'faraway places'. It also adds an object to the mix, a stolen ring that authenticates the forged

epistle. Affect theory, new materialism, prothesis theory and Derrida are all invoked in this chapter somewhat haphazardly, along with primary comparanda ranging from Aristophanes, Euripides and Antiphanes to Lucian, Achilles Tatius and 2 *Baruch*. A concluding chapter discusses how letters function within the *Epidicus* and *Trinummus* to enunciate comic 'roads not taken'. A brief conclusion ('Postscripts') comes next, followed by a useful appendix listing actual, imaginary and hypothetical letters in the Plautine corpus, along with a catalogue of letter-reading and writing characters.

Williams College
awilcox@williams.edu

AMANDA WILCOX

doi:10.1017/S0075435824000248

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies.