Monkey Business:
Imitation, Authenticity, and Identity
from Pithekoussai to Plautus

This essay explores references to monkeys as a way of talking about imitation, authenticity, and identity in Greek stories about the “Monkey Island” Pithekoussai (modern Ischia) and in Athenian insults, and in Plautus’ comedy. In early Greek contexts, monkey business defines what it means to be aristocratic and authoritative. Classical Athenians use monkeys to think about what it means to be authentically Athenian: monkey business is a figure for behavior which threatens democratic culture—sycophancy or other deceptions of the people. Plautus’ monkey imagery across the corpus of his plays moves beyond the Athenian use of “monkey” as a term of abuse and uses the “imitative” relation of monkeys to men as a metapoetic figure for invention and play-making. For Plautus, imitator—and distorer—of Greek plays, monkeys’ distorted imitations of men are mapped not onto the relations between inauthentic and authentic citizens, as in Athens, but onto the relation of Roman to Greek comedy and culture at large. Monkey business in Plautus is part of the insistence on difference which was always crucial in Roman encounters with Greek culture.

Anyone who has been to the zoo would agree that when we look at monkeys it is hard to avoid thinking about ourselves. Monkeys look like us, act like us, and can even choose to imitate us. Our human shape is replicated in them but also (from one point of view) distorted: wild, hairy, they meet our gaze across an unbridgeable divide between human and animal, culture and nature.

We may think we see nature when we look at monkeys, but actually it is more complicated than that: the kinds of thinking we do about monkeys are inseparable from the culture of the encounter. Several studies demonstrate how reflections on...
the monkey’s nature, its proximities to human shape and action, are expressions of cultural values. H. W. Janson’s magisterial *Apes and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (1952) shows how European representations of apes as the devil, as symbols of human sinners, as fools, as sexual predators, and as foreigners are indexes of shifting views of humanity’s place in a divinely ordered world against a background of changing social and economic circumstances. Donna Haraway’s *Primate Visions: Gender, race and nature in the world of modern science* (1989) trenchantly analyzes the projection of social concerns onto scientific study of primates in whom the origins of human society are thought to lie: through the 1940s and 50s studies tend to focus on male animals as providers and dominating forces in their communities; in the 60s and 70s and beyond there is a quickening interest in the overlapping social roles of female animals as caregivers, forces for social cohesion, and sexual beings in their own right that parallels the development of feminist consciousness in the societies inhabited by the scientist-observers. What they describe in nature is shaped by what they know of culture. In his *The Ape and the Sushi Master: Cultural reflections by a primatologist* (2001), Frans de Waal argues in a similar way. Emphasizing cultural differences between Japanese and Western scientists, he maintains that culturally specific assumptions about what “culture” is shape perceptions of whether primates have “culture.”

On another cultural frontier, Henry Louis Gates traces the history of the figure of the “Signifying Monkey” in African-American culture. African-American vernacular verse stories tell how the Monkey tricks the Lion into getting beaten up by the Elephant by telling him the Elephant has been saying insulting things about the Lion. The Monkey’s language, which achieves its goals through a cunning blend of imitation and indirection, is called “signifying.” Gates argues that as such the Signifying Monkey tales express concerns central to African-American identity:

> the monkey is a hero of black myth, a sign of the triumph of wit and reason, his language of Signifyin(g) standing as the linguistic sign of the ultimate triumph of self-consciously formal language use. The black person’s capacity to create this rich poetry and to derive from these rituals a complex attitude toward attempts at domination, which can be transcended in and through language, is a sign of their originality, of their extreme consciousness of the metaphysical.

As different as their worldviews are, the artists, the primatologists, and the storytellers all use representations of monkeys to express what is at the core of their culture: when they talk about monkey business they talk about themselves.

What monkeys did the Greeks and Romans know and how did they encounter them? Monkeys are not native in Europe and the Middle East. De Waal suggests that differences between Eastern and Western attitudes toward monkeys, and

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2. Gates 1988: 44–88; the quote is from p. 77.
toward animals more generally, may depend on where monkeys are at home: “The presence of monkeys in India, China and Japan—in contrast to the Middle East and Europe—may have strengthened people’s closeness to nature: seeing other primates makes it hard for us to deny that we are part of nature.” 1 Monkeys enter into the Greek and Roman world as exotic strangers whose resemblance to men seems more uncanny than natural. Phoenician traders had connections to the home of the tailless “Barbary ape,” macaca sylvanus, in the western part of northern Africa; Etruscan and other representations of tailless monkeys derive from Phoenician contacts. Monkeys with tails were also known. These would be the “sacred baboon,” papio hamadryas, native to Ethiopia, Eretria, and Somalia, and the southwestern tip of Arabia, and regarded by the Egyptians as sacred to the god Thoth; Greek or Roman contact with these animals or their representations would come mainly via Egypt. 2 The Greek πίθηκος (diminutive πιθήκιον, cf. Latin pithecium) and Latin simia (related to simus, meaning “snub-nosed”; cf. Greek σίμος) can be used to mean monkeys generally or the tailless Barbary ape from North Africa in particular; a monkey with a tail can also be specified by Latin cercopithecus/Greek κερκοπίθηκος (from κέρκος, “tail”) or by κυνοκέφαλος/cynocephalus, or by κυνός. In strict scientific terms, the English words “monkey” and “ape” are not interchangeable: “ape” denotes a member of the hominoid family, which includes bonobos, gorillas, gibbons, chimpanzees, orangutans, and humans; “monkey” denotes any of the families Callitrichidae, Cebidae, or Cercopithecidae. Historically, the terms have been used more loosely, with “ape” used especially when resemblance to humans is at issue: see Oxford English Dictionary s.vv. “ape” and “monkey.”

Greek and Roman monkey business survives mostly in bits and pieces. 3 Even so, it is possible to see what people said about themselves when they talked about monkeys. The Greeks and Romans both see monkeys existing in an imitative relation to humans, but the strategies of self-definition that this imitative relation is used to express differ sharply. The first section of this essay will consider the Greek material. In archaic Greece, “imitation” can answer the question: “Are newly wealthy men the same kind of men as traditional aristocrats, or are they imitations?”—“Imitations! Monkeys!” In classical Athens, “imitation” can be the answer to the question: “Are men who abuse the privileges of citizenship (speaking to the demos, acting in court) authentic Athenian citizens or are they perpetrating a mere imitation of a citizen’s rights?”—“Imitations! Monkeys!”

4. For modern discussion and photographs, see van Hooff 1990: 246–49 on papio hamadryas and 222–28 on macaca sylvanus. The Etruscan material is discussed by Bonacelli 1932. For representations of the “sacred baboon” and their Egyptian source see Evans 1921–1934: vol. 1, p. 83 fig. 51; vol. 2, pp. 447–50, plate x, figs. 262, 264.
5. References to monkeys in ancient literature are collected and discussed in McDermott, 1934, 1935, and 1936; see also García Gual 1972, Toynbee 1973: 55–60, and Lilja 1980. The text of Plautus will be cited from Lindsay’s OCT.
Plautus offers the most substantial collection of ancient monkey business: it appears in one way or another in ten of his twenty surviving plays, and it will be the focus of the rest of this essay. Plautus’ monkeys differ from the monkeys at large in Greek literary sources, and I will suggest that these differences reflect differences in the way in which imitation is understood and evaluated in Roman republican culture and by Plautus in particular. In the Roman Republic, as it appropriates natural and cultural resources in the Mediterranean world, and establishes its masterfully imitative relation to Greek culture, thinking about imitation can generate something more like the question: “How can a culture express its power?” “Imitation!”

Against this background, Plautus achieves great literary success by adapting Greek comedies for the Roman stage. Patient sifting of the largely fragmentary evidence for Greek New Comedy has revealed the extent to which Plautus’ plays eliminate or downplay sentimentality, domesticity, and serious ethical reflection and allot new prominence to clever slaves, extravagant language, and pungent imagery. Plautus places audacious, transformative imitation at the center of his literary identity in proclamations such as *Philemo scripsit, Plautus vortit barbare* (“Philemo wrote it, Plautus put it into that barbarous language, Latin,” *Trin.* 19, cf. As. 11). In the description of Plautus’ imitation of his model in the prologue of the *Casina*, the confidently self-deprecating tone of *barbare* appears again, this time through a punning association of the poet’s own name with the barking of a dog: *Diphilus/hanc graece scripsit, postid rursum denuo/latine Plautus cum latranti nomine* (“Diphilus wrote this in Greek, then Plautus with his barking name wrote it all over again in Latin,” *Cas.* 32–34). *Plautus* is a word used of a dog with soft, flat ears (Paul. *Fest.* p. 231M); the echo of *latine* in the sound of the word for “barking” (*latranti*) seems to suggest that Latin itself might be a kind of barbarous barking.

