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Door Inscriptions in Plautus' Comedy (*Merc*. 409-412; *Asin*. 759-760): Visuality, Agency, and Property

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Abstract
This paper examines the interplay between inscription, materiality, and comic dynamics in Plautus' *Mercator* and *Asinaria*, situating these passages within the broader cultural and material context of Roman epigraphic practice and domestic architecture. Beginning with an introduction that outlines the aims of the study and the cultural familiarity of audiences with inscribed media, it will then show the theoretical approaches that will be used in the analysis of the two passages. Through these examples, the paper investigates how Plautus mobilises the door—illuminated by material reconstructions based on Vesuvian archaeological evidence—not merely as an architectural element but as a site of visual and material writing, a semiotic interface that shapes the audience's interpretive horizon. In *Mercator*, the imagined door covered with charcoal inscriptions becomes a medium of comic excess, transforming the respectable *domus* into a brothel-like facade and exposing anxieties of class, gender, and social transgression. In *Asinaria*, the instruction given to the *meretrix* to inscribe *occupata est* literalises the inscription's power to project ownership and control, turning the door into an active agent in the negotiation of desire and possession.

By reading these scenes through the lens of inscriptional practices—comparing literary imagination with archaeological and epigraphic evidence—the paper highlights how Plautus stages the act of writing as a dynamic negotiation between object and body.

Keywords
Graffiti, Plautus, comedy, Roman house, visuality, materiality

1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, it aims to reassess two passages in Plautus where epigraphic writing is mentioned, grounding their literary representation in the tangible world of Roman material culture.[1] By aligning textual evidence with archaeological and palaeographic data, this approach seeks to interpret Plautus' comic allusions not in isolation, but in relation to actual practices of writing. Such a perspective situates the plays within the lived visual and spatial experience of Roman audiences, for whom inscriptions formed a familiar and pervasive aspect of urban life.

Secondly, the study examines how Plautus transforms this quotidian form of writing into a theatrical device. References to inscriptional texts on entrance doors serve distinct dramaturgical purposes: they generate humour and shape characterisation by invoking the visibility and immediacy of informal text. Exploring

these mechanisms reveals how Plautus exploits their performative potential to blur the boundary between the fictional world and the audience's own environment. In Plautine comedy, written texts fall broadly into two categories: those produced on perishable supports—above all wax tablets[2]—and those on durable ones. The former type, which is much more often referenced in his comedies, typically records private texts. Since these tend to have a more personal and individualised content, they must be read almost *verbatim* aloud on stage in order to become performative and fulfil their role within the narrative. The latter type, by contrast, is designed for endurance and public visibility. Even in the case of graffiti, materially fragile yet conceptually 'durable' through their exposure, these inscriptions are intended for public display and communal legibility. This publicly oriented form of writing occupies a more marginal place in Plautus' plays, where explicit references to it are comparatively rare.[3]

Previous scholarship on epigraphic writing in Plautus has concentrated on three well-known passages involving inscribed objects (*Poen*. 836–838; *Rud*. 476–478; *Rud*. 1153–1164).[4] While these are unquestionably instances of inscriptional writing, the two scenes examined in this study deserve to be regarded in the same light. As the following analysis demonstrates, they share several significant features with these examples and should likewise be understood within the broader category of inscriptional practices in Plautine comedy.[5] By engaging with this everyday visual practice, Plautus draws upon a deeply ingrained 'epigraphic culture' characteristic of early, middle, and late Republican Italy,[6] transforming familiar traces of urban literacy into dynamic elements of comic performance.

The passages examined in this study themselves invite a reading attentive to the visuality and materiality of writing. In Plautus' comedies, the marking of surfaces with writing is never merely a reference to text but a performative and 'visible' gesture that unfolds within a multimodal medium—spoken theatre—where language, gesture, and physical objects interact. The analysis therefore adopts perspectives drawn from the study of the *Schriftbildlichkeit* ('visuality of writing'), multimodality, and agency, not as externally imposed frameworks, but as tools that respond to the plays' own dramaturgical dynamics.

