Novom aliquid inventum (Plautus, Pseud. 569)

An unsurprising innovation?

By Andrea De March (Leiden University)

Project: Inventing anchors? The function of ‘Greek models’ within the process of innovation in Early Roman Drama

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palliata

Up to the beginning of the 20th century, scholars looked at Plautus’ Greek-like comedies known as fabulae palliatae (from pallium, the Greek cloak worn by the actors) as a useful tool to reconstruct the lost plays by Greek authors such as Menander1, Diphilus and Philemo. This approach was evidently based on a strict reliance on Plautus’ definition of his own work as a translation (vertere) from some Greek models – as he does, for example, in the prologue to the Asinaria, quoted further on in this paper. Fortunately, in 1922 Eduard Fraenkel’s capital book Plautinisches im Plautus marked a turning point in the history of Platine studies and contributed to the definitive acknowledgement of Plautus’ originality despite his dependence on certain Greek sources. Moreover, in the first half of the 20th century the sands of Egypt gave back a relevant number of papyri containing several Menandrian comedies, some of which were wholly preserved. These finds allowed not only to expand our

1 Plautus never mentions Menander as his own model, although he has certainly adapted some of the latter’s works (see the most paradigmatic case of the Bacchides, derived from Menander’s Dis exapaton). Conversely, Plautus explicitly names as his own models two canonical playwrights (Diphilus and Philemo) of the Nea out of three (with Menander) and refers to a third non-canonical and otherwise unknown poet, Demophilus, regarded by TRAINA 1954, 198-199 as a post-Menandrian poet. Thus, together with Menander’s ‘absence’, it must be remarked the presence of an ‘out-sider’, whose Onagos was adapted by Plautus in the Asinaria.
knowledge of Menander\(^2\) but also to compare his works with Plautine ones. In particular, the discovery that the fragment of Menander’s *Dis exapaton* was the direct model of a section of Plautus’ *Bacchides* did not undermine the substance of Fraenkel’s achievements and some original aspects of Plautus’ poetry were once more confirmed. This evidence confirmed also that Plautus really adopted and adapted certain Greek sources; consequently, the issue of how Plautus’ innovative features relate to the elements inherited from the models proves crucial to understand the nature of his art.

In my paper I aim to problematize this issue by focusing on a specific case study, namely the framing of Pseudolus as a peculiarly Plautine character within a dramaturgical device retraceable in Menander’s *Aspis* (*The Shield*)\(^3\). Pseudolus, after whom Plautus’ play is named, is the peculiar scheming slave occurring in most of Plautine plots. Even more Plautine is his meta-theatrical function, according to which the slave, while acting on stage, simultaneously develops the plot of the play\(^4\). He thus gives the impression that the drama is being improvised and that no script is being followed. The concentration of elements such as cunning nature, meta-theatricality and improvisation in the figure of the slave is unknown to Greek New Comedy\(^5\). Nevertheless, these features do not represent an abrupt insertion in the Greek atmosphere of Plautine *palliata*, rather they are anchored in a dramatic context occurring in the *Nea*. The analysis of such a device can shed new light on some aspects concerning the making of Plautus’ comedy. Actually, on the one hand Plautus did have his own idea of theatre and his art must have been to some extent indebted to the Italic improvisatory tradition\(^6\). On the other hand, it was Greek drama that gave birth to official Latin literature, whereas Italic improvisatory forms such as the *fabula Atellana* became written only during the 1\(^{st}\) century BC, being very likely influenced by Plautus’ theatre. Consequently, it must be suspected that the reference to certain Greek models (or the claim to have adopted them, such as the one occurring in some prologues) fulfills a strategy aiming to bring those native

\(^2\) On whom our knowledge of the whole Greek New Comedy is based, since the fragments from other playwrights are extremely meagre.

\(^3\) ANDERSON 1970, 229-236 already noticed the occurrence in Menander of a forerunner of the Plautine *servus currens* and found a connection between the *Aspis* and the *Pseudolus*. In this paper I will present a more in-depth analysis of the two plays by looking at other features and draw more extensive conclusions. Prototypical running slaves occur also in Menander’s *Dis exapaton* and *Perinthia*.