To use *barbare* to describe translation from Greek into Latin is, of course, to adopt a distinctly Hellenocentric viewpoint. But there are nuances here too. The elder Cato wrote with some irritation that the Greeks “are always calling us barbarians (*barbaros*) and they insult us in a filthier way than they do others [whom they merely call *barbari*] by calling us Oscan (*opicon appellatione*)” (Plin. *Nat.* 29.14). This scornful use of “Oscan” cited by Cato occludes the recent history of Roman military supremacy over Greek territories. Instead, the relation of Greek to Roman is viewed as that between (superior, sophisticated) colonizing Greek immigrants and (primitive, Oscan) natives in Campania and southern Italy. It is reasonable to suppose that Plautus draws on the traditions of native Oscan Atellan farce in making Athenian comedy Roman, and his name Maccius (or

Maccus) likely alludes to the standard Atellan farce clown character Maccus.\textsuperscript{7} He could have chosen to comment explicitly in his prologues on the presence of Oscan elements in his Latin versions of Greek plays, but that might engage with the contemptuous Greek use of “Oscan.” By claiming his translations are “barbarous,” Plautus preempts Greek scorn on his own terms. At the same time, Plautus neatly avoids seeming too philhellenic. He self-deprecatingly acknowledges his distance from his Greek models in much the same way as Cicero downplays his knowledge of Greek art and culture when referring to Verres’ thefts of Greek artworks in Sicily by strategically “forgetting” that Polyclitus was the sculptor of the statues in question.\textsuperscript{5} Barbarous difference is a crucial ingredient in Plautus’ crowd-pleasing imitations of Greek comedy.

Why so many monkeys in Plautus? While it could be just that we have so many of Plautus’ plays, I think it is likely that the idea of a monkey as imitation embodied was a fascinating one to Plautus. Monkeys are viewed as imitative; by talking about them and their disruptive tricks, Plautus is also talking about the processes of barbarous imitation that create his plays and about the acts of imitation that are perpetrated therein. Scholars have described various ways in which Plautus comments metatheatrically on his production of theatrical illusions.\textsuperscript{9} As Matthew Leigh has remarked, “the idea of acting is often expressed in Latin through verbs of simulation (\textit{simulare, dissimulare}). In Plautus, the theatrical event is therefore reproduced in microcosm as characters use the same verbs to express the intention to present themselves to an unwitting third party as that which they are not.”\textsuperscript{10} Plautus repeatedly exploits the traditional view of monkeys as an imitation of men by devising puns between \textit{simia} and forms of \textit{similis}. In addition to these fairly brief and straightforward references to monkeys, Plautus also deploys more complex monkey business in which the actions of the monkey are intimately connected with the imitative business of the plot. This “emplotted” monkey business should also, I argue, be understood as one of Plautus’ several metatheatrical techniques of commenting on his production of dramatic action. When understood as debased imitators of men, monkeys are an apt symbol for the same kind of strategic self-deprecation that makes Plautus call his (expertly,

\textsuperscript{7} Plautus jokes about the Atellan tradition at 	extit{Bac.} 1088 and 	extit{Rud.} 535–36. See further Gratwick 1973 and Christenson 2000: 9.


\textsuperscript{9} Barchiesi 1970 compares metatheatricity in Plautus with that in Renaissance and modern plays; Muecke 1986 emphasizes the metatheatrical dimension of Plautus’ disguise plots; Slater 1985: 16 = 2000: 11–12, and McCarthy 2000: esp. 17–29, have analyzed the ways in which Plautus’ clever slaves operate like playwrights in their capacity to make up successful dramatic plots that get the better of their masters—at least up to a point; Gowers 1993: 52 and 87–107 has shown the ways in which his cooks, with their expert mixing of all sorts of ingredients, are figures for Plautus’ mixture of traditions in his playmaking too; Moore 1998: esp. 67–90 has explored the ways in which characters’ metatheatrical utterances to the audience contribute to the plays’ festive Saturnalian atmosphere and also create a wryly satirical “take” on the audience itself.

\textsuperscript{10} Leigh 2000: 303.
inventively imitative) translations barbarous: when Plautus talks about monkeys he talks about himself.

I. GREEK MONKEY BUSINESS: ON THE TRAIL OF THE KERKOPES FROM LYDIA TO PITHEKOUSSAI TO ATHENS

Thinking about monkeys starts in Greece, as elsewhere, from the notion that monkeys are uniquely and problematically close to humans, or in other words that they constitute a distorted imitation of human form and action. Philosophers use the monkey to gauge man’s place among all beings: Heraclitus uses the relation between apes and humans as an analogy for the relation of humans to gods;11 Aristotle situates monkeys in an intermediate category, sharing some features with their fellow quadrupeds but others with humans.12 In literary contexts there emerges a recurring interest in the ways that monkeys offer a distorted version of human—that is, Greek—behavior. The phrase καλοὶ κἀγαθοί embodies a central value of Greek culture: the inseparability of physical grace and social authority.13 Small, hunched over, in Greek eyes monkeys embody the opposite of an elite, dignified, and authoritative human physical presence: calling a man a monkey is a strategy of precluding his social dignity and authority, and especially of calling into question the persuasive power of his speech. The notion of comparing a persuasive but false speaker to an ape may even owe something to the similar sounds of πίθηκος and πιθανός (persuasive).

In Pythian 2, Pindar uses the monkey image to defuse the persuasive power of an enemy’s speech. He warns Hieron against being deceived by a rival of Pindar who flatters Hieron and denigrates Pindar: children call a monkey kalon, he says, but the discerning judge of the Underworld, Rhadamanthys, is undeceived when a man spreads lying slander (Pyth. 2.72–75; the scholiast comments that Pindar’s rival here is Bacchylides). In Plato’s Republic the soul of the ugly Thersites chooses for himself the body of a monkey (10.620c), and this too is an indirect attack on the power of Thersites’ speech. In the Iliad Thersites is described as bandy-legged, lame in one foot, hunch-backed, and hollow-chested (II. 2.216–19). Thersites imitates and distorts language too: he knows many things to say, but they are disordered, inconsequential, inappropriate (οὐ κατὰ κόσμον), likely to spark quarrels with the leaders (βασιλεύπισσομενεσι ν), but what he thinks the Achaians will find amusing (II. 2.213–16). Thersites speaks compellingly: Odysseus calls him a λιγύ̋ . . . ἀγορητή̋ (2.246), a clear speaker, a description also used of Nestor (1.248, 4.293). But from the elite point of view, Thersites says the wrong

things, berating Agamemnon for quarrelling with Achilles and saying that the Greeks should return home (2.225–42). Odysseus thwarts Thersites’ attempt to speak for the ordinary soldier by beating him and making him a laughingstock (2.265–77). It is precisely this combination of replication and distortion of socially authoritative language (at least from an elite point of view) that makes Thersites appear to Plato the perfect candidate for a monkey’s body (Lycophron calls Thersites πιθηκομορφοφρο, Alex.1000). Plutarch too mobilizes the monkey image to undermine an individual’s social authority, comparing a flatterer’s imitation friendship to monkey business in “How to tell a flatterer from a friend” (Mor. 52 B, 64 E).

Monkeys also appear in some versions of the myth of the Kerkopes, troublemaking and deceptive dwarves whose name seems related to the Greek word κέρκος, “tail.” 14 In the visual tradition, represented in numerous artworks ranging from the sixth to fourth centuries BCE, they are linked to Herakles. When he catches them trying to rob him of his characteristic lionskin and club (thereby attempting to become counterfeit Herakles figures), he hangs them by the ankles and slings them over his shoulder, where they get a good look at his backside, heavily weathered by travel and labor. “Aha!” they laugh, recalling that their mother told them that they could be ruined by “black-buttocks.” Herakles in turn laughs at their merriment and eventually releases them (Plutarch compares the Kerkopes’ impudent jokes to the jokes of a flatterer at Mor. 60 C).15

Literary evidence recounts the transformation of the Kerkopes into monkeys commemorated in the name of the island of Pithekoussai (modern Ischia), just off the shore of Italy in the Bay of Naples. One source for this is the lexicographer Harpocration’s explanation of the use of Κέρκωψ as a term of abuse in oratory in his Lexicon of the Ten Orators:

ἐν τοις εἰς Ὄμηρον ἀναφερομένους Κέρκωψιν δηλοῦται ὡς ἐξουσιασθένες τῆς ἡμᾶς καὶ βιέσται οἱ Κέρκωπες. Ξεναγόρας δὲ εἰς πιθήκους αὐτῶν μεταβαλεῖν φησι καὶ τὰς Πιθηκοῦσας νήσους ἀπὸ ἀυτῶν κληθέναι. Ἅμισθην τὸ χαμός ἡ Σαρδιανὸς ἐὰν τοὺς ἱμβούς καὶ τὰ ὀνόματα αὐτῶν ἀναγράφει, Κάνδουλον καὶ Ατλαντόν.