The notion of *Schriftbildlichkeit* redirects focus from writing as a transparent conduit for language to its visual and material presence. Within the study of ancient cultures, it underscores how the *Textur*—the perceptible form of writing, including its shape, surface, and tactile qualities—plays an active role in generating meaning, rather than merely conveying it.[7] This perspective accords with broader discussions on the materiality of communication, advocating an approach to writing that does not privilege linguistic content alone but recognises the aesthetic and sensory properties of written forms as essential components of meaning-making.[8]

In literary and theatrical studies, multimodal approach examines how meaning arises from the interaction of diverse semiotic resources—such as spoken language, visual arrangement, bodily movement, and auditory elements—rather than from verbal expression alone.[9]

The category of agency provides a further lens for understanding these moments. In the context of writing and material culture, 'agency' refers to the capacity of both human and non-human actors to effect change within a communicative or social process.[10] This includes the agency of the writer, whose intentions shape the act of inscription; the agency of the medium, determined by the affordances and constraints of the material surface;[11] and the agency of the written text itself, understood as its ability, once produced and displayed, to make things happen or change.[12]

Taken together, these approaches make it possible to account for the perceptual and operational qualities of writing as represented on stage. In this way, the study aims to reconstruct how Plautus mobilises the appearance of epigraphic writing to shape comic space, while endowing objects with dramatic and semantic force.

2. *Merc*. 409-412

DEM. impleantur elegeorum meae fores carbonibus.
atque, ut nunc sunt maledicentes homines, uxori meae
mihique obiectent lenocinium facere. nam quid eost
opus?[13]

With their pieces of charcoal my door would be filled with ditties. And, given what crooked gossipers people are nowadays, they would disapprove of my wife and myself on the grounds that we were keeping a brothel. What on earth is that necessary for?[14]

The *senex* Demipho seeks to prevent Pasicompsa, the beautiful Rhodian slave with whom he is enamoured, from being assigned to serve his wife as a maid. To this end, he constructs a pretext and elaborates a detailed catalogue of the supposed dangers the young woman would encounter upon her return home, having passed through the streets and closed the door behind her.[15]

This passage is particularly noteworthy as one of the earliest Latin literary testimonies to the making of graffiti, alongside references to 'elegiac' compositions, which will be explored in greater depth shortly.[16]

As modern readers—neither spectators of ancient performance nor inhabitants of the Roman world—we require a clarification when referring to these *fores*, the external door of a Roman house. Such fittings were tipically designed not only to protect against the elements but also to ensure security and a certain measure of seclusion. Given the predominant use of wood for these structures, few examples have survived intact. Nevertheless, reconstructions based on archaeological evidence, especially from the Vesuvian area, have been possible.

One initial concern for the reader might be the legibility of inscriptions made with charcoal, especially given the irregularities of wooden surfaces and the case of dark-coloured doors. In fact, the fittings could be coated with various pigments applied after a plastering process intended to smooth out the wood's unevenness. This decorative technique has been documented in Herculaneum homes, where some fittings were found at the time of excavation[17] covered with a uniform red paint.[18] White fir was particularly favoured for doors, windows, and the supporting structures of furniture, prized for its solidity and suitability for intricate marquetry work.[19]

It is worth highlighting the typical plural use of the term *foris*, which appears repeatedly in many passages of Plautus.[20] Depending on the width of the entrance, doors had one or more panels, usually divided into two or four rectangular or square sections. In this regard, several examples have been preserved thanks to casts of the doors in the Vesuvian area.[21] These doors were often further adorned with rows of bronze and iron studs fixed to the wood.[22]

Once clarified the structure of the Roman *fores*, it is now useful to consider the term *carbonibus*, which refers to the creation of inscriptions made "using an instrument that was either dipped in charcoal ash or a piece of charcoal itself."[23] The term *graffiti* is not entirely appropriate here, because "they are not technically so as they were not inscribed (…)."[24] In fact, the word *graffito* derives from the Italian *graffiare*, meaning 'to scratch.' Notably, however, they still represent a spontaneous and informal mode of writing.

We do not have many examples of charcoal inscriptions, owing to the fact that they are easily erased and quickly disappear when exposed to weather conditions. The ancient Vesuvian area and its graffiti may assist in interpreting this Plautine passage. In particular, the town of Herculaneum and its charcoal inscriptions have recently attracted renewed scholarly attention. Of particular relevance to this paper is their visual impact. It should first be noted that, given the perishable nature of both charcoal and wood, there is no surviving evidence of such inscriptions on wooden surfaces.[25] Not even the favourable conditions for the preservation of wooden elements at Herculaneum, such as doors, partitions, tables, and so forth, have made it possible to read any inscriptions that might have been present: these structures are, in fact, either completely or partially carbonised.[26] It should nevertheless be borne in mind that the inscriptions of this type would have been likely easy to remove even at the time.

