

Bacchides

A Scene of Writing

Introduction

Bacchides features a typical amatory plot. In the play's backstory, young man Mnesilochus met and fell in love with a *meretrix* named Bacchis while traveling to Ephesus. Since she happened to be on the way to his home city of Athens, the *adulescens* wrote a letter to a friend called Pistoclus with orders to find the courtesan and keep her safe until his return. Pistoclus tracked the girl to the house of her sister, whose name is also Bacchis; we will call her Athenian Bacchis for clarity's sake. In a section of the play that does not survive,¹ Athenian Bacchis and Pistoclus begin a liaison of their own, and thereby set up for the confusion that will engender the comedy's central *crux*. It all begins when Mnesilochus and his slave Chrysalus return to Athens. The slave learns from Pistoclus that he has followed Mnesilochus' instructions by locating Bacchis, although her freedom from another contract must be bought. Chrysalus accordingly fabricates a scheme to steal the requisite gold from the sum Mnesilochus has brought from Ephesus. Although initially successful, this ruse is doomed to failure. In a fit of misdirected anger towards Pistoclus and Bacchis, whom he wrongly believes to have betrayed him by carrying on a love affair between them, Mnesilochus admits to the deception and returns the stolen money to his father, Nicobulus. This misunderstanding caused by the sisters' common name (the *adulescens* does not know that there are *two* courtesans named Bacchis) is soon clarified, and we find ourselves back at square one. Mnesilochus begs his slave to do the impossible and swindle his father yet again to buy Bacchis' freedom, though the old man has been put on guard

¹ Save for a set of thirty-four non-continuous verses preserved in the indirect tradition, the beginning of *Bacchides* does not survive. For the various problems presented by the fragments and possible reconstructions, see Bader (1970). On *Bacchides*' position in the manuscripts which jeopardized the opening scene, see Tontini (2001).

by his son's previous confession. Cleverly taking advantage of this mistrust, Chrysalus spins a new story to fool Nicobulus and steal his gold twice over.

With its magnetic slave-hero and lively plot, *Bacchides* is one of Plautus' most fêted texts. Since the publication of fragments from its model, Menander's *Dis Exapaton*, made it possible for the very first time to compare a Plautine comedy with its Greek source text (at least in part),² *Bacchides* has also been among the Plautine corpus' most-studied plays. Much ink has been spilled trying to substantiate or disprove Plautus' originality on the basis of the broken succession of verses that correspond to *Bacch.* 494–561,³ but the incomplete picture the fragments give us of the original raises more questions about Plautus' innovation than it answers, and much uncertainty remains about which elements of the play are *Plautinisches im Plautus*.⁴ But *Bacchides* is a fascinating text for many other reasons, too. Among these are its letters. This comedy is a veritable showpiece of epistolarity featuring the Plautine corpus' most complex manifestation of the epistolary motif. Not only does the dramatic action originate in a missive when Mnesilochus writes to Pistoclerus about his girlfriend, but Chrysalus straightens out the troubles that ensue upon the collapse of that dialogue via textual mischief, forging and delivering two tricky letters to the *senex*. Through it all, most of the conventions and phases of the epistolary process that occur in Plautus' other letter plays figure prominently and are staged at length. Chrysalus' tricky missives are alternately composed and read aloud on stage, and both are consigned

² All of the Menandrian fragments are from the first part of the Greek play, beginning as the father and tutor of Moschos (=Pistoclerus) encourage Sostratos (=Mnesilochus) to reprimand his friend for carrying on an affair with a courtesan, and breaking off just as Sostratos confronts Moschos for his alleged betrayal. The total absence of *Dis Exapaton*'s second half has generated speculation about the extent of Plautus' innovation in the corresponding part of *Bacchides*, leading some critics to conclude that the ending of the Latin play contains significant change to the model text. This suggestion was first made by Fraenkel (1922/2007), 53–5; for summary and bibliography see Lefèvre (2011), 66–8 and 120–1.

³ The bibliography on the comparison of the two plays since Menander's text resurfaced is vast. See Handley (1968) – the inaugural publication of the fragments, Alfonsi (1969), Gaiser (1970), Del Corno (1973), Pöschl (1973), Clark (1976), Grisolia (1976), Bain (1979), Anderson (1993), 13–21, Damen (1992), Gratwick (1995), Riedweg and Weisweiler (2004), Batstone (2005), Lefèvre (2011), Fontaine (2014a) and Barbiero (2016).

⁴ Although the Menandrian fragments demonstrate that Plautus transformed the tone and pace of his model significantly, skepticism about the extent of the translator's originality persists. See Bain (1979) and especially Damen (1995), who notes of the *Dis Exapaton* fragments that “They certainly do not resolve the burning question of Plautus' originality for they show him as both a literal translator and a liberal adaptor” (p.28). For the idea that we need not rely on the Menandrian fragments to perceive Plautus' novelty vis-à-vis *Dis Exapaton*, see Barbiero (2016).

before the audience with much ado. What is more, these epistles exist alongside instances of oral communication both real and invented, resulting in a multiplicity of verbal and graphic messages between the play's characters that variously inform, misinform and altogether fail to inform their correspondents.

To begin, I consider the spoken and written messages in the comic past and the play's first take; i.e. before Mnesilochus spoils everything by revealing Chrysalus' mischief to his father. Here I elucidate *Bacchides'* interface between communicative media, arguing that it exemplifies how modes of correspondence work in the Plautine universe. This section also investigates the kinetic force of communication by proxy within the plot. How does Plautus employ messages and letters proper to both invent and propel the dramatic action forward? I show that *Bacchides* is launched by a missive that is occasioned, in its turn, by an instance of oral correspondence and that messages both spoken and written keep the plot going until it is finally entrusted to the capable, letter-writing hands of the *servus callidus*. My discussion then moves on to the textual ruse devised by Chrysalus to remedy the confession of his younger master in the play's second take. The slave devises a plan to rob Nicobulus twice more, using a pair of epistles to invent two separate fictive scenarios in which the old man has no choice but to relinquish 400 *nummi* for his son's sake. I pay particularly close attention to the dictation-cum-scheming scene at *Bacch.* 714–60. This onstage portrayal of epistolary composition is an unicum both amongst the Plautine letter plays and across classical literature in that it provides a rare glimpse of letter writing in action, or at least as it was represented on the Roman stage. The scene of writing is also rich with metatheatrical and metapoetic imagery, illustrating a main premise of this book, viz. that writing in Plautus is a source of creativity and comic power inside the play that reflects the playwright's poetic enterprise outside of it. We shall see that Chrysalus resuscitates the ruined comedy literally, composing dramatic material for its second half. But his comic invention turns out to be derivative, since the new "script" only duplicates what transpired in the performance's first half, thereby carrying off a phenomenon of internal replication that in *Bacchides* and throughout the letter plays constitutes a self-referential image of Plautus' act of translation and the limits placed upon it. Chapter 1 lays the foundations for those following it by investigating this phenomenon, demonstrating how letters are employed metapoetically in the Plautine corpus to cast an image of the comedy's origins within the play itself.

Bacchides*: Take One**The Epistolary Choice***

Mediated communication is the deliberate transmission of information via a third party enabling a dialogue at second hand.⁵ It may be transacted by means of writing in the form of a letter, or orally through words memorized, conveyed and reperformed by a messenger in another time and place.⁶ Both correspondence types occur in *Bacchides*' comic past and precipitate in their turn the onstage action, although we learn of this communication only indirectly, as the following backstory is revealed piecemeal. *Senex* Nicobulus sent Mnesilochus to Ephesus as his messenger requesting repayment of a loan from a certain Archidemides. Armed with a *symbolum* verifying his identity as Nicobulus' rightful proxy, the youth relayed his father's request as a verbal message: "Pay back your loan!" Within the context of this initial scenario, a letter came into play when Nicobulus' courier turned into an author. Mnesilochus met and fell in love with Bacchis during his voyage, but the girl was bound for Athens with her current long-term client, the soldier Cleomachus. Unable to pursue her in person (presumably because of his commitment to convey his father's message), the *adulescens* sent a traveling text in his stead, writing to Pistoclerus with directives to find and secure Bacchis upon her arrival at Athens. These two messages, Nicobulus' to Archidemides and Mnesilochus' to Pistoclerus, form an inverted doublet: father and son send information that travels in opposite directions (Athens → Ephesus/Ephesus → Athens) and is relayed in opposite media, creating a neat doublet of correspondence whose composite of verbal and graphic communicative modes invites reflection on the use of each. I want to begin by exploring Mnesilochus' epistolary choice via comparison with the *senex*'s oral communication. What motivates the *adulescens*' choice to employ text? Our inquiry will yield insight into the epistle that gets *Bacchides* going and into epistolography in the corpus as a whole, elucidating the when and why of letters on the Plautine stage. As we shall see, Mnesilochus' decision to write Pistoclerus a letter is a deliberate one that has everything to do with the nature of his message. Given the potential risks associated with spoken correspondence, what the *adulescens* has to say is best entrusted to a mode of communication that replaces human agency with text.

⁵ For definition and relevant bibliography, see Ceccarelli (2013), 101–2.

⁶ Verbal and graphic modes of mediated communication can also work together to strengthen the one or the other; for an instance of such collaboration in tragedy, see pp.22–5.

From preservation to realization, an oral message relies on a courier at every step of its transaction. This total reliance on human agency opens the door to a host of potential problems. *In primis* there is the matter of authenticity. How can the origin of conveyed speech be verified without the material support of the author's handwriting,⁷ distinctive style or seal?⁸ For this reason Nicobulus' message to Archidemides depends on a secondary agent besides its messenger: the *symbolum* borne by Mnesilochus.⁹ Serving as a confirmation of the herald's legitimacy, this token signifies in its own right as a pictogram that says: "My bearer rightfully transmits Nicobulus' words." Nicobulus' message to Archidemides, then, is twofold, and works in a hierarchy of signification. The words conveyed by Mnesilochus can only be accepted once the authenticity imparted by the *symbolum* is confirmed. And yet this security feature does little to resolve a second vulnerability endemic to spoken correspondence, what we might call the "broken telephone" dynamic. Since it exists without a fixed form to anchor it into permanence, an oral message may be modified in the act of transmission. Even the slightest, unintentional alteration in delivery, such as a change in tone or a presentation of the facts in a different order, can change the import of a message significantly – to say nothing of the havoc that can be wrought by deliberate sabotage. Epistles may be beset by their own set of weaknesses, but a message encoded as text is protected from these particular dangers. Even if a letter still depends on a messenger to make the journey from point A to point B, its written content tucked away in a folded tablet or rolled papyrus in precisely the form its composer intended it to be read is stable and unchanging. Text removes the necessity of a middleman from the act of communication,¹⁰ sidestepping the pitfalls associated with sending an unfixed message. Further, the epistolary seal

⁷ On the use of an author's handwriting as a means of authenticating a document, see Sarri (2017), 142–6. Chrysalus instructs Mnesilochus to write the first forged letter *manu sua* for this reason; see pp. 33–6.

⁸ On seals, see pp. 135–43.

⁹ This *symbolum* must be Nicobulus' signet ring, of which the Ephesian debtor would have had a wax impression as an aid to recognition (such is the fictional correspondence between Mnesilochus and Theotimus; see pp. 28–9). Although *symbola* are not reserved for oral communication in Plautus (see, e.g., the scenario at *Pseud.* 55–8 where an imprint of the soldier's *symbolum* is left with his future addressee so that the latter may recognize the *miles'* letter when it comes), in this instance it seems clear that the *adulescens* used the *symbolum* to substantiate his transmission of Nicobulus' words and his role as the *senex's* rightful messenger. There is no mention of a letter.