\(^4\) «Deception by powerful, heroic slaves who are the main focus of the drama is, then, largely a Plautine invention» (SHARROCK 1996, 170). FRAENKEL 1960, 223-24 had already acknowledged the overwhelming presence of the scheming slave in Plautus’ plots as a *Plautinisches*.


\(^6\) Plautus’ name, Titus Maccius Plautus, sounds like a stage name: Maccus is actually the name of a stock character typical of the Atellan farce; other stock characters belonging to the Atellana are named in his plays. This might hint at the fact that Plautus began his career by composing Atellan farces.
elements to the same level as the established Greek literary genres and thus to provide them with an official literary form: I will call this strategy ‘anchoring’. The Plautine need for an authoritative anchor can be inferred, for example, from a seemingly understated claim such as the prologue to the Asinaria 10-11: huic nomen graece Onagost fabulae; / Demophilus scrispit, Maccus vortit barbare. Plautus’ ironic definition of his own work as a translation into a barbarian language of a Greek model evidently mocks the general attitude of worshipping Greece as culturally superior to Rome that will occur multiple times in later Roman authors. Still, the Greek cultural hegemony hit by Plautus must have represented an inescapable touchstone conditioning the judgment of part of his audience. Actually, if the audience’s acceptance were irrelevant, Plautus would not ask its permission to alter the Greek model (e.g. Asin. 12 Asinariam volt esse, si per vos licet). From this we can infer that, among Plautus’ intended spectators, at least a part of them expected him to conform to the generic features of Greek comedy. And this expectation proves even more challenging when the most innovative and original elements of Plautus’ art are at stake.

To provide my point with concrete evidence, I will now consider Plautus’ strategy of anchoring in a Menandrian device one of his typical features, namely the scheming slave (i.e. Pseudolus), which thanks to his meta-theatrical and improvisational character indeed represents an innovation with regard to the Greek comic tradition.

As I have anticipated above, Pseudolus, the eponymous protagonist of Plautus’ play, represents the typical scheming slave who helps his young master Calidorus to find out the money necessary to ransom the latter’s girlfriend from the pimp Ballio, the villain of the plot. Consequently, the play revolves around the development of the slave’s deceits aimed at fooling the pimp and the older master Simo, Calidorus’ father. Pseudolus is more than the protagonist of the play, for he is portrayed since the very beginning as the maker of the play itself. Such a meta-theatrical feature occurs quite often in Plautus’ theatre. As a consequence, Pseudolus is deeply aware of his own role and actually his short monologues are very auto-referential and concerned with his mission. All these elements emerge from Pseudolus’ very first monologue (ll. 394-414) onwards, in the second part of the first act, according to the Humanistic division. Here Pseudolus at first admits that he does not have any clue on how to get the twenty minae he promised to his young master: Pseud. 396-400 Ubi sunt ea? / Quoi neque paratass gutta certi consili, / neque adeo argenti - neque nunc quid

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7 This declaration proves openly ironic only with respect to the whole prologue. The Asinaria is the oldest comedy (212 BC) of the Plautine extant corpus; in Plautus’ following plays this recurrent kind of irony becomes much more evident.
8 E.g. Porcius Licinus fr. 1 Courtney (apud Gell. 17, 21, 44) Poenico bello secundo Musa pinnato gradu / intulit se bellicosam in Romuli gentem feram ; most of all Hor. epist. 2, 1, 156-160 Graecia captam ferum victorem cepit et artes / intulit agresti Latio; sic horridus ille / defluxit numerus Saturnius, et graue virus / munditiae pepulere; sed in longum tamen aevum / manserunt hodieque manent uvestigia ruris.
9 See note n. 4.
faciam scio. / Neque exordiri primum unde occupias habes, / neque ad detexandum telam certos terminus. This first declaration has the immediate effect of creating the illusion\(^\text{10}\) that no pre-determined scheme is guiding the development of the plot, which will be seemingly improvisied. Secondly, Pseudolus compares himself to a poet, who invents the inexistent by means of lies\(^\text{11}\) (*mendacium*). There could not be a more straightforward way to hint at the meta-poetic\(^\text{12}\) function of Pseudolus, who, by comparing himself to a poet, takes over Plautus’ role in shaping the plot of the comedy. Just as the poet profits from making exist what does not, Pseudolus profits from uncertain events to make them happen. By virtue of this very poetic (or perhaps ‘poietic’) function, Pseudolus can then confidently disclose his ability to find a solution in any case, having received from the author the power to lead the plot to an end. The comedy is thus based on a paradox according to which the scheming slave proves pretty confident in an otherwise unknowable outcome of his deeds, for predestination is the only certainty that Pseudolus can rely on.

