

Character by Proxy: Phoenicium in *Pseudolus*

In Plautus's *Pseudolus* the character Phoenicium plays a plot-critical role without receiving any spoken lines. Phoenicium is primarily a stock character, the prostitute girlfriend seen in multiple other plays by Plautus as well as appearing in comedies of Terence. In *Miles Gloriosus* a similar prostitute girlfriend has lively, extensive dialogue to express her character and further the plot. In *Pseudolus*, Phoenicium fulfills a similar essential plot functions without speaking; she appears in only two scenes, and has no recorded dialogue in either.

Phoenicium does, however, write a letter, giving her speech by proxy. Some scholarship has investigated the nature of the personal letter and its metaphorical uses based on the letters in this play, though with little attention to the nature of the characters doing the writing (O'Bryhim 2010; Phoenicium in particular receives almost no exploration beyond her stock type (Zwierlein 1991), to the point that discussions of the slaves in *Pseudolus* may leave her out entirely (Stace 1968). Each letter in *Pseudolus* is read out loud by a speaker hostile to the writer, so that the words of the characters are delivered through an obviously biased filter. Thus Phoenicium is both voiced and unvoiced in terms of the dialogue recorded in the text of the play, and presented to the audience primarily through the medium of other characters.

However, the stock characters in Plautus show a clear variation that a given type can display in his plays whether or not they speak. Whereas the prostitute girlfriend of *Miles Gloriosus* employs speech to further the plot, Phoenicium is constantly and aggressively silenced; even her silent appearances on stage are accompanied by other characters giving her orders, such as when the second tricky slave of the play commands her to be silent (*Pseud.* 1038). But this lack of dialogue also opens up a space for ambiguity in the play, where a given

staging can significantly change Phoenicium's characterization based on performance choices. Every line delivered by an actor constitutes a decision to support or subvert the text as written (Bungard 2015), and this holds true for when Pseudolus reads out the words written by Phoenicium in her letter. Furthermore, the silent actor for Phoenicium herself can convey reaction--and thus opinion and character--through body language and gesture while on stage. Even when neither she nor her recorded words are present, her character is further supported, as stock and default or subversively nuanced, by the way other characters discuss her and react to discussions of her.

As such, Phoenicium inhabits a complex state within the play, potentially static or dynamic based on how the play as a whole is staged. The single letter she writes can be read as mockery of her pretensions (Hemelrijk 1999) or "evidence of her literary genius and acumen" (Hallet 2006: 43-44) by different critics, given nothing but the written text; in performance, this debate is more likely to be resolved in one direction or another. This paper will explore what space Phoenicium inhabits within the play, and thus what range of Phoenicium's different performances have the option to bring out while using the Plautine text.

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