

Ancient Comedy and Reception

Essays in Honor of Jeffrey Henderson

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The Trickster Onstage: The Cunning Slave from Plautus to *Commedia dell'Arte*

Abstract: This article surveys the development of the character of the comic trickster, from Plautus' *servus callidus* in ancient Rome to the *servi* of *commedia erudita* and the *zani* of *commedia dell'arte* in Renaissance Italy. I show that the astute, quick slave of Plautus turns into a powerless servant in *commedia erudita*. In *commedia dell'arte*, the *zani* regains center stage in the comic show, but loses the intelligence that made Plautus' *servus callidus* an iconic figure of Roman comedy. The *zani* is a buffoon, but like the *servus callidus*, he remains at the core of comic laughter. The importance of the slave figure in comedy as well as his development from Plautus to *commedia dell'arte* can be explained by looking at the historical and social context of the times in which these characters flourished.

From the Aristophanic Athenian *démotês* able to create a revolutionary new world fitting his own aspirations, to the *giullari* and fools in Medieval plays and European folklore, tricksters are an integral part of comedy and comic laughter.¹ Indeed, the first comic trickster in European comedy is the hero of Old Comedy, the multi-faceted *deus ex machina* of Aristophanic fantasies, who is in charge of the dénouement of the plot. When Old comedy "developed" into Middle and New Comedy, and eventually enjoyed a new golden era in the Rome of Plautus and Terence, the Aristophanic comic hero changed in nature, significantly altering the social and behavioral features of the "original." From the energetic, inventive free citizen of the democratic polis, the comic hero of Roman comedy (and in particular Plautine comedy) became a slave in the political center of the new Mediterranean power: the *servus callidus*. This change in the comic trickster's social class is important because it adds to the carnivalesque nature of comedy as a genre: comedy began depicting a topsy-turvy world in which slaves were in charge and tricked their masters. When the comedies of Plautus enjoyed new popularity in Renaissance Italy, this pivotal and partly "revolutionary" character

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¹ Tricksters are not found only in comedy; the first example in Greek literature is Hermes in the fourth Homeric Hymn; among heroic characters, Odysseus/Ulysses is the most famous trickster. On the trickster figure, see Paul Radin, *The Trickster: a Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972). On the trickster in Renaissance theater in particular, see Donald Beecher, "Intriguers and Trickster: The Manifestations of an Archetype in the Comedy of the Renaissance," in: D. Beecher and M. Ciavolella (eds.), *Comparative Critical Approaches to Renaissance Comedy* (Ottawa: Dovehouse, 1986), pp. 53-72.

molded by Plautus returned to the stage in two new types of comedy: the *commedia erudita* and the later *commedia dell'arte*. Like the Aristophanic trickster in Roman comedy, however, the *servus callidus* again experienced a significant evolution.

This paper considers how this stock figure developed from the prototype of Plautus' comedy to the *commedia erudita* and *commedia dell'arte*. Without attempting a complete analysis, I will focus on elements typical of Plautus' slaves and on their evolution over time. In addition to the plays of Plautus,² my analysis is based on a sample of Renaissance comedies dating from 1508 to ca. 1598.³ As for *commedia dell'arte*, which was primarily an improvised form of theater, my main source has been the scenarios published by Flaminio Scala (1552–1624) in 1611 (*Il teatro delle favole rappresentative*, i.e. *The Theater of Tales for Performance*).⁴ These are the oldest and best preserved scenarios of *commedia dell'arte*, as they alone were collected to be published and not as personal copies of a company or an actor. I have also used some of the so-called “zani-texts”, popular texts in prose or meter about the “zani” (the character of the servant, as he was known in Italian improvised comedy) and his life,

2 I have omitted cunning slaves in New Comedy from my analysis because, beyond the difficulty of identifying such a character in this type of comedy, the Renaissance intellectuals who wrote *commedia erudita* did not know Menander and New Comedy. Any possible influence of the latter on the former is thus to be excluded. On slaves in New Comedy, see Philip W. Harsh, “Intriguing slaves in Greek comedy,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 86 (1955), pp. 135–42; W. Thomas MacCary, “Menander’s Slaves: Their Names, Roles and Masks,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 100 (1969), pp. 277–94; William S. Anderson, “A New Menandrian Prototype for the *Servus Currens* of Roman Comedy,” *Phoenix* 24 (1970), pp. 229–36. I have also not analyzed slaves in Terence’s plays, because Terentian comedies generally lack *servi callidi*. See C.W. Amerasinghe, “The Part of the Slave in Terence’s Drama,” *Greece and Rome* 19 (1950), pp. 62–72; Giovanni Cupaiuolo, *Terenzio, Teatro e Società* (Napoli: Loffredo, 1991), pp. 37–47, 82–8; Kathleen McCarthy, “The Joker in the Pack: Slaves in Terence,” *Ramus* 33 (2004), pp. 100–19.

3 I consider the following comedies (in chronological order): Ludovico Ariosto, *Cassaria* (*The Play of the Strongbox*, 1508, prose version), *Suppositi* (*The Pretenders*, 1509); Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena, *Calandria* (1513); Niccolò Machiavelli, *Mandragola* (*The Mandrake*, ca. 1518) and *Clizia* (1525); Angelo Beolco (Ruzante), *Betia* (1523–1525); Pietro Aretino, *Cortigiana* (1525); Ludovico Ariosto, *Negromante* (*The Magician*, second version, 1528) and *Lena* (1528); Angelo Beolco (Ruzante), *Moscheta* (1529), *Parlamento* (1529), *Bilora* (1529), *Fiorina* (1531), *Piovana* (1532), *Vaccaria* (1533); Anton Francesco Grazzini, *Il frate* (*The Friar*, 1540); Annibal Caro, *Gli straccioni* (*The Ragged Brothers*, 1543); Alessandro Piccolomini, *Alessandro* (1544); Giovan Maria Cecchi, *Assiuolo* (*The Horned Owl*, 1550); Luigi Groto, *Emilia* (1579, a rewriting of Plautus’ *Epidicus*); Giordano Bruno, *Il candelaio* (*The Candlestick*, 1582); Giambattista Della Porta, *La sorella* (*The Sister*, ca. 1591/1598); Anonymous, *Venexiana* (16th century).

4 As edited by Richard Andrews, *The Commedia dell’Arte of Flaminio Scala. A Translation and Analysis of Thirty Scenarios* (Lanham, Toronto and Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2008). Scala’s collection includes 50 scenarios (though Andrews publishes only the 30 most representative), and is thus both extensive and varied. Scala designates each scenario as the play of a ‘day’ (for a total of 50 days) using a literary frame first adopted by Boccaccio in the *Decameron*, thus stating the literary ambition of his collection.

often in the form of a dialogue or monologue of the servant himself.⁵ Together with Scala's scenarios, the "zani-texts" are the oldest source for *commedia dell'arte* and among the most ancient evidence for the character of the *zani*, since they were mostly published between 1576 and 1588. The advantage of the "zani-texts" compared to Scala's scenarios (which merely inform us about the action, scene by scene, with no dialogue between characters) is that they preserve the very words of the *zani*.

1. The *servus callidus* in Plautus

Plautus' plays are full of slaves, and a few recurrent types can be identified.⁶ The cunning slave is a staple: his main role is to solve the problems that lie at the heart of the plot itself, and he is thus the engine of the entire play. The *servus callidus* reaches his goals through wit and intelligence, working alone and surrounded by other characters, who are above him in the societal hierarchy but cannot give him advice. In the topsy-turvy comic world, therefore, the cunning slave, with his role and qualities, outshines—*semel in anno*—the "free" characters in the play, and thanks to his intelligence and his leadership, he becomes the audience's hero.

The main characteristic of the *servus callidus* is self-confidence. Of all comic characters, the *servus callidus* is the most self-conscious: he is fully aware of his own skills and ability in trickery, as well as of his role in the play. Strobilus, a slave in *Aulularia*, gives a snapshot of the characteristics of the "good" (i.e. cunning) slave: faithful to his master, able to understand his master's feelings and inclinations, and fast to act.⁷ Chrysalus, the cunning slave of the *Bacchides*, even provides a lecture on what a cunning slave should be (*Bacch.* 651–60):

There's nothing more worthless than a servant without a plan, unless he has a powerful mind: whenever there is necessity, he will draw [the plan] out of his mind. No one can be worthy, unless he knows how to do both good and evil. He must be a rogue with rogues, he must rob thieves, and he must steal what he can. The person of value, the one who is wise in his mind, should be a

⁵ They are published by Vito Pandolfi, *La Commedia dell'Arte. Storia e Testo*, Vol. I (Florence: Sansoni, 1957), pp. 155–293, and studied by Robert Henke, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell'Arte* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 106–36.

⁶ On Plautus' slaves, see Eduard Fraenkel, *Plautine Elements in Plautus (Plautinismes in Plautus)*, trans. T. Drevikovsky and F. Muecke (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 159–72; C. Stace, "The Slaves of Plautus," *Greece&Rome* 15 (1968), pp. 64–77. The latter lists the following Plautine "cunning slaves": Libanius (*Asinaria*), Chrysalus (*Bacchides*), Epidicus (*Epidicus*), Palaestrio (*Miles Gloriosus*), Tranio (*Mostellaria*), Toxilus (*Persa*), Milphio (*Poenulus*) and Pseudolus (*Pseudolus*). "Deceived slaves" are Sosia (*Amphitruo*), Olympio (*Casina*) and Scelerus (*Miles Gloriosus*). Stace also lists "slaves of special interest"—Tyndarus (*Captivi*), Gripus (*Rudens*) and Truculentus (*Truculentus*)—as well as more "ordinary slaves"—Lampadio (*Cistellaria*), Messenio (*Menaechmi*) and Trachalio (*Rudens*).

⁷ *Aul.* 587–602.

man skilled in dissimulation: he must be good with the good, and bad with the bad; whatever the situation is, he must adapt his soul to it.

The most representative of the *servi callidi*, almost a blueprint for the character, is Pseudolus in the play named after him. He seems to miss no occasion to display full confidence in his skills. Already at the beginning of the comedy, he takes charge of the situation and reassures his young master Calidorus, even if he still lacks a plan.⁸ He later asks Calidorus to let him find the money needed to free Calidorus' beloved as a challenge to his own intelligence.⁹ Pseudolus even challenges the old Simo, the father of Calidorus and his own master, warning him that on that very day he will steal from him the money needed for his son's girlfriend;¹⁰ the challenge is carried out impudently, as Pseudolus continuously warns his old master to guard against him.¹¹

Self-confidence borders on real boasting in Pseudolus,¹² Tranio,¹³ Toxilus,¹⁴ Chrysalus and Palaestrio. The latter two boast about their *machinae*.¹⁵ Chrysalus also constantly reminds himself, his young master Mnesilochus and his friend Pistoclerus that he has the wits and courage necessary to solve any problem.¹⁶ He is so proud of himself that he even suggests that he should be honored with a gold statue.¹⁷ Such self-confidence leads cunning slaves to indulge in the pleasure of briefing their young masters about their success in tricking various blocking characters.¹⁸ In taking the

⁸ *Pseud.* 96–120, 232–4, 316–17.

⁹ *Pseud.* 114–16: “Ask me for twenty minae, so that you will be assured that I’ll do what I promised. Ask for them, by Hercules, I beg you; I long to make that promise.” Similar promises are made by Milphio to his young master Agorastocles, who is begging for help, in *Poen.* 159–169.

¹⁰ *Pseud.* 481–558.

¹¹ *Pseud.* 508–11, esp. 517–18: “I warn you to be on your guard. I say to be on your guard, I tell you. Beware! Look, today with those same hands you will give me the money.”

¹² Pseudolus is certainly a braggart at *Pseud.* 574–6: “By Jupiter, how splendidly and fortunately does everything I undertake turn out to be! In my mind a plan has been put together for which I have no doubt or fear. For it would be folly to entrust a great deed to a fearful heart.”

¹³ Tranio first reassures his young master Philolachetes and tells him to let him take care of everything (*Most.* 387–408); then he launches into a monologue about the importance of being skilled in trickery (*Most.* 409–18), and eventually ends with a final promise about the tricks (*ludi*) he is going to play on the old master (*Most.* 427–30).