Harpocration, s.v. Κέρκωψ, k 42 Keaney

In the “Kerkopes” attributed to Homer, it is related that the Kerkopes were deceivers and liars. Xenagoras says that they were changed into apes and that the Ape-Islands, “Pithekoussai,” were named after them. Aeschines the Sardian recorded their names in his iambic verses as Kandoulos and Atlantos.

14. Cf. Semonides: “Kerkopes are deceptive (ἀπατηλοί) rogues (πανούπσιοι), and . . . monkey business (κερκωπία) is deception,” (West 1972: Semonides fr. 34). An unattributed comic fragment runs: “they reviled him as a wizard (γόης) or a kerkops of words” (Kock 1888: Aesopota fr. 1307).

In the visual tradition, the Kerkopes steal Herakles’ gear and joke their way out of trouble when he tries to punish them for their ill-gotten gains. By contrast, the Pithekoussai stories involve permanent punishment for an offence against Zeus. The Hellenistic *Alexandra* attributed to Lycophron describes Pithekoussai by saying that enemies of Zeus were relegated to the island which was subsequently populated by apes, though, as is typical for this poem’s obscure style, the name of the island is not mentioned (*Alexandra* 688–93). Ovid recounts the transformation of the Kerkopes as Aeneas approaches Italy:

quippe deum genitor, fraudem et periuaria quondam  
Cercopum exosus gentisque admissa dolosae,  
in deforme viros animal mutavit, ut idem  
dissimiles homini possent similesque videri . . . .

*Met.* 14.91–94

For once the father of the gods, hating the deceit and lies of the Cercopes and the crimes of the tricky race turned the men into an ugly animal, so that the same ones could seem unlike and like man . . .

Because of the mythical link between *kerkopes* and Pithekoussai (and the aural link between Kerkops and κέρκος, “tail”), even though *kerkops* is not used to describe real monkeys (except by the Latin poet Manilius *Astronomica* 4.668), calling a man a *kerkops*, or calling actions *kerkopia*, does not just convey the idea of deception but also seems to carry the image of the monkey as well; clearly Harpocration thought so, since he cites the Pithekoussai story to gloss the use of the term Kerkops in Greek oratory. The term *kerkops*, like other uses of the monkey image, constructs an implicit analogy: deceptive behavior is to truthful behavior as monkeys are to men. In each case the former replicates and distorts the latter.

But how—and when—exactly did the myth of the deceitful Kerkopes come to be linked to the island of Pithekoussai? Pithekoussai is the earliest known Greek settlement in the west, and during the second half of the eighth century its Euboean colonists (from Chalcis and Eretria, Strabo 5.4.9) generated great wealth by smelting iron obtained from the Etruscans and exporting it to points east. The connection to metalwork is probably commemorated in the Latin name for the island, Aenaria, related to *aes*, “bronze” or “money” (though Aenaria was sometimes said to be derived from Aeneas, who passed the island on his way to Cumae, Plin. *Nat.* 3.82). The etymology of the name Pithekoussai itself is not certain: it may be a Hellenization of an indigenous (or Phoenician, cf. Diod. Sic. 20.58.3) name, or a product of the monkey / Kerkopes myth via πίθηκος, or even, as Pliny would have it, a derivation from πίθος (a figlinis doliorum, “from

16. On the dating of the *Alexandra* see further *OCD* 3 s.v. Lycophron (2).
its pottery workshops,” Nat. 3.82). Can Harpocratus’s gloss on Κέρκωψ or Lycophron’s passing reference to it give us any clues about when the monkeys moved in to Pithekoussai? The lost Homeric poem that Harpocratus refers to is undateable. Xenagoras’ “On Islands” dates from the second (or possibly third) century BCE (FGrHist 240 F 28 and FGrHist 3 [Pherecydes] F 77). Aeschines the Sardian is of unknown date. It is notable that he is said to hail from Lydia, the area where the Herakles episode of the myth is sometimes located (Diod. Sic. 4.31.7). In addition, Kandoulos, one of the names he assigns to the Kerkoenses, has clear Lydian overtones, recalling the famous king Kandaules of Sardis (Herod. 1.7), while the name of his brother Atlantos evokes the western realms of Atlas: in this version, then, the brothers’ names probably reflected the westward trajectory of their myth, starting in Lydia and ending up in Pithekoussai. Although the link between the Kerkoenses and Pithekoussai cannot be traced back in literary sources further than the Hellenistic Alexandra, it must be older. For one thing, the poet expects his audience to recognize it, so it must predate him. Moreover, Pithekoussai’s economic preeminence receded after the end of the eighth century once the Euboeans established a settlement at Cumae. What cultural context makes the most sense for the image of deceptive monkey men swarming over Pithekoussai? Imagining Pithekoussai as a monkey society suggests that the island holds a distorted and inauthentic version of culture, whose influence destabilizes the traditional order, just as the Kerkoenses had challenged Zeus or Herakles. Surely it makes most sense to suppose that the mythical monkeys took up residence on Pithekoussai while Pithekoussai was making Euboean traders very rich. Lydian associations for the Kerkoenses would also support the hypothesis that this version of the myth is somehow connected to moneymaking of one kind or another: the Kerkoenses move from one place renowned for moneymaking—Lydia, where gold and silver coinage, and commercial trade, were invented, according to Herodotus (1.94)—to Pithekoussai, famous for the wealth it generates in the iron trade. A late gloss (Paul. Fest. p. 49L) explicitly puts profit motives at the center of kerkoensian deception: cercops Graeci appellant lucrari undique cupientem, “the Greeks call a cercops one who wants to make a profit from every possible source.” This gloss makes explicit a concern with moneymaking that had been implicit, I think, in the Pithekoussai stories from the beginning. Once we suspect that the myth of monkeys on Pithekoussai may be a response to profitable trading based there, it makes sense to situate this response within (or alongside) Leslie Kurke’s elucidations of the ways in which an elite element within archaic Greek culture defines its identity through a “language of metals”: while traditional elites

19. On a date for Xenagoras as early as the third century BCE, see Cornell 1975: 20–21.
celebrate their worth by comparing themselves to pure (uncoined) gold, enjoy
(as markers of their elite status) luxury objects and practices originating in the
east (especially Lydian ones), and describe money-making trade as deception, the
Kerkopes are expelled from Lydia and Pithekoussai’s profitable industry is recast
as monkey business.\textsuperscript{22}

So much for (at least arguably archaic) monkey business at Pithekoussai. In
classical Athens, the “monkey” is a term of abuse directed not at far-off traders but
toward men in the heart of the agora and the courts: the ways that monkey business
replicates and distorts human behavior serve as a screen on which to project
Athenian concerns about regulating who is entitled to the privileges of Athenian
citizenship. In Aristophanes, “monkey” (πίθηκος) and related words are terms of
abuse which characterize their targets as deceptive or ugly or both.\textsuperscript{23} A fragment
of Phrynichus calls four men apes (πίθηκους), each presumably an unsatisfactory
citizen: one is δειλός (cowardly), one is a κόλα/κσι (a flatterer), and one is a νόθος
(someone not entitled to citizenship because he is not the child of legitimately
married citizen parents\textsuperscript{24}); the fourth term in the series has not survived.\textsuperscript{25} A
fable of uncertain date attributed to Aesop takes these possibilities to the extreme.
A dolphin rescues a monkey from the sea and brings him toward Athens. As
they approach the shore, the dolphin asks if the monkey “knows Piraeus.” The
monkey says yes, Piraeus is a good friend of his, and the dolphin, angry at the
lie—that is, at the monkey’s false claim to Athenian authenticity—drowns him
(Perry, \textit{Aesopica} #73).

Orators use Κέρκωψ or πίθηκος as virtual synonyms for “sycophant” to char-
acterize their opponents as having the power to deceive the demos. Aeschines
denounces Demosthenes by saying that the latter “instructed” him in the “myster-
ies” of deception by teaching him the meaning of the terms Κέρκωψ, παπάληµα
(“piece of subtlety”), and παλίµβολον (“change of mind”) (Aeschines 2.40). De-
mosthenes in attempting to discredit Aeschines derides him as (among other
things) a sycophant (συκοφάντης) and a “perfect tragic ape” (αὐτοτραγικὸ πίθηκος,
18.242). Practices characterized as sycophancy were a particular focus
for Athenian concerns about appropriate citizen behavior. Athens had no pub-
lic prosecution system and any citizen could bring suit against another; those
who brought suits could be eligible for a share in property forfeited by a losing
defendant. Accordingly, the legal system—a distinguishing feature of Athenian
democracy—was open to exploitation by those who brought malicious suits not to
exact revenge for wrongs done to them personally or to protect the community
from a wrong-doer, but to win a profit and promote their own advancement. And

\textsuperscript{22} Kurke 1999: esp. 41–64, 80–89.
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Acharn.} 120, 907; \textit{Birds} 441, \textit{Knights} 416, 887, \textit{Peace} 1065–66, \textit{Frogs} 708, 1085, \textit{Thes.}
\textsuperscript{24} For discussion of the exclusion of νόθοι from citizenship at Athens see Ogden 1996: ch. 4.
\textsuperscript{25} Phrynichus \textit{Monotropos} fr. 21 Kassel-Austin (= \textit{schol. vet.} on Aristophanes \textit{Birds} 11).
accusations of sycophancy (of improper exploitation of the legal system) could be mobilized by any defendant against an accuser. Even if a sycophant’s accusations are accurate ones, his manipulation of the legal system both replicates and distorts the uses good citizens make of the legal process. This combination of replication and distortion makes the monkey image an apt one: in the *Acharnians*, where the notion is that outside of Athens a sycophant could be put on profitable public display as an exotic specimen, a sycophant is called “like a monkey, full of mischief” (907).