Taking charcoal inscriptions on wall surfaces as a comparandum, it should be noted that these tend to be larger than their graffito counterparts—which are generally smaller—written on top of the plaster and not inscribed into it, and are therefore clearly visible.[27]

Another unsurprising aspect is the cumulative presence of various inscriptions (*impleantur*), presumably left by different suitors: graffiti, in fact, tend to appear in clusters.[28] It is important to recall that graffiti tend to cluster "in the core areas of the house and places where people were frequently present,"[29] and, more generally, in locations where one could be openly observed while writing.[30] The entrance area, where the *ostium* is located, should be understood as a liminal space[31]—one that lies at the intersection between public and private spheres.[32]

Building on this, one must consider the dynamic interplay between the semantics of the door, the presence of inscriptions, and the poetic motif of the *paraclausithyron*. Evidence for the practice of writing on the thresholds of houses already exists in Greek literature, particularly within the bucolic tradition, though not exclusively.[33] From a narrative perspective, the 'Plautine door,' with its controlled rhythm of openings and closings, plays a crucial role. When open, it ensures seamless movement of characters, objects, and even sensory perceptions between house and street. When closed, standard knocking or verbal summons—sometimes even from within—maintains communication between stage and offstage. However, when this rhythm breaks down, the door shifts from conduit to barrier: in actantial terms, from 'helper' to 'opponent', becoming an obstacle to be overcome.[34]

In the present case, this dynamic is not enacted on stage but rather evoked and imagined by the audience. The passage engages directly with the visuality of writing. The comedic effect hinges not only on the mention of writing but also on the image of a door densely covered with inscriptions, creating a visual overload of love verses and greetings from lovers. These writings evoke a semiotic saturation of space that renders private emotion publicly legible.[35] As in other examples from the Vesuvian cities, writing in public parts of the house, especially the immediate surroundings of the entrance door, *fauces* and *atria*, served not just communicative but performative functions, drawing on the agency of text to assert presence and desire.[36]

Ultimately, the humour of the scene arises in part from the sheer density of expected writing on the door—so extreme that it evokes not a respectable *domus*, but rather the brothel (*postribulum*). The audience would have recognised the implication: love poetry, greetings to lovers, erotic ditties, and even obscene verses were associated with brothel walls, as is amply attested by graffiti from the brothel of Pompeii.[37] The suggestion that such inscriptions might cover a respectable house door thus plays on both class anxiety and the comedic potential of spatial transgression, resting on a culturally legible system of spatial semiotics.[38]

Finally, this passage further illustrates how Plautus uses inscriptions to probe questions of property and possession. As in the three mentioned cases of inscribed objects—*Poen*. 836-838; *Rud*. 476-478; *Rud*. 1153-1164—which cannot be discussed here in detail, inscriptions serve as a comic device through which ownership is affirmed or challenged. In those examples, the inscribed texts play respectively on the ownership of amphorae by a pimp, on a votive urn that "self-identifies" as belonging to someone else, and on the non-ownership of a young woman, whose freedom is revealed through the inscriptions on her tokens.

A similar pattern is evident in the present scene: the young woman herself becomes a contested object of possession and control. Demipho's concern that the door might be inscribed—and that such inscriptions could allow others to 'claim' her—reveals not so much an active attempt to assert ownership as an anxious awareness that his control over her is precarious and socially exposed. At the same time, his irritation makes clear that he nonetheless wishes to retain exclusive access to her. The door becomes a medium of potential social degradation, as writing turns the private body into public property. The visuality of the writing thus mirrors the contested status of the girl herself, caught between various male interests and projected fantasies.

3. *Asin*. 759-760

PAR. fores occlusae omnibus sint nisi tibi.
in foribus scribat occupatam esse se.

The door shall be shut for everyone except you. She shall write on the door that she is engaged.

In this scene, Diabolus asks the parasite to read aloud the written contract (*syngraphum*), intended to exert

control over Philaenium, the *meretrix* with whom he is infatuated.[39] Among the clauses being read—and occasionally corrected or supplemented at Diabolus' request—we find the one contained in these lines.

