

Plautus and the Poetics of Property: *Aulularia* and the Acrostic *Argumenta*

This paper argues for a new way of thinking about Roman drama through an analysis of ll. 731-807 (Act 4.10) of Plautus' *Aulularia* and the (almost certainly: Deufert 2002: 224-237, 270-291) second century CE acrostic *argumenta*, or verse summaries, of Plautus plays. With their reminiscences of the legal formulae of property (e.g., *hanc rem meam esse aio*, "I say this thing is mine": Watson 1971: 69-71), Plautus and his tradition reveal an understanding of drama as a process, not only of deed and word, but specifically of action and avowal. A close reading of the climactic scene of the *Aulularia* evinces such an avowal, while parallel language in the acrostic *argumenta* of the later tradition suggests that Roman readers' understood that Plautus understood drama to work on this proprietary model.

For the purposes of this paper, *avowal* differs from "word," as in the formula "word and deed," because avowal reifies the deed: that is to say, avowal is the means by which an individual actor stakes a position in the field of action, which, because of the use of the language of ownership, becomes a symbolically economic field, or indirect means of engaging in action with real economic consequences, on analogy with economic exchange (Bourdieu 1990: 134-41, e.g., cf. Bettini 1982: 55f., 62f., 96, 92-101, Feeney 2012). At the climactic moment of the *Aulularia*, the miser *Euclio* who has lost his titular "pot of gold" is confronted by the errant adolescent *Lyconides*. The latter, who has illicitly impregnated *Euclio*'s daughter, avows the infraction in abstract language, which *Euclio* takes to be an avowal of the theft of his pot of gold. The form and context of *Lyconides*' avowal feature the language for the avowal, not only of crime, but also of ownership in Roman law (e.g., *fateor me fecisse*: "I confess that I did it" vis-à-vis "I say this thing is mine" above). Such language depends on a marked distinction between avowal (*fateor*) and act (*facinus, factum, rem, fecisse, fieri*), which establishes a relationship

between action and avowal as between real and symbolic. The additional fact that the act in question, the “theft” of the virginity of Euclio’s daughter, is mistaken in the comedy of the scene for the theft of an actual thing, the pot of gold, demonstrates the tendency of Plautine poetics to *reify* actions, in addition to people (cf. Konstan 1983: 36-9, Sergi 1997: 79f.), including the action of the plot. The purpose of this reification is not the literal exchange of the “thing” (action) in question, but rather the *transaction* of the play, as indicated by the presence of avowal at climactic moments, whether or not, as in the *Aulularia*, there really is any “thing” (*res/factum*) to avow.

The extension of the language of reification from things, to actions, to the *plot* of the play in general is confirmed by the implicitly literary critical language of the acrostic arguments, written in Plautus’ style in the second century CE. These acrostics tend to identify all Plautine plots on the model of the *Aulularia*: they call the action at the center of the play a “thing” (*res*) and hint that thing will be “recognized” (*cognosci*, e.g.), whether or not the play that they summarize entails an actual misdeed, recognition, or avowal (*Amph.* Arg. 1.10, 2.9, *Asin.* Arg. 7, *Cas.* Arg. 6, *Aul.* Arg. 2.6-9, *Cist.* Arg. 10, *Ep.* Arg. 6, *Most.* Arg. 1-2, *Pseud.* Arg. 1, 8-9, *Rud.* Arg. 5, *Trin.* Arg. 1-3, *Truc.* Arg. 9, *Stich.* Arg. 1.3, 6). I argue that this explicit reification (use of *res*) for the plot suggests a partially explicit literary critical theory of drama in the ancient readers’ response to the real but implicit theory of drama implied in Plautus. I close with the lines of Seneca’s *Oedipus* (1042-5, cf. Dupont 1995: 60), in which the protagonist uses Plautine language (N.B. *fatidice, fatis*) to avow his infamous acts as his identity, suggesting that the originally economic language of Plautine poetics persisted in the ostensibly higher genre of tragedy, only divested of its originally economic associations.

Works Cited

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