Authenticity is at issue in all of this Greek monkey business, whether it is the authenticity of traditional aristocratic prerogatives, or authentic participation in democratic institutions. Nobody ever calls himself a monkey: it is always an accusation to discredit someone else. Monkey business is viewed as imitation, and the utility of the idea persists; references to monkeys are first employed to define what authentic aristocrats are not and then to define what authentic Athenian citizens are not.

II. ON STAGE WITH PLAUTUS’ MONKEYS

Now that I have outlined the ideas about imitation as a kind of inauthenticity which are expressed in Greek uses of “monkey” as a term of abuse, I want to turn to Plautus’ monkey business. Here, monkeys can symbolize the capacity to create illusion. Puns on *simia* and *similis* associate monkeys with the plots perpetrated when comic characters use deceptive imitation. Other references to monkeys seem to derive most directly from the Athenian usage of “monkey” as a term of abuse, especially in accusations of sycophancy of various kinds. The most complex and sustained bits of monkey business associate monkeys with the staging of comic performances at festivals (*ludi*) and with dreams, and function as a metatheatrical commentary on the playwright’s capacity to create theatrical illusions which are to real life what monkeys are to men: distorted imitations.

SIMIAN DISSIMULATION

Plautus’ references to monkeys can, because of the similarity between *simia* and forms of *similis*, punningly heighten the comedy of plots and stage business involving impostors or deceptive substitution. Latin puns on *simia/similis* are important to this effect and these puns are not available in Greek. In a line of Ennius, quoted by Cicero (probably from Ennius’ satires), the fact that apes more than any other animals both imitate and resemble humans is playfully emphasized in a pseudo-etymological pun between *simia* (where the first -i- is long) and *similis* (where the first -i- is short): *simia quam similis turpissima bestia nobis* (“how similar to us is that ugly beast the ape”), Cic. *Nat. Deor*. 1.97 (= Enn. *Sat*. fr. 23). Ovid uses the same pun when he describes the metamorphosis of men into

monkeys on the island of Pithekoussai (Met. 14.91–94); Martial uses it to say that a man is as ugly as his pet monkey (7.87.4); and it is made twice in the medieval prose paraphrase of Phaedrus’ fable of an ape who behaved like an emperor (Phaedrus 4.13). Puns on simia/similis also appear in Plautus’ mention of apes at moments when deceptive resemblances are essential to the success of comic schemes. Clearly it is not the case that Plautus only or always uses monkeys when plots turn on the deceptive actions of impostors. After all, most comic plots involve some kind of deception. But because of the possibility for punning between simia and similis, when Plautus’ plots do involve pretence and deception (frequently signaled with similis and related words), references to monkeys can heighten the comic effect.

The clearest example of simia punning occurs when Pseudolus fits out a certain Simia (slave in the household of Charinus, friend of Pseudolus’ master’s son Calidorus) to impersonate a messenger sent by a soldier to complete payment on and take possession of a woman: Simia stands in both for the messenger and, in another sense, for Pseudolus himself, who can’t carry out the trick himself because the pimp who holds the woman knows him too well already. As others have observed, both Simia’s imitation of the messenger and his status as almost-but-not-quite Pseudolus is comically emphasized in his simian name (Pseud. 724–44).27 The master too is embedded in deceptive language from his first appearance: Pseudolus announces his master’s entrance by pronouncing his name, Simo (410). Although Simo is a Greek name (from σιµός, “snub-nosed”), in a Roman context the puns between Simo and simia become available. The deceptive overtones of Simo’s name come into play when Simo proceeds to discuss his lovelorn son with a friend, lamenting his extravagance and mentioning that many people have been telling him about Calidorus’ wish to buy and free his beloved. He himself had suspected it was going on, but has so far pretended (dissimulabam, 422) not to notice.28 Simo is monkey-ish, but not monkey-ish enough for his deception to be effective.

In two other plays women are called after monkeys in ways which pun on their implication in deceptive plots. A slave woman in the Truculentus is called Pithecium, apparently as a proper name, and deception is front and center: the meretrix Phronesium is pretending (adsimulavi, 472) to have just given birth to a child so as to demand funds from the soldier she alleges is the baby’s father. She asks her female slaves to help her stage the scene, and Pithecium is the first she names. The simian associations of Pithecium’s name underscore Phronesium’s project of dissimulation: eho, Pithecium! / face ut accumbam, accede, adiuta. em


28. And in the Mostellaria simian associations may heighten the comic effect when the clever slave Tranio deceives the returning father by telling the lie that his son has bought the house next door, a house belonging to one Simo (669–70).
“Hey, Pithecium! Help me lie down, come here, help me. There, that’s what suits a woman who’s just given birth” (Truc. 477–78).

Monkey business is a big thing in the *Miles Gloriosus*; for the moment I want to mention only one small punning touch to the plot, which turns on the attempt to extract a girl from the house of the braggart soldier. To distract the soldier, Acroteleutium, a local courtesan, is hired to pretend to be the neighbor’s richly dowered wife perishing with lust for the soldier, and her slave Milphidippa poses as go-between. When the soldier sees the slave, he says she looks attractive: Palaestrio fans the soldier’s lust with the retort that “compared to the wife, this one’s a monkey (*pithecium*) and an owl” (one suggestion for *spinturnicium*) (989). When used of Milphidippa, the word *pithecium* is a term of abuse; we might compare Menander *Plokion* fr. 1.8, where a shrewish wife among her slaves is called “a proverbial ass among monkeys.” At one level, Palaeastro is merely saying that Milphidippa is less beautiful than her mistress, and certainly monkeys had long been used in talking about ugly women and ugly men. But the reference to a monkey also ironically underscores Milphidippa’s deceptive mission: the soldier can’t say he wasn’t warned. And indeed, the “monkey” Milphidippa’s first action is to dissimulate:

iam est ante aedis circus ubi sunt ludi faciundi mihi.

   dissimulabo, hos quasi non videam neque esse hic etiamdum sciam.

*Miles* 991–92

Here in front of the house is the place where I must put on my show. I’ll pretend I don’t see them or know they are here yet.

Taken individually these simian puns are fleeting and rather trivial, but since the pun is not available in Greek they demonstrate a distinctively Roman approach to the image of the monkey.

**MONKEYS AND SYCOPHANTS**

As discussed above, the term sycophancy can be used to describe manipulation of the legal system. In addition to this rather narrow, legally oriented, understanding of sycophancy, the term can be used more loosely of other sorts of discourse that replicate and distort the truth, such as deception or flattery. In Greek New Comedy and Roman Comedy the term expands beyond the political and legal structures of classical Athens and can be used of those engaging in any kind of deception for hire: these comic scenarios don’t necessarily involve

29. The *spinturnix* is some kind of bird, ugly (so Festus p. 446L) and probably related to *σπινθαρῆς*, “spark”; Hammond et al. 1963 state that it “is supposed to have been a small owl, whose name perhaps referred to its bright eyes or quick movements.”

30. The fragment is preserved at Aulus Gellius 2.23.9 and discussed at Gomme and Sandbach 1973: 704–706.

31. Semonides fr. 7.71–82 highlights ugliness in his picture of the monkey-like woman.
law cases, and often involve the sycophant acting as an impostor. So, for example, in the *Menaechmi*, Messenio warns Syracusan Menaechmus about the dangers of impostors and sycophants at Epidamnus (260) and subsequently characterizes Epidamnian Menaechmus as “either a sycophant or your twin brother” (1087). Plautus uses the term *sycophanta* and related vocabulary some thirty times. Both narrowly legalistic examples of sycophancy and extra-legal sycophantic deceptive schemes occur, and both are represented as monkey business by Plautus.