¹⁰ However, messengers could serve as hermeneutic intermediates by aiding the addressee in interpreting the epistolary content. See further p. 24.

that fastens a letter allows the addressee to both verify the message's authorship and simultaneously confirm its integrity. A seal that arrives intact guarantees the security of the words within. These properties make the letter a useful remedy for the flaws of oral correspondence, and evidence from the tragic stage suggests that epistles were used in precisely this way, serving as a textual receipt attesting the authenticity and accuracy of words conveyed in speech.

In the opening scene of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Agamemnon is fretting about a letter. Agonizing over his decision to dispatch this missive to Clytemnestra in Argos, the King repeatedly inscribes it, seals it, opens it back up and rewrites it once again (Eur. *IA* 34–41). He is writing the letter to undo one composed and sent in the comic past, a message which ordered Clytemnestra to send Iphigenia to Aulis so that the girl could be married to Achilles, though in truth Agamemnon has summoned his daughter to be slaughtered as a sacrifice to Artemis in order that the Greek fleet may finally sail off to Troy. The penitent King now means to take back his previous instructions, and has penned a missive directing Clytemnestra to keep their daughter at home, feigning that her wedding to Achilles will be celebrated another time.¹¹ Before finally sending off an old slave to deliver it, the author reads his letter aloud, recording the message in the courier's memory as a doublet of what he has inscribed as text (Eur. *IA* 115–16, 119–23). Why the duplication? To be sure, this epistolary reading scene has to do with theatrical constraints. Agamemnon's letter must be read aloud in order to let the spectators in on its written contents so crucial to the tragedy's unfolding.¹² But the epistolary content's doubling as writing and as speech is also motivated within the context of the plot. Agamemnon composes a text that he sends as proof of the message conveyed by spoken word. The letter confirms his messenger's fidelity, an interpretation of the scenario borne out by the exchange between the slave and his master (Eur. *IA* 153–6):

¹¹ Agamemnon's indecision is thus made material. As Mueller (2016), 187 observes, the letter enables "an externalization of the mind's tropes and self-torments," which transforms "the usually interiorized process of cognition into visible drama."

¹² So Rosenmeyer (2001), 66: "One of the most important points of conflict in the transition from epistolary private exchange to dramatic presentation is that a written letter is actually an obstacle to communication on stage. In order for it to function effectively, it must be passed around to the rest of the characters on stage (in which case the audience remains in the dark), 'overheard' by other characters and the audience, or read out loud for all (on stage and off stage) to hear." On the matter of reading aloud and plot exposition, see pp.88–9.

πρ: πιστὸς δὲ φράσας τάδε πῶς ἔσομαι,
 λέγε, παιδι σέθεν τῆ σῆ τ' ἀλόχῳ;
 αγ: σφραγίδα φύλασσο' ἦν ἐπὶ δέλτῳ
 τῆδε κοιμίζεις.¹³

OLD MAN: Tell me, once I've said these things, how shall I seem truthful to your child and to your wife?

AG: Guard the seal upon the tablet which you carry.

In this epistolary scene orality precedes the written word, as is pointedly suggested by the aorist tense of the participle in Eur. *IA* 153: the messenger will recite Agamemnon's message from memory before letting the text "speak" for itself as written confirmation of his speech which is, in turn, originally that of Agamemnon. Oral communication is supported by script¹⁴ in the (ultimately unfulfilled) consignment of Agamemnon's letter to authenticate a scenario and a message, both of which might have otherwise seemed suspect. If the courier had traveled to Argos (neither he nor the *deltos* will ever even leave Aulis; Menelaus wrests the letter from his hesitating brother soon after this scene,¹⁵ and Agamemnon's attempt to rectify one letter with another fails utterly),¹⁶ his message seeking to undo the King's previous directives would have created a doublet of contradictory information ("Send Iphigenia to Aulis" / "Do not send Iphigenia to Aulis"), potentially making the Queen wary of treachery.¹⁷ Which message truthfully represents

¹³ See also Eur. *IA* 117–18 where the old man encourages Agamemnon to read the letter thus: λέγε καὶ σῆμαι', ἵνα καὶ γλώσση/ σύντονα τοῖς σοῖς γράμμασιν αὐδῶ. This passage is explored further on pp.136–7, with particular focus on the epistolary seal.

¹⁴ Rosenmeyer (2001), 83 observes: "We can imagine the oral and written versions functioning together as a kind of *symbolon*, the two parts fitting together at the break. The oral and written messages coexist on stage and are represented as mutually reinforcing." While Rosenmeyer sees the two communicative media working together in an order that is the opposite of my reading ("Agamemnon wants his letter to be verified by the oral testimony of his loyal servant", p.82), the text suggests that it is the other way around, with Agamemnon's letter existing as a proof of the oral message.

¹⁵ On the struggle between the two brothers over the text as a struggle over the body of Iphigenia and thus on Agamemnon's letter as metonymic for Iphigenia herself, see Mueller (2016), 186–8.

¹⁶ Mueller (2016), 184 observes that Agamemnon's failure to retract his previous instructions emphasizes the letter's (dangerous because possibly rogue) material autonomy: "Both letters in this respect reveal their author's impotence in the face of the material autonomy of the *deltos*, for while the first arrives at its destination before it can be intercepted, the second letter . . . falls narrowly short of its goal of countermanding the first." On the independence of things, see pp.140–3.

¹⁷ Pointed out by Rosenmeyer (2001), 82–3: "Given the precedent of the first, deceitful letter, which may or may not have had an oral message to support it, Agamemnon is rightly concerned about the potential reception of the second, in spite of its honesty." But Agamemnon's second letter is also lying: although it claims that the wedding between Achilles and Iphigenia will be postponed (Eur. *IA* 122–3), there is no plan for a wedding.

her husband's wishes? Is the slave lying about this change in plans? The writing tablet sealed with Agamemnon's *sphragis* is a preemptive measure, corroborating both the message's provenance and the integrity of its substance. At the time of writing, the author no longer wanted Iphigenia to come to Aulis.¹⁸

Text supports speech in conveying Agamemnon's message to his wife, but the two media work vice versa, too. The messenger's appraisal serves to fix the problem of communicative solitude which is particular to letters. Despite the stability offered by the textual medium, a written message might nevertheless still be misconstrued by its recipient given that it travels unaccompanied by its author, who is therefore unavailable to explain the epistolary content.¹⁹ After all, a letter does not embody meaning but only signifies it, creating the potential for misinterpretation. A courier who carries a message in both memory and text can field questions or clarify ambiguities. Unlike the addressee, he has received the information to be transmitted from its source and thus can act in the author's stead. In fact, it appears to have been common practice in the ancient world for epistolary messengers to double as hermeneutic intermediaries,²⁰ a role Agamemnon's slave in *Iphigenia at Aulis* plays, too. When he encounters Clytemnestra later in the play (soon after the letter's interception by Menelaus, the Queen comes to Aulis with Iphigenia, duly following her husband's first epistolary directives),²¹ the old slave tells her about his aborted mission, revealing the truth behind Agamemnon's second, undelivered message: the King attempted to take back his orders when he was in his right mind,²² but now he has returned to his folly and the girl is to be slain. The courier provides insight into the author's frame of mind, shedding light on Agamemnon's set of conflicting messages, albeit belatedly.

¹⁸ For more on the chronological complications of this scenario, see p.165.

¹⁹ This problem created by the separation of a message and its creator is famously set forth in Plato's *Phaedrus*; see pp.181–3.

²⁰ Ceccarelli (2013), 231. Compare, for instance, the passage in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* where Cyrus sends a letter to Cyaxares containing some rather unwelcome advice to the elder King. Xenophon reports that Cyrus dispatched the messenger as follows (Xen. *Cyr.* 4.5.26): ἀναγνώσαι δέ σοι καὶ τὰ ἐπιστελλόμενα, ἔφη, βούλομαι, ἵνα εἰδῶς αὐτὰ ὁμολογῆς, ἂν τί σε πρὸς ταῦτα ἔρωτῶ. Of course, this detail might also be part of Xenophon's narrative strategy, since it provides the pretext for quoting the King's epistle in full.

²¹ Even if Clytemnestra accompanies the girl instead of sending her to Aulis alone, as Agamemnon had instructed.

²² Eur. *IA* 893: φρονῶν γὰρ ἔτυχε σὸς πόσις τότ' εὔ.

In *Iphigenia at Aulis*, a letter play we will return to repeatedly in subsequent chapters, the weaknesses of spoken and scripted communication are rectified by using both media to send the same message, one medium reinforcing the other.²³ And yet writing can also be used deliberately solo to enact the transmission of content that must remain secret and therefore silent. This is an attribute of the letter that features in Antiphon's famous account of epistolary praxis in *On the Murder of Herodes*,²⁴ a speech composed for a man called Helos who stood accused of murder. In the following excerpt, the defendant is made to argue against the prosecution's allegation to have discovered a note in which Helos admitted to the crime in question (Antiphon, *On the Murder of Herodes* 53):

φασί δὲ γραμματείδιον εὐρεῖν ἐν τῷ πλοίῳ, ὃ ἔπεμπον ἐγὼ Λυκίνῳ,
ὡς ἀποκτείναιμι τὸν ἄνδρα. καίτοι τί ἔδει με γραμματείδιον
πέμπειν, αὐτοῦ συνειδότης τοῦ τὸ γραμματείδιον φέροντος; ὥστε
τοῦτο μὲν σαφέστερον αὐτὸς ἔμελλεν ἔρεῖν ὁ εἰργασμένος, τοῦτο δὲ
οὐδὲν ἔδει κρύπτειν αὐτόν· ἅ γὰρ μὴ οἶόν τε εἰδέναι τὸν φέροντα,
ταῦτ' ἂν τις μάλιστα συγγράψας πέμψειεν.

They say that on the ship they found a note which I was sending to Lycinus [which said] that I had killed the man. But why was it necessary for me to send a note, if he who was delivering the note was himself my accomplice? On the one hand, as one who had done the deed, he [i.e. the messenger] would have spoken of it [i.e. to the recipient] more clearly himself, and on the other it was not necessary to hide the message from him. For it is fundamentally those things that cannot be disclosed to the courier that one sends in writing.

The argument here relies on what the logographer sees (and presumably thinks the jury will see) as a basic quality of epistolary communication: its capacity for secrecy. Rather than a record of transmitted speech, Antiphon presents the letter as a means of protecting information from being transformed into speech.²⁵ The use of text in correspondence is here depicted as a safeguard against a message's promulgation, keeping it from getting out and being passed on to unintended recipients via an untrustworthy messenger, or indeed to the messenger himself. Simultaneously speaking and silent, a letter's content is available only to those who have access to the words beneath the seal and, further, are capable of reading it.

²³ Compare the epistolary scenario in *Iphigenia amongst the Taurians*, in which the author's written message is doubled as speech in case the physical tablet should get lost; see p.26 n.27.

²⁴ For discussion of this passage, see Ceccarelli (2013), 269–70 and Rosenmeyer (2001), 30–1.

²⁵ Antiphon also implies that oral testimony is more precise than written communication: his accomplice would describe the crime he himself had committed better than any letter could.

