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CALLIDUS AND COMEDY: A NEW ARGUMENT FOR AN OLD ETYMOLOGY

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Abstract: In the corpora of republican authors and the glosses of late antique grammarians, the lexemes *callidus* and *calliditas* are used to describe a certain variety of intelligence, which is often translated into English as “cleverness” or “cunning.” This paper looks more closely at these lexemes in order to explain how the root *call-* (“hard”) came to be associated with mental capacity and acuity. In short, I argue that the type of intelligence that *callidus* originally denoted ought to be linked to the brutal treatment of slaves and the coping mechanisms that they had to develop in light of their condition as chattel. Not only is this violent form of education depicted in Plautus’ comedies, but its implications and logic can also be found in later authors such as Cicero.

Keywords: *callidus*, slavery, Plautus, Roman comedy, intelligence.

The phrase *servus callidus* is often used to describe Roman comedy’s most distinctive character. That said, this ubiquitous collocation never occurs in comedy itself, but rather is a product of ancient criticism, first attested in Quintilian, though the phrase has tantalizing echoes in earlier authors.¹ This does not prevent the word *callidus* from having a strongly comic pedigree that is rightly associated with the sly slave.² The adjective, I will argue, is comic in origin and encapsulates a central paradox of slavery repeatedly acted out on the Plautine stage: the slave, supposedly beaten into submission, nevertheless wields his cunning to dupe his master. The adjective is found throughout the Plautine corpus where it is used to describe the clever slave’s deceitful tricks. In the *Pseudolus*, for instance, the play’s namesake looks for some help to fool his master Simo and the pimp Ballio. Here Pseudolus enumerates the ideal qualities in candidate’s *curriculum vitae*:

¹ QUINT. *Inst.* 11.3.78; cf. CIC. *Clu.* 47 for *non incallidus*. Horace refers to himself as *callidus* when speaking to the slave Davus (*S.* 2.7.100–101). Semantically analogous phrases can be found in Ovid (*servus fallax*, *Am.* 1.15.17) and Manilius (*agilisque per omnia servos*, 5.473).

² Contra McKeown 2007, 82–3; cf. Bradley 1987. Fitzgerald 2000, 41 briefly alludes to the connection between the slave and *callidus* argued for in this paper.

*malum, callidum, doctum, qui quando principium prehenderit, porro sua virtute teneat
quid se facere oporteat; atque qui hic non visitatus saepe sit.*
(Ps. 724–6)

This passage can be taken as representative of Plautus' use of the adjective.³ The wily slave and his associates are certainly clever (*doctum*), but are also—at least from the master's perspective—wicked (*malum*).

Late antique grammarians and commentators took note of *callidus* and other words derived from the same root.⁴ The grammarian Nonius Marcellus, for example, glosses the verb *calleo* thus: *callet significat scit, hoc est, calliditate, quae est urbana scientia* (Lindsay 1903, 392). Isidore of Seville also focuses on the root's association with knowledge and defines *callidus* in the following manner: *callidus, fraudulentus, quia celare novit, et male peritus*.⁵ There is a noteworthy difference between the two glosses, since each bears a distinct connotation. For Nonius, the word signifies intelligence or knowledge. Here,⁶ the word does not carry an overtly ethical connotation, though the presence of *urbana* does suggest a positive association.⁷ Isidore, on the other hand, conjures up the imagery of tricks, dissimulation and knowhow employed to a bad end—all aspects of *callidus* already attested in Plautus. While these definitions have opposed connotations, they refer to the same set of characteristics: despite a consistent denotation, the word is deeply ambivalent on a connotative level; in short, in later authors context and intended audience determine the adjective's connotation.⁸

Neither of these late glosses, however, touches on the idea of hardness,⁹ the semantic core of *call-* that other ancient authors tease out through *figurae etymologicae* of the root's derivatives. Plautus, for instance, plays with the semantic possibilities of the verb *calleo*. While it often means “to be smart,” comic jokesters can pretend to confuse this standard meaning of the verb with the meaning “to have become hard.”¹⁰ In the following exchange, we can observe the play

³ Cf. *As.* 256–7 and *Bac.* 642.4. Prostitutes and madams who know how to manipulate men can be described as *callida* (*Truc.* 414–416 and *As.* 186).

⁴ Cf. Ernout and Meillet 1951 and especially Vaan 2008 s.v. *callum* for the link with *callis*.

⁵ ISID. *Orig.* 10.41. For further passages, see Maltby 1991 s.v. *callidus*.