In some instances where Plautus associates monkeys and sycophancy, he seems simply to draw on the Greek usage of “monkey” as a term of abuse to describe sycophantic or deceitful behavior. In the *Mostellaria*, the slave Phaniscus is on his way to collect his dissolute young master at the house of Philolaches: he will thus destroy the illusion, carefully designed to protect the hard-partying Philolaches from the wrath of his returning father, that the house is haunted and derelict. Phaniscus’ fellow slave Pinacium tries to stop him, calling Phaniscus a monkey (*simia*, 886b) and a counterfeiter (“smith who is used to striking coins from lead,” 892). The tattletale Phaniscus will reveal (as the “bright” connotations of his name might suggest) the truth about the house to Philolaches’ father, so he is not deceptive. But Pinacium is “right” to call Phaniscus a monkey because his behavior is still similar to that of a sycophant: his revelation is designed more to promote himself than to preserve the integrity of the family or the community.  

In his recent commentary on the *Menaechmi*, Gratwick draws on the notion of a connection between monkeys and sycophancy to propose a clever emendation. The Syracusan Menaechmus pretends to go mad and denounces the wife of Epidamnian Menaechmus and her father. Perhaps inspired by Messenio’s earlier warning about sycophancy in Epidamnus he calls the old man a monkey:

(poste autem ille Cerco〈p〉s al(i)us qui saepe aetate in sua perditit civem innocentem falso testimonio.

*Men.* 838–39

But behind me is that other ape-man, who often during his lifetime destroyed innocent citizens with his false testimony.

*P*: post te autem illi circa salus

Monkeys are here too associated with the practices of sycophancy, that is with denunciation motivated by a desire for personal advancement. These two examples show sycophantic behavior and monkey business linked together almost in shorthand, and suggest that the association was a familiar and readily discernible one for comic audiences.

32. The pairing of “counterfeiter” with “monkey” seems parallel to the association of monkeys with monetary profits which I have hypothesized as lying behind the tale of Pithekoussai.
MONKEY BUSINESS AT THE LUDI

Next, I want to consider situations in which Plautine monkey business expands beyond its origins in Athens as a term of abuse to act as a metaleiterary figure for Plautus’ own Roman imitations and distortions of Greek comedy during the staging of the ludi. An association between monkey business, deceptive plotting, and play-making may also be glimpsed in a fragment of Afranius (fl. 150 BCE), where the speaker—no doubt victim of some kind of plot—calls someone a monkey for making him into something to laugh at: *quis hic est simia, / qui me hodie ludificatus est? “Who is this monkey, who has made me ridiculous today?”* (Afranius *Temerarius* 329–30 Ribbeck). In the *Poenulus*, the young man Agorastocles enthusiastically accepts his slave Milphio’s plot to win Agorastocles’ beloved away from her pimp Lycus by framing Lycus for harboring an allegedly runaway slave, bringing him to court, and having the praetor award him all of Lycus’ goods (185–86). The resemblance of this plot to the kinds of trumped-up suits an Athenian sycophant might set in motion is clear, and Milphio uses the vocabulary of sycophancy when he refers to his deceptions as *sycophantius* at 425. Milphio’s sycophantic plot to get the best of the pimp in court is unexpectedly pushed to the side when the Carthaginian Hanno arrives. Father of the girl whom Agorastocles loves, he is also the uncle of Agorastocles, who was kidnapped as a child. Hanno’s recognition of Agorastocles has monkey business at its very core: Agorastocles is recognized by his uncle in part because he bears the scar of a bite he received while playing with a monkey as a child (*signum esse oportet in manu laeva tibi, / ludenti puero quod memordit simia, 1073–74*). Agorastocles’ exotic origins in Carthage are reinforced by the tale of the monkey bite, since North Africa was a source from which monkeys were imported. His monkey-ish identity is explicit in this recognition scene, but it had already been implicit in his intended imitation and distortion of legal practice in the side-tracked sycophantic plot against Lycus. Milphio too lays claim to Carthaginian origins when he offers to “translate” Hanno’s “Punic” conversation for the other characters (990–91). And Milphio’s name may also have monkey-ish overtones. Agorastocles’ playing along with the Carthaginian Milphio’s monkey-ish sycophantic scheme finds a prequel in Agorastocles’ playing with that real monkey back in Africa where they both came from.

33. His name is similar to that of Milphidippa in the *Miles Gloriosus*, who is associated with monkey business at 989. The term *milphosis* is used by Galen to denote eye discharge accompanied by the falling out of the eyelashes (Galen 12.789). When Aristotle describes how apes are the most similar to men of all quadrupeds, he remarks that while other quadrupeds only have lashes on either the upper or the lower eyelid, the ape has them on both upper and lower, though they are extremely delicate, especially the lower lashes, and very small (*Historia Animalium* 502a 31–34). A peculiar anecdote in Aelian (*Nat. Animal*. 17.25) recounts that monkeys could be captured by giving them mirrors: when the monkeys gaze at the mirrors, a powerfully sticky substance surges up around their eyelids, rendering them blind and easy to capture. This too seems to reveal a fascination with monkeys’ eyes as perhaps exceptionally large and viscous. Perhaps for Roman and/or Athenian audiences the syllable *milph-* could connote “limpid, virtually lashless, monkey-ish eyes.”
The small monkey bite scar at the center of Agorastocles’ recognition scene is a metaphor for comedy’s own compressed and distorted imitations of life. As John Henderson remarks, “this monkey-business gets the identity of comedy to a (Cf. Odyssey’s boar-scar on its aristo thigh under Nurse’s nose, for Epic, and Euripidean Electra’s scarry eyebrow from Orestes’ trip on a twee fawn-chase ‘in Father’s palace,’ for Tragico-Romance). How true: Comedy is the infantile love-bite of the parodic catachresis of Man, what your left hand’s for!”

In its capacity to invite us to measure comedy against tragedy and epic, then, the monkey bite expresses Plautine poetics; it embodies Plautus’ creative project in a metaliterary way. A long-ago scene of a boy playing (ludenti) with a monkey is the crucial center of the plot Plautus stages at the ludi. When the monkey left its mark on Agorastocles, he was only doing what Plautus himself is doing, leaving his mark on Greek models. As such, this emplotted monkey business in the Poenulus has a scope and extent which are very different from the use of “monkey” as a term of abuse that Plautus inherited from the Greek tradition.

MONKEYS AND THE DREAM WORLD

In addition to connecting monkeys with the plot-generating phenomena of dissimulation and ludi, Plautus also associates them with each of the three major dream narratives in his surviving plays. In the Mercator and the Rudens, characters tell the audience of dreams they claim to have had about a monkey; in the Miles Gloriosus a dream is made up to further a distinctly monkey-ish deceptive plot. The parallel reality of the dream world is intensified and literalized by the presence of a monkey in the dreams (in the Mercator and the Rudens) or the larger context (in the Miles).

As the action gets under way in the Mercator, Demipho has dreamed that he had a she-goat, and gave it to a monkey to look after; the monkey complained that the goat ate all of his wife’s dowry, and made a (rather sycophantic?) threat to bring the she-goat to Demipho’s wife; finally a he-goat claimed the she-goat and mocked Demipho (Merc. 225–51). As in the Poenulus, the monkey business has a metaliterary aspect. The dream, recounted near the beginning of the play, is a comic spectacle (ludus) staged by the gods: as Demipho begins to narrate the dream he says, miris modis di ludos faciunt hominibus (“the gods make comedy for men in wondrous ways,” 225). As the play unfolds it becomes clear that the dream is a compressed and debased version of the comic plot. Initially, Demipho realizes the dream refers to the fact that he has fallen in love with a slave his son has bought on a business trip (253–54, 268). Father and son each pretend to have a friend who is eager to buy her (425–28). Then Demipho actually recruits his friend Lysimachus to purchase the girl on the pretense that she is for Lysimachus.  

34. Henderson 1999: 34.
35. The dream of Aesculapius briefly narrated by the ailing Cappadox in the Curculio (260–63) seems mainly designed to give a bit of local color to the play’s setting in Epidaurus.
himself (466–67). The lovely she-goat (formosam capram, 229) whose presence could upset his household in the dream (230, 244) is parallel to the lovely slave girl (forma eximia mulierem, 260) with whom Demipho is in love. The decision in the dream to give the she-goat into the custody of an ape (in custodelam simiae, 233) is parallel to Demipho’s subsequent decision to use Lysimachus as a stand-in to conceal his own interest in the girl. The ape’s complaint that the she-goat has eaten his ape-wife’s dowry seems odd to Demipho in the dream (240–41), but it is matched by the anger of Lysimachus’ wife when she discovers the girl in his house: em quoi decem talenta dotis detuli, / haec ut viderem, ut ferrem has contumeliais, “Oh, see what kind of man I brought a dowry of ten talents to, that I should see such things, that I should suffer such insults!” (703–704; compare Men. 803–806 for the idea that a wife’s only legitimate complaint against a mistress would be that the husband was giving his wife’s property to the mistress). The notion that the she-goat was in the custodela of the ape is borne out when Lysimachus tells his wife that the girl has been put in his trust like a piece of disputed property (sequestro mihi datist, 738). The arrival in the dream of a he-goat (hircus) who claims to have stolen away the she-goat from the ape and begins to mock (inridere, 250) Demipho corresponds to the final scene in the play, in which Eutychus, friend and ally of Demipho’s son Charinus and son of Lysimachus, arrives with word that he has secured the girl for Charinus and makes fun of the old man (962–1026, esp. 966). Implicit throughout the dream, if suppressed in Demipho’s narrative, is the identity of Demipho himself as an old goat, senex hircosus, just what Lysimachus calls him at 575. Even Demipho gives the game away though, when, just after finishing his dream narrative, he overhears Lysimachus direct a slave to castrate a troublesome he-goat on his farm and hopes it is not a bad omen for him: nec omen illuc mihi nec auspiciurn placet. / quasi hircum metuo ne uxor me castret mea, “I don’t fancy that omen or augury. I’m afraid my wife might geld me like the goat” (274–75). The weirdly intense picture of the ape arguing with the goatish Demipho in his dream filters through the rest of the play, providing the only characteristically Plautine comic buffoonery in what is otherwise a very straightforward and unspectacular plot.