Once again, Plautus presents another example of inscription. It is highly unlikely that the audience would have imagined a perishable medium, like a wax-tablet or a sheet of papyrus, being used for this purpose. Affixing such materials to an external door, exposed to the elements, would severely compromise their durability, defeating the very purpose of conveying a lasting and publicly visible message to potential clients or rivals. The phrase *in foribus* itself militates against this interpretation: it implies writing directly on the door as a surface, rather than attaching a separate object to it. Moreover, Plautus is generally explicit in the text when introducing perishable writing supports—*epistulae*, *tabellae*, and comparable items. He does this immediately afterwards in this same contractual scene, further reinforcing that the inscription mentioned here belongs in fact to a different order of writing.[40] At the same time, the text gives no indication of the precise mode of execution: the inscription could have been incised (*graffito*), painted (*dipinto*), or produced with charcoal, chalk, or another material. While the passage suggests a permanent, publicly visible marking on the door, its technical realisation remains indeterminate.

The passage invites comparison with *Mercator*, where would-be suitors write impassioned graffiti on the external door of the house, making it resemble a brothel. Here, however, the dynamic is reversed: it is not the admirers who inscribe longing messages, but the *meretrix* herself who is instructed to inscribe a message of exclusion. She is to write that she is "occupied" (*occupata est*) in order to ward off other potential suitors.[41] The phrase *occupata est* may also carry a rich comic ambiguity. While it could be interpreted in the neutral sense of 'engaged' or 'not available,'[42] in this context—given the speaker and the profession of the woman—it lends itself more suggestively to the double-meaning 'she already has her hands full' or even 'she's otherwise engaged (in bed).'[43]

The requirement that the inscription should endure foregrounds what may be termed the material agency of the written mark: its durability and public visibility enable it to act within the comic economy, projecting authority and exclusion beyond the literal wording. As in the previous example, the visuality of the writing is crucial. What matters here is not merely the linguistic content of *occupata est*, but the fact that it is displayed on the door—a highly exposed and socially charged surface.[44] This is precisely where the notion of *Schriftbildlichkeit* becomes operative: the meaning of the inscription arises not only from what is written, but from how and where it appears, from the perceptible and situational qualities of the written form.

At the same time, the scene illustrates the multimodal nature of Plautine dramaturgy. The meaning of the inscription is produced through the interplay of verbal reference, imagined visual layout, spatial positioning on the door, and the performative context of the contract being read aloud. The door thus ceases to be a neutral backdrop: it becomes a semiotic surface whose material properties shape interpretation. Through this process, the inscription itself acquires agency. In this sense, the door, activated by the presence of writing, enters the action as a participant rather than a prop, influencing behaviour and narrative development.

Finally, the inscription here also operates as a commentary on property and possession. By directing Philaenium to write this declaration, Diabolus attempts to inscribe his claim over her not just verbally but materially, transforming the door into a marker of social and sexual ownership.[45] The inscription's visual presence functions as a symbol of contested ownership, mirroring the tensions surrounding Philaenium herself, who becomes both subject and object of inscription—simultaneously the agent who writes and, somehow, the thing written upon.[46]

Conclusions

In conclusion, the analysis of *Mercator* and *Asinaria* has shown that Plautus' references to inscriptions on house doors do not function as decorative details but as dramaturgically charged gestures rooted in the everyday visual environment of his audience. The comic potential of these scenes relies on the spectators' familiarity with exposed writing in urban space—regardless of whether

they were fully literate.[47] Graffiti and other inscriptions, encountered on a variety of surfaces and objects, constituted a pervasive semiotic backdrop in Republican Italy. An equally important factor to consider is literacy: even those who had never written or read an *epistula* would have recognised (without necessarily being able to read) such markings as part of the visual fabric of daily life.[48] This shared horizon allows Plautus to evoke complex scenarios with minimal textual cues. Audiences would be immediately able to fill in the blanks.

The discussion has highlighted the relevance of the visuality of writing: these texts matter not primarily for their linguistic content, but because they are imagined as visibly present on an architectural surface that mediates between public and private realms. The door becomes an active semiotic field whose potential saturation with text produces humour and social commentary. Although in both plays the inscribed texts are not physically staged, they remain performatively active, revealing how Plautus exploits the multimodal nature of performance, where speech, spatial configuration, object, and imagined inscription jointly produce meaning.

The two examples also underline the importance of agency. First, the agency of the writers: suitors who inscribe love elegies in *Mercator*, or the *meretrix* instructed to assert unavailability through writing in *Asinaria*. Second, the agency of the material object: the door itself becomes a participant in the plot, capable of transforming reputations and signalling ownership. Finally, the writing itself acquires agency: once envisioned on the door, it acts—turning a respectable *domus* into a quasi-brothel and marking a *meretrix* as 'occupied.' This dynamic agency stems not from the text's permanence but precisely from its exposed and interactive legible nature, full of social implications.