¹⁴ In a monologue and an aside (*Per.* 449–58, 480–1), that is, addressing the audience, Toxilus praises his plan and claims to be confident in its outcome.

¹⁵ *Bacch.* 232 (*machinabor machinam*); *Miles* 138 and 813 (*quantas moveo machinas*). One might wonder whether this metaphor in the *Miles* is used on two other occasions by other characters (Pericleptomenus, Acroteleutia, and Milphippa), who are plotting with Palaestrio and carry out his orders, when they call him an ‘architect’ (*Miles* 901, 902, 1139).

¹⁶ *Bacch.* 225–7, 232–3, 239–42, 751–2.

¹⁷ *Bacch.* 640.

¹⁸ E.g. Epidicus in *Ep.* 337–77.

lead in the action, these *servi callidi* become masters of the game and give orders even to their masters¹⁹ or free men.²⁰

This confidence, however, is not adamant. The slave is faced with what at first sight seems an extremely difficult task, and he knows that, if his plan fails and his master discovers his deception, he will be badly punished.²¹ Thus in a moment of despair the *servus callidus* gives voice to his fears in a monologue, in which he calls upon his wits and dives into a series of questions and doubts about what to do, as happens with Libanius²² and Epidicus.²³ An excellent example of such a monologue is delivered by Pseudolus, who candidly admits that he has no clue about what he will do to help his young master, who needs 20 minae to free his beloved Phoenicium from the pimp Ballio.²⁴ Yet Pseudolus quickly recovers his wits and compares himself to a poet: just as a poet in his writing is able to create something that does not exist, so he too will create the necessary 20 minae *ex nihilo*.²⁵ Such momentary lapses of self-confidence also occur during the action, when the slave has a moment of despair²⁶ or needs to encourage himself at a critical moment in his plans.²⁷ These moments of weakness, however, are always brief; an idea springs into the slave's mind and he quickly recovers his usual self-confidence.²⁸ This despair, always quick to disappear, can thus be seen as a device that serves to underline the inventiveness and wit of the slave.

19 Pseudolus in *Pseud.* 383–93, Palaestrio in *Miles* 805–12, Chrysalus in *Bacch.* 728–60.

20 Palaestrio gives orders to Periplectomenus, an old Athenian citizen, on several occasions in *Miles* 232–59, 771–805.

21 The threats of tortures are not actually carried out in any of Plautus' plays. On the subtle relation between fear of tortures, threat of torture and lack of final punishment in Plautus' slaves, see Holt Parker, "Crucially Funny or Tranio on the Couch: the *Servus Callidus* and Jokes about Torture," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 119 (1989), pp. 233–46.

22 Libanius in the *Asinaria* (249–64) warns himself to kick away his idleness, invokes his *ingenium*, and urges himself to do something to help his master rather than harming him.

23 Epidicus sees a disaster approaching and blames himself; his helplessness is well shown when his monologue turns into a dialogue in which he plays both speakers (*Ep.* 96–100): "You are a worthless fellow, Epidicus.—What's the pleasure in insulting yourself?—Because you let yourself go!—What can I do?—Are you asking me? Before, you used to give advice to the others. Something must be found out, in some way."

24 *Pseud.* 394–400.

25 *Pseud.* 404–5: *nunc ego poeta fiam: viginti minas, / quae nusquam nunc sunt gentium, inveniam tamen.*

26 Pseudolus in *Pseud.* 423–6, 1025–32; Tranio in *Most.* 676–9.

27 Tranio in *Most.* 543–6, 562–6. Pseudolus talks to himself in the second person to gain courage before tricking his master (*Pseud.* 453–4): "They are coming to you, Pseudolus; prepare your speech against the old guy."

28 Many examples can be quoted for the slave's recovery of self-confidence, such as with Pseudolus at *Pseud.* 759–60: "Whatever before was uncertain or doubtful in my intellect, now is clear; my mind has been cleansed and the path is now open." In *Bacchides*, Chrysalus initially anticipates the success of his plan, but then is halted by the fear that something may go wrong and he may be punished, although he eventually finds the courage to continue (*Bacch.* 349–65).

Another consequence of the topsy-turvy world of Plautine comedy is that the *servus callidus* is allowed to talk in a style that does not fit a man of his condition. When boasting and full of self-confidence, for example, the slave may use military language, comparing himself to a general. At these moments, he becomes a “braggart slave” acting as a comic foil of the braggart soldier, another common stock character in Roman comedy. Military language is used to boast about the slave’s own “heroic deeds” by Pseudolus in the homonymous comedy,²⁹ Libanius in *Asinaria*,³⁰ Chrysalus in *Bacchides*³¹ and Palaestrio in *Miles*.³² Toxilus in *Persa* launches into a tirade full of military metaphors:

The enemy defeated, the citizens safe, the state in tranquility, the peace ratified, the war over, the deed accomplished successfully, the army and the garrisons uninjured, as you, Jupiter, and all the other gods powerful in heaven have helped us well, I am grateful and thank you, because I took complete revenge upon my enemy. Now, for this reason, I will divide and allot the booty among my allies.³³

29 *Pseud.* 579–89: “For in my breast I have already prepared my forces (*copias*)—double, threefold stratagems, treacheries, in order that, wherever I engage with the enemy (*hostibus congregiar*)—I will say it trusting in the virtue of my forefathers, in my industry and in my deceitful malice—I may easily win, and easily spoil my enemies by my treacheries (*facile ut vincam, facile ut spoliem meos perduellis meis perfidiis*). Now I will splendidly finish this Ballio, this common foe of me and all of you; only give me your attention. Now I want to besiege this town [i.e. the house of Ballio] in order to conquer it today (*hoc ego oppidum admoenire ut hodie capiatur volo*), and I will lead my legions there (*atque huc meas legiones adducam*). If I capture it (*expugno*)—and I will make it an easy task for my citizens—without delay I will immediately lead my army (*meum exercitum protinus obducam*) against this other old town [i.e. the house of Simo]. Then I will load and fill myself and all my fellow-soldiers (*participis omnis meos*) with booty (*praeda*) so that they know that I was born [to become] terror and flight for my enemies (*perduellis meis*).” Earlier in the play, Pseudolus talks about battles he must fight (*Pseud.* 524–5); later on, he claims that he will lead his legions against the enemies (*Pseud.* 761–3), rejoices after he has put the enemy to flight (*Pseud.* 1269: *hostibus fugatis*) and, completely drunk, ends his exultation with a ‘*vae victis*’ (*Pseud.* 1317), like a new Brennus.

30 *Asin.* 554–6 (*legiones, copiae, exercitus, pugnando, virtus*).

31 *Bacch.* 709–11 (*ballista, turrim, propugnacula, invadam, oppidum*), *Bacch.* 1069–1074 (*praeda, urbe capta, exercitum, triumpho, milites*).

32 The *Miles* provides a good combination of a moment of doubt followed by the elaboration of the trick celebrated with military language: his fellow in trickery Pericleptomenus urges Palaestrio to quickly find a good plan using a long series of military metaphors: *hostis, obsidium, exercitum, perduellis, praesidium, inimicis, legiones, moenia, inimicos* (*Miles* 219–30). When Palaestrio has found a plan, his use of military language is particularly heavy (*Miles* 267, 596–608, 815), and those who obey his orders all call him ‘*imperator*’ (*Miles* 1160). In this comedy, the military language of Palaestrio is clearly used to underline the role of the slave as boasting counterpart of the bragging soldier Pyrgopolinices.

33 *Per.* 752–7: *Hostibus victis, civibus salvis, re placida, pacibus perfectis, / bello extincto, re bene gesta, integro exercitu et praesidiis / cum bene nos, Iuppiter, iuvisti, dique alii omnes caelipotentes, / eas vobis habeo grates atque ago, quia probe sum ultus meum inimicum. / Nunc ob eam rem inter participes dividam praedam et participabo*. Similarly, earlier in the play Toxilus invited a ‘cunning maiden’ (the daughter of the parasite Saturio) to start her own battle (*proelium*) with the leno Dordalus (*Per.* 606–7).

The phrasing echoes real triumphal inscriptions and *elogia*,³⁴ reinforcing the comic effect of such exaggerated metaphoric language put in the mouth of a slave. The language of the *servus callidus*, however, is not limited to the military sphere. In the upside-down world of Plautine comedy, a slave can also talk with a senatorial flair, as do Epidicus³⁵ and Tranio.³⁶ This mix of military and senatorial language would have sounded strange when used by a slave, and it is indeed this aspect that Fraenkel identifies as one of the most important “Plautine” innovations in the slave figure.³⁷

The self-celebration of the cunning slave does not spare the epic style. On the contrary, it reaches its highest point when the slave, like a new Homer, praises his own skills and accomplishments as if he were an epic hero. The most famous example is Chrysalus singing his own *Iliad*³⁸ and equating himself to both Agamemnon (the “*imperator*” of the Greek army) and Ulysses (the real conqueror of Troy). The comparison of Chrysalus’ machinations to the heroic capture of Troy is used again elsewhere in the play.³⁹ The parallel with Ulysses is especially interesting, because he is the trickster *par excellence* in the mythic universe of the ancients. Indeed, the comparison is used in other plays: Pseudolus, the prototype of the cunning slave, is equated to Ulysses by his own master Simo⁴⁰ and is even judged better than Ulysses at the end of the play.⁴¹ *Servi callidi* seem to know no limits in their use (or abuse) of myth, epic and “heroic” comparisons. Toxilus, an interesting mix of a cunning slave and a desperate lover, states that his love-labors are far worse than those of Heracles,⁴² and equates himself with the Titans.⁴³ Chrysalus, probably the most versed in mythical and epic examples of Plautus’ cunning slaves, compares his robbing and tricking Nicobulus to the killing and skinning of Phrixus’ ram,⁴⁴ and equates himself to Bellerophon when

34 Cf. Fraenkel, *Plautine Elements in Plautus* (above, n. 6), pp. 163–5.

35 Epidicus (*Ep.* 158–63) mixes military language (*bellum, audendum, oppugnare*) with an imaginary call to the senate of his wits to convene (*ego de re argentaria / iam senatum convocabo in corde consiliarium*).

36 *Most.* 687–8: *huc concessero, / dum mihi senatum consili in cor convoco*. Later on, Tranio uses the same mix of military and senatorial language in a different sense (*Most.* 1047–50): “and from there I led every legion out (*eduxi omnem legionem*), both men and women. After I led my soldiers (*manipulares meos*) away from the siege (*ex opsidione*) into a safe place, I decided to convoke the senate of my playfellows (*senatum congerronum*); but after I convoked them, they removed me from the senate (*ex senatu*).”

37 Cf. Fraenkel, *Plautine Elements in Plautus* (above, n. 6), p. 159–65.

38 Chrysalus, in *Bacch.* 925–78. On Chrysalus’ *Iliad*, see Fraenkel, *Plautine Elements in Plautus* (above, n. 6), pp. 46–53.

39 *Bacch.* 987, 1053–8.

40 *Pseud.* 1063: *meus Ulixes*.

41 *Pseud.* 1244: *Superavit dolum Troianum atque Ulixem Pseudolus*. The old master Simo also compares Pseudolus to Socrates (*Pseud.* 464–5) because of his dialectic ability.

42 *Per.* 1–5.

43 *Per.* 26–7.

