

Theaetetus in the Theater: Plautus on Plato and Truth

Comedy and philosophy have long been considered rivals which present opposed approaches and visions of reality. The philosopher enjoys the reputation of possessing great wisdom, engaging in serious study, and effectively being able to communicate the truth to others. The comic produces a world of untruthful characters with vain motives and humorous outcomes ostensibly only for the entertainment of their audience. Plautus makes this rivalry salient in his *Curculio* where he makes fun of the ‘*Graeci palliati*’ that stuff their arms with books and do nothing but block the walkways of the forum as they talk amongst themselves (see Plaut. *Curc.* 288-91).

Nevertheless, in recent years, scholars have proposed the two groups are not so alien to one another as one might expect at a glance. For example, Dorota Dutsch has proposed a number of *loci* in which Plautus seems to engage with philosophical questions within his corpus. Moreover, this would imply the audiences of the comedians have a far more intimate knowledge of the Greek philosophers than one might suspect (Dutsch, 2014). Christopher van den Berg contributes to this line of thinking in his excellent chapter, “Phaedrus in the Forum: Plautus’ *Pseudolus* and Plato’s Phaedrus,” which takes the *Pseudolus* as his case study (2021). Here, van den Berg points to examples in Plato where Socrates creates scenarios of philosophical absurdity which themselves are ripe for depiction in comedy. Next, he demonstrates how Plautus takes some of these absurd scenarios and puts them onto the stage.

van den Berg first argues that Plautus in various points explicitly signposts that he is engaging with philosophical themes. For example, the *Pseudolus* is the only play in the entire Plautine corpus which makes explicit reference to Socrates by name, making it a suitable case

subject to examine. Second, van den Berg argues that Plautus plays upon ideas from Plato's *Phaedrus* which have to do with the dangers of written language.

The present paper seeks to re-evaluate the arguments of van den Berg. On the one hand, I argue strongly that van den Berg has successfully and convincingly demonstrated Plautus' clear engagement with philosophy in the *Pseudolus*, offering another dimension of nuance to the already notorious piece. Yet, on the other hand, I cast doubt upon van den Berg's attachment of the *Pseudolus* to the *Phaedrus*. Rather, I counter propose that the *Pseudolus* deals far more explicitly with the imagery and themes found in Plato's *Theaetetus*, in which Plato offers his clearest presentation on epistemology and the nature of true knowledge. In the end, I present a clearer understanding of how philosophical *ad absurdum* arguments are put onto the stage and demonstrate how Plautus' *Pseudolus* engages in a rich intertextual dialogue with the world of philosophy.

Bibliography

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