Although no such inscriptions survive on ancient wooden doors, particularly from the Republican period, archaeological comparanda from the Vesuvian area allow us to reconstruct how audiences might have visualised them. These parallels do not serve merely as illustrations, but as instruments for reconstructing the spectators' mental image and, therefore, the comedic mechanism at work.

Ultimately, these Plautine passages demonstrate that the use of inscriptions in comedy is best understood at the intersection of literary technique and cultural practice. Rather than treating these references as incidental elements inherited from Greek models,[49] the analysis suggests that Roman audiences would have interpreted them through the material textures and visual habits of their own world. For modern readers—no longer inhabiting that world—commentary and material comparanda are essential tools for recovering the extratextual resonances that ancient spectators would have grasped immediately.[50]

Conflict of Interest and ethics

The author declares no conflict of interests. The author also declares full adherence to all journal research ethics policies, namely involving the participation of human subjects anonymity and/ or consent to publish.

Footnotes

1 Where relevant, reference will be made to material comparanda. Yet for certain aspects of the present discussion, most notably architectural elements such as doors, no contemporaneous material evidence survives. In these cases, caution is required when drawing parallels with sources that postdate Plautus (3rd-2nd cent. BCE). Nevertheless, such later materials can often still prove illuminating, offering valuable insights that help clarify the passages in the plays. Moreover, it should be recalled that Plautine comedies continued to be performed after the death of their author: see Hanses 2020 on this point.

2 These have been extensively discussed in scholarship on the *epistulae* in Plautus' comedies; references to letters occur, for instance, in *Bacch*. 734–37, *Curc*. 429–36, and *Pseud*. 998 ff. For a comprehensive catalogue, see Barbiero 2022, *passim*.

3 Bork 2023, 426 suggests that the absence of the typical media for epigraphy (stone or bronze) might be attributed to a practical reason, namely their unsuitability for stage use, particularly within the theatrical settings of early *palliata* comedy.

4 See Bork 2023, who offers a focused discussion of these three instances. For broader approaches—though not specifically concerned with epigraphic forms of writing—Vogt-Spira 1998, 124-128, analyses the function of 'alphabetic plays' (e.g., *Merc*. 303-304, *Rud*. 1304-1306), including references to the act of reading, as a reflection of the cultural transformations occurring in Plautus' period; Clark 2002 concentrates on *Pseud*. 29–30, proposing comparisons with cursive writing on wax tablets; Slater 2004 provides an overview of the staging of literacy in Plautus, with particular attention to the dramaturgical role of writing characters.

5 I will discuss all major instances of epigraphic writing in Plautus, together with their dramaturgical and cultural implications, in a longer forthcoming study.

6 See esp. Solin 1999 and Salomies 2015.

7 See, e.g., Cancik-Kirschbaum 2005 on ancient Mesopotamian texts; on theoretical approaches Krämer 1996 and Ehlich 2002.

8 As McLuhan 1964, 1 memorably argues, "the medium is the message," a formulation that highlights how the material and technological form of communication exerts effects that far exceed its overt content.

9 For recent bibliography on 'multimodality' as applied specifically to literature, see Archer and Breuer 2015 and Norris 2020.

10 For theoretical discussions, including an overview of previous studies on the topic, on the active role of objects in shaping meaning, rather than functioning as mere passive supports, see Jones and Boivin 2010 and Englehardt and Nakassis 2012.

11 For discussion on this theoretical distinction, see Whitehouse 2013, 250 ff.

12 This has been described as 'secondary agency' or 'material agency', according to the definitions proposed by Gell 1998 and Knappett and Malafouris 2008, respectively.

13 For both passages, the Latin text follows the edition of Leo 1895.

14 The translations are from the Loeb editions of de Melo 2011-2013.

15 See ll. 406-408 (… *quando incedat per vias, / contemplent, conspiciant omnes, nutent, nictent, sibilent, / vellicent, vocent, molesti sint; occentent ostium*:).

16 For charcoal graffiti, comparable literary passages include Lucian. *Dialog*. X, 4, 18-23 (ἐγὼ δὲ καὶ ἐπιγράψειν μοι δοκῶ ἐπὶ τοῦ τοίχου ἐν Κεραμεικῷ […] Ἀρισταίνετος διαφθείρει Κλεινίαν […] ἄνθρακά ποθεν λαβοῦσα) and Mart. XII, 61, 9-10 (*qui carbone rudi putrique creta / scribit carmina, quae legunt cacantes*).