The flipside of this is the fact that a text can be read by anyone who comes to possess it. When maintaining the pretense of an unread letter matters not, even a sealed epistle is vulnerable to interception.²⁶ This hazard of graphic communication is once again staged by Euripides when in *Iphigenia at Aulis* Menelaus intercepts Agamemnon's missive and discovers his brother's wavering will. Had the message to Clytemnestra been entrusted as an oral message to the memory of the loyal messenger alone, Agamemnon's indecision would, perhaps, never have been revealed, and Iphigenia might have stayed safe at Argos.²⁷

Returning now to *Bacchides*, the impetus behind Mnesilochus' epistolary choice in communicating with Pistoclerus is clear. The *adulescens* was eager to keep secret the news of his new love interest. Although fooling around with *meretrices* is conventional behavior for comic youths, nevertheless such liaisons are normally discouraged by their fathers and tutors. Take, for instance, *Bacchides*' last scene in which the old men try to storm the brothel to get back their naughty sons: that Philoxenus and Nicobulus end up following the *adulescentes*' lusty example is a joke on this very principle. As we have seen, a letter can both speak at length and remain silent when need be, ensuring the privacy of the correspondence it conducts, characteristics that suited the sensitive nature of Mnesilochus' situation. Nicobulus, on the other hand, contacted Archidemides about a matter with which both parties were already *au fait*. A short, oral message was thus easily commended to a herald for repetition without worry that it might be divulged to the author's detriment.

Mnesilochus and Nicobulus opt for a means of correspondence based upon the kind of information each needs to transmit, illustrating that a message's content is crucial in determining the medium for its conveyance. The *senex* communicates orally to transact *negotium*, whereas the *adulescens* writes a letter in the name of pleasure, availing himself of the inherent qualities of graphic communication that make it the obvious choice

²⁶ A letter can also be illicitly read after delivery since any message in textual form is subject to prying eyes by its very materiality.

²⁷ Ceccarelli (2013), 12 considers this safety feature of oral communication vs. correspondence via text, pointing out that heralds were sacred and thus could not be tortured to reveal the messages they carried. On the other hand, text presents a potential obstacle to actual communication. Should the physical text itself come to ruin, the epistolary content is lost forever – *unless*, of course, it has been committed to the courier's memory as a precaution. This is the scenario in *Iphigenia amongst the Taurians*. Iphigenia attempts to contact Orestes by sending him a letter informing him that she survived the sacrifice at Aulis and now lives at a temple of Artemis in the land of the Taurians. Concerned with getting this urgent information out to her brother, the girl recites her message to the would-be courier Pylades so that he may be able to recite it from memory in case the writing tablet should be lost or destroyed (Eur. *IT* 755–65).

for handling naughtiness. Together, father's and son's messages encapsulate the basic thematic dichotomy of comedy and point us to a rule of letter writing in the Plautine corpus. By virtue of its propensity for deception and capacity for discretion in matters of *indiscretion*, the letter is an apt medium for *voluptas* and the trickery that enables it. And in fact, letter writing in Plautine plots is employed *without exception* for amorous affairs, used by lovers both male and female as well as clever slaves to initiate, manage and facilitate them.²⁸ This “intimate” association between epistolary activity and sex²⁹ is neatly illustrated in *Asinaria*, when a parasite reads out the contract he has written up to establish the terms of a yearlong liaison between *miles* Diabolus and his girlfriend Philaenium. Amongst various contractual stipulations that aim to keep the girl away from other men is the following epistolary interdiction, ironically encoded as text (*Asin.* 761–7):

*aut quod illa dicat peregre allatam epistulam,
ne epistula quidem ulla sit in aedibus
nec cerata adeo tabula;³⁰ et si qua inutilis
pictura sit, eam vendat: ni in quadriduo
abalienarit, quo aps te argentum acceperit,
tuos arbitratus sit, comburas, si velis,
ne illi sit cera ubi facere possit litteras.*

And as for the fact that she might say a letter has been delivered to her from abroad,
let there be not a single letter in her house,
and not even a wax tablet. And if some useless
painting is in her possession, let her sell it; if within four days
of taking the money from you she will not have gotten rid of it,
let it be your decision to burn it, if you wish,
lest she have wax with which she may make a letter.

The hired *meretrix* is to possess neither letters nor materials for letter writing because in the world of comedy the epistle is a powerful tool that

²⁸ These are not love letters but letters written to enable love affairs, an important difference. For a list of all the letters in Plautus, see the Appendix. There is one instance of epistolary communication in the corpus that occurs outside the comic plot, in the prologue to *Amphitryo*, when Mercury tells the audience not to use *scriptae litterae* to attempt to fix the acting competition (*Amph.* 70). In the real world, letters serve a variety of purposes besides affairs of the heart, but interestingly the medium is nevertheless associated with deception.

²⁹ On the equation of writing and sex, see pp.93–4.

³⁰ According to O'Bryhim (2010), this *cerata tabula* is not a writing tablet but an erotic encaustic portrait onto which a sexy letter could be scratched. O'Bryhim further connects this passage to Pseudolus' joke about Phoenicium “lying in the wax” at *Pseud.* 36 (on which see pp.100–2). For this idea, see also Slater (2004), 171.

serves to transact sex as well as to get girls like Philaenium out of the clutches of *militēs* like Diabolus – and into the clutches of other men. So is the medium used in *Bacchides* to steal Bacchis away from Cleomachus for Mnesilochus. Let us turn to Chrysalus' first round of trickery.

Kinetic Letters

Upon his return to Athens, Chrysalus swiftly lays the groundwork to steal cash from Nicobulus to get Bacchis for Mnesilochus. The slave invents a fantastic story about the errand to Ephesus, claiming that after a series of calamities involving a treacherous debtor and pirates, Mnesilochus deposited part of the collected money with Theotimus, the priest of the temple of Diana. Exactly how much is left deliberately ambiguous so that slave and young man can steal *ad libitum* from the gold. This first plan modifies the plot's backstory by feigning that a successful transaction of mediated communication has failed, a lying version of the comic past that entails a new comic future. Chrysalus tells the old man that he must now travel to Ephesus himself to obtain the balance of his money by showing the sign supposedly established between his son and the priest (*Bacch.* 327–30):

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

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

Chrysalus conjures up a part for the *senex* that mimics his son's. Just as Mnesilochus bore Nicobulus' *symbolum* and instructions to Archidemides to retrieve the loaned gold, Nicobulus is to become the courier of his son's *signum* and directives for Theotimus in order to reclaim the very same money. In Chrysalus' scheme, father and son swap roles and the messenger-to-Ephesus scenario is replicated via inversion, shifting from past to future.³¹ Even before his mischief with letters, Chrysalus puts

³¹ This inversionary dynamic is reflected in the language used for the token of authenticity carried by each courier: the Greek of Nicobulus' *symbolum* is turned into a *signum*.

mediated communication to the service of deception, demonstrating skill in using it for comic invention. We should note in particular that his creation of a courier role for Nicobulus generates the stuff of yet another plot in the dramatic future. The *senex*'s absence while traveling to Ephesus would allow for the emancipation that gives rise to comedy in Plautine plots such as *Persa* and *Mostellaria* and even in *Bacchides* itself, since it is while traveling without his father that Mnesilochus gets involved with a *meretrix* and kicks off the fun. Like Plautus, Chrysalus uses messages to make *ludi*, an equation between playwright and dramatic hero that will become explicit in the epistolary dictation scene to come. Further still, the slave's fiction replicates a scenario that has already happened in this plot (a messenger departs Athens for Ephesus to get back the money given on loan), employing existing comic *materia* to create more comedy, and thereby foregrounding the play's reset and repeat to follow.

But the plot Chrysalus contrives is never to be. His scheme is subverted by none other than Mnesilochus himself when Lydus, Pistoclerus' tutor, tells the *adulescens* that his pupil has taken up with a courtesan named Bacchis. Enraged, Mnesilochus comes clean to his father and returns the stolen money, dashing all of Chrysalus' efforts.³² This disaster occurs because the *adulescens* is missing a crucial piece of information. Mnesilochus naturally assumes that Pistoclerus has betrayed him³³ since he does not know that his beloved has a namesake sister. There has been no communication between the two friends after their initial epistolary correspondence between Ephesus and Athens, and their paths have not crossed since Mnesilochus' homecoming.³⁴ A close reading of the text, however, reveals that Pistoclerus has tried to reach his friend, but the news about *two* girls named Bacchis was lost in the mail.

At *Bacch.* 526–9 (after Mnesilochus has returned the money and just before he confronts his friend) Pistoclerus comes on stage speaking these lines back into the brothel:

³² This central episode of *Bacchides* (*Bacch.* 494–562) corresponds to the sections of Menander's *Dis Exapaton* deciphered from the Oxyrhynchus papyrus discovered in the mid twentieth century; see p.18 n.2 and n.3.

³³ It is ironic that Mnesilochus should suspect his friend Pistoclerus whose *sprechender Name* "says" that he has remained faithful (*pistos*), something Mnesilochus should remember since the first part of his name is probably derived from *mneme*, "memory." Both names are original to Plautus.

³⁴ Although Chrysalus has run into Pistoclerus, he, too, is unaware of the two Bacchis girls; see *Bacch.* 719–20.

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

Bacchis, before all other affairs I've put your orders to me –
that I search out Mnesilochus and that I lead him with me to you.
But I really wonder what delays him, if my message/messenger has
reached him.

I'll go look him up in the house here, [to see] if by chance he's at home.

In a detail that has escaped critical notice, Pistoclerus tells the audience that he has sent word to his friend. We can safely assume that this message seeks to apprise Mnesilochus of the current situation, crucial information that would forestall his rash volte-face; viz. that Bacchis has been located at the house of her sister Athenian Bacchis, and that the former remains devoted to Mnesilochus, whereas the latter is now Pistoclerus' girlfriend. But what sort of correspondence has Pistoclerus sent, oral or written? The answer hinges on the definition of *nuntium* in *Bacch.* 528. According to the *OLD*, the word can refer to either a courier bearing a message or to the message itself, two senses that are often difficult to tell apart: although couriers are frequently masculine and messages neuter, this distinction is not always maintained,³⁵ and anyway in some instances impossible to discern given identical inflexions for the two genders in the second declension singular outside the nominative.³⁶ In any "case," whereas the *OLD* claims that *nuntius/nuntium* denotes exclusively oral communication,³⁷ Lewis and Short cite a passage from Livy (42.37.6) in which a messenger called *nuntius* delivers written correspondence, but they classify this usage, equivalent to *tabellarius*, as "very rare."³⁸ Lewis and Short likewise exclude "epistle" as a definition when the word signifies the message itself, with the exception of the legal phrase *nuntium uxori remittere* as a formula for divorce.³⁹ Must we conclude that Pistoclerus has sent an oral message to his friend? Not necessarily. A survey of the Plautine corpus reveals that of seventeen occurrences of the word

³⁵ Cf. e.g. the message about Arrius' mispronunciation at Catull. 84.10: *cum subito affertur nuntius horribilis*.

³⁶ To further confuse the matter, the masculine plural of *nuntius* can also be used to denote a message. Cf. e.g. Cic. *ad Att.* 3.17.1: *de Quinto fratre nuntii nobis tristes nec varii venerant . . .*

³⁷ *OLD*, s.v. 1 and 2. ³⁸ Lewis and Short, s.v. II b.

³⁹ Lewis and Short s.v. II β. At the time of my writing, the *TLL* had not yet reached *nu-* within the letter N.

(including the compound *internuntius*), five very clearly refer to written messages or to specifically epistolary couriers.⁴⁰ *Nuntius* is employed another ten times to refer to verbal communication,⁴¹ whereas the remaining four occurrences are ambiguous, including Pistoclerus' message to Mnesilochus referred to in *Bacch.* 528.⁴² But we can definitively classify this instance of *nuntius* by looking at one of the plainly textual usages of the term in a line spoken by none other than Pistoclerus earlier in the play. In response to Chrysalus' questioning about whether he has accomplished Mnesilochus' orders transmitted by letter, the *adulescens* says this (*Bacch.* 197–8):

*egon ut, quod ab illoc attigisset nuntius,
non impetratum id adveniēti ei redderem?*

As for what the letter/letter-bearing messenger from him had mentioned, wouldn't I deliver it to him accomplished when he arrives?