44 *Bacch.* 241–2: “Here today I will make Phrixus’ ram of him [i.e. Nicobulus, his old master] and I will shave him of his gold down to his skin.”

he delivers a letter to Nicobulus in which his son Mnesilochus (at Chrysalus' suggestion) asks him to tie Chrysalus up.⁴⁵ Tranio prefers historical models: with his immortal deeds (*facinora immortalia*), he is equal if not superior to Agathocles and even Alexander the Great.⁴⁶ Pseudolus, who boasts that he is destined to accomplish great deeds,⁴⁷ is compared to Agathocles by his master,⁴⁸ and Strobilus claims to be the great King Philip of Macedon.⁴⁹

Thanks to his larger-than-life qualities and his privileged position with the audience, which is led to sympathize with him more than with the other characters, the *servus callidus* even delivers moral teachings and wisdom—more than any other figure in the comedy. Without going into the details of the “didactic” element of Roman comedy, we can simply note that the most serious concepts in Plautus' comedies are often put in the mouths of cunning slaves.⁵⁰ A simple invitation to drink, for example, becomes an occasion for Stichus to recommend moderation and to state that everyone should celebrate according to his means.⁵¹ Pseudolus tries to urge his young master to control himself and resist the temptation to surrender to passion,⁵² and dives into an ambiguous monologue that celebrates the power of Fortune in human life under the rule of “seize the day.”⁵³ Palaestrio becomes an instructor in love to the *adulescens* Pleusicles, and accuses him of not being enough of a lover,⁵⁴ while Milphio scolds his young master for having fallen in love with a greedy courtesan.⁵⁵ In addition, the cunning slave often comments on other characters, in particular the old masters, underlining their stupidity or immoral behavior;⁵⁶ a typical example is Palaestrio, who makes a fool of his new master, the *miles gloriosus*.⁵⁷ We cannot exclude the possibility that these “didactic” and “moralistic” comments put in the mouths of

45 *Bacch.* 810: like Chrysalus, Bellerophon delivered a letter containing instructions to kill its bearer (*Il.* 6.155–95). On a lower level, even Epinacius, a young slave in the *Stichus*, when he has to send a message, promises to eclipse Talthybius and all (epic and tragic?) messengers (*Sti.* 305).

46 *Most.* 775–7.

47 *Pseud.* 590: *magna me facinora decet efficere*.

48 *Pseud.* 531–2.

49 *Aul.* 704.

50 In Terence and Menander, of course, the question is different, because serious concepts are more frequent and are voiced by different characters.

51 *Sti.* 692–5.

52 *Pseud.* 235–7.

53 *Pseud.* 667–87. Only an abrupt interruption stops him and decreases the seriousness of his words (*Pseud.* 687: *sed iam satis est philosophatum; nimis diu et longum loquor*).

54 *Miles* 624–5.

55 *Poen.* 291–2.

56 I have excluded from this list passages in which the cunning slave makes jokes against the young or old master without moral overtones, simply because it is normal for comic slaves to make fun of their masters. I have also omitted cases in which the slave makes affectionate fun of a young master who is in love (e.g. Pseudolus about Calidorus in *Pseud.* 1–96).

57 *Miles* 947–1083, 1200–83, 1311–77 (passim).

slaves might also have an ironic twist, especially when uttered with a particular tone of voice or bodily movement. None of this, however, affects the general principle that the slave is allowed “didactic” comments which are never voiced by any of the other characters.

The peculiar status of Plautus’ cunning slave is also highlighted “onstage” by his metatheatrical exploits. He is almost the only character allowed to break the fourth wall and address the audience. This is possible because the audience naturally sympathizes with him and is thus more prepared to accept a direct address from him than from any other character. Pseudolus can be taken as a model for this device. From the very beginning, he tries to bring the audience over to his side by advising them not to trust him,⁵⁸ and he forms an alliance with them against their “common enemy,” the pimp.⁵⁹ The complicity between Pseudolus and the audience surfaces again at the end of the play, when he invites them to applaud with the promise that he will invite them to dinner the next day.⁶⁰ Similar “friendly” addresses to the audience are made by Chrysalus⁶¹ and Palaestrio.⁶² Milphio, on the other hand, clearly admits that he prefers the audience’s favor to his own master’s.⁶³

The slave is also allowed to make metatheatrical comments about stock characters and stock scenes. Stichus, for example, reassures the audience that a slave can drink and party because this is possible in Athens (where the play is dramatically set),⁶⁴ while Tranio and Milphio celebrate the comic gags of slaves in comedies.⁶⁵ Pseudolus is particularly concerned about the difference between what the characters know and what the audience knows, as if he were an expert on comic irony: he refuses to tell Calidorus his plans, since they will be revealed to the audience in due course

58 *Pseud.* 125–8: “Now, in order that no one may say that he wasn’t told, I tell you all, to the adults here assembled, to all the people, I declare to all my friends and all my acquaintances, that for this day they must guard against me and not trust me.”

59 *Pseud.* 584–85: *Nunc inimicum ego hunc communem meum atque vostrorum omnium / Ballionem exballistabo lepide.*

60 *Pseud.* 1334–5.

61 *Bacch.* 1072–4: “But, Spectators, do not be surprised now that I don’t celebrate a triumph; this is too common, I don’t care about it. Still, the soldiers will be received with honeyed wine all the same.” On this scene, see Fraenkel, *Plautine Elements in Plautus* (above, n. 6), p. 162.

62 *Miles* 1130–1, where Palaestrio comments on Pyrgopolynices’ stupidity, addressing the audience.

63 *Poen.* 920–2: “I will go inside to tell this to my master. For it would be folly to summon him in front of the house and repeat here again the same things that you have just heard. I would rather be an annoyance to my master alone inside than to all of you here.”

64 *Sti.* 446–8.

65 *Most.* 1149–51; *Poen.* 427. But Milphio is not a typical cunning slave, as he is himself tricked. See Christopher Bungard, “L’ingannatore ingannato. I due aspetti di Milfione nel *Poenulus*,” in R. Raffaelli and A. Tontini (eds.), *Lecturae Plautinae Sarsinates XV – Poenulus* (Sarsina, 24 settembre 2011) (Urbino: Quattroventi, 2012), pp. 73–88 (and references therein).

and he does not want the show to be too long;⁶⁶ he also refuses to provide the details of the previous scenes, because the audience knows them already and the comedy is being performed for them.⁶⁷ Chrysalus also refers at length to the theatrical world and its conventions: he complains about the “usual,” common comic slaves, “those Parmenos, those Syruses;”⁶⁸ he hints at characters in another play;⁶⁹ and he even refers to another comedy of Plautus, the *Epidicus*, and how much he likes the actor Pello.⁷⁰ In the *Miles*, in a postponed prologue, Palaestrio updates the audience about what happened before, the topic of the play and its Greek models.⁷¹

Plautus’ comedies are full of comic gags in which mimicry and coarse humor abound. Yet Plautus spares his *servus callidus* slapstick gags, while involving him in the so-called elastic gags.⁷² These consist of a series of repetitive wisecracks or remarks that can be added to indefinitely;⁷³ they are the result of comic improvisation and belong to the comic repertoire, which Plautus, having been an actor himself, knew well. In *Asinaria*, for example, Libanius offers a long list of “heroic deeds” in order to glorify his own accomplishments, his companion Leonidas echoes this list with another, and finally Libanius returns the compliment by cataloguing all Leoni-

⁶⁶ *Pseud.* 388.

⁶⁷ *Pseud.* 720–1. The special link with the audience, together with comments on the theatrical role of the slave and the expectations of the audience, is summarized in a masterly fashion by Pseudolus himself (*Pseud.* 562–73a): “[To the audience.] I have a suspicion that now you suspect that I promise these great deeds to amuse you, while I perform this play, and that I will not do what I said I would do. I will not change my mind. In what way I will accomplish that, I do not know yet, I only know that it will happen for sure. For it is fit that the one coming forth onto the stage should bring, in a new manner, some new invention. If he is not able to do that, he should give place to someone who is able to do it. I want to go inside for some time, while I assemble together deceits in my mind. But I will come out, I will not keep you waiting; in the meantime this flute-player will entertain you.”

⁶⁸ *Bacch.* 649: *non mihi isti placent Permenones, Syri.*

⁶⁹ *Bacch.* 911–12.

⁷⁰ *Bacch.* 213–15. Cf. John Barsby (ed.), *Plautus, Bacchides* (Warminster, Wiltshire: Aris & Phillips, 1986), pp. 115–16.

⁷¹ *Miles* 79–155; in particular, Palaestrio begins with these words (*Miles* 79–87): “I will have the kindness to tell you the subject-matter [of this play] if you have the courtesy to listen to me. Whoever does not want to listen, please let him rise and get out, in order that those who want to listen have a place to sit. Now because it is for this reason that you have sat down in this festive place, I will tell you the title and the subject-matter of the comedy that we are going to perform. *Alazon* is the name, in Greek, of this comedy; the same we call in Latin: ‘the Braggart’ (*Gloriosus*).”

⁷² On this expression, see Andrews, *The Commedia dell’Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), p. lvi n. 64 (with additional bibliography).

⁷³ The comic force of these types of elastic gags was famously analyzed by Henri Bergson, *Le Rire. Essai sur la signification du comique*, first published in instalments in *Revue de Paris*, between 1899 and 1900. This important essay was first published in English in 1911 as *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic*, by Henri Bergson; authorised translation, by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1911).

das' "achievements."⁷⁴ Onstage, this list can be extended *ad infinitum* for the amusement of the audience; by the same token, it can be curtailed if the joke is not going well. The same result, but with the goal of vituperation, is obtained in *Persa*, in which Toxilus rages against the *leno* Dordalus with an expandable list of insults.⁷⁵

Linguistic playfulness necessitates inventiveness, which is why the cunning slave takes pleasure in it. Pseudolus, for example, is the only character in the play to mix Greek phrases with Latin;⁷⁶ he also plays with language by inventing new names—e.g. Subballio⁷⁷—and using alliteration.⁷⁸ Alliteration and accumulation, as well as comic neologisms, are used by Palaestrio,⁷⁹ while Chrysalus plays with his own name.⁸⁰ Cunning slaves are also better with languages than their masters, so that Milphio works as a (comic) interpreter between his young master Agorastocles and the Carthaginian Hanno.⁸¹ The best example of linguistic inventiveness is Sagaristio, the second cunning slave in *Persa*; when impersonating a Persian and asked his own name, he proudly gives a true performance by telling "his name:"

[My name is] Idle-speaker-dorus, Virgin-seller-ides, Nonsense-talker-ides, Silver-extractor-ides, Worthy-of-you-talker-ides, Nonsense-ides, Flatterer-ides, What-he-has-once-snatched-ides, Never-again-return-ides.⁸²

The *servus callidus* embodies the spirit of carnival in one more aspect: he likes life and the pleasures that come with it. Gluttony is typical of all slaves in drama, and the cunning slave is not immune to this failing. One example that can stand for all is the praise of the joys of life offered by a drunken Pseudolus at the end of the comedy, where he also adds a little boasting about his own bravery with wine.⁸³

Plautus' *servus callidus* was thus the embodiment of the comic trickster at every level: in his role, his deserved self-confidence, his boasting, his language and his

⁷⁴ *Asin.* 545–76. The text is partially corrupt.

⁷⁵ *Per.* 406–11.

⁷⁶ *Pseud.* 443, 483–84, 712.

⁷⁷ *Pseud.* 607.

⁷⁸ *Pseud.* 585 (*Ballionem exballistabo*, also with a neologism), 704–5.

⁷⁹ Alliteration in *Miles* 189–92; neologism in *Miles* 649 (*semisenem*).

⁸⁰ *Bacch.* 240 (*opus est chryso Chrysalo*) and 362 (*facietque extemplo Crucisalum me ex Chrysalo*).

⁸¹ *Poen.* 990–1027. Milphio was indeed originally from Carthage, which he left years before with his young master Agorastocles. While the latter candidly admits (*Poen.* 985–7) he has forgotten Punic, Milphio brags that no Punic man is more Punic than him (*Poen.* 991: *Nullus me est hodie Poenus Poenior*). In the scene, however, first Milphio seems to translate correctly Hanno's words, but then his translation becomes comic, which shows his ignorance of the language as well as his linguistic inventiveness. On this scene, see Giovanni Garbini, "Il *Poenulus* letto da un semitista," in: R. Raffaelli and A. Tontini (eds.), *Lecturae Plautinae Sarsinates XV – Poenulus* (Sarsina, 24 settembre 2011) (Urbino: Quattroventi, 2012), pp. 38–43.

⁸² *Per.* 702–5: *Vaniloquidorus Virginesvendonides / Nugiepioloquides Argentumextenebronides / Tedigniloquides Nugides Palponides / Quodsemelarrripides Numquameripides*.

⁸³ *Pseud.* 1246–82.

privileged relationship with the audience. His flippant but not buffoonish comic *vis* was a staple of Plautus' art and could hardly escape notice later on, when Italian *literati* decided to "translate" Roman comedy onto the Italian stage.