Pseudolus’ meta-poetic awareness reaches its climax in his next monologue at lines 561-573, where, after reassuring the public that he will keep the promise to develop a machination, he states that once on stage, the actor must bring along some novelty in an innovative way (*Pseud. 568-569 nam qui in scaenam provenit, / novo modo novum aliquid inventum adferre addecet*), otherwise he should leave the floor to more competent figures (*Pseud. 570 si id facere nequeat, det locum illi qui queat*). I will deal with the possible relationship of this declaration with the Callimachean poetics of the «untrodden paths» soon. Now I will rather look at the most immediate implication of this claim to novelty. It has already been pointed out that Pseudolus is the unquestionable protagonist of the play named after him. Consequently, the comedy undoubtedly aims at drawing attention to such a deceitful character\(^\text{13}\), to which Plautus lends his own role as a writer. And since Pseudolus himself actually defines the poet as a deceiver, both his name and the whole play deal with the poetic process. We have also already pointed out that Pseudolus represents the most paradigmatic case of a typically Plautine character. More specifically, Pseudolus is a

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\(^{10}\) «When Pseudolus pretends to be improvising, Plautine drama indeed shows its ancestry in improvised Atellan farce and its reliance on an Atellan-type mask which is always threatening to make up its own script» (SHARROCK 1996, 157).

\(^{11}\) *Pseud. 401-405 sed quasi poeta, tabulas cum cepit sibi, / quaerit quod nusquam gentium, reperit tamen, / facit illud veri simile, quod mendacium est, / nunc ego poeta fiam: viginti minus, / quae nusquam nunc sunt gentium, inveniam tamen*.

\(^{12}\) I prefer to use in this case ‘meta-poetic’ instead of ‘meta-theatrical’ because what Pseudolus is presenting here is an actual declaration of poetics, which of course deals with theatrical aspects, but concerns Plautus’ more general literary vision.

\(^{13}\) On the *Pseudolus* as the play of deceitfulness see SHARROCK 1996, 170-171. Of course, as the title itself says, this comedy is also the play of Pseudolus, whose bilingual name hints at both the Greek ψευδος and the Latin *dolum* (both standing for ‘deceit’). For the most recent and interesting conclusions drawn from Pseudolus’ name see MINARINI 2010, 43-54.
figure that both acts and composes poetry, for he indeed plays a role on stage and develops the plot by means of his deeds. His only certainty is that he will lead the plot to an end, as if he felt predestined for that. By virtue of these observations, it can be inferred that the declaration about the necessity for the actor to bring along something new must apply first of all to Pseudolus himself, otherwise, on his lips, these words would sound rather incoherent and untrustworthy. Throughout the comedy Pseudolus is in fact constantly committed to finding something new, namely a new deceit to get the money to ransom the girl from the pimp and fool his older master. Actually, after Pseudolus has already planned two deceits\(^{14}\), the evolution of the plot itself provides him with the best occasion to fraud the pimp, and he must consequently set his previous plans aside\(^{15}\). After informing his young master about the new project, the cunning slave ends his presentation by saying *em tibi omnem fabulum!* (Pseud. 754) The word *fabula* refers to both the plotting and the play, once again confirming the meta-theatrical function of Pseudolus, who thanks to his new trick has finally found a way to lead the comedy to an end. As he admits himself (Pseud. 667-693), this third escamotage was made possible by the intervention of Chance itself (Pseud. 669-670 *namque ipsa Opportunitas non potuit mi opportunius / advenire*), an unforeseeable entity. Yet, Chance is only partly responsible for Pseudolus’ success, since his capacity to profit from the actual situation was equally necessary. And Pseudolus’ third monologue actually presents this ability as innate in the cunning slave: Pseud. 574-593, esp. 590-591 *eo sum genere gnatus: magna me facinora decet ecficere / quae post mihi clara et diu clueant.*