17 See Maiuri 2008, esp. on the excavations made between 1927 and 1939.

18 De Carolis 2007, 26, n. 17 suggests that this practice may plausibly be compared to the ancient technique of applying colour mixed with wax onto the wooden surfaces of ships, in order to protect them from salt and moisture (see Plin. *Nat*. *Hist*. XXXV, 149). Doors, similarly exposed to weather and humidity, were treated with a "campitura di colore rosso a base di ossido di ferro sciolto in cera." This wax-based application, besides its protective function, also served aesthetic purposes. It helped conceal the grain of lower-quality woods and prepared the surface for decorative finishes.

19 Plin. *Nat*. *Hist*. XVI, 225: *Firmissima in rectum abies, eadem valvarum paginis et ad quaecumque libeat intestina opera aptissima sive Graeco sive Campano sive Siculo fabricae artis genere* (…). The technical-literary evidence is further supported by analysis of wood samples from the Vesuvian area, which shows that approximately 60% of the species identified were white fir: see Fioravanti 2003, 101-104.

20 See the numerous examples in *TLL* s.v. *foris*, coll. 1058, 75 ff. Compare these passages with the numerical references to *fores* found at *Capt*. 831 and *Most*. 453 (here <*foris*> was conjectured by Ritschl, but *ambas* is found in the manuscripts). Although *fores* typically denotes the leaves of the door, the term can, at least in principle, be

understood more broadly to refer to the entire entrance, potentially encompassing the doorposts and the adjoining wall surrounding the doorway.

21 For entrance doors, such as the one under consideration, see the casts of those from the *Casa dei Ceii*, the *Casa dell'Efebo*, the *Casa del Bell'Impluvio* and the *Casa* II, 2, 4. For images of these, refer to *PPM* 1990, I, 412-413, nos. 3-4; 628, no. 12; 1991, III, 110, no. 2. Further examples, also found in wall decorations, are discussed in De Carolis 2007, 27, n. 26.

22 See e.g. the cast of the entrance door leaves on Via dell'Abbondanza, Pompeii, from the house of Loreius Tiburtinus (II, 2, 2). An image can be found in *PPM* 1991, III, 43, fig. 1.

23 DiBiasie-Sammons 2022, 386.

24 *Ibid*.

25 Inscriptions on different types of wooden supports, such as the Vindolanda tablets or the *tabulae herculanenses*, should be considered separately, as these are mostly wooden tablets inscribed with ink (see e.g. Tab. Vindol. 122 and *AE* 1951, 213 = Camodeca 2017, 99 ff.). To these compare the wooden tablets inscribed with a stylus by incising the coat of wax, sometimes partially survived: for the *tabulae pompeianae*, see e.g. *AE* 1974, 269 = Camodeca 1999, 184. Since the wax does not generally survive in the ground we are left with the incision where the stylus has penetrated to the wood below (on this aspect see Bowman and Tomlin 2005, 10-11 and fig. 1.3).

26 Excluding the entrance doors, for which we possess casts discussed in note 21, there remain examples of wooden internal doors of various types. Consider e.g. the following examples from Herculaneum: the wooden partition in the *Casa del Tramezzo di Legno* (III, 11), featuring a double-leaf double door, and the wooden lattice gate, composed of a diamond-shaped lattice of slats with two sliding leaves, in the *Casa del Bicentenario* (V, 15-16).

27 If charcoal graffiti—as DiBiasie-Sammons 2022, 390 ff. argues—were typically avoided in the public-facing areas of the house for precisely these reasons, then applying that framework here could be revealing. We cannot be certain that the observations made by the scholar can be extended to this context as well: it may be problematic to detach those considerations from the specific context of Herculaneum and the different historical period to which they belong. However, if we could, this would make the joke even more excessive: large, highly visible inscriptions would be imagined on the external door itself.

28 For the characteristics of the clustering phenomenon see Benefiel 2010, Benefiel 2011, and MacDonald 2018.

29 Benefiel 2010, 87.

30 Benefiel 2011, 39, and DiBiasie-Sammons 2022, 398.

31 The facades of private houses were regarded as suitable surfaces for all kinds of public messages, and the owner often had little control over them—as is precisely the case with Demipho here. Nevertheless, there are examples of attempts to curb the practice. See *CIL* IV 7521 (p. 1464, 1466, 1468): *si quis heic scripserit tabescat neque nominetur*; compare also *CIL* VI 52 (p. 831, 3003, 3532, 3755, 4100): *C(aius) Iulius Anicetus / ex imperio Solis / rogat ne quis velit / parietes aut triclias / inscribere aut scariphare*.