2. Servants in *Commedia Erudita*

The so-called *commedia erudita* ("erudite comedy") developed in the 16th century in Italy, partly in response to the discovery of new Plautine comedies.⁸⁴ While Terence's plays were known through the Middle Ages, twelve new comedies of Plautus were found by Nicholas of Kues in 1429, and this discovery had a major impact in Italy.⁸⁵ The new comedies led to the production and performance of plays by Plautus and Terence in Italian courts. Even if these performances spread the popularity of Latin comedy, what may have also contributed to the development of the *commedia erudita* was the presence on the market of new illustrated editions of Plautus and Terence that presented characters of the Roman plays dressed in Renaissance costumes and with a "Renaissance background." This mixture of ancient and contemporary elements was brought to the stage by the authors who wrote the first "erudite comedies," that is, comedies written "à la mode" of Plautus but set in contemporary Italy and written in Italian. These authors were Ludovico Ariosto and Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena (called Bibbiena), who followed the Plautine model closely for their cunning slaves: Dulippo in the *Suppositi* (1509) and Corbolo in the *Lena* (1528) by Ariosto, and Fessenio in Bibbiena's *Calandria* (1513). After these initial attempts at replicating Plautus' characters, however, *commedia erudita* experienced an evolution that took the character of the *servus callidus* progressively to the margin of the action. Eventually, authors abandoned such characters or, like Machiavelli, retained the idea of a "cunning trickster" but transferred it into a new figure.

⁸⁴ On the birth and development of *commedia erudita*, see Richard Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Giorgio Padoan, *L'avventura della commedia rinascimentale* (Padua: Vallardi, 1996). The so-called "Humanist comedy," written in Latin after the model of Plautus and Terence, developed in Italy before *commedia erudita*, which was written in Italian. Humanist comedy is a peculiar product and had no influence on *commedia erudita* or *commedia dell'arte* but remained an isolated "experiment." For this reason, I omit it from my analysis. A new edition in Latin and English is now available in Gary Grund (ed. and transl.), *Humanist Comedies*, I Tatti Renaissance Library 19 (Cambridge Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2005). See also Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios* (above), p. 31; Charles Fantazzi, "Roman and Humanist Comedy on the Renaissance Stage," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 15 (2008), pp. 281–90.

⁸⁵ In 1433, Giovanni Aurispa discovered Donatus' commentary on Terence in Mainz. For a brief overview of the impact of these discoveries in Italy, see Fantazzi, "Roman and Humanist Comedy" (above, n. 84), pp. 288–90.

Before analyzing the features of the servants in *commedia erudite* set in Italy, it is worth mentioning another comedy by Ariosto, the *Cassaria* (1508), which is considered the first *commedia erudita*. Although written in Italian, it does not take place in Italy but in Metellino, probably Mytilene at Lesbos, and has an “exotic” setting throughout. It is telling that the plot of the first *commedia erudita* in Italian is not set in Italy but “displaced” eastward, exactly as in Plautus’ comedies, which are never set in Rome. The *Cassaria* thus seems to be a bridge between Latin Humanist comedy, which was a pure remake of Plautus’ Latin comedies, and the “new” *commedia erudita* set in Italy. Ariosto’s *Cassaria* contains the servant characters closest to their Plautine models: Volpino and Fulcio almost compete with Pseudolus and Chrysalus in self-confidence, resourcefulness and boasting,⁸⁶ sometimes interrupted by moments of despair when they seem to have no clue of what to do,⁸⁷ and in their ability to take charge of the situation and dominate the action.⁸⁸ Volpino excels in his rhetorical, playful use of language,⁸⁹ and together with Fulcio he is the only character to break the fourth wall and refer to some “extra-theatrical” reality of Ferrara (where the comedy was performed).⁹⁰

In the earlier examples of “real,” Italy-based *commedia erudita*, many features of the original *servus callidus* were maintained, though in a less flamboyant manner than in *Cassaria*. In Ariosto’s other comedies and Bibbiena’s *Calandria*, for example, the servants are very confident in their ability and wit. The typical Plautine scene in which the young master puts all his hope in the cunning slave, who in turn promises to help, as well as the typical scene in which the latter takes charge of the situation and explains his tricks to the former, were preserved. Fessenio in Bibbiena’s *Calandria* has no doubt that he will help his young master Lidio and takes the lead;⁹¹ this attitude surfaces again in Act V, when an unforeseen circumstance requires a new plan, which Fessenio devises by once more taking charge of the situation.⁹² A similar (but longer) scene between servant and young master is found in Ariosto’s *Suppositi*.⁹³ The servant stars as the mover of the action again in Ariosto’s *Lena*, in which Corbolo equates himself with the “servi” he has seen in comedies for his “malizia,”⁹⁴ and then congratulates himself about how the plot is developing.⁹⁵

⁸⁶ *Cassaria* Act II, i (Volpino); Act V, i (Fulcio).

⁸⁷ *Cassaria* Act IV, i (Volpino), vii (Volpino), and viii (Fulcio).

⁸⁸ *Cassaria* Act III, i (Volpino); Act IV, iii (Volpino).

⁸⁹ *Cassaria* Act IV, ii: “A parlar per dritto, a torto ti corucci con lui” (“To tell it to you straight, it’s twisted for you to be angry with him”).

⁹⁰ *Cassaria* Act IV, vii, where Volpino makes reference to the “Tavern of the Monkey,” and Act V, v, where Fulcio refers to the “Tavern of the Moor;” both were famous taverns in Ferrara.

⁹¹ *Calandria* Act I, iii.

⁹² *Calandria* Act V, iv.

⁹³ *Suppositi* Act II, i. Here a false Erostrato (a disguised Dulippo, the servant) explains his plan to the false Dulippo (a disguised Erostrato, the young master).

⁹⁴ *Lena* Act III, i.

⁹⁵ *Lena* Act III, iii. Corbolo also seems to take pleasure in tricking his own master later in Act V, iii.

Similarly, the dialogue between Cornelio and his servant Querciola in Piccolomini's *Alessandro* (1544)⁹⁶ is built around the servant's confidence in his tricks and his insistence that he will solve his young master's problems; the scene ends with the usual self-confident statement.⁹⁷

Another typical feature of Plautus' comedies that passed into *commedia erudita* is the moment of despair of the cunning slave, when he feels lost and wonders what to do. Corbolo, the cunning servant in Ariosto's *Lena*, for example, goes through such a moment at the end of Act IV.⁹⁸ Similarly, the cunning slave Dulippo in Ariosto's *Suppositi* has a desperate outburst of hopelessness and dives into a series of self-directed questions about his future course of action.⁹⁹ At such uncertain moments, servants invoke their own "natural" resources just as Plautus' *servi* do: Corbolo invokes his own lies ("bugie") in Ariosto's *Lena*,¹⁰⁰ and Querciola his own wits ("ingegno") in Piccolomini's *Alessandro*.¹⁰¹

In the early phase of *commedia erudita*, especially in the plays of Ariosto, the braggart side of the *servus callidus* is also preserved, as in Ariosto's *Suppositi* and *Lena*. Similarly, Fessenio in Bibbiena's *Calandria* displays pride in his scheming,¹⁰² although with less braggadocio (and more vitriolic invective against the old master) than his Roman predecessors. Already in Ariosto's *Negromante* (1528), however, the servant Temolo is the one who tricks the Magician (the "negromante") and takes charge of everything,¹⁰³ but he lacks many aspects of the cunning slave: no boasting, no moment of despair followed by recovered courage, and a generally weak leadership role. In the same way, Querciola in Piccolomini's *Alessandro* stars in many "philosophical" and metatheatrical intrusions similar to those of Plautus' cunning slaves, but beyond invoking his own wits, he never indulges in boasting.

In the early comedies, the fascination of the Plautine models was strong and his comedies were followed closely. As time went on, however, the spell faded, authors began to depart from the model, and the cunning servant in *commedia erudita* experienced a marked evolution. In fact, more and more servants are introduced (or present themselves) as "*servi callidi*," but in reality they play no role in advancing the plot. An interesting example is Annibal Caro's *Gli straccioni* (1543, but published in 1582), a comedy reworking the Greek novel *Leucippe and Clitophon* by Achilles Tatius. In this

96 *Alessandro* Act I, v.

97 "Leave it to me, and I will be back shortly. Now let me plan some foxy trick to cheat the old geezer," as translated in Donald Beecher (ed. and trans.), *Renaissance comedy: the Italian masters*, Vol. 1 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), p. 314.

98 *Lena* Act IV, ix.

99 *Suppositi* Act V, iii.

100 *Lena* Act III, vi (beginning).

101 *Alessandro* Act IV, ii (end).

102 *Calandria* Act II, ix (last utterance by Fessenio) and III, i.

103 *Negromante* Act IV, i (ll. 1427–31) and iii (ll. 1513–32).

play, the servant Pilucca has no role in the resolution of a complicated plot. Despite this, Caro took pains to insert an entire scene (Act I, iv: a fast-paced dialogue between Pilucca and the steward Marabeo, both in the service of Madonna Argentina and Messer Giordano) in which Pilucca seems to fit the blueprint of the cunning slave. The author uses many of the typical features of Plautus' cunning slave here: Pilucca addresses the audience, presents himself as a trickster and gives orders to Marabeo, who entrusts himself to him. Pilucca also engages in a question-and-answer exchange, typical of comic gags, to inform Marabeo of their master's death,¹⁰⁴ and finally jokes about philosophical schools by distorting their names ("Peripottetici" for Peripatetics and "Stronzici" for Stoics¹⁰⁵). Yet the scene has no consequence for the plot, and it looks more like a tribute Caro wanted to pay to the classical model of the *servus callidus*, adding at the same time some comic flavor.

In later plays, the *servi callidi* tend to become even more immaterial. Giorgetto of Cecchi's *Assiuolo* (1550) boasts with his young master Giulio about his ability in matters of love and trickery;¹⁰⁶ but even if Giorgetto's plans eventually provide the happy ending, he is himself a marginal character and, far from being master of the play, is rarely present onstage. As time goes by, the *servus callidus* loses even more ground and becomes useless to the resolution of the story, because the happy ending is brought about by Fortune. A typical example is Trinca in Della Porta's *La sorella* (1591/1598). Trinca is believed by his young master Attilio to be a "situation-solver,"¹⁰⁷ who "can make miracles with a couple of words;"¹⁰⁸ Trinca himself is proud of his lies and in asides to the audience comments on how his trick is developing.¹⁰⁹ Yet his tricks are useless, and the problems are solved by Fortune.

Plautus' *servus callidus* also experiences an evolution in the style of his language, as not all his original features are preserved in his Renaissance heirs. Ariosto seems to be the only author who used military language for servants; *Lena's* Corbolo, for example, seems fascinated by the military vocabulary he uses throughout Act V, with the metaphor of "his army of lies" that are ready to "win" over his "enemies."¹¹⁰ Still, such moments are only an echo of the orgiastic military celebrations of Pseudolus, Toxilus, Tranio and the other Roman cunning slaves. Renaissance servants also seem to make no epic references, probably for two reasons. First, such references in the

¹⁰⁴ In fact, Messer Giordano is not really dead but is simply believed to be dead by Pilucca.

¹⁰⁵ Translated "Pleuripethetics," "Stoisters" in Beecher, *Renaissance comedy*, Vol. 1 (above, n. 97), p. 230 (but this misses the vulgar joke with "Stronzici").

¹⁰⁶ *Assiuolo* Act I, i.

¹⁰⁷ *La sorella* Act I, i.

¹⁰⁸ Beecher, *Renaissance comedy*, Vol. 1 (above, n. 97), p. 388.

¹⁰⁹ *La sorella* Act IV, ii.