The similarity of Pistoclerus' expression to that in question (*attigisset nuntius* in *Bacch.* 197, *tetigit nuntius* in *Bacch.* 528) as well as the fact that both are uttered by the same character in reference to the same matter (i.e. Bacchis) indicate that the *adulescens* replies to his friend's letter with a missive of his own.⁴³ Written communication is, after all, only fitting given the topic of the *adulescentes'* correspondence, a continuation of the dialogue initiated by Mnesilochus from abroad; an oral message would jeopardize the secrecy of their exchange about the Bacchis sisters, putting it at risk of being divulged to ears unintended – including those of the pedagogue Lydus, who seeks to put a stop to Pistoclerus' love affair throughout the play.

The foundered epistolary dialogue between the *adulescentes* thus constitutes yet another doublet of mediated communication that stands in contrast with the last. In one set (Nicobulus–Archidemides and “Mnesilochus–Theotimus”) the correspondents conduct *negotium* via the spoken word, whereas in the second (Mnesilochus–Pistoclerus and Pistoclerus–Mnesilochus) they coordinate *voluptas* through writing. But the *adulescentes'* missives are also opposites. Mnesilochus' letter traveled from Ephesus to Athens in the comic past, whereas Pistoclerus' is to be delivered

⁴⁰ *Bacch.* 197; *Curc.* 550; *Mil.* 133; *Pseud.* 603; *Truc.* 412.

⁴¹ *Amph.* 71 (*internuntium*); *Capt.* 375; *Mil.* 986 (*internuntia*), 1225; *Rud.* 352; *Stich.* 274, 275, 305, 392.

⁴² *Bacch.* 528; *Mil.* 1363; *Stich.* 148; *Trin.* 253 (this line contains both *nuntii* and *renuntii*).

⁴³ Whether *nuntius* in *Bacch.* 528 refers to the actual message, as de Melo (2011), 419 translates, or a letter-carrying messenger hardly matters, although in *Bacch.* 197–8 *nuntius* must be referring to the letter itself.

just around the corner in the comic present.⁴⁴ This inversion extends to the epistles' respective fortunes, too: Mnesilochus' letter arrives at Athens having overcome all of the perils associated with a traveling text to successfully reach its addressee and pass on its instructions, but Pistoclus' gets, ironically, lost in the mail despite the very short journey it has to make.

A wayward letter fails to prevent Mnesilochus' misapprehension, and as a result the lover tattles and spoils Chrysalus' plans. His dramatic sabotage, however, turns out to be productive for the plot when it forces the comic hero to start again *da capo* by cooking up another ruse and another plot for the comedy in course. Mnesilochus and Pistoclus' failed epistolary exchange, then, is kinetic by virtue of its very failure. *Bacchides*' dramatic action is precipitated entirely by mediated communication, verbal and graphic, successful and failed. The plot's premise is lined up by the set of messages in the comic past which act as bridge between the past and present by transmitting the action that transpires in another time and place (at Ephesus, before the play has begun) to the here and now of the dramatic world.⁴⁵ In their turn these messages set into motion a chain of correspondence that drives the action forward, forming the first two moves in a domino effect that culminates in Mnesilochus' undoing of the slave's theft. His mistake, itself precipitated by an epistolary mix-up, will be remedied by more of the same, when Chrysalus resuscitates the plot and remounts his attack using letters.

***Bacchides*: Take Two**

Ready, Set, Write

Chrysalus re-enters the text at *Bacch.* 640 after a long absence. The last time we saw him (at *Bacch.* 367) he was on his way to give the good news of Nicobulus' deception to Mnesilochus, and he returns proclaiming that his misdeeds far outdo those of his predecessors.⁴⁶ Like his younger master was before him, Chrysalus is now in the dark. He is clueless that his ruse has been ruined, making his celebratory *canticum* ironic for the spectators who have just witnessed its undoing. A despondent Mnesilochus soon fills the slave in and begs him to try his hand once more at trickery. Although

⁴⁴ The sending of messages to characters nearby or even just next door is not unusual in the Plautine corpus; compare, for instance, the exchange between Toxilus and Lemniselenis in *Persa* (on which see pp.60–70).

⁴⁵ For more on this sort of dramatic transmission by letter, see Chapter 4.

⁴⁶ On this agonistic stance as a metaliterary comment referring to *Bacchides*' Greek model, see Barbiero (2016).

just caught in a lie, Chrysalus rises to the occasion and embarks upon another round of scheming to make a second (and third) blitz on Nicobulus' gold. But it will not be easy. Thanks to Mnesilochus' confession, Nicobulus is now on the alert. The *adulescens* reports that his father proclaimed he would never again believe anything Chrysalus says, even if it were the truth itself (*Bacch.* 699–700):

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

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

Chrysalus declares that he will use the old man's suspicions to his advantage. If Nicobulus believes that he is a cheating liar, Chrysalus will act the part (*Bacch.* 701: *emungam hercle hominem probe hodie, ne id nequiquam dixerit*; "By Hercules, I'll thoroughly cheat that man today, so that he will not have said that in vain"). The slave contrives a psychological assault on Nicobulus that will first reel him in with the truth to then coax him with lies, an epistolary plan that both originates in and works on the basis of writing. He composes a letter that warns Nicobulus against yet another attack on his gold. By reporting what Chrysalus really *is* fixing to do, this document tells the truth, and so contains precisely what Nicobulus declared he would never accept if it came from Chrysalus. But this information will not come from his slave, or at least allegedly. To disguise Chrysalus' hand, the text is inscribed and "sent" by the old man's tattletale son, a strategy which plays into Nicobulus' distrust of Chrysalus on the one hand, and his trust in Mnesilochus on the other. On the basis of the *adulescens*' recent confession and the *servus*' misdeed, Nicobulus will certainly believe tidings consonant with a truth he already takes for granted.

Showing himself to be a consummate epistolary schemer, Chrysalus curates every aspect of the letter's creation to ensure its credibility. Mnesilochus is commandeered to scribe, writing the slave's text in his own hand so that Nicobulus will recognize its "authenticity" (*Bacch.* 729–30):

*nam propterea <te> volo
scribere ut pater cognoscat litteras quando legat.*

Now, I want you to write for this reason,
so that your father will recognize the letters when he reads them.

The epistle is fastened with the *adulescens*' personal seal and will be delivered by the very party it convicts of guilt to ensure that Nicobulus will not suspect that the letter announcing renewed treachery is itself an act of renewed treachery. In short, Chrysalus creates the perfect document for his deception⁴⁷ which is guaranteed to succeed in its ironically duplicitous purpose of persuading Nicobulus of the truth because it is exactly what it purports to be. As opposed to faked epistles in other Plautine letter plays which the characters are anxious to make appear genuine, this truth-telling missive is actually inscribed by the very person whose authorship it forges.

The scene of writing begins when Chrysalus directs his young master to take up the stylus and convert his speech into text (*Bacch.* 728–9):

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

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

The audience watches as Chrysalus devises the epistolary content and Mnesilochus commits it to the *tabellae* word for word, imprinting the wax according to the slave's commands. In a typical instance of comic role reversal,⁴⁸ the *adulescens* is transformed into Chrysalus' *instrumentum*, albeit an *instrumentum mutum*. Mnesilochus forfeits his voice in deference to that of the *servus imperator*, who orders him to write to his father as follows (*Bacch.* 731, 734–6, 739–44):

MN: *quid scribam?* CH: *salutem tuo patri verbis tuis . . .*
 MN: *'Mnesilochus salutem dicit suo patri.'* CH: *adscribe hoc cito:*
'Chrysalus mihi usque quaque loquitur nec recte, pater,
quia tibi aurum reddidi et quia non te defrudaverim' . . .
 CH: *'nunc, pater mi, proin tu ab eo ut caveas tibi:*
sycophantias componit, aurum ut aps ted auferat;
et profecto se ablaturum dixit.' *plane adscribito.*
 MN: *dic modo.* CH: *'atque id pollicetur se daturum aurum mihi*
quod dem scortis quodque in lustris comedim, congraecem, pater.
sed, pater, vide ne tibi hodie verba det: quaeso cave.'

⁴⁷ In so doing, Chrysalus shows himself to be conversant with the literary tradition. He is here recreating the ur-scene of Greek epistolography from the exchange between Glaucus and Diomedes in *Iliad* 6, which features Bellerophon unwittingly bearing the message of his own damnation. Chrysalus explicitly compares himself to Bellerophon at *Bacch.* 810–11. On this and other mythological references in *Bacchides*' delivery scenes, see Barbiero (2018).

⁴⁸ See Slater (2004), 175. See also Ketterer (1986b), 106–7 on how the props serve to visually represent this inversion.

MN: What am I to write? CH: A greeting to your father in your words . . .⁴⁹

MN: ‘Mnesilochus greets his father.’ CH: Now write this, quickly: ‘Chrysalus thoroughly reprimanded me, father, and not rightfully either, because I gave the gold back to you and because I didn’t deceive you. . .’

CH: ‘Now, father, for this reason be on your guard from him:
He’s composing tricks to steal the gold from you; and he said that he’ll certainly take it away.’ Write clearly.

MN: Okay, keep talking. CH: ‘And moreover, he promises that he’ll give me the gold,
so that I can give it to harlots, squander it in brothels, live it up like a Greek, father.
But, father, see to it that he doesn’t pull the wool over your eyes today.
Please, watch out.’

Although Chrysalus effectively masks his voice by having Mnesilochus inscribe the letter *manu sua*, this document comically alludes to the slave’s authorship throughout. Nicobulus will understand *sycophantias componit* in *Bacch.* 740 as referring to the misdeeds Chrysalus is cooking up, but this phrase also hints at the slave’s actual composition of the duplicitous epistle, via *componere*’s usual definition of “to write up.” The letter “says” “Chrysalus is *writing up* tricks to steal your gold” – which is exactly the case. This play on words points to the fundamental equation between writing and scheming in Plautus’ epistolary comedies: as the basis of the stratagem to follow, the text is a *sycophantia*, a piece of mischief.⁵⁰ Likewise, *verba dare* is a classic Plautine idiom for the act of deception, though the expression here is another joke on dictation: Chrysalus literally gives Mnesilochus words to inscribe on the *tabellae*. *Verba dare* also bespeaks the mechanics of this textual ploy, which scripts lines for the *adulescens* (the words inscribed on the wax “become” Mnesilochus’ speech),⁵¹ as well as for Nicobulus himself, who will be fooled (*verba dare*) into uttering yet more words: “Take this gold, Chrysalus.” So, too, the phrase in *Bacch.* 741: the slave does really say that he will steal the gold straight away; in fact, he says this very phrase to Mnesilochus as he dictates the text, and thereby simultaneously promises that he will provide means

⁴⁹ This expression is yet another joke on the letter’s dictation: Chrysalus tells Mnesilochus to write *verba tua*, but is, in fact, dictating *verba sua*!

⁵⁰ Further on the equation of scheming and writing, see pp.37–8.

⁵¹ And Mnesilochus thus takes up a dramatic role; see p.37.

for Mnesilochus' comic indulgence (*Bacch.* 742). Our anticipation of Nicobulus' clumsy reading gives this double talk its comic force. Despite the fact that he is handed a letter that spells out its own forgery, the addressee/victim will be tricked into thinking that the text contains Mnesilochus' own words.

Exactly how Chrysalus' epistolary truth-telling will accomplish his comic ends remains unexplained. We know what the letter says ("Father, beware: Chrysalus is plotting against you") and what it "says" ("Father, you are being tricked as you read this letter that Chrysalus wrote in my hand"), but what this message *means* for the slave's scheming remains elusive because Chrysalus refuses to provide hermeneutic insight into the text to anyone, including the external spectators. Our perspective is aligned with that of the puzzled Mnesilochus, who enacts our bewilderment when he asks (*Bacch.* 749–50):

*opsecro, quid istis ad istunc usust conscriptis modum,
ut tibi ne quid credat atque ut vincitum te adseruet domi?*

Please, what's the use of this letter written in this way,
so that he entrusts nothing to you and guards you, tied up, at home?