In the Rudens too a dream of a monkey serves as a miniature and distorted version of the action of the play, just as a monkey can be viewed as a miniature and distorted version of a person. Plautus signals the resemblance between a monkey dream and the poet’s creation of the play with the same line as in the Mercator: miris modis di ludos faciunt hominibus (Rudens 593 = Merc. 225 ). The action of the Rudens turns on the recognition of a shipwrecked girl as the citizen daughter of Daemones, an Athenian residing at Cyrene. Daemones’ dream foretells his encounter with the two shipwrecked girls Palaestra and Ampelisca who have been separated from their pimp Labrax. In Daemones’ dream an ape (simia) tries without success to climb to a swallows’ nest (597–600), an action which parallels the threats to Palaestra’s person and identity in Labrax’s acquisition of her (he bought her from her kidnapper) and more particularly his confiscation of the
tokens which would prove her Athenian parentage. When the ape wants a ladder to mount a second attack, Daemones defends the swallows on the grounds that they are fellow Athenians, since they are descended from the Athenians Procne and Philomela (604–605). This second attempt by the ape corresponds to Labrax’s attempt to snatch the girls away from the temple of Venus (648–49, 782–83): the attack is fended off by Daemones’ vigorous slaves. In the dream the ape in turn takes Daemones to court, in sycophantic fashion, but Daemones catches the ape and puts it in chains. In the play, Daemones has Labrax brought to court, and the court denies Labrax’s claim to Palaestra (1283) who has in the meantime been recognized, via her recovered tokens, as Daemones’ daughter and an Athenian citizen. Labrax’s identification with the ape in Daemones’ dream is finally played out in his attempt to replicate and falsify the structures of oath-taking when he swears an oath which he intends not to keep (1343–44, 1353–55) to pay Gripus a talent of silver in return for handing over his lost luggage. The connection between the dream monkey’s attack on the (Athenian) swallows and Labrax’s false legal claim to Palaestra derive from Athenian usage of “monkey” as a term of abuse directed toward sycophantic manipulation of the democratic legal system. Whether or not Plautus had a Greek model or models for the dreams in the Mercator and the Rudens, the framing of this monkey business within a dream and the metatheatrical description of this dream as a kind of play staged by the gods contributes to Plautus’ self-conscious poetics of play-making. 36 The monkey-dream world stands as a parallel universe to the world of the dramatic action, just as the comic world stands as a parallel universe to the world of the audience.

In the Miles Gloriosus, monkey business is a catalyst for the development of the plot, and a dream is a plot-making fiction. The bragging soldier Pyrgopolynices has abducted Philocomasium, a courtesan from Athens, and is keeping her as his concubine in his house at Ephesus. Her Athenian lover Pleusicles has been notified of her whereabouts and is staying next door. The adjoining wall has been pierced so that the lovers can meet, but to ensure their secrecy the slave Sceledrus, charged with keeping watch over Philocomasium, will have to be tricked. As the action begins, Sceledrus has just seen the lovers: while chasing after a pet monkey over the roof he looked down through the impluvium and could see Philocomasium and Pleusicles kissing. 37 To trick Sceledrus, the slave Palaestrio decides to pretend that he must have seen not Philocomasium but her (fictional)

36. The Rudens is based on a lost play by Diphilus, the Mercator on a lost play by Philemon. For an appreciation of Plautine elements in the dream narratives, see Fraenkel 1960: 187–95. For the view that the Rudens dream derives from Diphilus and Plautus imitates the Rudens in the Mercator, see Marx 1928 ad 597, supported by Katsouris 1978; for the view that the Mercator dream and Rudens dream are adapted from each play’s respective Greek model, see Leo 1912: 163, cf. Enk 1932 ad 7ff., Beare 1928.

37. First Periplectomenos, the owner of the neighboring house, quotes the slave as saying, “he was pursuing a cock (gallinam) or a dove (columbam) or a monkey (simiam),” 162; then he narrows
identical twin sister visiting from Athens. His language describing the plot uses the resemblance between forms of *similis* and *simia* which is a recurring feature of Plautus’ monkey business:

> et quidem ego ibo domum
> atque hominem investigando operam huic *dissimulabili te* dabo
> qui fuerit conservos qui hodie siet sectatus *simiam*.

*Miles* 259–61

And I too will go home and by finding out which fellow slave of mine it was who today pursued a monkey I will secretly help this neighbor [Periplectomenos, who wants to help the lovers outwit the soldier].

Thus the escape of a monkey, an animal of uncanny resemblance to humans, sets in motion the action of the play, and that action will revolve around the fictional, deceptive “resemblance” between Philocomasium and her invented twin. The monkey’s escape is doubled both in the movement of Philocomasium as she moves from house to house through the gap in the wall to complete the illusion of being two sisters and in her eventual escape from the soldier’s house. Indeed, the initial monkey business is a metapoetic figure for the action of the whole play, the plot for Philocomasium to escape from the soldier’s house. In a particularly nice twist, during the scene in which Philocomasium tries to convince Sceledrus that he saw her twin, she says she had a dream that her sister came from Athens, and was seen kissing, and that she, Philocomasium, was falsely accused of kissing: *id me insimulatam perperam falsum esse somniavi*, “I dreamed that this false charge was wrongly made against me” (392, cf. 365). Like the dreams reported to the audience in the *Rudens* and the *Mercator*, this invented dream, used to deceive Sceledrus, has a metatheatrical aspect: in the middle of her dream narrative, the slave Palaestrio in an aside reminds the audience that he is the author of her lines: *Palaestrionis somnium narratur*, “Palaestrio’s dream is being reported” (386). Using the word *insimulo* for false accusations here in the dream narrative, as in Palaestrio’s initial confrontation with Sceledrus (*si falso insimulas* Philocomasium, *hoc perieris*, “If you accuse Philocomasium falsely, you’ll die for it,” 297), plays subtly on the associations explicit elsewhere between monkey business and sycophantic false accusations. In Palaestrio’s version of events (one the neighbor Periplectomenos will also share, as he is in on the plot, 505–508) the slave was not so much chasing a monkey as behaving like (a sycophantic) one.

In the *Trinummus* too, as in the dream narratives of the *Mercator*, *Rudens*, and *Miles*, monkey business is part of the creation of a fictional parallel reality. In the

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37. See also James 1972: 123–124, 215–217. The word *simile* is explicitly transliterated to *similis* in the text, and the word *simia* is transliterated to *simia*.

38. So noted by Cleary 1972: 303–304.
play the youth Lesbonicus has squandered the family property and sold the family home at Athens while his father has been away on business. The buyer (Callicles) is a family friend eager to safeguard the treasure he knows is hidden in the house so that part of it can be used for the dowry of Lesbonicus’ sister. He therefore hires a comic sycophant (*sycophantam*, 815) to deliver funds to Lesbonicus and to claim that they have been sent by Lesbonicus’ father Charmides. As it happens, the returning Charmides comes upon the sycophant and is bemused to hear the sycophant say that he carries messages and money from Charmides himself. When challenged and asked where he met Charmides, the sycophant invents a distinctly “simian” lie: *pol illum reliqui ad Rhadamantem in Cercopia*, “by god I left him by Rhadamantes in Cercopia” (928). For *cercopia* the manuscripts have *cecropio* or *cecropia*; evidently an attempt was made to substitute a somewhat more familiar word (*Cecropia*, meaning “Athens,” cf. Catullus 64.79) for the unfamiliar *Cercopia*, meaning “Ape-land.”