¹¹⁰ *Lena* Act V, i: "Post' ho l'artegliaria alli canti. Facciano qui testa ormai le bugie ... non temo non averne poi vittoria"; *Lena*, Act V, vi: "Ben succede l'impresa: avrà l'essercito de le bugie, dopo tanti pericoli, dopo tanti travagli, al fin vittoria ..."; *Lena*, Act V, vii: "Da tante parti sí le forze crescere veggio ai nemici, che mi casca l'animo di potere a tanto impeto resistere."

mouth of a valet might have sounded too daring to the Renaissance élite, who were used to considering epic a high, noble genre ill-suited to comedy in general and servants in particular. Second, by mostly omitting the boasting and tricks of Plautus' *servus callidus*, Renaissance authors lacked occasions for servants to dive into epic celebrations of their own abilities and successes.¹¹¹

The "didactic" side, with its possible ironical overtones, has more luck in the servants of *commedia erudita*. Querciola in Piccolomini's *Alessandro* becomes a "teacher of love" for his young master Cornelio when he explains that "love itself is a force," meaning that Cornelio should not hesitate to "assault" his beloved.¹¹² Fagiuolo, the servant of the Captain in Piccolomini's *Alessandro*, mocks contemporary "philosophical" interest in ethical relativism when he argues for the relative value of beauty and goodness in the Captain's wife.¹¹³ Comments on unethical masters are made by Fessenio in Bibbiena's *Calandria*, when he makes a fool of the old, lascivious Calandro¹¹⁴ or comments on his stupidity with strong words in short monologues addressed to the audience.¹¹⁵ The case of Nibbio, the servant of the Astrologer/Magician in Ariosto's *Negromante*, is similar. He is not a typical cunning slave, as the *servus callidus* role is fulfilled by Temolo (who tricks the Magician, a trickster himself), but Nibbio offers many asides about the dishonesty of his master,¹¹⁶ who is Ariosto's polemical target. At the end of the play, Nibbio even decides to desert his "scelerato" master and gives a final moralizing speech to the audience.¹¹⁷ Aretino, in his dry satire of the nobility, launches his servant Rosso into a tirade against nobles who look respectable only because of their dress, and makes him say that everyone would bless

111 Only a brief reference to a contemporary epic can be found in Aretino's *Cortigiana*, when Rosso tells his master Parabolano that he is as valiant as Astolfo, the paladin of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (*Cortigiana* Act II, xv). Aretino's comedy, however, is a peculiar type of *commedia erudita* (see below) and his epic comparison is thus of no significance.

112 *Alessandro* Act IV, iv.

113 Fagiuolo explains to the Captain himself that his wife might be good and beautiful, but even if she were not, he should think she is, since the results will be exactly the same (*Alessandro* Act IV, vi). It is interesting that such references to contemporary culture and those "philosophical insights" are placed in the mouths of servants, even if the latter have no prominent role in the play.

114 *Calandria* Act I, vii; Act II, vi and ix.

115 *Calandria* Act I, vii (opening): "It is clear to me now: the gods have buffoons, just as mortals do. Love, who usually ensnares the hearts of the sensitive, has made his nest in that fool Calandro, and he's not going to leave. It is not very smart of Cupid to take up residence in such a blockhead. But he has a purpose in mind: among lovers, this fellow can be like a donkey among monkeys. And could he have put the task in better hands? He's got his feathers stuck in the birdlime" [trans. by Donald Beecher, *Renaissance comedy: the Italian masters*, Vol. 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), pp. 46–7]. See also *Calandria* Act II, ix (end).

116 Cf. *Negromante* Act II, iii (he also speaks Latin at l. 823); Act III, i and iv (esp. ll. 1322–1331). On this comedy, see Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios* (above, n. 84), pp. 80–3.

117 *Negromante* Act V, vi.

him if he were to rob his master;¹¹⁸ this is a harsh statement from a servant, but is in line with Aretino's polemical attitude toward contemporary society.¹¹⁹ The most serious side of the *servus callidus* is thus maintained by Renaissance authors, probably because it felt less threatening than the boasting side or the leadership position; moreover, as noted, the possible ironic overtones of a "philosophizing" servant would have made such figures even less threatening.

The metatheatrical ability of the cunning slave, a staple of Plautine comedy, remains alive in *commedia erudita*. Again, however, these direct addresses to the audience are very different from those of a Pseudolus or Chrysalus. The Roman slave almost challenged the audience to join him in his fictional disturbance of society's hierarchy, by siding with him against stupid or immoral masters; for one night, the audience could be the accomplice of an otherwise criminal act. In Renaissance plays, on the other hand, addresses to the audience by servants lose this carnivalesque flavor and are generally reduced to the most trivial function: the invitation to applaud at the end of the play, as with Nibbio in Ariosto's *Negromante*,¹²⁰ Giorgetto in Cecchi's *Assiuolo*, Querciola in Piccolomini's *Alessandro* and Trinca in Della Porta's *La sorella*. Only rarely do we find a bolder address, such as that in Bibbiena's *Calandria*, where Fessenio explicitly addresses the audience in the opening scene of Act III, trying to bring them over to his side against the old Calandro, who becomes the common comic target. Similarly, metatheatrical references to the theatrical world and conventions are far less frequent in *commedia erudita*, although there are a few examples in Ariosto's comedies,¹²¹ as well as in Piccolomini's *Alessandro*¹²² and Aretino's *Cortigiana*.¹²³

Renaissance *commedia erudita* is particularly lacking in comic gags, and scenes of pure slapstick are rare. Despite their "erudite" nickname, however, Renaissance comedies do make use of obscenities, especially in the mouths of servants. In Ariosto's *Lena*, for example, Corbolo repeatedly goes into sexual double entendres with Lena,¹²⁴

118 *Cortigiana* Act I, xv.

119 Andrews suggests (per litt.) that—even with an element of social satire—the starting point of these scenes is a standard comic (or buffonesque) topos, meaning that if an idiot exists, it is a crime not to exploit him.

120 Even if the main cunning slave of the play is Temolo, not Nibbio.

121 *Lena* Act III, i (Corbolo comments that now he needs a servant's trick, as he has sometimes seen in comedies); *Suppositi* Act II, ii (a reference to *Cassaria* by a minor servant) and Act V, vii (where it is the parasite Pasifilo, however, who says that one could write a play about the strange events that have just occurred).

122 *Alessandro* Act II, iii (end) and v, with two references by Querciola to the Accademia degli Intronati ("Academy of the Deaf and Daft" in Andrews' translation), which was founded in Siena in 1525 and produced several erudite comedies; Alessandro Piccolomini was a member of it. Cf. Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios* (above, n. 84), p. 91–108.

123 *Cortigiana* Act I, xv (Rosso wants to play the trick that another fellow like him played in a story "everybody knows"). See also Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios* (above, n. 84), p. 152, who quotes the "metatheatrical" speech of Ortica in Giancarli's *La capraria* (*The "Goat Comedy,"* 1544).

124 *Lena* Act I, ii; Act II, iii; Act IV, ix.

obscenities are also used by servants to attack enemies, as in Della Porta's *La sorella*,¹²⁵ or in short gags in which they make fun of an old man in love and tell him how to "approach" his beloved, as in Piccolomini's *Alessandro*.¹²⁶

Playing with languages, a specialty of Plautus' *servus callidus* and a sign of his trickery, is used for comic effect also in *commedia erudita*. In *La sorella* by Della Porta, the servant Trinca poses as a fake Turkish interpreter in order to trick his master with a manipulated translation,¹²⁷ and the scene's comic effect depends entirely on the distortion of a foreign language. The inventiveness of Trinca recalls Milphio in Plautus' *Peonulus*, with his colorful "personal" translation of Punic.¹²⁸ In Renaissance society, then, the servant is still able to play comically with foreign languages. Here he also works as a foil for the (fake) "doctus," who believes himself to be intelligent and educated and frequently uses Latin, often with many mistakes.

While preserving a few original traits of the Plautine character, therefore, the servant of the *commedia erudita* lost his original primary features: leadership in action, intelligence and a carnivalesque status based on real cultural and intellectual superiority to his masters. As a result, the *servus callidus* became a pale, useless reflection of his Roman ancestor. The reason for this failure at reviving the character may be twofold. First, *commedia erudita* was not a universally accepted theatrical paradigm. There are many plays of the period written either ignoring classical models or even opposing them. Other Renaissance comedies, not based on Latin models or consciously avoiding them, simply omit the character of the *servus callidus*. Two authors in particular stand out as more independent of the classical model and can serve as examples: Aretino and Ruzante. Aretino never mastered Latin, and his comedies are thus less influenced by classical comedy;¹²⁹ in *La Cortigiana* (1525), the servant Rosso, although he shares some features of earlier *servi callidi* (see above), does not behave like one. Ruzante, on the other hand, was a very sophisticated author who, rather than producing a re-enactment of Roman plays, chose to focus his attention on a crude and realistic depiction of the lower classes of the Venetian area. The main character of his plays (generally called Ruzante, Zilio or Bilora) is a vilified comic victim who is the antithesis of Plautus' flamboyant slave. Ruzante's view of reality, therefore, is antithetical to Plautus' carnivalesque depiction of the victorious slave; his

125 *La sorella* Act I, v.

126 *Alessandro* Act III, i.

127 *La sorella* Act III, iv.

128 *Poen.* 990–1027. This scene also recalls the Persian ambassador Pseudoartabanes in Aristophanes' *Acharnians* (*Ach.* 100, 104) or the barbarian god Triballus in *Birds* (*Av.* 1615, 1628–9, 1678–9). As Richard Andrews (per litt.) points out, linguistic distortion is typical of *commedia dell'arte* (see below). Della Porta's plays date to the 1590s, when *commedia dell'arte* was already booming, so these scripted comedies were being influenced by improvised ones, as well as *vice versa*. These "linguistic games," therefore, might not be a direct borrowing and reworking of the Plautine models, but Della Porta could have adopted them through the medium of *commedia dell'arte*.

129 Cf. Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios* (above, n. 84), p. 69.

main character has been defined as “an underdog,”¹³⁰ whose personality almost excludes the presence in the play of another dominating, antithetical character like the *servus callidus*. There is no cunning servant in Ruzante’s comedies, *Betia* (1523–1525), *Moscheta* (1529), *Parlamento* (1529), *Bilora* (1529), and *Fiorina* (1531).¹³¹ Ruzante was nonetheless aware of classical comedies, and in fact he wrote two comedies after the Plautine model: *Piovana* (1532, based on *Rudens*) and *Vaccaria* (1533, based on *Asinaria*). In these works, a cunning servant very similar to the Roman models (especially Truffo in *Vaccaria*) plays the central role; yet the fact that in his masterpieces Ruzante avoided the *servus callidus* shows that his idea of “modern” comedy departed greatly from the classical model. Even more different is the isolated case of Giordano Bruno’s *Il candelaio* (*The Candlestick*, 1582), which includes servants in the cast, none of whom, however, follows Plautus’ model or has an important role in the comedy. The comedy, Bruno’s only play, is particularly heavy in sexual *double entendres* and the pervasive sense of *Schadenfreude* for the comic victims Bonifacio, Bartolomeo and Manfurio recalls Aretino’s polemical style. The production of these comedies, in which the servant played no major part or was even absent, may have suggested that other types of comedies, in which the *servus* was unimportant, were possible. In addition, the milder Terentian comedy, in which slaves were “tamer,” showed Renaissance playwrights that a *servus callidus* was not essential for a comedy.¹³²

The second, deeper reason for the failure to revive Plautus’ slave is summarized by Anton Francesco Grazzini in the prologue of *La strega* (*The Witch*, 1545–1550), where the “Prologue” debates with the “Argument:”

PROLOGUE: I do not want that we enter the sacristy, because neither the time nor the place require it, but I do maintain that observing the ancient rules, as Aristotle and Horace teach us, is most necessary.

ARGUMENT: You are getting too excited, brother; Aristotle and Horace saw their own times, but our times are different: we have different costumes, a different religion and a different way of life, and therefore we must write comedies in a different way; in Florence people do not live as they lived in Athens or in Rome; there are no slaves, there are no adopted sons, there are no pimps to sell girls, nor do soldiers now when sacking cities and castles take new born baby girls and, raising them as if they were their own daughters, prepare a dowry for them. Rather, soldiers now think about stealing as much as possible, and if by chance they should capture grown up girls or married women, they would take their virginity and their honor (unless they expected to be able to gain a good ransom from them).

¹³⁰ The expression is used for Ruzante by Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios* (above, n. 84), p. 127, whose chapter on Ruzante (pp. 125–43) is a good introduction to this author.

¹³¹ *Bilora* (1529) has Zane, the Bergamask servant of Andronico, the old lover of Bilora’s wife. He is not a cunning slave, appears only in one scene (scene 12) and has no role whatsoever. It is interesting, however, that he has the name (Zane) and origin (Bergamo) which will become the staple of the servant of the *Commedia dell’arte* (see below).

¹³² The *Venexiana*, an anonymous comedy that is almost unique in Renaissance production, also consciously avoids the classical model and lacks *servi callidi*.