Chrysalus evades his master's question (*Bacch.* 751: *quia mi ita lubet. potin ut cures te atque ut ne parcas mihi?* "Because that's what I wanna do. Can't you just mind your own business and spare me?"), and the state of knowledge with which this scene began is inverted. Initially oblivious to the first ruse's ruination, the slave now keeps his dramatic omniscience to himself, leaving us to wonder how his truthful epistle will engender a second round of deception.

This scene of writing/scheming in which Chrysalus' new stratagem comes into being functions as a self-conscious representation of the slave-hero's plotting abilities. Chrysalus' status as internal dramaturge is made literally concrete in what amounts to an onstage depiction of theatrical invention, for ancient authors dictated their work to scribes,⁵² and *tabellae* provided the

⁵² See the seminal observation of Slater (1985/2000), 88: "Chrysalus changes from an improvisatory playwright (a player first among equals) to a literary one. Ancient poets usually dictated. Chrysalus is dictating a play here: directly, by writing a speech for Mnesilochus, and indirectly, as the subsequent course of the play is shaped by the letter." And yet Slater sees the improvisatory powers of Plautus' slave-heroes as trumping anything they accomplish via the written word; so Slater (2004), 176: "literacy and its techniques are subordinate then to the improvisatory powers of the Plautine comic hero. He can steal others' texts and write them into his own plots or compose his own texts, true and false. The source of the texts ultimately does not matter, for Plautus' tricksters know it does not matter who writes the texts, as long as they interpret them."

material support for their composition.⁵³ *Ludi* – deceitful tricks synonymous with and identical to comedy – come into being on and through text. By analogy the forged epistle represents the script for Chrysalus’ ploy, a figurative role it continues to fulfill throughout *Bacchides*’ play-within-the-play. Not only is the document inscribed with Mnesilochus’ “lines,” but it sets out a specific role for the *adulescens* (“second-time tattletale”), his father (“forewarned victim”), and even Chrysalus himself (“unknowing messenger,” since the slave pretends to obliviously deliver a letter that indicts him), and sets out a premise that will be realized upon its delivery and activation. Onstage composition establishes the forthcoming ruse as drama, portraying Chrysalus’ subterfuge as a mini, script-based performance inset within the comedy, and the slave himself as its author-architect. Epistolarity’s affinity to the dramatic medium is thus put to the service of metatheatre, the portrayal of theatrical performance within a theatrical performance, but also metapoesis, the portrayal of poetic production within poetry. The play’s portrait of its own inception at the hands of a clever auteur must reflect the playwright’s literary activity; Chrysalus’ comic writing represents that of Plautus himself. Such self-reflexive poetics go back to the beginnings of Greek literature,⁵⁴ and the suggestion that Plautus identifies with his slave-heroes is nothing new; *servi callidi* who take control of the plot and determine its course by staging a theatrical trick have long been read as the playwright’s in-play representatives.⁵⁵ The novelty of my reading lies in its focus on the medium Plautus employs to cast an image of his own creativity within the play. Writing inside the comedy which makes comedy indicates that the comedy itself originates in a script.⁵⁶ Contrary, then, to what much recent scholarship has asserted about the essentially oral nature of his oeuvre,⁵⁷ Plautus’ own text conceptualizes itself as text, a claim which does not rely on a metapoetic reading of *Bacchides*’ dictation scene alone. The equation of

⁵³ So in Pseudolus’ famous monologue (quoted and discussed on p.38) the *poeta* employs *tabulae* for his creative composition, but the image is found elsewhere too; cf. e.g. Callim. *Aet.* Pf. fr.1 21–2: καὶ γὰρ ὅτε πρῶτιστον ἔμοις ἐπὶ δέλτου ἔθηκα / γούνασιν. . . For these lines in *Pseudolus* as a possible allusion to Callimachus, see Farrell (1991), 289.

⁵⁴ Homer fashions various images of his own bardic activity throughout the epics. Thus Achilles sings of the *klea andrōn* in *Iliad* 9 and in *Odyssey* 8 bard Demodocus sings three songs which mirror the song that contains this depiction. On the latter as generically self-conscious *mise-en-abymes*, see Rinon (2006).

⁵⁵ First suggested by Barchiesi (1969) and subsequently elaborated by Wright (1975), Chiarini (1979), Slater (1985/2000), 97–120 and Hallett (1993). For the implications of Plautus’ identification with a non-person under Roman law and a possible connection to the hierarchy of literary genres, see Sharrock (2014).

⁵⁶ A similar dynamic has been discerned in Euripidean tragedy. See p.187 n.48.

⁵⁷ For this critical discourse, see pp.10–12.

comic invention and textual composition is made explicit in *Pseudolus*, whose eponymous *servus* compares his own comic scheming to the act of writing and himself to a poet (*Pseud.* 401–5).⁵⁸

*sed quasi poeta, tabulas quom cepit sibi,
quaerit quod nusquam gentiumst, reperit tamen,
facit illud veri simile quod mendacium est,
nunc ego poeta fiam: viginti minas,
quae nunc nusquam sunt gentium, inveniam tamen.*

But just like a poet, when he takes to his writing tablets,
seeks what is nowhere on earth and yet finds it,
and makes what is a lie resemble the truth,
now I shall become a poet: 20 *minae*,
which are now nowhere on earth, I shall yet find.

Poetae make (literally, from the Greek ποιέω, “to make”) *poemata* – written compositions in verse, which is what Plautine comedy presents itself as throughout but especially within the letter plays. Consider what *Asinaria*’s *lena* Cleareta says in response to an accusation that she is being cruel in her dealings with a lover from whom she is demanding yet more money and gifts (*Asin.* 173–5):

*quid me accusas, si facio officium meum?
nam neque fictum usquamst neque pictum neque scriptum in poematis
ubi lena bene agat cum quiquam amante quae frugi esse volt.*

Why are you reprimanding me if I’m just doing my job?
For never has it been [represented] in sculpture, nor [painted] in a painting or
even written in poems
that a *lena* who wants to be a financial success treats any lover well.

Cleareta defends herself on the basis of her stock character: she is greedy by comic convention. The *poemata* in which depictions of her role occur can be nothing but theatrical scripts (where except in popular drama do we encounter female pimps and prostitutes?)⁵⁹ such as the very one in which these lines occur. *Asinaria*, like *Bacchides* and the rest of Plautus’ plays, is a *poema*.

⁵⁸ On this scene of writing and the letter *qua script*, see Feeney (2010), 287–8. Aliter Christenson (2020), 196: “While *Pseudolus* seems to be thinking of the scripting of a play, the wax tablet readily allows for erasure and revision and so it is also conducive to improvisational modes of drama.” But don’t inscription and revision suggest the *opposite* of improvisation?

⁵⁹ In later ages comedy’s cast of characters will appear in other genres, such as Roman elegy and epistolography of the second sophistic. But in Plautus’ day, prostitutes, *lenae* and young men in love are exclusive to the stage.

And yet the inception of a new plot in *Bacchides* occurs through the very opposite of the creation in writing described by Pseudolus. It is a (meta) dramatic undoing of sorts that happens when Mnesilochus puts Chrysalus' speech onto wax. Dictation rewinds the act of performance by reversing the transformation in medium it entails: the scene is converted back into text as Chrysalus articulates content to Mnesilochus *ad scribendum*, for the slave's lines move from speech back into their original medium of writing when they are transferred onto the *tabellae*. That which is returned to the script becomes the substance of Chrysalus' new plot, *unperformed comic materia* put back into writing until its reactivation on stage later when the letter script is read out and its dramatic force unleashed. Implicated as it is in simultaneously unwriting and rewriting the comedy, *Bacchides'* dictation sequence is "a scene of writing whose boundaries crumble off into an abyss".⁶⁰ The text that thereby comes into being is a hinge connecting the play to the play-within-the-play, and yet its written content, which is simultaneously part of both the one and the other, muddles the boundary between them. The very premise of the letter reproduces a plotline that has already featured in *Bacchides* – Mnesilochus' confession of Chrysalus' mischief to Nicobulus. And the plot this text serves to enact likewise replicates the substance of the comedy it inhabits: in the internal *fabula* the slave will do twice what he has already done once, as is in fact written into the epistolary script and so rewound for a replay: "Chrysalus is fixing to steal the *senex's* gold which he will give to Mnesilochus for comic fun." Chrysalus' use of the plot's undoing for its redoing (that is, his exploitation of Mnesilochus' tattle-telling and Nicobulus' resulting suspicions as his plan's foundation) is thus made literal, inscribed onto writing tablets that fold theater and metatheatre in on themselves. In this way the play-within-the-play's frame of reference, its existence as a distinct, textual entity within *Bacchides*, dissipates into the larger comedy in accordance with Derrida's paradox of parergonal logic: the literary frame is always being framed by part of its contents. Chrysalus' mini-plot cannibalizes *but at the same time repeats* its frame – which is the play that contains it.

One layer out, Plautus' comedy exists within the same relationship of textual dependence as that of the internal playwright. *Bacchides* is itself a repeat, its contents traceable to and located in another text. Although the

⁶⁰ Thus Derrida (1975), 101 as translated by Johnson (1977), 480 in her critique of Derrida's analysis of Poe's *The Purloined Letter*. These two articles are part of a triad of interpretations: Derrida was responding to Lacan's "Le séminaire sur 'La Lettre volée'", given in 1955 and published in a revised version in Lacan (1966).

surviving fragments do not allow us to reconstruct the Greek model in full, they reveal that in *Dis Exapaton* Mnesilochus' Greek equivalent, Sostratos, likewise returned money stolen for merrymaking to his father, forcing his slave Syrus to (somehow) do it all over again. *Bacchides* is thus a repetitive repetition of a repetitive play, framed by its own content and existing "within" its original for anyone aware of its status qua translation.⁶¹ As a mirror of sorts that reflects back upon itself the outer frame (i.e. the larger play), Chrysalus' epistle replicates *Bacchides*' unframeability as a repeat and thereby the dynamic between model poet and translator; that is, Menander: Plautus::Plautus:Chrysalus. Second position in both analogies brings along with it a circumscription on originality expressed in Derrida's paradox, namely that Chrysalus is bound to repeat the content of his Plautine frame just as Plautus is bound to repeat that of his Menandrian source. This chain of dramatic agency contains, however, an expression of originality in the form of comic one-upmanship. Each second place playwright outdoes his predecessor numerically in trickery: Chrysalus' *fabula* features two tricks to Plautus' one, just as *Bacchides* contains three separate deceptions to the two signaled in the title of the Greek play, "Double Deceiver".⁶²

In this way Plautus simultaneously reflects upon and flouts his relationship of dependence to the source text, employing writing as a tool of internal dramaturgy to create a refracted image of the frame that symbolizes his creative process of *vortere*. We will see this dynamic at work again in the other letter plays. But for now, back to *Bacchides*.

Bait and Switch

After the epistle for the ruse has been composed, Chrysalus directs Mnesilochus and Pistoclerus in their roles, setting the stage for the performance to follow (*Bacch.* 753–8):

animum advortite.
Mnesiloche et tu, Pistoclere, iam facite in biclinio
cum amica sua uterque accubitum eatis, ita negotiumst,
atque ibidem ubi nunc sunt lecti strati potetis cito.
... ubi erit accubitum semel,
ne quoquam exurgatis, donec a me erit signum datum.

⁶¹ This frame on the Latin translation is made literal by the didascalical references which actually frame the plays with their own content.