⁶ Nonius, however, is inconsistent; cf. his note on *PL. As.*: *versutos non solum ad malitiam callidos, verum et recte peritos intellegi posse Plautus informat* (Lindsay 1903); cf. Marinone 2004, 728.

⁷ On *urbanus* generally, see Ramage 1973; more recently, cf. Adams 2007, 126–144 and Krostenko 2001, 93–4.

⁸ Cf. Jerue 2016, 80–129 for a discussion of the word's opposed connotations found in Ciceronian oratory and rhetorical treatises.

⁹ Cf. Vaan 2008 s.v. *callum*.

¹⁰ Cf. Fontaine 2010, 55 for this type of pun more generally.

between the ideas of “being clever” and “having thick skin,” a meaning closely related to the nominal form *callum*, which can refer to an animal’s hide (*OLD* 2):

Milphio: vide sis calleas.

Collybuscus: quid opust verbis? callum aprugnum callere aequae non sinam.

(*Poen.* 578–9)¹¹

Here Collybuscus’ “misunderstanding” of his interlocutor brims with the verbal wit central to comic discourse.¹² This slave, who is in town from the country, manages to maneuver the verb’s semantics so as to demonstrate that he indeed possesses the *calliditas* needed to swindle the pimp Lycus.¹³ The pun is funny, because the response literally signifies the opposite of what Milphio had meant: being thick like a hide suggests insensitivity or dullness instead of cleverness.¹⁴ The point is that to play dumb one must actually be quite clever. This reading jibes with Isidore’s *celare novit*: Collybuscus showcases his intelligence by concealing it. Plautus puns on *calleo* and *callidus* elsewhere.¹⁵

The nexus of associations inherent in Plautus’ etymological play is later paralleled in Cicero, though without any trace of humor. In Book 3 of *De natura deorum*, Cicero provides two telling *figurae etymologicae* in order to distinguish *callidus* from *versutus*, the adjective with which it is most often collocated in Cicero’s writings:¹⁶

Et Chrysippus tibi acute dicere videbatur, homo sine dubio versutus et callidus (versutos eos appello quorum celeriter mens versatur, callidos autem quorum tamquam manus opere sic animus usu concalluit)

(*N.D.* 3.25)

Here these apparently synonymous adjectives are each connected to a different verb: the *homo versutus* has a fast turning mind (*celiter... versatur*), while the *homo callidus* has gotten his smarts through toil (*usu concalluit*). The difference seems to lie between an innate quality and an acquired one. The *mens* of the *homo versutus* is simply fast turning, as if his type of intelligence is a gift inherited from *natura*. The *homo callidus*, in contrast, acquires his intelligence through

¹¹ The same pun is also found at *Per.* 305, where Toxilus is talking to the *ancilla* Sophoclidisca. Her verbal wit shows her qualifications to take part in the plot.

¹² For the *servus callidus*’ creative misunderstandings, cf. Stewart 2012, 167.

¹³ Agorastocles’ friends confirm Collybuscus’ intelligence a few lines later: *hic homo sapienter sapit* (*Poen.* 606).

¹⁴ *OLD* s.v. *callum* 3 and *infra* on Cicero’s use of *callum* with *obduro*.

¹⁵ Compare the collocation of *callidus* and *quaestum* (*As.* 186 and *Truc.* 414–16) with *Truc.* 931–2; cf. *Poen.* 574–5.

¹⁶ They are closely collocated eleven times in Cicero.

experience. The analogy between the mind and the hand drives this point home. *Vsus* is associated with practice and experience as opposed to abstract theory.¹⁷ Cicero's definition of *callidus* shows that connecting hardened skin to a sort of cleverness remained a productive association in late republican discourse. While Cicero does not connect the hardened hand to any particular type of work, his use of *opus* perhaps provides a clue:¹⁸ when referring to the type of work that can harden a body, the word refers to manual or forced labor rather than military service.¹⁹ In Late Antiquity the connection between *callidus* and the body hardened by work continued to be productive. Commenting on Syrus' use of the adverb *callide* at *Adelphoe* 417, Donatus adds the gloss, *callidus dicitur, qui callum sibi usu artis induxerit*. As these passages from Plautus, Cicero, and Donatus all suggest, being *callidus* comes about through (at times metaphorical) difficult labor that transforms the body into a rough instrument.