32 See Lohmann 2017, 70–77, on graffiti in the public areas of the house and the differing nature of graffiti in 'public' and 'private' contexts. On the difficulty of applying sharp distinctions between these two categories in the Roman house, see Wallace-Hadrill 1988 and Beltrán Lloris 2015, 91. See also Wallace-Hadrill 2015, 4, for relevant observations: "(...) it was taken for granted that a private facade was a suitable location for messages addressed to the passing public."

33 For Greek examples, see Theocr. 23, 46-48; *A.P.* 5, 191, 5ff.; 12, 23, 3-4; Aristoph. *Vesp*. 97-99. For latin, see Ov. *Am*. 2, 1, 27-28; 3, 1, 53-54; and perhaps also Prop. 1, 16, 9-10.

34 For further considerations on the narrative dynamics of the 'Plautine door' see Lowe 1995 and Mazzoli 2003. On the *topos* of the prosopopoeia of the door as taken up

by Plautus (especially *Curc.* 145–54), see Fraenkel 1960, 99 n. 1, and Portuese 2012.

35 On the well-known graffito long regarded as a *paraklausithyron*, *CIL* IV 5296 (p. 705), see Copley 1939. More recently, however, Graverini 2012–2013 and Graverini 2017 has convincingly shown that the label *paraklausithyron* is inappropriate. Even so, the text remains a valuable comparandum for the type of inscriptions discussed here. A closer parallel is provided by *CIL* IV 12155, in which the writer, presumably after taking leave of the beautiful Sabidia, records some Ovidian lines; note especially *tu, quae nunc excludis amantes* (point to bear in mind also for the subsequent example from *Asinaria*). For the *paraklausithyron* motif in *Curculio* comparison with Frangoulidis 2013 may likewise be useful.

36 See Varone 2002 *passim* for examples of erotic and love compositions in areas such as *atria* and *fauces*, often indicated in the footnotes. These include instances in which the writer asserts his presence (and agency) by inscribing his own name; cases in which he records only the name of the woman he desires; examples where both names appear together; and, occasionally, quotations of verses by well-known poets or composed by the writer himself.

37 See in general Levin-Richardson 2019, 40-63, 153-162, and the bibliography recalled therein for the graffiti from the Pompeian brothel (VII.12.18-19; *CIL* IV 2173-2296, 3101a).

38 Demipho could, in principle, have female slaves in the house for sexual use (cf. Levin-Richardson 2021 for discussion of the phenomenon, as well as the relevant graffiti, *CIL* IV 4592 and 4593). His difficulty lies elsewhere. (1) First, he is clearly infatuated with the girl and wishes to keep her exclusively for himself; his objections amount to transparent pretexts. (2) Second, his concern is to avoid being accused of acting as a *leno*, a socially stigmatised label that he is keen to avoid—*lenones*, along with gladiators and actors, occupied a low social status (see, e.g., McGinn 1998, 33, 41–42, 59, 65–69). (3) Third, one should recall the reproach at ll. 983 ff.: at his age it is considered unbecoming to involve himself with *meretrices*. As is evident, I retain the Latin term *meretrix* throughout, given the difficulty of rendering it adequately in translation (*courtesan*, *prostitute*, *sex worker*, etc.); on this issue see James 2005, 245 n. 25, and Witzke 2015.

39 On this contract see Scafuro 2004, James 2005, 228-232, and Fayer 2013, 31-37.

40 In the next lines, 761-763, the author explicitly mentions both an *epistula* and a *tabula cerata*.

41 I would not follow Slater (2004, 172), who writes: "The written word is required then to defend the household's integrity against the dangers posed by literacy." While it is true that writing functions as a powerful social tool of self-assertion and can therefore carry certain "dangers" (see also note 45), this cannot explain the use of *occupata est* in the present passage. The issue here is not one of household honour—least of all in the house of Cleareta, a *lena*, where any notion of 'integrity' is irrelevant in a setting openly connected with a form of prostitution—but of availability. The inscription signals that the woman is not available to other men, as her profession would ordinarily imply. Demipho wants to purchase her legitimately for twenty *minae*, as a commodity, and wishes to retain exclusive access; his concern is therefore less about moral integrity than about what James 2005, 226, aptly terms "sexual anxieties," fully aware as he is that the woman's profession would normally entail service to multiple clients. Comparable cases of *meretrices* kept back or hired for personal use over a period of time are attested, for example, in *Truculentus* (Phronesium), *Miles Gloriosus* (Philocomasium), and Terence's *Hecyra* (Philotis).