⁶² The matter of the number of tricks in both *Dis Exapaton* and *Bacchides* is complicated; see Barbiero (2016).

Pay attention.

Mnesilochus, and you, Pistoclerus, now make it so that each of you goes to lie down on a dining couch with his girlfriend. That's what's up,

and in that same place where the beds have been made up (that very place where you'll soon get laid) – quickly, get wasted.

And don't get up to go anywhere until I give you the signal.

He himself dons the mask of “unknowing messenger” to deliver the tricky missive, setting his deception in motion by unleashing a text into the fray. As he is about to make his debut, Chrysalus reflects aloud upon his ploy and its method of deception (*Bacch.* 763–5):

*sed nunc truculento mi atque saevo usus senest;
nam non conducit huic sycophantiae
senem tranquillum <mi> esse ubi me aspexerit.*

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

Unlike his first ruse, which seized upon Nicobulus' obliviousness to rob him blind, Chrysalus' second plan requires the *senex* to be angry and suspicious. This complex intrigue capitalizes upon Nicobulus' rage by using it against him, as Chrysalus implies in his proclamation upon the old man's grumbling entrance on stage (*Bacch.* 772–3):

*salvos sum, iratus est senex. nunc est mihi
adeundi ad hominem tempus.*

I'm safe! The geezer is angry.
Now's the time for me to get at the man.

Slater has elucidated the joke here, which alludes to a Roman proverb originating in the world of theater.⁶³ He has also perceived the dramatic self-consciousness of Chrysalus' lines, observing that “the fact that the *senex* is *iratus* is a theatrical given: it is in his mask.”⁶⁴ The scheming *servus* acknowledges his use of generic convention to score another victory against Nicobulus, but also demonstrates sensitivity to the importance of time in

⁶³ *Salva res est, saltat senex.* See Slater (1985/2000), 89. The origin of the saying is a theatrical performance at the Apolline games of 211 BC, when the continued dancing of an old actor despite the threat of war (a rumor about an invasion had driven all the spectators from the audience) ensured that the ritual of the performance was not interrupted and did not need to be repeated. On the proverb, see Duckworth (1952/1992), 13.

⁶⁴ Slater (1985/2000), 89 n.22.

epistolary consignment: Chrysalus evidently realizes that the recipient's state of mind at the moment of delivery can affect a missive's reading. Much like a conversation *viva voce*, an epistolary dialogue should ideally take place when the addressee is of a suitable disposition to receive the news contained beneath the seal. Cicero reflects upon this dynamic of letter writing in an epistle to Brutus (Cic. *ad fam.* 11.16.1):⁶⁵

permagni interest quo tibi haec tempore epistula reddita sit, utrum cum sollicitudinis aliquid haberes an cum ab omni molestia vacuus esses. itaque ei praecepi quem ad te misi ut tempus observaret epistulae tibi reddendae. nam quem ad modum coram qui ad nos intempestive adeunt molesti saepe sunt, sic epistulae offendunt non loco redditae. si autem, ut spero, nihil te perturbat, nihil impedit, et ille cui mandavi satis scite et commode tempus ad te cepit adeundi, confido me quod velim facile a te impetraturum.

It makes a great difference when this letter is delivered to you, whether at a time when something is bothering you or when you are free from all anxiety. Therefore I have instructed the man I've sent to you to look out for the right moment for handing over the letter to you: for just as those men who arrive inopportunistly are often an annoyance in person, so, too, do letters delivered at the wrong time offend. But if, as I hope, nothing worries or distracts you and that man to whom I entrusted [the letter] is sufficiently clever in seizing upon a time for approaching you, I'm sure that I'll easily obtain from you what I want.

Like Cicero's messenger, Chrysalus looks out for the perfect time to strike. Luckily for him, the requisite mood for epistolary reception is the naturally furious one of Nicobulus' mask. The *senex iratus* is always ready for "Mnesilochus" letter and so he cannot but fall for this well-laid trap, which uses the characteristics inscribed on his mask to fool him.

Once he has acknowledged the mark of his son's *signum* and therefore the letter's (supposed) authenticity, Nicobulus reads the duplicitous document silently.⁶⁶ He then ducks backstage only to swiftly return in the company of two slaves whom he orders to tie Chrysalus up. The *senex* has been wholly convinced of the truth reported by the missive (*Bacch.* 803–7):

⁶⁵ On this passage, see also Jenkins (2006), 45–6.

⁶⁶ Although Jenkins (2005), 386 assumes that Nicobulus' reading takes place off stage, Barsby (1986), 158 persuasively argues that Nicobulus reads the letter on stage and only afterwards heads backstage to summon his slaves to tie Chrysalus up.

NI: *eho tu, † loquitatusne es gnato meo †*
male per sermonem, quia mi id aurum reddidit,
et te dixisti id aurum ablaturum tamen
per sycophantiam? CH: egone istuc dixi? NI: ita.
 CH: *quis homost qui dicat me dixisse istuc?*

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

Nicobulus' accusations play right into Chrysalus' hands. The addressee has fallen for the truth-telling missive and unknowingly becomes implicated in the text's play on its own creation via dictation, repeatedly using words associated with speech to describe the letter's contents. He accuses Chrysalus of speaking, and the slave does not miss the opportunity to underline the joke, incredulously repeating the old man's charge and repeating the verb *dicere* threefold in two lines: "That's what *I* said? What man said that I said such a thing?" (*Bacch.* 806–7). But that is *exactly* what Chrysalus said. The text of "Mnesilochus" missive is a transcript of the slave's speech transferred to wax through the process of dictation. What is more, although the old man read the missive silently, he now repeats its contents almost verbatim, adding another level of comedy to Chrysalus' ironic questions in *Bacch.* 805–6: Who says that Chrysalus said these things? None other than Nicobulus, repeating the slave's *own* words. In this light, the warning at the end of the epistle (*Bacch.* 744: *sed, pater, vide ne tibi hodie verba det: quaeso cave!* "But father, see to it that he doesn't trick you / give you words: please, watch out!") gains an extra layer of irony. Chrysalus has not only successfully tricked Nicobulus (*verba dare*), but he has in the process literally given the *senex* words: the old man repeats the text of the missive, following the script composed for him to the letter. All of this repetition is signaled on the lexical level via the rare frequentative *loquitari* in *Bacch.* 803, and indeed Chrysalus' words have been said over and over again, dictated, written, read and now repeated aloud by the old man. In the process, the missive's contents jump to-and-fro from word to text, changing back into dialogue from the written form they took on upon the document's inscription. The material unperformed in the dictation scene is now re-realized on stage, signaling the beginning of Chrysalus' plot. And here we go: as per the epistle's instructions, the old man constrains his slave to keep him from going through with his devious plans, convinced that for the second time now, Mnesilochus' warnings

have put the brakes on Chrysalus' mischief. But by trusting in the *adulescens'* epistle, the hapless *senex* has been hoodwinked. Thus the bait. Now the switch.

The first stage of Chrysalus' plan successfully played into the effects of his first, spoiled ploy by at once affirming the old man's distrust of his slave and his trust in Mnesilochus. This is now inverted by undermining the latter.⁶⁷ Chrysalus turns the tables, hinting to the *senex* that by lending credence to the letter he is being fooled – which of course he actually is (*Bacch.* 814–15):

*o stulte, stulte, nescis nunc venire te;
atque in eopse astas lapide, ut praeco praedicat.*

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

This is double talk that speaks to the complicated mechanics underlying Chrysalus' scheme. Nicobulus is being set up to change his mind about Mnesilochus. The slave will persuade the *senex* that his son is not the stand-up telltale he appears to be (*Bacch.* 786: *nosces tu illum actutum quali' sit*; "You'll know right away what sort he is"), convincing Nicobulus that the true report of the epistle is actually false. But the spectators perceive the real meaning behind Chrysalus' words, which refer to Nicobulus' comic victimization. By being led to believe that his son is deceiving him, the old man actually *is* being deceived by Chrysalus. The slave now replaces the truth with fiction by undercutting Mnesilochus' credibility, asserting that Nicobulus will even beg the slave to take his gold once he knows the "truth" about the young man (*Bacch.* 824–7):

NI: *numquam auferes hinc aurum.* CH: *atqui iam dabis.*
NI: *dabo?* CH: *atque orabis me quidem ultro ut auferam,
quom illum rescisces criminatorem meum
quanto in periclo et quanta in pernicie siet.*

NI: You'll never take the gold away from here. CH: And yet, you shall
presently give it to me.
NI: I'll give it? CH: In fact, you shall moreover beg me, yes indeed, to take
it away,
when you shall discover in the midst of how much danger and
destruction is that accuser of mine.

⁶⁷ Rizzo (1990), 23 observes: "attraverso le due lettere egli [Chrysalus] determina un netto rovesciamento di situazione modificando in suo favore sentimenti e disposizione d'anima del vecchio e riuscendo così nell'impresa, apparentemente impossibile, di riacquistarne la fiducia."

Chrysalus wastes no time in showing his elder master exactly what sort of *periculum* and *perniciis* Mnesilochus is into. The internal playwright leads Nicobulus across the stage, directing his gaze to the *mise en scène* prepared in advance (and more of the truth revealed for the sake of deception) – the *adulescens*, together with his friend and ally Pistoclerus, lying in love with their girlfriends in the brothel next door.⁶⁸ Nicobulus is stunned at the sight, which leads the old man to realize that his faith in Mnesilochus was misplaced (*Bacch.* 836):

interii miser!

Wretch that I am, I'm done for!

The *senex* will now do what he swore he would never do: put his trust in the wily slave.

A Most Convenient Lie

Now that he has exploited the truth to fool Nicobulus and invert his sentiments of trust and distrust in his son and his slave, Chrysalus moves on to fiction. He fabricates a story about Bacchis' identity, alleging that Mnesilochus' lover is a free, married woman. But Chrysalus will not be the one to tell this lie. In a move that blurs the line between reality and fiction inside the fiction but which also neatly aligns Chrysalus' internal dramaturgy with the plot of the play he inhabits (the slave comments at *Bacch.* 844: *per tempus hic venit miles mihi*; "The soldier has come here just in the nick of time for me"), *miles gloriosus* Cleomachus, who is not in on the deception, nevertheless sets it up when he first appears on stage (*Bacch.* 842–3):

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

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

The trick lies in the ambiguity of Cleomachus' words. He thunders on about the unlawful retention of his *mulier*, a term that can mean

⁶⁸ Chrysalus has cleverly taken advantage of the conventional comic stage to set the scene for the *senex* to catch Mnesilochus *in flagrante delicto*: the Bacchis sisters live next door to Nicobulus and all the action takes place on the street before the two houses. This configuration will also be of key importance in the next scene, when the raging soldier Cleomachus comes in search of Bacchis and her lover.

“mistress,” “woman” or “wife.” Chrysalus adds to the equivocation by informing Nicobulus that this angry soldier is Bacchis’ *vir*, which can, likewise, mean “lover” or “husband” (*Bacch.* 851: *vir hic est illius mulieris quacum accubat*; “This is the man/husband of the woman/wife with whom [Mnesilochus] is lying.”) The slave manipulates Cleomachus’ voice to do the lying for him, just as he uses the hand of Mnesilochus to compose the duplicitous letter. Employing the agency of others, Chrysalus successfully hides himself and keeps Nicobulus from suspecting his involvement in the events unfolding on stage. And, once again, the old man is completely deceived. Terrified that Cleomachus will catch sight of Mnesilochus lying with his “wife” in the house next door⁶⁹ (perfectly possible thanks to Chrysalus’ use of the stage space), Nicobulus is convinced to release the schemer so that he can strike a bargain with Cleomachus. Via a carefully executed performance, Chrysalus negotiates with the soldier on his master’s behalf and gets Nicobulus to pledge 200 gold *nummi* for Mnesilochus’ safety – i.e. his happily ever after with Bacchis. Once this transaction is complete, Chrysalus exits to (supposedly) reprimand Mnesilochus for his bad behavior. The dupe remains on stage, suspicious about what has just transpired (*Bacch.* 919–24):

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

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

The *senex*’s impulse to reread his son’s missive points to yet another attribute of graphic communication that distinguishes it from oral correspondence. As a stable repository of information, epistles can be preserved for reiteration. A dialogue transacted by letter can be (re)enacted at will, allowing the addressee to consider and reconsider his interlocutor’s words and, perhaps, reinterpret the letter’s meaning on a second reading.