Slaves in general, and cunning slaves in particular, did not fit in contemporary comedies, because they belonged to another society: their “Roman” features and tricks could not be recycled in Renaissance society. As a consequence, plays written after the classical model could only be pale copies of the originals; not adapting to modern society, they failed to revive classical comedy. Indeed, the play *Il frate* (*The Friar*, 1540) by Grazzini has no servant at all.

Machiavelli, at least in his masterpiece *Mandragola* (1518), followed this idea. His play is modern, takes place in contemporary Florence, is populated by characters modeled on people of the author’s own time, and deals with contemporary issues, for example the (widespread) polemical attitude against corrupt religious figures, which is absent from Roman comedy. Machiavelli does use a few stock scenes and characters, but they have been given a new life. The key feature that ensured the success of the comedy is that Machiavelli, unlike the other authors of *commedia erudita*, did not limit himself to reproducing the old models but “translated” them into his own world. In fact, Messer Nicia, Fra’ Timoteo, Ligurio and Lucrezia have a personality that the other characters of *commedie erudite* lack. Machiavelli’s choice of the trickster in this play is particularly telling in this regard. Ligurio is exactly like the Plautine *servus callidus*, and the only “real” trickster in Renaissance comedy, yet he is neither a servant nor a slave, but a parasite. The real servant, Siro, is only a simple servant, while the parasite Ligurio devises the entire trick and brings the comedy to a “happy” ending for the young lovers, Callimaco and Lucrezia. Even if Plautus’ Curculio is already a *parasitus callidus*, Ligurio is markedly different to the degree that he displays many typical features of the Plautine cunning slave: he is witty, intelligent, self-confident, boastful and quick to act. He even uses military language with the same force as a Pseudolus or Chrysalus in *Mandragola*, Act IV, ix. In this scene, Nicia, the husband of Lucrezia, prepares an ambush with Ligurio, Fra’ Timoteo and the servant Siro to kidnap Callimaco (who pretends to be a passerby) because they want a “victim” who will sleep with Lucrezia immediately after she drinks the dangerous mandrake.¹³³ Here is how the “commander in chief” Ligurio arranges his comic army:

Let’s not waste time here. I will be the captain and command the army for today. Callimaco¹³⁴ will be on the right horn, I’ll be on the left, and the doctor [= Messer Nicia] will be here, between the two horns. Siro will be the rearguard to help out the side that might lose ground. The password will be Saint Cucu.

133 The core of the trick devised by Ligurio consists of convincing the stupid Nicia that his wife Lucrezia will become fertile after drinking the mandrake, but that the first person who sleeps with her after she drinks the magic potion will die.

134 Fra’ Timoteo in disguise (like the other members of the “army”) will pretend (for the unaware Messer Nicia) to be Callimaco, while the real Callimaco will impersonate a passerby, who will be ambushed and taken to Lucrezia.

This is a masterpiece of comic double entendres by the “imperator” of the comic action. Not only does Ligurio use military metaphors, but his language has an additional layer of *double entendres*: the lawyer Nicia will be “between the two horns,” which alludes to his future status as cuckold (called “horned” in Italian). The concept is wittily underlined at the end by the password: “Saint Cucu,” hinting at the French “cucu,” which means both the bird “cuckoo” and “cuckold.”

This piece is worthy of a Pseudolus or a Chrysalus at their best, but Machiavelli chose a more modern figure, the parasite. To the contemporary Florentines the sponger would certainly have appeared a much more likely candidate for the trickster than a humble servant. Interestingly enough, Machiavelli’s late play *Clizia* (1525) is a reworking of Plautus’ *Casina*, a play lacking a *servus callidus*. In Plautus as in Machiavelli the trick against the *senex* in love with a young girl is played by the *senex*’s wife. Yet Machiavelli has increased the role of the “cunning wife” compared to the model; while Plautus’ Cleostrata, though plotting the deception of her husband, does not behave onstage as a trickster, Machiavelli’s Sofronia, Nicomaco’s wife, is a real “comic hero”, who, unlike the Plautine counterpart, is also given the final and only direct address of the audience, celebrating female victory.¹³⁵ While Machiavelli successfully develops a cunning parasite (*Mandragola*) and a *matrona callida* (*Clizia*), most erudite comedies try to replicate Plautus’ *servus callidus*—and they fail. It is indeed telling that one of the most cunning servants of Italian Renaissance comedy is Christoforo in Luigi Groto’s *Emilia* (1579), which is an adaptation of Plautus’ *Epidicus*. When a specific model to follow is lacking, however, *commedia erudita*’s cunning servants are dull copies of the Roman originals and progressively lose ground and status. After all, erudite comedies were largely an intellectual exercise, aimed more at following Horace and Aristotle than at achieving humor. Most of the authors were not men of the theater but Latinists or learned men of letters; they copied Plautus’ plots in an attempt to intellectually recreate the Roman world they loved to study and admired, but they could not reproduce the theatrical force of a true playwright.

3 Servants in *Commedia Dell'Arte*

Commedia dell'arte plays began to be performed in Italy around the 1540s; they mainly consisted of an improvised form of theater based on scripts (*scenari*), which were limited to the outline of the plots and gave the artists (the *comici*) freedom to add set pieces of dialogue and comic gags as they saw fit.¹³⁶ Even if this type of improvised

¹³⁵ *Clizia* Act V, vii.

¹³⁶ On the development and characteristics of *commedia dell'arte*, the best English introductions are Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios* (above, n. 84), pp. 169–203; Andrews, *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), pp. ix–li. See also Allardyce Nicoll, *The World of Harlequin: a Critical*

theater “onstage” was rather different from the fully scripted *commedia erudita*, scholars agree that plots and characters of the written *commedia erudita* were adapted by the *arte* actors to a new audience and a new type of acting.¹³⁷ It is difficult to trace exactly how the literate Renaissance comedy turned into the improvised, “oral” *commedia dell’arte*, which in its early phases had neither theoretical treatises nor, with the exception of Scala’s scenarios, fixed scripted texts that could be used as evidence for the connection. Still, the striking similarities between plots and stock characters in the two types of comedy, as well as their identical geographical location and proximity in time, can be taken as evidence of the influence of *commedia erudita* on *commedia dell’arte*. From this perspective, it is striking that *commedia dell’arte* brings the stock character of the servant back onstage and gives him a major role in its plots.

Like its predecessors of Roman and Renaissance comedy, *commedia dell’arte* centered on two young lovers who must overcome various obstacles in order to fulfill their love; these obstacles were normally represented by blocking characters such as old fathers, braggart soldiers and the like, or obstacles arising from fortune and the vicissitudes of life.¹³⁸ To help the audience to recognize the characters and follow the always varying story, characters became “masks.” “Mask” in this context means more than the actual masks the actors wore on the stage—some (the young lovers), in fact, acted without one. By “mask,” scholars mean instead a group of fixed characteristics that identified a character and were the same in all plays, regardless of the plot. These included the mask (if present), the costume, the behavior and even the Italian dialect which the character spoke. These characteristics made the character easily identifiable any time he/she appeared onstage, so that the audience knew who this was and what to expect even before a single word was said. Before discussing the servants in *commedia dell’arte*, it is necessary to briefly introduce the other main masks:

- Pantalone is a wealthy Venetian merchant and normally plays the role of the old father and master who “blocks” the love story.
- The “Dottore” (often called Graziano) is a comic pedant. He invariably comes from Bologna, which at that time was considered the prototype university town. He speaks with a thick Bolognese accent and talks nonsense rather than (mis)using Latin, like his counterparts in *commedia erudita*,¹³⁹ because the audience of *commedia dell’arte*, being more culturally and socially diverse, often did not know Latin but could certainly laugh at nonsense.
- The young lovers or “Innamorati” are fundamental, as their story is at the core of the play. They speak the Tuscan dialect, a more sophisticated language, and are

Study of the Commedia dell’Arte (Cambridge, Cambridgeshire and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1963); Henke, *Performance and Literature* (above, n. 5).

¹³⁷ Cf. Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios* (above, n. 84), pp. 169–75.

¹³⁸ For a more detailed analysis of comic plots in *commedia dell’arte*, see Andrews, *The Commedia dell’Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), pp. xxxii–xxxvii.

¹³⁹ As, for example, does Messer Nicia in Machiavelli’s *Mandragola*.

the least comic of the characters. Even if their dialogue sometimes borders on the buffoonish, they still have “romantic” undertones. In Scala’s scenarios, the name of the young man is often Flavio or Orazio; the young ladies are called Flaminia and Isabella. *Commedia dell’arte* plays most often have two pairs of “Innamorati,” whose stories add complexity to the plot.

- The “Capitano” is one of the main blocking characters. He is a Spaniard and thus has a foreign accent. He is definitely the heir of the *miles gloriosus* of Plautus with his notably boastful attitude.

Servants in *commedia dell’arte* are called “zani” or “zanni,” a Venetian abbreviation of the name Gianni/Giovanni common in Northern Italy and especially among servants.¹⁴⁰ In *commedia dell’arte*, the *zani* are characterized by a thick Bergamask accent. This is historically due to the fact that the city of Bergamo was under Venetian rule, and that many poor farmers from the Bergamo area emigrated to Venice to work as servants in rich Venetian families. Moreover, the Bergamask accent sounded (and still sounds) “primitive” to a native speaker of Italian, because it uses guttural sounds and words that seem harsh and unfamiliar to a non-Bergamask. This strange, heavy language made the *zani* character automatically comic.¹⁴¹ *Commedia dell’arte* scenarios usually include two *zani*: one is smart and tricky, the other dumb and only a victim of comic laughter.¹⁴² This is not an innovation; the stupid slave is found already in Plautus,¹⁴³ and this type of physical buffoonery becomes a staple of the medieval fools. In Flaminio Scala’s scenarios, the first *zani* is called Pedrolino¹⁴⁴ and the second Arlecchino. Other names of *zani* in *commedia dell’arte* are Burattino, Fritellino, Brighella, Scapino, Coviello and Pulcinella. (All but Burattino are absent from Scala’s scenarios.)¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Pandolfi, *La Commedia dell’Arte* (above, n. 5), p. 157. For a more complex analysis of the origin of the name Zanni and its connections with the name Giovanni, see Alessandra Mignatti, *La maschera e il viaggio: sull’origine dello zanni* (Bergamo: Moretti & Vitali, 2007), pp. 33–79. On the character of the *Zani*, see Pandolfi, *La Commedia dell’Arte* (above, n. 5), pp. 157–64.

¹⁴¹ On the effects of Bergamask dialect in scripted *zani*-texts, see Henke, *Performance and Literature* (above, n. 5), pp. 111, 114–15. The Bergamask accent and in general the ability to play with different languages for comic purposes was already used by the Venetian “buffoni,” another type of buffoonish figure typical of Venice; see Henke, *Performance and Literature* (above, n. 5), pp. 50–68, esp. 58–9, 68.

¹⁴² In the *zani*-texts, the differentiation between the first and second *zani* is not yet present: the *zani* is both smart and a buffoon. See Pandolfi, *La Commedia dell’Arte* (above, n. 5), p. 162. A predecessor of the two *zani* can be found in Ruzante’s plays (discussed above). As Richard Andrews points out, Ruzante in fact played regularly opposite his colleague Alvarotto, who impersonated a character who tricks and exploits Ruzante—Nale, Duofo, Menato, etc. The latter, however, is a trickster but not a servant.

¹⁴³ Stace, “The Slaves of Plautus” (above, n. 6), calls them the “deceived slaves.”

¹⁴⁴ Perhaps the French Pierrot, who appears in the 1660s, was derived from Pedrolino. See Andrews, *The Commedia dell’Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), p. xxvi.