These attestations allow us to reconstruct the semantic development of the root *call-* in Latin. This narrative can be strengthened with an analysis of the threats of torture that are found throughout Plautus' plays.²⁰ *Callidus* comes to mean "clever" or "learned" by first having referred to a slave whose beaten back resembles a tough animal hide (*callum*).²¹

In Latin *callum* is rarely used of humans, but is commonly used to refer to animals and food.²² Before Cicero the word appears only in Naevius and Plautus. Many of these occurrences refer to meat (*OLD* 1).²³ We have already seen Plautine jokes that playfully use *callum* and *calleo* to compare a slave's body to an animal's thick skin. One suggestive Naevian fragment likely refers to a slave's battered body and also points to the important aspect of *call-* that we have been pursuing: *utrum scapulae plus an collus calli habeat nescio* (fr. inc. 16W). Since the *scapulae* are a traditional place where a slave would have been beaten,²⁴ Naevius appears to refer to a body so battered that even the neck has been scarred.

¹⁷ At *De orat.* 1.17, for example, the noun *usus* underscores the point in the meaning of 'practice as opposed to theory' (cf. *OLD* s.v. *usus* 6). Cicero says that *doctrina* is enhanced by *usus* (i.e. real experience).

¹⁸ *OLD* s.v. *opus* 2 and 5.

¹⁹ *LIV.* 2.23 captures different attitudes towards the maimed body.

²⁰ Varro does not discuss the group of words under consideration in any enlightening way. Varro, for his part, laments that he cannot discuss all of the interesting poetic words (*L.* 7.107).

²¹ This reading works well since *-idus* in Latin is a stative suffix and hence the adjective could be glossed as 'becoming/being rough'. Cf. Olsen 2003, 256–7.

²² In later authors, the word can describe a range of things from elephant meat (*PLIN. Nat.* 8.31) to edible mushrooms (*PLIN. Nat.* 22.96).

²³ *Ex ambigui tituli fabulis*, *NAEV. fr.* 104W (listed with other cuts of meat); *PL. Ps.* 166, *Capt.* 906 and *Carbonaria* fr. 1.

²⁴ *OLD* s.v. *scapulae* 1.b and *infra*.

We can assume that it is a slave's body being described, since it would be unsuitable to describe a soldier's body in such a fashion, except to ridicule a coward.²⁵ *Callum* is an apt word to designate a slave's beaten body since it also carries associations that dehumanize the individual.²⁶ Slaves, famously conceived of as *instrumenti genus vocale* (VAR. R. 1.17), are assimilated both physically and metaphorically to other living, albeit subhuman, creatures. It is through the brutal process of domination to which slaves were subjected that they acquired knowledge of how the world works: this was quite literally a "school of hard knocks." Slaves were trained and beaten like animals.²⁷

The comic connotations of the word are all the stronger, since Plautine comedy is chock-full of threats of beatings that are meant to teach a lesson.²⁸ The connection between *call-* and beating is made explicitly at *Asinaria* 419: *qui latera conteram tua, quae occalluere plagis*.²⁹ Furthermore, the characters that we now call *servi callidi* often show off their bruised backs as if they were actually war wounds. As scholars have noted, the clever slave's cavalier attitude towards the violence he endures is potentially quite radical and matches the well-known carnivalesque quality of Plautine comedy.³⁰ Another passage from the *Asinaria* (318–9) drives the point home: *si quidem omnes coniurati cruciamenta conferant, habeo opinor familiare tergum, ne quaeram foris*. As is well known, slaves' backs were beaten to make them look cowardly, since in Antiquity a wounded back was a proverbial sign of running away during battle.³¹ By Plautus' day, the types of violence inflicted on slaves had become distinct from punishments for free citizens:³² such punishments reduced the slave to the level of an animal and wounding the back was just one good way to mark his lesser status.³³

In the *Pseudolus*, the pimp Ballio takes the cake when it comes to this sort of imagery. He is gearing up for his birthday party and insists that his slaves do their

²⁵ For Segal 1987, 268, the fragment is "rather Plautine."

²⁶ Such aspects of the master's exertion of control are well known; for a discussion of CAT. Agr., see Stewart 2012: 50–55.

²⁷ *Callum* also occurs in medical discourse to describe a sick or crippled body; cf. CELS. 5.26.31 for a grisly description of a poorly treated wound and PLIN. Nat. 32.127 for some recommended treatments. For *callum* of the body, also cf. CIC. Tusc. 2.36 and 3.54 as well as Fam. 9.2.

²⁸ This is just one aspect of Plautine comedy that Terence tends to avoid, except in markedly Plautine moments (see Karakasis 2013). As Wright 1974, 48–50 argues, foregrounding the slave's punishment is not unique to Plautus but was rather a larger part of the *fabulae palliatae*. For violence towards slaves in Plautus generally, see Segal 1987, chapter 5.