42 This interpretation is supported, for example, by de Melo's translation and by Gray 1894, 78.

43 Gray 1894, 91 commenting on *occupatust* at line 537, compares it with *Pseud.* 244, 246, and 278. In those passages, however, the meaning is 'busy doing something' rather than 'engaged' in the romantic or relational sense. If *occupata est* were indeed taken with this primary meaning, the comic double entendre would be even more immediate. A particularly interesting comparison is drawn by Hurka (2010, 246) from Lucian's *Ἑταιρικοὶ διάλογοι*: "Vielleicht handelt es sich bei der Regelung um eine

Übersteigerung der gängigen Praxis, einen Freier durch die Formel ἔνδον ἕτερος (*occupata sum?*) abzuweisen Luc. Meretr. 12, 1."

44 On the doorway being "the location at which a house is most sexual," the "erotic charge of a closed door," and on doors and their entrants as "sexually loaded entities," see Nichols 2024, in particular her analysis of the house of Simo in *Mostellaria*, as well as the bibliography cited therein for further discussion of these aspects in elegy.

45 Philaenium's position in this scene shows an example of a *meretrix* with education: she possesses the literacy that could, in other contexts, enable forms of self-assertion, yet here writing becomes a means of re-subordination. As Levin-Richardson 2013 has argued for female-authored sexual graffiti, women's inscriptions reveal a tension between agency and constraint: the capacity to write presupposes subjection, and acts of inscription may simultaneously reproduce marginalisation while enacting limited forms of resistance. A comparable dynamic is visible here: Diabolus requires Philaenium to inscribe her own 'exclusion' on the door—an act that ostensibly gives her a 'voice,' yet functions only to reinforce his control. The subsequent prohibition on her receiving or sending letters further underscores the perceived 'danger' of writing as a social tool for a woman like her. Such a portrayal aligns with broader evidence for educated women slaves in Greek and Roman societies, trained for many roles (e.g., midwives or secretaries), or, as Hallett 2011 notes in his analysis of *Pseudolus*, even as prostitutes.

46 As far as I am aware, no real-life parallels survive that correspond closely to the specific notion of personal ownership implied here, with which to draw parallels as in the previous case. On the branding or tattooing of slaves as a form of marking ownership, generally associated with status-labelling or punishment, see Jones 1987, Jones 2000, and Gustafson 2000. A related phenomenon is the use of inscribed metal neck-collars, of which approximately forty-five examples survive, all date to the 4th and 5th centuries CE. Although significantly later, they nonetheless help illuminate the conceptual logic of inscribing ownership upon the body. Particularly relevant is one of the two female names preserved in this corpus, *AE* 1906, 148, which concerns the possession of a *meretrix* (see Trimble 2016, 457. Cf. Rocchi and Marchionni 2021, 24, 26, 39, 122-124). The text reads: *Adultera meretrix. Tene quia fugivi de Bulla R(e)g(ia)*. In the Plautine passage, however, it is not the body of the *meretrix* that is exposed, but rather the door of the *domus*; hence, the inscription must appear there.

47 On pre-imperial time literacy see esp. McDonald 2019 and Lomas 2016. For a general overview on ancient literacy Harris 1989 and Harris 2014.

48 For the concept of 'functional literacies' see Woolf 2009. To understand the issue, one may compare, for instance, the inscribed expression *cacator cave malum*—a "three-word formula whose simplicity and repetition throughout the urban landscape" (Levin-Richardson 2015, 231) which would have made it recognisable to everyone, even to those not fully able to read it. Repetition and formulaicity are the two fundamental aspects that enable a text to be visualised and recognised without necessarily being read, while participating to its "sensory experience" (Whitehouse 2013, 254).

49 Scholars like Fraenkel 1960, 399, have argued that if such elements are plot-driving, they are likely of Greek origin; if removable or secondary, they may be Plautine additions. However, as Cristaldi 2011, 501, points out, Plautus often "forgets" he is in Greece, inserting recognisably Roman features into a supposedly Greek world.

50 Contemporary attitudes toward graffiti provide a useful point of comparison: in modern contexts, graffiti are typically viewed either as vandalism or as artistic expression, not as a widespread and socially embedded mode of everyday communication. For reflections on similarities and differences between ancient and modern graffiti, see Wallace-Hadrill 2015, 6–7.

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