¹⁴⁵ Among all these *zani*, Arlecchino deserves more commentary. As Andrews, *The Commedia dell’Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), pp. xxvi–xxvii, explains, the name Arlecchino is the Italian

The *zani* became the staple of *commedia dell'arte*, also known as “*commedia degli zani*.”¹⁴⁶ Despite being apparently, although not directly, the heir of the cunning servant of Plautine comedy, the *zani* in *commedia dell'arte* is very different. In a sense, the evolution of the *servus callidus* that began with the *commedia erudita* is here brought to an extreme conclusion, with an important new twist. First, scenarios always seem to have two servants, both of whom play an important role in the spectacle. The closest to the original Plautine cunning servant is of course the smarter servant—the first *zani*. He opposes his old master in most *commedia dell'arte* scenarios; indeed, some scholars see the opposition between Pantalone and the first *zani* as the real core of *commedia dell'arte*, even more than the young lovers' story.¹⁴⁷ In this sense, the original opposition slave/old master of Plautine comedy and *commedia erudita* is maintained. On the other hand, the relationship between the cunning servant and the young master in love is almost lost in *commedia dell'arte*. In a few scenarios, Pedrolino does play the role of the helper, but in most cases there is no particular connection between the young lover and the *zani*. Even when there is one, the main goal of the *zani* is not to help the young lover but to have fun tricking Pantalone. Another difference from Roman comedy is that the first *zani* most often has his own agenda; in many cases, for example, the two *zani* compete for the love of Franceschina, another mask used for the female servant, and normally the first *zani* wins her. This love story among *zani* parallels that of the young lovers and provides an additional plot-layer.¹⁴⁸ Even if the *zani* has a love story that makes him take the initiative, however, he loses his role as mover of the plot: not only is the second *zani* inept, but the first *zani* is also useless or unsuccessful. Indeed, in most of Flaminio Scala's scenarios, the first *zani* Pedrolino does not help to resolve the plot, and even less does Arlecchino. The tricks Pedrolino devises are mostly “jokes” merely aimed at making the audience laugh (e.g. Day 1,

word for Harlequin, a character of Medieval French drama and a demonic figure derived from Northern Europe folklore. Harlequin became a sort of anarchic clown in France in the 16th century, and in this form he was imported into *commedia dell'arte* by Tristano Martinelli (1557–1630): Flaminio Scala included this mask out of admiration for the actor. The success of Martinelli's Arlecchino eventually led to the popularity of this mask in *commedia dell'arte*. Arlecchino is thus not an original character of *commedia dell'arte*: his origin has nothing to do with a Plautine cunning slave but rather has dark connotations. In *commedia dell'arte* Arlecchino often plays the role of second (dumb) *zani* and he is thus completely different from the French original as well as the cunning slave. Because of his different original function and meaning, any attempt to identify Arlecchino as the ‘typical’ *zani* of *commedia dell'arte* is risky; an example is Nicoll, *The World of Harlequin* (above, n. 136), whose title is revealing. On Arlecchino, see also Pandolfi, *La Commedia dell'Arte* (above, n. 5), pp. 163–64.

146 Cf. Andrews, *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), p. xi.

147 Cf. Andrews, *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), p. xxi; Henke, *Performance and Literature* (above, n. 5), p. 27.

148 This type of device is also used, for example, in Molière's *Amphitryon*, where the “love story” of Sosias with his wife Cleanthis and Mercury parallels the one between Amphitryon, Alcmena and Jupiter (while this second, slave-based love story is absent from the Plautine original).

Day 2, Day 12, Day 16,¹⁴⁹ Day 29, Day 38). Sometimes these scenarios involve a trickster, as in Plautus' comedies, but he is one of the lovers and not the *zani*; in Day 28 ("*Flavio finto negromante*," *Flavio the Fake Magician*), for example, Pedrolino would like to help the young lover, but Flavio himself directs the plot toward the happy ending, and Pedrolino and Arlecchino have no room to play their tricks.¹⁵⁰ Similarly in Day 31 ("*Il pedante*," *The Tutor*), Pedrolino seems to be in charge of everything (Act I, 6 and 12), but he is miserably beaten by Isabella and ends up weeping together with Arlecchino in a clownish scene (Act I, 13–14): it is Isabella, the young and beautiful wife of Pantalone, who devises the trick to get rid of the attentions of the awful Maestro Cataldo (Act III, 11). There are some exceptions. In Day 39 ("*Il ritratto*," *The Portrait*), for example, Pedrolino is able to reconcile the two lovers and is thus successful at providing the resolution of the plot and the happy ending. Unlike the cunning slaves of Plautus, however, he does so without tricks but only through "normal" human interaction. In two other scenarios, Day 6 ("*Il vecchio geloso*," *The Jealous Old Man*) and Day 9 ("*Il marito*," *The Husband*), Pedrolino is successful. In particular, in Day 9 he plays the same role as Plautus' *servus callidus*, by helping the young lover Orazio to defeat the old master Pantalone and marry his beloved Isabella. In this scenario, Pedrolino is really in charge of the plot and helps the young lovers against the old masters (Act III, 4 and 11), asks to be trusted (Act II, 2; III, 4 and 6), has a sort of didactic function by mocking the excessive jealousy of lovers (Act I, 10¹⁵¹), takes part in many elastic gags, and he even has a moment of doubt before carrying out his plans (Act III, 7¹⁵²). It is thus unsurprising that Scala chose this scenario, in which the characters' roles best resemble those of the "classical" comic plot, to develop into a fully scripted, five-act comedy ("*Il finto marito*," *The Fake Husband*, 1618). In Day 21 ("*Il finto negromante*," *The Fake Magician*), Arlecchino takes over the role of primo *zani*, replacing Pedrolino; starting as the usual stupid slave but from Act III, 13 on disguised as a magician, Arlecchino devises the final trick that leads to the happy ending.¹⁵³

Aside from these exceptions, however, the *zani* generally loses the status of "master of the plot." Nevertheless, this does not mean that *commedia dell'arte* servant has become a redundant, a relic of the past that has lost its meaning and has no true role. To the contrary, the *zani* has a new, central place in *commedia dell'arte* and can be considered one of its main constituents. The servant's new role is that of buffoon. This new status uses (in a distorted way) some features of the old Plautine cunning servant, while introducing new ones. One new feature is dialect. As noted, the Bergamask dialect

149 In this scenario, Pedrolino does not play the role of the servant but rather of the friend; his mask, however, remains the same: with Arlecchino, a real servant, he does play tricks, though useless for the advancing the plot.

150 Cf. Andrews, *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), pp. 169–71.

151 See also Andrews, *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), p. 50.

152 See also Andrews, *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), p. 51.

153 Cf. Andrews, *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), p. 130.

was typical of the *zani*, while a linguistic characterization of the servants was absent from both Plautus and *commedia erudita*. Bergamask was chosen not only because many peasants from Bergamo worked in Venice as servants, but to underscore that the *zani* is a primitive, ignorant person. The prejudice linking language and level of sophistication (still present in modern Italy) suggests that the role of the servant in society had changed for the worse, and this change influenced the portrayal of the servant onstage. First and foremost, a servant who speaks a rough dialect cannot be the plot-mover, nor can he be depicted as cunning while speaking a language that is—consciously or unconsciously—linked with uncivilized, primitive behavior. The roughness of the dialect also prevents the servant from using language as a tool for trickery or a means of celebration. In fact, cunning word-play seems to be absent from the *zani* character, both because the other characters already have a hard time understanding him when he speaks in his own dialect in the standard way, and because this is a sign of intelligence which a buffoon can hardly afford. The servant's occasional boasting does not celebrate the wit and intelligence of the *servus callidus*, but is the ridiculous bragging of a rough peasant who has come to Venice from Bergamo and thinks he has mastered various disciplines, becoming a comic polymath, as we read in the second sonnet of "*La Dottrina del Zani*" (*The Zani's Education*).¹⁵⁴ Here the *zani* not only speaks a dialect but mixes nonsensical Latin into it with increased comic effect.

Mythological references, abundant in speeches of Plautine slaves, who also brag about their literate culture, are mostly absent, appearing only at a very basic level (e.g. quick references to mythological models of love stories) or grossly distorted into a thick, heavy scene full of explicit, gross sexual references. In "*Genealogia of Zan Capella*" (*Genealogy of Servant Capella*), a scripted "*zani-text*,"¹⁵⁵ the birth of the "*zani* race" is backdated to "Homeric" Troy, where the ur-*zani* Zampet is said to have been born of the union of the "famous blood of Troy" and a pig. This represents a pun on the double meaning of the Italian word "Troia:" the name of the ancient city of Troy, but also a female pig and, when applied to a woman, "slut." Epic resonances are also present in the poem "*Insonio del Zani*" (*The Zani's Dream*),¹⁵⁶ where a *zani* dreams of going to Hell, paralleling Ulysses and Dante in their voyages to the Underworld. Unlike his more illustrious predecessors, however, the *zani* does not return from the trip a wiser man, but is left in Hell to be punished for his gluttony.

The roughness of the language and the role of the *zani* also eliminates the didactic function the *servus callidus* once had: no lectures can be expected from a character who lacks intellectual superiority and dialectical ability. It is true that from time to

154 Pandolfi, *La Commedia dell'Arte* (above, n. 5), pp. 201–4; see Henke, *Performance and Literature* (above, n. 5), pp. 129–30.

155 Pandolfi, *La Commedia dell'Arte* (above, n. 5), pp. 253–7; see also Henke, *Performance and Literature* (above, n. 5), p. 122.

156 Pandolfi, *La Commedia dell'Arte* (above, n. 5), pp. 257–61; see Henke, *Performance and Literature* (above, n. 5), pp. 127–9.

time a *zani* has a monologue that goes beyond the requirements of the story, but those lines are far from the philosophical or moral speeches of earlier slaves. The repertoire of the *zani*'s wisdom and philosophy rarely goes beyond the list of complaints about the hardship of a servant's life.¹⁵⁷ When more serious issues are touched upon by a slave, as in Pedrolino's words about love to his master in Act I, 2 of Day 14 ("*Il pellegrino fido amante*," *The Faithful Loving Pilgrim*), doubt rises as to whether Pedrolino, perhaps quoting some mythical examples,¹⁵⁸ is to be taken seriously. Serious remarks going from the mouth of the *zani* to the ear of a bragging Captain might have a funny rather than a serious effect. Even when the servant comments on unethical masters, the effect is laughter rather than moral education. In Day 28 ("*Flavio finto negromante*," *Flavio the Fake Magician*), for example, Pedrolino reproaches Pantalone, who is sleeping with Burattino's wife Franceschina (Act II, 1), but Pedrolino himself has an affair with Franceschina, and he later (Act II, 9–10) jokes with her about the poor Burattino, who finally realizes that he is a cuckold: the didactic tone of the earlier comment is thus turned into a scene made for laughter. The possible irony looming behind Plautus' slaves in their "didactic" mode, which became more evident in the servants of *commedia erudita*, is now the only *raison d'être* for the "didactic" and philosophical exploits of the *zani* in *commedia dell'arte*.

The aspect of the *servus callidus* that is magnified in the *zani* of *commedia dell'arte* is the use of comic gags. These are in fact the heart of *commedia dell'arte*, and the *zani* develops comic gags into an "art:" the art of slapstick comedy.¹⁵⁹ Beating, running and vulgarity are pervasive in Scala's scenarios, even if the author attempted to tame the buffoonery, because slapstick was intrinsic to the genre in any case.¹⁶⁰ These features were not absent from earlier theater. The comic hero sometimes beats a blocking character in Aristophanes (e.g. in *Clouds* and *Birds*), while in Plautine comedies the slave, always worried about being beaten himself or condemned to forced labor, often beats other characters. Yet the victims of this violence are "stupid" slaves or blocking figures, such as the pimp or the braggart soldier Pyrgopolynices,¹⁶¹ and never cunning slaves: Plautus spared his hero from such slapstick. *Commedia dell'arte*, on the other hand, does not refrain from beating the *zani*, even the smarter ones like Pedrolino, who sometimes beats the Captain (Day 37, Act II, 20) or chases him away (Day 29, Act I, 13), but is in turn chased and beaten by the Doctor (Day 15, Act I, 13) and his mistress Isabella (Day 31, Act I, 3 and 13¹⁶²). This type of slapstick is even more common with the stupid slave Arlecchino, who is often merely a buffoon who excels in jumping

¹⁵⁷ Such as the monologue that could be inserted by Arlecchino in Day 11 ("*Il capitano*," *The Captain*), Act II, 7. See Andrews, *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), p. 60.

¹⁵⁸ See Andrews, *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), p. 77.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Andrews, *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), pp. xliv–xlvi.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Andrews, *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), p. xli–xlii.

¹⁶¹ Miles 1394–1425.