39. See Ritschl 1884 ad 928 with *app. crit.*; Wagner 1896 ad 928; Gray 1897 ad 928.


The reference to Rhadamantes taps into Greek notions of Rhadamanths the undeceivable judge (Plato *Gorgias* 523–26), invulnerable (as at Pindar *Pythian* 2.72–75) to the ape-ish dissimulations of men like the sycophant. By lying about his connection to Charmides, the sycophant on a metaphorical level playfully reveals the truth about himself. His lie appropriates the traditional term of abuse directed at sycophancy for his own (sycophantic) plot-making purposes. As a sycophant, he is ape-ish, and he does in a way inhabit an ape-ish version of Athens: the sycophant’s fictional, invented world of lies replicates and distorts the “true” world of Athenian citizens in general and Charmides in particular. For Plautus, on a metapoetic level, because comic monkey business replicates and distorts the “real” world, its invented plots are a figure for the playwright’s own imitations and distortions of the real world: the Roman Plautus’ Athens is, like the sycophant’s lie, a Cercopian version of the real thing.

III. MONKEY BUSINESS AT ROME

Both Plautus’ *simia* puns and his association of monkeys with dreams and the plots that happen at *ludi* would seem to be original innovations, and both celebrate the power of plot-generating imitation in ways that seem quite different from the surviving Greek evidence. But how different are they from other Roman monkey business? Although Terence generally eschews character names redolent of animal imagery, he does use the monkey-ish name Simo in the *Andria* and its diminutive Simulus in the *Adelphoe*. In the *Andria*, the father Simo has learned that his son is having an affair, and that his neighbor, who had agreed to give his daughter in marriage to Simo’s son, has withdrawn his consent. To find out his son’s true feelings, Simo pretends that the wedding is still going to take place...
In a 1921 study of names in Terence, James Curtiss Austin remarks that Simo is distinctive among other old men in Terence for his “lack of dignity . . . peculiar to him, making him a comic old man, one who stoops to banter with his slaves and to try to beat them at their own tricks.” While acknowledging that Simo is a typical name for an old man in Greek, Austin also argues that Roman audiences might have perceived a connection between Simo’s deceptive plots (described with forms of *simulo* at 48, 472, 500, 588) and *simia* in Latin. Monkey-ish connotations of Simo’s name would help make his scheming look low and ridiculous. In this he is rather like Plautus’ Simo in the *Pseudolus*.

Associations between Simulus and *similis* are exploited in a different way in the *Adelphoe*. In this play, Hegio speaks to Micio to insist that Micio’s adopted son, who has impregnated the daughter of Hegio’s late friend Simulus, do the right thing and marry her. The strained circumstances in which the girl Pamphile and her mother Sostrata find themselves suggest that perhaps Simulus was not the economic equal of the confident and assured Hegio. Yet at the outset Hegio emphasizes the closeness of the connection between himself and the late Simulus: *nostrum amicum noras Simulum atque aequalem?* (“you did know Simulus, our friend and equal?” *Ad*. 465–66). The word *aequalem* can mean simply that Simulus and Hegio were similar in age, but the term also resonates within the play’s overall exploration of the importance of what is *aequum* (fair, just, and evenly distributed). A girl without a dowry who bears a child to a man unwilling to marry her looks more like a concubine than like a citizen. In effect, Hegio’s protection of the girl’s interests—what amounts to his insistence that she is as much a citizen as he and Demea are—are all that stands between her and the loss of her capacity to transmit Athenian citizenship to legitimate children. Terence uses the name Simulus to allow a pun on *similis* that will underscore Hegio’s insistence on the likeness between himself and Simulus as citizens. The name Simulus could carry connotations of disruptive or debased imitation—these are clear in the *Moretum*, to be discussed below. Here though, the name Simulus is deployed instead to emphasize parity and unity among Athenian citizens.

Elsewhere in the Roman evidence, as in the Greek evidence, it is not hard to find instances of “monkey” used as a term of abuse. But where the Athenian examples seem to cluster around issues of specific civic and legal prerogatives, these Roman examples are often found in contexts in which literary or cultural standing is at issue. Horace contemptuously describes a fellow poet by calling him a monkey (*simius*) who knows nothing but how to imitate Calvus and Catullus (Hor. *S*. 1.10.18–19). The elder Seneca (*Contr*. 9.3.12) recounts an anecdote about Cestius’ annoyance that his former pupil Argentarius would twist Cestius’ turns of phrase to plead the other side of a case: Cestius would say that Argentarius was “Cestius’ ape” (*Cesti simius*, *Contr*. 9.3.12). The younger Pliny describes how the delator M. Aquilius Regulus used the term *Stoicorum simiam* to denote

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Junius Arulenus Rusticus, whose praises of Thrasea Paetus and Helvidius Priscus, adherents of Stoic philosophy and critics of imperial rule, led to Rusticus’ being charged with treason and executed in 93 (1.5.2). Monkeys show up in Martial: he mocks Cronius as doting on a monkey that resembles him (similem cercopithecоn amat, 7.87.4); another epigram is written to accompany the gift of a hooded cloak (bardocucullus)—surely the recipient would not be flattered by being told that this was till recently worn by monkeys (14.128); yet another is to accompany a monkey itself, one that performs by dodging spears (14.202). For Juvenal, not surprisingly, monkeys are evidence of social depravity and decay: performing monkeys learn to throw spears as they ride on the back of goats (5.153–55); old men look like monkeys (10.192–95); Egyptians worship a monkey-god (15.4); Juvenal pities the ape who is sewn into a sack (along with a cock, a snake and a dog, Digest 48.9.9) with a parricide and thrown into the sea (13.154–56, cf. 8.211–14). The monkeys in Phaedrus’ fables are particularly interesting, for, as John Henderson’s readings make clear, these fables stage fierce denunciations of the authenticity of imperial authority. In 4.13 (which survives mostly in medieval prose paraphrase), a lying man and a truthful man come to the land of the apes. The lying man tells the leading ape that he is the Emperor (imperator) and is rewarded; the truthful man tells the ape he is an ape and is torn to pieces. The story asserts the centrality of pretence in autocratic imperial power; its parody unmasks the inner ape that wears every king’s purple. In a companion piece, 4.14 (likewise preserved mostly in medieval prose), the lion king asks all the animals whether his breath smells sweet or foul; whatever they answer they are killed for him to eat. When the lion puts the question to the ape, the ape deceitfully flatters him, saying the lion’s breath smells sweeter than frankincense. Embarrassed to have the ape killed after such praise, the lion pretends to be ill and asks his doctors to prescribe ape-meat, with the inevitable fatal result for the ape. Even the ape’s supreme mastery of flattery cannot save him from the lion’s jaws. Henderson’s verdict: “word for word, the most systematically damning indictment of dictatorship we are ever likely to come across.”

The issues are the same as in Greek denunciations of men as monkeys: the falseness of flattery, the inauthenticity of a claim to political power. But Phaedrus’ tale is much more radically critical than the Greek examples: rather than protect democratic institutions by calling a particular citizen a monkey, he rejects the whole premise of imperial power by calling an ape an emperor.

The imitative monkey-ish associations of the name Simulus (or Simylus) are deftly used in a parodic and ironic way by the author of the pseudo-Virgilian Moretum, a mock-epic hexameter poem on how a country dweller makes his

43. McDermott 1936: 154 cites figurines depicting monkeys wearing such cloaks.
By naming the rustic “hero” of the poem Simylus (Mor. 3), the poet metapoetically comments on the parodic status of his poem. Simylus is not just snub-nosed and (stereotypically) coarse-looking: he is to the epic heroes his poem parodies as monkey is to human—a low, but often amusing, imitation. A monkey is also part of establishing a striking contrast between low and high registers in the scene in which Lucius is turned back into a man from an ass in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* (11.8). Before the sacred procession in honor of Isis there comes the anteludia, a procession of people and animals dressed in costumes. It includes a soldier, a hunter, a man dressed as a woman, a gladiator, a magistrate, a philosopher, a birdcatcher, a fisherman, a bear in the guise of a woman, a monkey costumed as Ganymede, and an ass with wings attached, along with an old man to play Bellerophon to the ass’s Pegasus. Most of the figures seem to have some link to Lucius’ novelistic adventures; the monkey has no obvious link with previous events, perhaps, but it in itself embodies the combination of low and high elements which his adventures span.

Only these last two examples from the *Moretum* and Apuleius come at all close to displaying the kind of audacious self-identification with monkeys as plot-makers that I am suggesting is present in some of Plautus’ monkey business. In fact, the closest neighbor to Plautus’ monkeys in Latin literature’s metapoetic menagerie is the parrot, whose uncannily imitative voice was a figure for a poet’s ability to repeat and transform an earlier poet’s work. Ovid’s lament for the death of Corinna’s parrot, an imitatrix ales (Amores 2.6.1), comments self-consciously on his own literary “parroting” of Catullus’ lament for the death of Lesbia’s sparrow (Catullus 3). Statius in turn “parrots” Ovid in his lament for Melior’s parrot (Silvae 2.4). A parrot poem attributed to Petronius (Anthologia Latina 691 = fr. 45 Müller) may indicate that he too used a parrot as a symbol of his “parroting” of epic and other genres in the *Satyricon*. In each case, the poet proclaims his status as an imitator but does it with a confident flourish: I’m so good, they seem to say, that even when I insinuate that I am a mere parrot you’ll realize how inventive I really am. In much the same way, both in describing his translations as “barbarous,” and in putting monkey business on stage, Plautus achieves simultaneously self-deprecating and self-confident expressions of his own status as a skillful imitator monkeying around with Greek plays. The monkey image serves him much better than a parrot would have, for parrots imitate only the voice, while monkeys embody drama as they imitate human action.

