In 1629 a Lutheran pastor and virtuoso Baroque Neo-Latin poet named Jo(h)annes Burmeister published in Hamburg a comedy titled Aulularia, ‘The Pot of Gold.’ Ostensibly for school use, the play closely ‘inverts,’ or adapts, the Aulularia of Plautus to a biblical tale. The protagonist is an Israelite named Achan, a sacrilegus. Now, the word sacrilegus in Roman and Greek New Comedy (as hierósylos) is normally just a term of abuse whose etymology is irrelevant, like bastard or son of a bitch. In this play, however, Achan is literally a sacrilegus – a temple robber, an unholy or sacrilegious fellow: in the Book of Joshua – Burmeister’s source text – Achan steals treasure from the consecrated spoils of Jericho.¹

I have discussed the main text elsewhere;² my focus here is on two additional “intercalary” scenes that have no correspondence in Plautus’ text. My goal is to demonstrate their extraordinary verse form, for which I have found no parallel, and to show how their content warps the dramatic illusion to allude to contemporary events – firstly the Thirty Years War, secondly to witch burnings, and finally to the personal circumstances that inspired Burmeister to write the play in the first place. So let’s get straight to them.

At the end of the book, after the text of the play, we turn the page to find the following message:³

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¹ In the German argument (1.32) Burmeister translates sacrilegus as Kirchenräuber (i.e. Kirchenräuber). Since contemporary English lacks a corresponding term – ‘sacriilegist’ is archaic and opaque – I too render sacrilegus ‘church robber’ in my forthcoming edition and translation of Aulularia and the fragments of Burmeister’s Mater-Virgo (1621), to appear in 2015 in the Bibliotheca Latinitatis Novae series (Leuven University Press).


³ I have freely changed the haphazard punctuation of Burmeister’s Latin text in this paper and occasionally added guide marks to show the scansion. All translations are my own.
THE Intercalary Scenes in Burmeister’s Aulularia

LECTORI CANDIDO S[ALUTEM]

Lector candide, hae subsequentes intercalares scenae non sunt inversae plautinae. si tibi probantur, pro arbitrio legantur et notatis locis inserantur; sin minus, neglegantur. vale et have.

GREETINGS TO THE READER

Dear reader, the following intercalary scenes have not been inverted from Plautus. If you enjoy them, read them as you like and insert them in the passages indicated; if not, forget them. Farewell and hail.

The two scenes that follow together total 103 lines, and as Burmeister here tells us explicitly, they are entirely his own composition. Let’s look at the first.

1

Scene 1, a monologue, belongs after scene 1.ii (to become 1.iii, thus closing act 1) and offers little more than broad comic relief. It is spoken by the Israeliite spy or scout (speculator) named Shaphat who appears in acts II and III, and its theme and catchwords are fur (thief) and furari (steal). As it unfolds, we gradually realize that the monologue is in fact his defense speech for having stolen a horse in his past life.4 Among other points of interest, the speech features two major showpieces.

In the first, Shaphat argues that while stealing is universal (8–22), punishments for stealing are unequal: ‘If certain types of people steal – well, they get away with it. But if your average man on the street gets accused of stealing, there’s just no hiding it: he’s going to hang’ (21–44). Using a pun, he begins by explaining that the difference lies in whether the stealing gets covered up (occulta) or becomes public knowledge (oculata) (24). He then introduces a riddle before swiftly moving to explain it (24–42, pp. 53–4; emphasis added):

4 The speech is composed on a classical model, with its broad divisions clear: proem (1–3, closed with a rhyming couplet), proof (4–44, with subdivisions marked by rhyming couplets in 25–6 and 41–2), narration (45–57), and epilogue (58–4). The speech can therefore be analyzed as either a defense speech whose narration and proof are inverted (as assumed here) or a general invective against unequal justice, with a healthy component of self-apology.