

Of Travels, Fish-Jokes, and the Roman Forum: Plautus's *Curculio* Revisited

This panel aims to revive scholarly interest in a Roman comedy that, in spite of its brevity, numbers among the genre's most interesting. At 729 lines, Plautus's *Curculio* may be the playwright's shortest extant drama, but it is a showpiece of comic *topoi* featuring a typical love plot, an epistolary deception, and an *anagnorisis*. The play also contains Latin literature's first *paraclausithyron* scene and a veritable shattering of the fourth wall when its *choragus* interrupts the performance to address the Roman audience directly. Inhabiting the *Curculio* is a memorable cast of characters such as the seriously sick pimp, Cappadox, who likes to wear his hair in a perm, and the "wandering" *pseudo-meretrix* Planesium. As for the comedy's eponymous trickster, Curculio is a world-traveling parasite with all the attributes of Plautus' best *servi callidi* who moves with ease between Caria, Epidaurus, and Rome. This panel brings together three scholars of Roman comedy who examine these and other features of the *Curculio* from varied perspectives to foster a greater appreciation of a play that last received sustained critical attention a decade ago (e.g., Raffaella and Tontini, eds. 2005; Richlin 2005: 57-108; Welsh 2005; Lanciotti 2008), and whose seminal English treatments date from the 1990s (Moore 1991; Wright 1993; Moore 1998: 126-37).

In the *Curculio*, Phaedromus loves Planesium, a girl owned by Cappadox. In an attempt to obtain the money necessary to purchase her, the *adulescens* has sent his parasite Curculio to Caria requesting a loan from a friend. Although this mission fails, the parasite returns to Epidaurus at the comedy's start, armed with another plan. Curculio reports that while abroad he met the soldier Therapontigonus, who revealed to him that he had deposited money at Epidaurus to buy Planesium. A *tarpezita* ("banker") is set to pay out this retainer to Cappadox upon receipt of a letter sealed with Therapontigonus's ring. Curculio subsequently stole the *anulus*, which he

uses in the course of the play to forge the requisite document and steal Planesium away by posing as the *miles*'s messenger. This epistolary plan is a success, though the soldier soon arrives at Epidaurus and discovers the mischief. All is resolved when Planesium is recognized as Therapontigonus's lost sister, and the lovers are betrothed.

The panel's first speaker focuses on a pun relating to the pimp Cappadox's mysterious disease. At the Asclepieion in Epidaurus, Phaedromus's quick-tongued *servus* approaches Cappadox and jokes that the *leno* seems to be suffering from a *morbus hepaticarius* (Plaut. *Curc.* 239). While this paper agrees with the existing scholarship in seeing *hepaticarius* as a funny nonce-coinage, it elucidates Plautus's word play to reveal the joke that criticism has missed. The speaker posits that the word (1) should be divided not *hepati-arius* but *hepat-arius* and (2) should be derived not from ἥπαρ "liver" but from ἥπατος, the hepatus fish, whose digestive organs were as complicated—and apparently vanishing—as Cappadox's.

The second paper reveals the *Curculio*'s doubled setting and chronological orientation, showing that its kinetic events happen both "here" (Epidaurus) and "there" (Caria) as well as "then" (in the *Vorgeschichte*) and "now" (on stage). This speaker demonstrates that Curculio acts as a bridge between the play's twofold *scaena*, and argues that this twin setting may be replicated in the *choragus*'s speech, which blurs the lines between the real and theatrical worlds.

The third and final speaker stays with the topics of space and the *choragus*'s speech, but focuses specifically on the buildings he describes in the Roman forum. This paper relies on recent studies of space and topography to posit that the edifices visible to the original audience were just as "readable" as the play's script. The *choragus* uses these three-dimensional inter-"texts" to present Plautine comedy as the culmination of a long line of Roman cultural achievements and, simultaneously, as a means for members of the city's lowest social *strata* to

claim control over their visually impressive city and its empire.

Bibliography

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