⁶⁹ Chrysalus uses the technical legal term for adulterers caught *in flagrante delicto* to describe Mnesilochus’ predicament (*Bacch.* 858): *iam manifesto hominem opprimet*.

Epistolary interpretation, however, is confined to and by the text itself.⁷⁰ In this instance Chrysalus' role as "unknowing messenger" preempts any difficult questions from Nicobulus, who can rely only on his own reading to decipher the truth. Limited by his superficial understanding of the forged text, the old man is thoroughly deceived. He persists in believing that the signed and sealed letter from his son is real and truthful (which it is), because the *senex* cannot imagine why Mnesilochus would blow the whistle on Chrysalus' scheming if the slave were doing his son's dirty bidding (which he is). The key to this ruse is the *servus*' manipulation of the epistolary process and his appropriation of the *adulescens*' voice to tell the truth. By delivering an authentic document written by Mnesilochus that indicts him, Chrysalus fools Nicobulus into thinking that he has had no part in a letter which he has masterminded from conception to consignment.

The slave is not yet done with his epistolary mischief. While Nicobulus contemplates the letter, Chrysalus is off stage composing another text, dictating a second missive to Mnesilochus which will serve to steal more gold from the old man. Nicobulus' vow to reread the tablets at *Bacch.* 923 is thus proleptically ironic, anticipating the *senex*'s forthcoming re-victimization at the hands of *Bacchides*' epistolary miscreant. Nicobulus will read through a letter again, and again will he be tricked by it. Moreover, the old man's proclamation that it is right to trust a sealed letter (*Bacch.* 924) guarantees that he will fall for the doublet ruse, which will consist of another missive signed and sealed by Mnesilochus himself. As Jenkins notes: "Nicobulus nevertheless clings to the letter as a sliver of sanity amid the lunacy. He is simply unable to admit that *writing* could be the cause of mayhem."⁷¹ But it is.

An Epic Canticum

Chrysalus soon returns on stage singing an elaborate *canticum* (*Bacch.* 925–78). The song is a mythological tour de force in which the slave likens his various misdeeds throughout the play to the three fates of Troy and the Greek sack of the city. This extended metaphor culminates in the equation of the comedy's second, forthcoming letter to the Trojan horse,⁷²

⁷⁰ Unless, of course, the missive is accompanied by a messenger equipped to act as a hermeneutic intermediary: see p.24.

⁷¹ Jenkins (2005), 387.

⁷² Chrysalus also compares his first, subverted trick to the theft of the Palladium, and the first letter to the murder of Troilus, whose death is alluded to at *Il.* 24.257 (*Bacch.* 957–60). On the *tria fata* in

and the identification of the words upon these wooden tablets with the Achaean soldiers hidden within the horse's belly (*Bacch.* 935–6, 941–2):

*nam ego has tabellas opsignatas, consignatas quas fero
non sunt tabellae, sed equos quem misere Achivi ligneum.*

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

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

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

Bacchides' characters are also incorporated into this Trojan scheme. Fittingly, Chrysalus himself is Ulysses, the architect of the plan that finally ends the ten-year war (*Bacch.* 940). His victim Nicobulus is compared with Priam (*Bacch.* 933, 973, 976–8) and the two *adulescentes* Pistoclerus and Mnesilochus are likened to Epeus, the builder of the horse, and Sinon (*Bacch.* 937), respectively, for their roles in helping to realize the deception.⁷³ As Barsby notes of the song, “The essential similarity is that both [the Trojan horse and the letter] are a means to storm the enemy's citadel. They are also both made of wood”.⁷⁴ But Chrysalus' metaphor is much richer than Barsby allows, and hinges on more than a superficial equivalence between the two entities. Chrysalus uses Trojan legend to elucidate his plot, likening the mythical tradition surrounding the *Iliupersis* to a textual deception in order to both illustrate and magnify his accomplishments.

On the most basic level, both the Trojan horse and the comic epistle are a guileful method of infiltrating behind enemy lines, a similarity underscored by Chrysalus when he delivers the *tabellae*. Upon encountering Nicobulus after his lengthy song,⁷⁵ the *servus* hands over the new letter.

Bacchides (which differ from those reported in other ancient sources), see Questa (1965/1975), 64–6 and Barsby (1986), 176.

⁷³ Shifting imagery in the metaphor as well as other narrative inconsistencies have caused some critics to doubt the origin and integrity of the *canticum*, and hence to posit interpolations. Lefèvre (2011), 19 and 102–16 gives a summary of the relevant scholarship.

⁷⁴ Barsby (1986), 174; see also Skafte Jensen (1997), 317–18, who makes essentially the same points, but argues that the terms of comparison in the Trojan *canticum* are not very similar at all. It is her view that the “way in which Chrysalus forces every detail of the myth to have a parallel in his own situation” is “grotesque.”

⁷⁵ Nicobulus seems to be present on stage but unhearing throughout Chrysalus' entire *canticum*: the text gives no indication that the old man has exited at any time between his line at *Bacch.* 924 and the slave's song. This has provoked scholarly controversy. Barsby (1986), 171–2 lays out the problem in detail, concluding that Plautus may have unskillfully adapted the Greek original, which would have had a choral break at this point. But as Slater (1985/2000), 91 n.27 correctly

Once again Chrysalus prompts the old man to recognize his son's seal upon it (*Bacch.* 986: *nosce signum. estne eius?* "Notice the seal. Isn't it his?"). Nicobulus immediately acknowledges his recognition (*Bacch.* 986: *novi*; "I recognize it."). The schemer then encourages his victim to read the message within, and makes a devious aside connecting the present scenario to the Trojan metaphor of his song (*Bacch.* 986–8):

pellege.
nunc superum limen scinditur, nunc adest exitium <illi> Ilio,
turbat equo' lepide ligneus.

(To Nicobulus) Read it through.

(To the audience) Now the upper lintel is sundered, now destruction is upon that Ilium.

Delightfully does the 'wooden horse' make trouble.

The second letter's opening is equated with the dismantling of Troy's walls to allow the enormous wooden horse to pass through. Both are crucial moments in the execution of Ulysses' and Chrysalus' stratagems, representing the schemers' surreptitious invasion. Once the Trojans allow the horse into their city, its fate is sealed. Similarly, Nicobulus' opening of the *tabellae* and his acceptance of the words inscribed within as truly those of his son will lead to his utter deception.⁷⁶ That is, the letter's unsealing amounts to the rupture of Nicobulus' defenses just like that of the Trojan *limen*.⁷⁷

The slave now hands over this disguised siege engine, slyly describing the dictation scene that occurred off stage as he does so (*Bacch.* 982–5):

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

NI: What did he say? CH: He didn't say a word: crying, he was listening in silence to what I was saying.

In silence he inscribed these tablets, which he gave to me signed and sealed. He ordered me to give them to you . . .

observes, Chrysalus and Nicobulus are in "separate imaginative spaces" at this moment in the play, which means that the *senex* simply cannot hear the slave's song.

⁷⁶ After all, the *senex* has just proclaimed his trust in sealed tablets; see *Bacch.* 924 and p.46.

⁷⁷ Skafte Jensen (1997), 317 misses the point when she argues that "the idea of comparing the writing tablet with the wooden horse is ingenious, but the letter will break no lintel when it is given to Nicobulus." On the tradition surrounding the dismantling of the gate, see Austin (1964), 114–15. Quoting Servius, Austin explains that the *superum limen* of the Scaean Gate incorporated the tomb of the city's founder, King Laomedon. To let the horse into the city, the Trojans had to remove the tomb, thereby (in at least one version of the myth) invalidating one of the *fata Troiana*.

Playing upon the spectators' knowledge of the first letter's creation, Chrysalus implies by his ambiguous description that this document is, likewise, a combination of his own words and Mnesilochus' handwriting.⁷⁸ As the slave spoke, his young master listened, inscribed and sealed the tablets. The youth's silence is emphasized, repeated twice over: the voice Nicobulus will hear by reading the letter is that of Chrysalus alone, although it has been disguised as Mnesilochus'.⁷⁹

Nicobulus recites the contents of these wooden tablets aloud, a reading scene that is the corollary of the earlier dictation scene in which Chrysalus composed his letter on stage. *Bacchides*' second tricky missive is a natural complement to its predecessor in that together the letters make up a complete picture of the epistolary process from the moment of composition through to delivery and reception. The same is true of the metatheatrical image generated by these internal texts, since Nicobulus' performance of the second letter resembles a player's reading of the script in acting out his part. By reciting the lines that Chrysalus has written, Nicobulus conforms to the role scripted for him in the play-within-the-play, a role that entails him handing over another sum of cash. This scene at once inverts and completes the representation of the script's composition in the dictation scene, engendering an image of the dramatic text from its inception to its realization. *Bacchides*' set of forged epistles functions as a complete portrait of the theatrical process, mimicking the genesis of the play within the narrative by their corresponding representations of the script as two halves of one whole.

Mnesilochus, the *senex* reads, has sworn by sacred oath to give his beloved 200 *nummi*. He begs his father to pony up the sum lest he perjure himself, money that will be paid over to Bacchis before her imminent departure (*Bacch.* 1028–30):

⁷⁸ Chrysalus alludes to his dictation of the letter again later on in *Bacch.* 1012 and 1018, while Nicobulus reads through the second epistle.

⁷⁹ There is a similar joke on voice in *Bacch.* 979. As Nicobulus becomes aware of Chrysalus' presence on stage, he wonders aloud, *quoianam vox prope me sonat?* His question drives at the heart of the slave's brilliant strategy, for the *senex* has been fooled, and now will be fooled again, this time into thinking that he hears Mnesilochus' own voice in the *tabellae*. As the audience knows, however, Nicobulus has been listening to Chrysalus all along. Slater (1985/2000), 91 has pointed out that the old man's words may also be read as a joke on the unrealistic staging at this part of the play. Nicobulus has been on stage all throughout Chrysalus' fantastic soliloquy, but only hears him now. See further p.48 n.75.

*'ego ius iurandum verbis conceptis dedi,
daturum id me hodie mulieri ante vesperum,
priu' quam a me abiret.'*

'I gave my word by sacred oath
that I would give [the gold] to the woman today, before evening,
before she leaves me.'

The youth asks his father to hand the cash over to Chrysalus (*Bacch.* 997: *pater, ducentos Philippos quaeso Chrysalo / da*; "Father, please, give 200 Philippi to Chrysalus"), since he is too mortified to face the old man himself (*Bacch.* 1007–9):

*'pudet prodire me ad te in conspectum, pater:
tantum flagitium te scire audiui meum,
quod cum peregrini cubui uxore militis.'*

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

Mnesilochus offers an apologia for his letter writing, claiming that it is rooted in shame. The *adulescens* prefers to communicate in writing rather than approach his father in person given what Nicobulus now knows (or believes) he has done. This excuse at once relies upon and confirms the previous scene's premise regarding the identity of Bacchis by amounting to Mnesilochus' confession that he has committed adultery with the soldier's wife. Incidentally, it also highlights a letter's ability to create distance. Although the ancients conceived of epistolary discourse as *sermo absentium* and so as a means of eliminating distance by uniting separated correspondents, it can also be employed as a tool to achieve the opposite effect, particularly in situations of emotional delicacy. Hodkinson observes:

One reason for writing a letter is to express a sentiment or report a fact which one either could not, or would rather not, say in person. That is to say, rather than being motivated by absence, a letter can be used deliberately to ensure this absence at the crucial moment.⁸⁰

Once again Chrysalus demonstrates his sensitivity to the nuances of epistolarity, justifying the *adulescens*' second missive in a single day with an appeal to a particular characteristic of the medium. And, once again, his epistolary trick succeeds. Nicobulus' doubts about Chrysalus' story and

⁸⁰ Hodkinson (2007), 291.

paying off the soldier disappear, and in a stroke the success of the first theft is confirmed and the groundwork for the subsequent one laid.