To draw some preliminary conclusions, Pseudolus’ main capacity leading him to success, and, thus, to the solution of the impasse of the plot is the ability to improvise by making the best out of the mutable situation. And, as we saw, improvisation is a peculiarity of Italic pre-literary performances, where the author was also the actor of

\(^{14}\) The first one is the initial plan to get the money from his older master Simo. The second trick is aimed at deceiving the pimp Ballio with the help of Charinus’ friend. Pseudolus himself admits to have set up a triple deceit on purpose: *Pseud.*,702-705\(=\) *Io, / io te te, turanne, te te ego, qui imperitas Pseudolo, / quaero, quoi ter trina triplicia, tribus modis tria gaudia, / artibus tribus tris demeritas dem laetitias, de tribus / fraude partas per malitiam et per dolum et fallaciam.* It is worth noticing the insistence on the number three: in Greek New Comedy the deceit is generally twofold (e.g. Menander’s *Dis exapaton*, “The two times deceiver”), whereas in Plautus it is very often triple. Critics (especially with regard to the *Bacchides*, that, as I said above, derives from the *Dis exapaton*) have always thought that the third deceit derives from the contamination of two different models. Given the recurrence of the triple deceit in other Plautine plays and Pseudolus’ explicit mention of the number three when referring to his own deceits, the hypothesis of *contaminatio* should be revised and the triple deceit should be analysed as a possible Plautine feature.

\(^{15}\) In order to get from Harpax (the servant of the soldier who bought Calidorus’ girlfriend from the pimp) the letter with which Calidorus’ girlfriend can be sold; Pseudolus will then give it to Simia, who will disguise as Harpax to swindle the pimp.
his own sketches\textsuperscript{16}, as in the case of Pseudolus, Plautus’ mouthpiece. It seems thus legitimate to infer that the professed \textit{aliquid novum} deals in part with improvisation, an element that proves overwhelming within the play. Improvisation is new not only because it is unknown to the tradition of the Greek \textit{Nea} (adapted by the Latin \textit{palliata}), but also because it constantly pretends to create something new, and, as a consequence, it presents itself as something innovative by nature.

A prototype of the meta-theatrical scheming slave can be retraced also in Menander’s \textit{Aspis}. Here the slave Daos develops a trick to prevent the old villain Smikrines from marrying the sister of his young master, who is believed to be dead. In order to accomplish his target, Daos enacts Chairestratos’ death, so that the villain will be inclined to marry the latter’s daughter, who has a richer inheritance. Like Pseudolus, Daos too presents his own trick meta-theatrically, for the deceit is portrayed as a paratragedy: \textit{δεῖ ταραγωδήσαι πάθος} (\textit{Aspis} 329-342 Sandbach); Daos proves in fact able to make a paratragic use of some quotations from the Greek playwrights\textsuperscript{17}. Similarly, Pseudolus too deals with some paratragic features typical of Latin\textsuperscript{18} and Charinus explicitly remarks on this aspect: \textit{Pseud. 707 ut paratragoedat carnufex!}. The similarities between Daos and Pseudolus are striking, but with regard to one aspect the two slaves are radically different from each other: although Daos stages his trick in a meta-theatrical way, unlike Pseudolus he cannot improvise and profit from the sudden favorable change of events. The reason is very simple: in the postponed prologue of the \textit{Aspis}, the Fate itself appears to provide the audience with a brief summary of the plot; she concludes her speech by presenting herself as \textit{πάντων κυρία / τούτων βραβεύσαι καὶ διοικῆσαι} (\textit{Aspis} 148/149). The Fate is then the absolute ruler of the events and cannot allow a third character to change them. A similar, yet not identical, concept appears in a section of Pseudolus’ fourth monologue, where he admits that \textit{centum doctum hominum consilia sola haec devincit dea, / Fortuna} (\textit{Pseud. 678-679}). Then follows a philosophical remark on the stupidity of human beings, who praise people to whom the Fate has been favorable, whereas they despise people whose deeds have been unlucky.

The limitation of Daos’ capacities by the overwhelming presence of Tyche is perfectly consistent with the tradition of Greek New Comedy\textsuperscript{19}. Conversely, a character such

\textsuperscript{16}Liv. 7, 2 \textit{Livius post aliquot annis, qui ab saturis ausus est primus argumento fabulam serere, idem scilicet - id quod omnes tum erant - suorum carminum actor, dicitur.}

\textsuperscript{17}l. 407 from Euripides’ \textit{Stheneboia} (fr. 661 N\textsuperscript{2}); l. 411 from Chairemon’s fr. 2 N\textsuperscript{2}; ll.412-413 from Aeschylus’ \textit{Niobe} (fr. 156 N\textsuperscript{2}).