¹⁶² Cf. Andrews, *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), pp. 190 and 191.

about (e.g. Day 15, Act II, 19) and producing chaotic noise (e.g. Day 37, Acts I, 9 and III, 7), and who is the victim of choice for violence. Beating and the exchange of violent injuries are also the typical outcome of the dialogue/contrast between master and servant as preserved in the “zani-texts.”¹⁶³

Buffoonery is often based on elastic gags, which were already used by Plautus; *commedia dell'arte* has plenty of these and the *zani* thrives on them.¹⁶⁴ Arlecchino often stars in elastic gags that can be extended *ad libitum* (e.g. Day 14, Acts I, 7 and II, 9¹⁶⁵). His “acrobatic scenes” in particular can be extended as long as the audience keeps laughing (e.g. Day 21, Act I, 16–17, and Day 29, Act I, 15–16, where in almost identical sets of scenes Arlecchino repeatedly falls from a ladder¹⁶⁶). Other typical repetitive scenes of *commedia dell'arte* have a *zani* refusing with endless excuses to open the door for someone, or a master calling for a servant who never shows up.¹⁶⁷ In another case (Day 27, Act III, 7–18), Burattino performs in a puppet-like scene in which he is forced to stay mute by a trick of Pedrolino and communicates with other characters via comic gestures that can be repeated *ad infinitum*.¹⁶⁸ Another typical buffoonish gag involves the *zani* running onstage in haste. This gag is taken from ancient comedy, where the *servus currens* is common:¹⁶⁹ sometimes the *servus callidus* runs to deliver news or search for people (e.g. Epidicus in *Ep.* 194–200), but more often Plautus uses the device for “normal” slaves, who are not to be counted among his *servi callidi* (e.g. Thesprio in *Ep.* 1 and Mercury as “servant” of his father Jupiter in *Amphitruo* 984–98) or parasites who act only as “clowns” (e.g. Ergasilus in *Capt.* 776–80¹⁷⁰). This gag is also used by authors whose slaves are not typically *callidi*, such as Menander (e.g. *Dysc.* 81–2¹⁷¹) and Terence (e.g. *Andria* 338–9; *Eunuchus* 643–4; *Phormio* 177, 840–45). Not only is it maintained in *commedia dell'arte*, but it is attached to Pedrolino, the first, smart *zani*, in particular: Pedrolino is pursued and runs to escape beating (Day 11, Act I, 17), or appears onstage “out of breath” to deliver important information to his master Pantalone

163 As in the “*Dialogo del patron e del zane*” (*Dialogue of the Master and the Zani*) in Pandolfi, *La Commedia dell'Arte* (above, n. 5), pp. 187–8; see Henke, *Performance and Literature* (above, n. 5), pp. 130–3.

164 Cf. Andrews, *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), p. 61.

165 Cf. Andrews, *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), p. 77–8.

166 Cf. Andrews, *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), p. 180.

167 Cf. Andrews, *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), p. xlv.

168 Cf. Andrews, *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), p. 160.

169 On the *servus currens*, see George E. Duckworth, “The dramatic function of the *servus currens* in Roman comedy,” in: *Classical studies presented to Edward Capps on his seventieth birthday* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1936), pp. 93–102; Stace, “Slaves of Plautus” (above, n. 6), p. 70; Anderson, “*Servus Currens*” (above, n. 2).

170 Where he equates himself to a “comic slave:” “Now the situation is clear [to me]: in the same way as the slaves in comedy do, I will throw my cloak around my neck [and run] in order that he hears first from me this news; I hope I will get endless food because of this announcement.”

171 See also Davos in *Aspis* 391–409, although he is also a would-be cunning slave; see Anderson, “*Servus Currens*” (above, n. 2), pp. 231–5.

(Day 11, Act I, 4; Day 21, Act III, 12) or to young male lovers (e.g. Day 6, Act I, 4; Day 25, Act II, 8; Day 29, Act II, 13); in other cases, Pedrolino pretends to be out of breath to trick Arlecchino (Day 9, Act II, 6) and help the lovers. Even if in the last case Pedrolino's behavior is consistent with that of the Roman *servus callidus*, the gag and its effects are far from Plautus' original. The *servus currens* is thus adopted by the *comici* of *commedia dell'arte* because this is a clownish device, like beating and being beaten; it adds to the repertoire of the *zani* as buffoon and not as cunning servant.

Physicality and lower status also imply an extraordinary appetite. The *zani* is even more of a glutton than his predecessors, and gags with food abound in *commedia dell'arte*, sometimes combined with elastic gags.¹⁷² Many of the "zani-texts" play with long lists of exquisite food¹⁷³ and the dream of "Cuccagna," the mythical land where all delicacies are available.¹⁷⁴ Here the *zani* also becomes a braggart, but only to boast about his appetite and about being a "good eater" ("valent mangiador").¹⁷⁵

Other physical types of humor, such as obscenities, are absent from Scala's scenarios, but since such jokes could be improvised onstage, the lack of them in the scenarios does not mean that they were not used. In the same way, it is difficult to know if the *zani* was allowed to break the fourth wall and talk to the audience as his predecessors were. An actor could easily improvise direct addresses, winks and gestures to the audience; there was thus no need to indicate this in the scenarios. On the other hand, written scenarios could contain more complex references to the performance and the theatrical events themselves. Among Scala's scenarios, Day 39 ("Il ritratto," *The Portrait*) explicitly includes metatheatrical elements: in Act I, 11, Pedrolino asks Orazio, who is having an affair with both his lady Isabella and an actress, how long it is since he went to a play, and inquires about the characters in the company of his mistress. The reference makes sense in the scenario, but it also provides opportunities to play with theatrical references, and Orazio and Pedrolino can easily be imagined listing the members of their own companies.¹⁷⁶ Likewise, later in the scenario Pedrolino makes peace between Flavio and Flaminia, the other pair of lovers, and tells them "that they can now stay in bed and enjoy themselves until the end of the play, which lasts until midnight; and that they can do what other women do while their stupid husbands are laughing away at the comedy"

172 In Day 1, Act I, 3, Pedrolino is desperate at learning that his young master Orazio has decided to return to Pisa rather than going to the villa in the countryside, because this means that Pedrolino will miss a good dinner at the villa; such a scene, with lengthy descriptions of the food Pedrolino will miss, is an elastic gag that could be prolonged. See Andrews, *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), p. 16.

173 As in "Il sontouso pasto fatto dal Zanni" (*The Luxurious Meal Made by Zani*) in Pandolfi, *La Commedia dell'Arte* (above, n. 5), pp. 192–6.

174 Henke, *Performance and Literature* (above, n. 5), pp. 126–7.

175 "Vanto del Zani" (*Zani's Brag*) in Pandolfi, *La Commedia dell'Arte* (above, n. 5), pp. 246–52. Cf. Henke, *Performance and Literature* (above, n. 5), p. 135.

176 Andrews, *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), p. 250.

(Act III, 21).¹⁷⁷ These metatheatrical remarks are strikingly reminiscent of the comments about being in the theater and the advantages of having wings sung by the chorus in Aristophanes' *Birds*.¹⁷⁸

The evolution of the *servus callidus* into the *zani* thus privileged physical over intellectual qualities. Still, part of the original Plautine servant was preserved in this evolution: his theatrical power. Like the Roman *servus callidus*, the *zani* is a pivotal figure in the *commedia dell'arte*: he becomes its staple, and rarely is such a character not part of a plot. This holds true even in scenarios that cannot be defined as comic (e.g. Day 40), and even those defined as "tragedy" (Day 41), "mixed drama" (Day 42), "heroic drama" (Day 44) or "pastoral" (Day 49). In all of these, Pedrolino and Arlecchino still star as comic buffoons, and their role is to lighten the tone of the play. The servant was still the center of the show, and we can even contend that in this respect *commedia dell'arte* was far more faithful to the original Plautine comedy than the plays of *commedia erudita*, in which the servant grew less and less useful.

4. Conclusions

The evolution of the comic slave from the intelligent and clever master of the play (the *servus callidus*) to a comic buffoon with no particular intellectual qualities (the *zani*) developed from the already weakened role of the servant in the Renaissance *commedia erudita*. In the latter, the servant was in the ambiguous position of having inherited a leading role from the classical models without being able to lead the action: he was not the master of the play but merely pretended to be. This loss of identity and of the role of the cunning slave later led this character to borrow in part from a different tradition, the medieval buffoon with his physicality and theatricality. In fact, the *zani* was not a trickster but a clownish servant. We might speculate about whether and how this evolution was tied to the social context from which *commedia dell'arte* developed. The Counter-Reformation favored a conservative society that was uncomfortable with the idea of a character from the lower classes ruling the story, giving orders to his masters, and above all else being intelligent and using his head, because all of this was potentially subversive.¹⁷⁹ The audience of *commedia dell'arte* was certainly more diverse than the one watching *commedia erudita*; in such a highly hierarchical and authoritarian society, it was crucial that the lower classes not be presented with the idea of subversion of roles and of a poor person taking a leading

¹⁷⁷ Andrews, *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* (above, n. 4), p. 247.

¹⁷⁸ Av. 793–7: "If one of you, whoever he might be, is having an adulterous affair and sees the husband of his mistress in the seats reserved for the Council, he could flap his wings and fly away from you, and, having laid her, he could fly back here. Having wings, isn't it the most valuable thing of all?"

¹⁷⁹ On the Counter-Reformist obstacles to comedy, see Andrews, *Scripts and Scenarios* (above, n. 84), pp. 204–26, esp. 220–5.

role in rich people's lives. It was safer to offer such an audience a character with no intelligence and no wit, able to entertain them with foul language, gross behavior, physical gags and no high-level thoughts or ideas. Yet this "social" explanation does not satisfy entirely. The social context of Plautus may not have been much different from that of the Renaissance theater: Republican Rome too was an oligarchy based on slavery, and the audience of the theater in Plautus' time was as diverse as the one watching *commedia dell'arte*.¹⁸⁰ Why, then, did patricians in Republican Rome tolerate and enjoy his comedies delivering a potentially subversive message that involved a slave serving as a powerful agent? I suggest that the difference lies at the core of the comic hero, the slave/servant, and the historical change of status of such figures in these societies. In Plautus' comedy, having a slave turn into a "hero" was funny because of the social extravagance of such a situation. Nevertheless, a Roman Republican audience was accustomed to intelligence in servants on a daily basis. Indeed, in Plautus' time, prisoners of war from Greece were brought to Rome as slaves; many were highly educated and became teachers for rich patrician families. Terence himself was one of these. These slaves were intellectuals, who were sometimes even freed for their intellectual achievements; it is largely due to them that Horace famously said "*Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit*" (*Epist.* II, 1, 156). The situation is quite different in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy, where servants were usually uneducated people, not prisoners of war imported from another country, more culturally sophisticated than her conquerors. Instead, servants in Italy were often local people of lower social status or peasants from the poorest regions, like Bergamo. Some individuals must have been quite intelligent, but at a general level there was no expectation that servants were an especially "gifted" group that could defy their social class and be superior to "free men." This, I suggest, is one reason for the evolution of the character of the slave/servant from Plautus to the *commedia erudita* and then *commedia dell'arte*. This complex character, characterized by the lowest social rank and the highest human *virtus*—intelligence—was plausible in Republican Rome, but it had no place in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy; in 16th-century Italy, a "cunning slave" had no social equivalent in everyday reality. For this reason, the authors of *commedia erudita* were uneasy with such a character, did not handle him well, and eventually failed to revive Plautus' *servus callidus*. To survive, the absurd "cunning slave"—a *contradictio in terminis* by that time—had to be transformed into a buffoon, the *zani* of *commedia dell'arte*.

The much greater success and popularity of the *commedia dell'arte* servant as opposed to his *commedia erudita* counterpart can be explained by the fact that *arte* actors, like Plautus, were men of the theater, stage professionals rather than armchair playwrights; they knew what the contemporary audience wanted and they gave it to them. In both Plautus and *commedia dell'arte*, the slave/servant is the comic hero:

180 Cf. Plaut. *Poen.* 23–35.

smart or simply funny, the servant is the king of comedy when comedy is most faithful to its true nature. With its carnivalesque roots, and when developed by authors who know their audience and the art of theater, the genre gives center stage to the humblest portion of society: in late Renaissance *commedia dell'arte*, Pseudolus has changed his social and intellectual characteristics but not his theatrical force.