Like the penetration of the Trojan defenses, the evasion of Nicobulus' suspicions regarding the letter's veracity through psychological manipulation allows the contents of the wooden trick to spill out and wreak havoc. The deceptive words inscribed upon the tablets can now set to work stealing the *senex's* gold. This infiltration is successful because Chrysalus' letter, like Ulysses' horse, is not what it appears to be. Both siege engines pose as innocuous proclamations of surrender. The Greeks pretend to abandon the war on Ilium by their "offering" to Athena, and the letter claims that Mnesilochus is submitting to the *senex's* authority, confessing his guilt and renouncing his affair when in fact he has just purchased Bacchis for himself. The play's second epistle duplicates the approach of its doublet with an important difference: both missives falsely avow capitulation, even if in the first instance the "author" informs on Chrysalus (for the second time in the play), whereas here the *adulescens* incriminates himself.⁸¹

Mnesilochus' role as traitor (both real and phony) throughout *Bacchides* makes his equation with Sinon in Chrysalus' Trojan *canticum* at *Bacch.* 937 especially appropriate. Barsby observes that "Mnesilochus, like Sinon . . . is a pretended deserter, deceiving Nicobulus by denouncing Chrysalus in the same way as Sinon deceived the Trojans by denouncing Ulysses."⁸² But the parts of these two co-conspirators are opposites, too. Mnesilochus is the supposed author of the incriminating letter, composing it in his own hand as if it were really his message, whereas Sinon is the man chosen to remain with the horse at the Trojan city gates, "delivering" the Greek gift to the Trojans.⁸³ A corresponding swap is present in the identification of Chrysalus with Ulysses, the author of the Achaean ruse.

⁸¹ Chrysalus' second letter replicates and reverses the content of his first epistle in other ways, too. Professing an outright lie about Bacchis' identity, "Mnesilochus'" new letter openly asks Nicobulus to hand 200 *nummi* over to Chrysalus, whereas previously he had warned his father to guard his money from falling into the hands of the clever *servus* by telling the truth. Likewise, in his first heist, Chrysalus insisted that Nicobulus would eventually surrender the gold and even beg his slave to take it (*Bacch.* 824–5). Now the *servus* changes his tune, telling the old man not to trust the *adulescens* with any money (*Bacch.* 1027), and disingenuously pretends to refuse to take the cash when Nicobulus, who has fallen for this second ruse, willingly gives it over (*Bacch.* 1059–64).

⁸² Barsby (1986), 174.

⁸³ Although Homer gives this job to Ulysses (see *Od.* 8.492–5), in the epic cycle it is Sinon who is left behind with the horse to accompany it into the walls and then signal the Greek troops to attack; see Scafolgio (2007). In *Bacchides*, Sinon is called *relictus* (*Bacch.* 938) and is referred to as handling a firebrand for signaling (*Bacch.* 939–40), suggesting that Plautus is familiar with this account of the siege. His source, however, need not be the epic cycle directly: Sophocles wrote a *Sinon* as well as a *Laocoön*, lost plays that may, further, have influenced Sinon's depiction in *Aen.* ii, where the trickster plays this very role; see Horsfall (2008), 94.

Within the fictive premise of his ploy, Chrysalus acts the part of messenger and certainly *not* author. These reversals produce a chiasmus between the roles in the comic and mythological scenarios (Figure 1.1).

<i>Bacchides</i>		Trojan myth
Mnesilochus – "author"	=	Sinon - messenger
Chrysalus – "messenger"	=	Ulysses - author

Figure 1.1

This inversion of the perpetrators' and accomplices' duties in activating the two wooden tricks further evinces the resemblance of the mythical Greek siege to an epistolary deception. The Achaean signal ("We surrender and have gone home") is a reified message "sent" to the Trojans by (supposedly) absent authors. And indeed, upon receipt, the addressees are unsure how to "read" it (*Od.* 8.504–10):

αὐτοὶ γάρ μιν Τρῶες ἐς ἀκρόπολιν ἐρύσαντο.
 ὥς ὁ μὲν ἐστήκει, τοὶ δ' ἄκριτα πόλλ' ἀγόρευον
 ἡμενοὶ ἀμφ' αὐτόν· τρίχα δέ σφισιν ἠνδανε βουλή,
 ἢ ἐ διαπλῆξαι κοῖλον δόρυ νηλεῖ χαλκῶ,
 ἢ κατὰ πετρῶων βαλέειν ἐρύσαντας ἐπ' ἄκρις,
 ἢ ἔάν μὲγ' ἄγαλμα θεῶν θελκτῆριον εἶναι,
 τῆ περ δὴ καὶ ἔπειτα τελευτήσεσθαι ἔμελλεν·

For the Trojans themselves had dragged it to the citadel.
 There it stood, and they were saying many things endlessly
 as they sat around it. Three courses of action were pleasing to them:
 To either cut through the hollow wood with ruthless bronze;
 or, having dragged it to the top of the cliffs, to throw it over;
 or to leave it be, as a great, charming ornament of the gods,
 and thereupon, in this last way was it to be.

The Trojans correctly recognize the horse's status as a *sema* – the carrier of a message, a crucial first step in decoding communication that operates outside the linguistic code.⁸⁴ They run into trouble in the next stage of interpretation. Is the horse truly a sign that the Greeks have retreated, or is it a sign of treachery? The recipients fail to correctly decipher it because they are ignorant of the fact that this *sema* is invested with a secondary meaning belying its outward significance. Only the hostile soldiers concealed within the horse's belly reveal the alleged votive offering's true sense.

⁸⁴ Steiner (1994), 11.

Chrysalus brings forth this literal and figurative duplicitousness at *Bacch.* 935–6 and *Bacch.* 941–2 (quoted above), when he divides both the Greek siege engine and his tricky letter into two parts: the wooden shell resembling a horse is compared with the wooden *tabellae*, and the concealed Achaeans to the words inscribed upon the wax. The comic scenario, however, contains a crucial difference: *Bacchides*' victim sees the baneful *scriptae litterae* lying in wait, and yet does not know how to properly interpret them. This is pointed out in the text just as Nicobulus unseals the letter and is about to start his reading (*Bacch.* 991–2):

NI: *eugae litteras minutas!* CH: *qui quidem videat parum; verum qui sati' videat, grandes sati' sunt.*

NI: My goodness, these letters are small! CH: Perhaps for someone who doesn't see very well.

But for someone who can see well enough, they're big enough.⁸⁵

Chrysalus mocks Nicobulus for being a bad reader incapable of perceiving the words' true sense. Although the old man knows that he has already been lied to once in writing by his son, he allows himself yet again to be convinced of a missive's ostensible meaning, this time that Mnesilochus has relented, repented and is giving up adultery. Like the *sema* sent by the Greeks, the epistle's real message lies beyond the recipient's grasp until it is too late.

Via this extended metaphor in song, Chrysalus contemplates the resemblance of his ruse to the most infamous deception in the ancient world, vividly elucidating his attack strategy on the *senex*. He implicitly depicts the *Iliupersis* as a quasi-epistolary scenario complete with a guileful author, a sneaky messenger and recipients fooled into letting down their guard by a duplicitous *sema*. By tracing the tricky letter as an instrument of deception going all the way back to Homeric epic and the greatest war ever fought, Chrysalus aggrandizes his own misdeeds and foreshadows the success of his ploy; after all, everyone knows how the Greek siege of Troy ended.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Compare the series of jokes on sight and trickery in *Mostellaria* at *Most.* 832–40. Here Tranio tries to get his master Theopropides to “see” a painting of two vultures being mocked by a crow; that is, to perceive that he and Simo (the old man whose house the play's *adulescens* has allegedly bought) are being taken in by the *servus*. Of course Theopropides cannot see a thing, and Tranio slyly concedes that old men (i.e. the dupes of Plautine comedy) do not have very good “eyesight” (*Most.* 840): *age, iam mitto, ignosco: aetate non quis optuerier.*

⁸⁶ For more on this mythological metaphor, including allusions to Homer and Euripides, see Barbiero (2018).

Once Chrysalus has the second sum of 200 *nummi* in his grasp, Nicobulus departs to pay off the soldier, fleeced for the third time in a row, and the clever slave congratulates himself on yet another success (*Bacch.* 1068: *hoc est incepta efficere pulchre*; “There’s a deed well done!”). He now disappears from the text, disappointing the audience’s expectation of another elaborate *canticum* with a “throwaway” rejection of a triumph (*Bacch.* 1072–3):

*sed spectatores, vos nunc ne miremini
quod non triumpho: pervolgatum est, nil moror.*⁸⁷

But spectators, don’t wonder
that I’m not holding myself a triumph: that’s all too common, and I don’t care for it.

Chrysalus has accomplished his comic goals of freeing Bacchis from the *miles* and procuring some pocket money for fun, and now slips away. The same is true of *Bacchides*’ multiple epistles. Having served their purpose in starting, sabotaging and resurrecting the plot, they disappear, leaving us to enjoy the effect of their dramatic kinesis.

Conclusion

As a medium suited to transacting *voluptas* and apt for disseminating information as well as for sowing deception, letters are employed in *Bacchides* to generate comedy. Epistles play a crucial role in all the levels that come together to make up the dramatic world, occurring in the comic past, the comedy proper and the slave’s deceptions, devised and manipulated by both Plautus and Chrysalus to mount and drive on the action. Functioning by virtue of their plot-precipitating power as images of the script, these embedded texts are also generative of metatheatre – comedy about the making of comedy – in that their onstage reading and the subsequent realization of their content as a fictive premise reproduce the performative moment, inviting the audience to contemplate a double vision of theater in which actors play-act as actors. We have seen, further, that these texts serve to establish an equivalence between the external and internal playwrights by depicting Plautus’ dramaturgy through Chrysalus’. Writing assimilates the comic creation to his creator, authors both of

⁸⁷ These lines have frequently been used as a means of dating *Bacchides* to a year in which the triumphs at Rome were plentiful. This is originally the hypothesis of Ritschl (1845), 423, who fixed the date at 187 BC. But Slater (1985/2000), 92–3, elaborating on a suggestion made by Fraenkel (1922/2007), 161–6, argues that Chrysalus’ move is an *aprosdoketon* joke: the *architectus doli* has tired of his stock role and retires from the play.

dramatic scripts, and lays bare the origins of the play as the clever slave engages in the very activity by which his persona came into being. *Bacchides*' epistles, then, are generative of metapoesis, too, mirroring the comedy's own composition when the internal poet put stylus to wax. In particular, Chrysalus' first letter actualizes its status as a *mise-en-abyme* (i.e. a text embedded within another text) by replicating events from the comedy proper, separate from and yet dependent upon the text that contains it. Finally, this self-reflection serves ultimately to gesture towards Plautus' translation of Greek New Comedy: the relationship between the internal and external playwright emulates that which exists between the translator and his model. We will see this dynamic of internal replication at work again in *Persa*, which is up next.