\textsuperscript{18}See, for example, the recurrent alliteration in the lines quoted in footnote n. 14. Alliteration is typical of Latin tragic and religious diction.

\textsuperscript{19}Of Menander and especially, as far as we know from the fragments, of Philemo. \textit{TRAINA 2000} 5-20 argues that the pessimism due to the fall of the \textit{polis} and the following raise of individualism (affecting the Hellenistic cosmopolitism) is the ideological landscape lying behind the primacy of Tyche in Greek New Comedy. By contrast, Roman comedy mirrors a completely different world, where human beings have the power to shape the reality into an ordered cosmos. As Traina says, Rome is the city of
as Pseudolus seems to escape the supremacy of Tyche, since he constantly proves confident in his predetermined success, despite his acknowledgement of the fact that success depends on the Fate’s favor. Moreover, if Pseudolus’ main task on stage is to lead the play to an ineluctably happy end, the figure of Tyche is weakened. This last point is crucial, because it shows that the presence of the Fate in the Plautine play is not essential for the functioning of the plot. So, how should this feature be interpreted?

As it has been done for many other Plautine seeming incongruities, it could be defined just as a flaw due to Plautus’ incapacity to adapt his Greek source properly. Thus, it should be considered as a remnant of the model. Yet, the opposition success- vs.-Fate looks intentionally rooted in Pseudolus’ speeches and not incidental. Unlike Tyche, Pseudolus is not a typical character of Greek comedy. Conversely, as we have seen, it is possible to retrace in him many peculiar elements of Italic pre-literary theatre, improvisation and the figure of the poet-actor above all. Moreover, Daos’ meta-theatrical way to arrange the deceit proves substantially different from Pseudolus’ one. The latter actually, by developing his trick, simultaneously develops the whole plot from the beginning up to the end of the play, and his paratragedism limits itself to the reproduction of some phonic features. By contrast, with his trick Daos develops only a section of the comedy, and his paratragedism is more refined, consisting of exact quotations from some Greek tragedians. It can be thus concluded that the novum aliquid Pseudolus is looking for (on Plautus’ behalf, of course) is accomplished by Pseudolus himself, or rather by his art of improvising and

humanitas, a concept that conveys the idea that the man can optimistically and concretely act in a world religiously, politically and legally well structured. And indeed the slave must represent part of this humanitas, being thus expression of a typically Roman entity.

20 Actually, there has already been a shift from Pseudolus’ first trick to a second one. The reason for this shift is not due to Chance’s intervention but, rather, to Pseudolus’ ape ingenii, for there has been a change of mind instead of a change of events. His remark on the triple nature of the deceit underlines a structural difference with Menander’s double trick, and it is a feature of which Plautus seems to be fond also elsewhere (see footnote 14). Consequently the triple deceit does not just mark a conscious structural difference from Menandrian duality, but it also provides Pseudolus with the chance to show that he is indeed able to develop tricks on his own. So, just as Pseudolus proved to be able to devise a new trick, he could have done the same a third time.

21 Here not necessarily the Aspis. In this paper I have provided a list elements occurring both in the Aspis and in the Pseudolus. Daos’ and Pseudolus’ way to enact their tricks is strikingly similar, but it does not necessarily mean that Plautus exploited the Aspis as a model for his play. As the case of the Aulularia shows (whose prologue resembles the one to Menander’s Dyskolos; despite the many similarities between its protagonist, Knemon, and his Latin counterpart Hegio, the differences are still much more than the similarities), it is safer to think about the presence in Plautus of a dramatic device that occurred in different Greek plays.

22 The only external intervention is represented by the providential appearance of the soldier’s delegate, which provides Pseudolus with the chance for a third better fabrication. See also the considerations made in footnote 20.