46. On parody in the *Moretum* see Ross 1975: 254–63; as he remarks, “The Alexandrian reformation of the heroic world in turn finds its own ultimate reduction in the figure of Simylus,” 263; Kenney 1984 ad Mor. 3; Fitzgerald 1996.

47. In Ellen Finkelpearl’s attractive formulation, “Lucius wakes out of his magically stuporous Isiac vision to a real and comic celebration of the possibilities of the genre in which he has been a character,” Finkelpearl 1998: 211.

overwhelmingly negative qualities of the monkey image in Greek are not so much forgotten as cannily appropriated. The situation is similar to Plautus’ handling of the character of the clever slave: in each case, Plautus associates his own power as playwright to make things happen (or, more precisely, to make ludi take place) with a subordinate figure who can (at least temporarily) get the upper hand over his superiors.49

By now, like Scelédrus in the Miles Gloriosus, I’ve come upon some surprising things while scrambling after a monkey. For Greek and Roman writers, references to a monkey’s nature, its distorted version of human shape and action, simultaneously offer accounts of culture. The uses to which the figure of the monkey is put reveal the variety of ways that the phenomenon of imitation was understood. If my suspicions about Pithekoussai are right, in the archaic period talking about Kerkopian monkey business is a way of talking about how the newly wealthy are mere imitations of the old aristocrats. Classical Athenians use monkeys to think about what it means to be authentically Athenian: “monkey” is a term of abuse to rebuke and regulate the behavior of citizens, and monkey business is a figure for behavior which threatens democratic culture—sycophancy or other deceptions of the people. Imitation citizens are to be stripped of civic authority. When Athenians talk about monkeys, they talk about what it means to be Athenian.

I said to begin with that in talking about monkeys Plautus talks about himself, and so far I have been arguing that he talks metatheatrically about himself as a playwright: because he defines himself so overtly as an imitator—and distoriter—of Greek plays, imitative monkey business looks more like play-making and less like false citizenship to him than it does to his Athenian models. In talking about monkeys I think Plautus speaks about himself as a Roman too. Like the tales of the Signifying Monkey in African American culture, Plautus’ monkeys are also expressions of larger cultural preoccupations. In other words, Plautus was perhaps not the only one to think that monkeys are to men as Romans are to Greeks: his monkeys mischievously embody in an especially literal way the wider cultural processes of imitation and adaptation and insistence on difference which are central to the development of Roman culture.

The post-colonial studies of Homi Bhabha and Michael Taussig have each considered the role of imitation (or mimesis, or mimicry) in structuring the relations between colonizer and colonized. Are they useful for understanding Plautus’ monkeying around with Greek plays in the context of Rome’s expanding military success in Greece? Taussig’s evocative and poetic Mimesis and Alterity: A particular history of the senses (1993) considers the multifaceted role of mimesis in the cultural practices of the Central American Cuna people, mainly in the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They believe a spirit world exists which is in some sense a copy of the world of substance. They in turn imitate some European practices; in particular, men wear western clothing. What most fascinates Taussig is that they use wooden figurines fashioned in the form of Europeans and thought to contain Cuna spirits as part of their healing rituals. Seeing himself as a white man reflected in the surface of these European-looking figurines, he meditates on “the power of the copy to influence what it is a copy of” (250). These reflections serve as the catalyst of a theory of the colonial encounter as a continuing, interactive series of imitations which express difference. Denis Feeney draws on Taussig’s reflections in his account of Rome’s encounter with Greece. Like the Cuna people, the Romans continually select aspects of another culture for imitation, and their imitations express as much about difference as they do about similarity. Roman literature is like one of the Cuna figurines: in the guise of the foreigner it expresses the essence of what it means to be native.

Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (1994) turns its gaze on interactions in the space between the colonizers and the colonized: “It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (2). In his chapter “Of mimicry and man: the ambivalence of colonial discourse,” Bhabha describes the operation of colonial mimicry: colonizers try to replicate their own values in the colonized; even when the colonized do mimic these values, they nevertheless continue to assert their difference from the colonizers. He puts it this way: “If colonialism takes power in the name of history it repeatedly exercises its authority through the figures of farce. For the epic intention of the civilizing mission . . . often produces a text rich in the traditions of trompe-l’oeil, irony, mimicry, repetition. In this comic turn from the high ideals of the colonial imagination to its low mimetic literary effects mimicry emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge.” Even though the power relations—mainly between colonized, mimicking India and colonizing England—which Bhabha is describing here are the inverse of those in Plautus’ time between conquering, mimicking Rome and conquered Greece, his formulation is a surprisingly good description of Plautus’ farcical mimesis. Yet think of a different, earlier colonial context: the founding of Greek cities in Italy. Cato is angry at the idea of Greeks calling Romans not just “barbarian” but “Oscan” (Plin. *Nat.* 29.14) to mean too ignorant to speak Greek. The insult is offensive precisely because it thrusts Romans back into a past in which Greece was the sophisticated colonizer and Italians were the primitive natives. Centuries later, even as it carries forward conquests in Greece, Rome seeks the magic of colonial mimicry to exert power over this impressive other.

Ever since Livius Andronicus’ activity as a pioneering translator and teacher in the third century, Romans had been in the business of building up a literature for its elite that imitated that of the Greeks. The early stars had a mastery of Greek that in itself was a tangible legacy of Greek colonization in Italy. Livius, from Tarentum, put the *Odyssey* and Greek drama into Latin; Naevius, from Capua or thereabouts, integrated Roman history with Greek myths of Troy and the Homeric gods; Ennius, from Calabria, put the Homeric hexameter in the service of Rome’s annalistic history. For each of them, becoming a Roman writer was a process of transforming himself and his Greek sources into something Roman. Like them, Plautus got to Rome; like them he was a brilliant translator and imitator; like them, he produced imitations that express both his mastery of Greek models and his understanding of and participation in Roman culture.

Within Roman culture, the idea of imitation is itself a powerful one. When Polybius wants to use one feature of Roman culture to explain Rome’s military strength, he chooses the Roman funeral. Masks remarkably faithful to the features of the dead are worn at subsequent funerals by men dressed to resemble the ancestors. The goal is to inspire noble young men to strive to attain the glory won by their ancestors (Polyb. 6.53–54). To be truly Roman is to imitate one’s ancestors. As the Romans gain more and more domination over Greek territory and people, and bring more and more Greek culture to Rome, imitation of Greek culture is an exercise of power. Roman gods are assimilated to Greek gods and enact Greek myths in a Roman setting. Rome’s origins come to be defined as Trojan—as legendary as Greek origins, but not derivative from them. To make Rome look like Greece by seizing its artworks is to secure the spoils of conquest within the Roman world. When demand for Greek art outstrips the supply of originals, copies can be produced locally. Playwrights who parade the Greek origin of their plots are the literary equivalent of triumphing generals who parade their foreign spoils.

Yet imitation can be dangerous too. Returning soldiers brought back to Rome the corrupting luxuries of Asia: bronze couches, lavish textiles, and elaborate banquets (Livy 39.6). The Bacchic cults suppressed in 186 were viewed as a dangerous version of Greek practice. Cato maintained that importing Greek doctors was dangerous, and told his son that he would convince him “what benefit

52. See further Flower 1996: esp. 91–127.
57. For a recent discussion of triumphal practice with analysis of allusions to it in Plautus’ *Amphitruo*, see Beard 2003.
58. See Livy 39.8–19, esp. 39.16.9, on how nothing is more dangerous to traditional religion than “when sacrifice is performed not according to the ancestral (patrio) practice but according to a foreign (externo) practice.” For further discussion, with an emphasis on the political motivations of the senate in suppressing the cults, see Gruen 1990: 34–78.
there is in having a look at their literature, not in making a thorough study of it (inspicere, non perdiscere),” adding that “when that nation (gens) gives her literature [to Rome] it will destroy everything (omnia conrumpet), and all the more if it sends its doctors” (Plin. Nat. 29.14). To build a vigorous Roman literature by imitation is to express a kind of cultural fortitude in the face of the dauntingly full and powerful Greek tradition. In all media and situations, it remained important to be seen to take possession of the tradition rather than to be overwhelmed by it. Monkey business in Plautus is part of the insistence on difference which was always crucial in Roman encounters with Greek culture.

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