23 See footnote n. 14.
inventing illusory and deceptive pieces for his spectators, as a good (early Roman) poet ought to do. In the making of the Roman palliata, these Italic pre-literary elements are framed in the context of Greek New Comedy by anchoring them in one of its most peculiar features, namely the overwhelming presence of Tyche. Pseudolus’ philosophical reflections on the Fate are quite alien to his own pragmatic character, which of course is more consistent with Roman culture. But if Pseudolus did not embed in his speeches the topic of destiny and fortune, relating it to the real impact of human agency, it would be hard for him to find a place within the frame inherited from the Nea.

This latter issue shows that reading Plautine theatre by applying the concept of Anchoring Innovation can shed some new light on the mechanism whereby Plautus designs his own theatre as the Roman version of a Greek precedent. The aesthetic principle of imitatio veterum can of course partly explain this artistic attitude; however, when it comes to Plautus’ theatre, given the impossibility to retrace a model for every single play, advocating such a principle proves an insufficient and unsatisfactory heuristic attitude. It has been recently proposed to set aside the tricky (sometimes even pointless) effort to discern possible adaptations from the Plautinisches in order to focus on more general influences, not necessarily indebted to a specific Greek model or to the Nea at all. The perspective provided by the concept of Anchoring Innovation allows to go even further and to abandon such a perilous field as the assessment of the impact of models that are otherwise unknowable, except for a couple of lucky cases. The present case study suggests in fact that the strategic employment of the ‘models’ (and devising a ‘rhetoric of the model’) could be of much more interest than the models themselves. Plautus performed his plays during some Roman festivals (such as the Ludi Megalesii for the Pseudolus), where, despite the lack of a permanent theatre, Roman spectators attended theatrical performances in a way that somehow resembled the custom of Athenian citizens. However, they must have been still fond of native improvisatory forms such as the Atellana and thus they likely expected to retrace in the new dramas some basic

As SHARROCK 1996, 54 notes, the definition of the poet’s role as a deceiver is already present in Hesiod, Plato and, more notably, Callimachus (Hymn 1, 65 Pfeiffer θευδοήν, ἀκούντος ἀ κεν πεπίθοιεν ἀκούνην [Sharrock quotes this as line 64, probably following the wrong numeration of Henderson’s Loeb edition]). The presence of the Callimachean poetics in the Pseudolus seems to be recurrent: I have already pointed out the possible connection of novum aliquid to Callimachus’ κέλευθοι ἄτριπτοι and, right now, the common portrayal of the poet as a deceiver (which can be traced in other authors mentioned above). It would be extremely interesting to verify whether Simo’s statement that Pseudolus has proved better than the Trojan-horse deceit and Odysseus himself (Pseud. 1244 superavit dolum Troianum atque Ulixem Pseudolus) bears a meta-poetic implication or not. If the answer were positive, we would have a Plautine declaration of the superiority of the palliata over the epic genre. It could be argued that such a declaration might derive from Plautus’ Greek model, if the association of the cunning slave with the figure of Odysseus did not seem to be a Plautine peculiarity (occurring, for example, also in the Bacchides).

See, above all, DANSE 2002 expanded into DANSE 2014.
features of their indigenous theatre, an expectation that the presence of an author-actor such as Pseudolus could fulfill. With his theatre, Plautus both satisfied his public’s expectations and inserted early Roman theatre within the established Greek tradition by appropriating some of its elements. Indeed, it is with regard to this prestigious tradition that Plautus, who has multiple times declared to be a follower of Greek playwrights, makes his mouthpiece Pseudolus define his theatre as a novom aliquid inventum. But this innovation affects also the Italic pre-literary tradition, to which it gives a new look. Similarly, also the direction of the strategy of anchoring is twofold: on the one hand Plautus’ novum inventum is anchored, as we have seen, in the Greek tradition; on the other hand, the Greek tradition is brought on the Roman stage, making thus Latin drama accessible and familiar also to Greek spectators or to those imbued with Hellenic culture. Finally, the strategic nature of the anchoring device shows that Plautus’ Callimachean claim to novelty does not overcome the «trodden paths», but cunningly exploits them in order to establish itself. In other words, the novom aliquid establishes itself without eliminating the old, but rather by making the best out of the elements belonging to the old. In our case, thanks to the strategy of anchoring, a peculiar element such as improvisation can be assimilated to a Greek precedent such as Daos’ meta-theatricality and compete with it on the same level, proudly showing what Plautus’ «barbarian» art is capable of.
**Bibliography**