²⁹ *Latus* is a word often used of humans, but also animals (OLD 1). This example importantly shows that the word can mean 'to grow hard'.

³⁰ Cf. McCarthy 2000, 27.

³¹ Cf. SAL. Cat. 61.3 for Catiline's wounds and bravery.

³² Cf. Stewart 2012, 82–95.

³³ *Ibid.* 15.

part to make it a memorable occasion, though he does not have confidence that they will meet his expectations. He rants, worries and complains:

*Neque ego homines magis asinos numquam vidi, ita plagis costae callent;
Quod quom feris, tibi plus noceas, eo enim ingenio hi sunt flagritribae. qui haec habent
consilia, ubi data occasio est, rape, clepe, tene,
harpaga, bibe, es, fuge: hoc est
eorum officium, ut mauelis lupos apud ouis
quam hos domi linquere custodes.*
(Ps. 136–41)³⁴

Here we see the relevant nexus of imagery shifted into high gear: Ballio's slaves are not like animals, but actually worse. First, they are so much dumber than asses that there is no point to beating them anymore. This is the discourse of the oppressive master par excellence who beats and degrades his slaves in an attempt to render them submissive. This brutal treatment has made slaves' ribs hard (*costae callent*). Several lines later, Ballio explicitly connects these hardened bodies to a corresponding mental dullness,

*verum ita uos estis praediti callenti ingenio improbi,
officium vostrum ut vos malo cogatis commonerier*
(Ps. 149–150)

Here Ballio's use of the phrase *callenti ingenio*, which is figured as both the cause of and the spur to punishment, is noteworthy. It betrays the master's logic of beating (it renders one dumb like an animal). If this is the master's logic, however, comic *callidus* suggests that this reasoning is rather precarious: instead of leading to submission, punishment can have the opposite effect: instead of misbehaving openly, slaves simply rebel in safer or more ambiguous ways.³⁵ As the plot of *Pseudolus* shows, Ballio is wrong: In the world of comedy, hardened "brutes" can get the better of a brutal master.

A final Plautine passage stresses how the discourse of domination can be appropriated within comedy, highlighting the carnivalesque aspect for which Plautus is so famous.³⁶ Though physical punishment is intended to instill fear of and respect for the master, these slaves learn the art of concealment and how to manipulate the oppressive system. Here the slave Libanus brings the series of images together:

³⁴ Cf. Ps. 154 for a pun on the whip and the back. For jokes about physical abuse in Plautus, cf. Parker 1989.

³⁵ For real life examples of this phenomenon, see Scott 1985, 27–37.

³⁶ For the Bakhtinian reading of Plautus, see Segal 1987.

*Perfidiae laudes gratiasque habemus merito magnas,
 quom nostris sycophantiis, dolis astutiisque,
 scapularum confidentia, virtute ulmorum freti
 qui advorsum stimulos, lamminas, crucesque compedesque,
 nervos, catenas, carceres, numellas, pedicas, boias
 inductoresque acerrimos gnarosque nostris tergi,
 [qui saepe ante in nostras scapulas cicatrices indiderunt]
 lacuna
 eae nunc legiones, copiae exercitusque eorum
 vi pugnando periuriis nostris fugae potiti.
 id virtute huius collegai meaque comitate
 factumst. qui me vir fortior ad sufferundas plagas?
 (As. 545–557)*

Getting smart does not mean acquiescing to the master’s blows, but rather resorting to trickery. Line 552, a possible interpolation, makes the point:³⁷ the slave has often been beaten and abused, but has overcome such obstacles, which are now figured as an enemy army (*legiones, copiae exercitusque*). In this passage, which employs martial imagery, there is an ironic mismatch. With a heroic turn of phrase, Libanus boasts that he is a *vir fortis* who is not scared of the toils and tribulations inherent in military service. Several items in the list of “weapons” that he has faced, however, clearly reveal that he has not been attacked and wounded like a free citizen soldier, but rather maimed like an animal: *stimulus* is a goad to spur on animals (*OLD* 1), *lammina* a brand to mark cattle or slaves (*OLD* 1d), *numella* a stock to keep animals in place (cf. *COL.* 6.19.2), *pedica* can refer to traps for animals (*OLD* 2) and *boia* to a cattle collar.³⁸ The mismatch between the reality described by Libanus and his metaphors is striking at the very least. The real struggle, which is so often played out on the Plautine stage, is not to overcome armies, but is rather slave society’s ideological war of dehumanizing those subjected to forced labor and service.

The Plautine corpus provides a richer picture of *callidus* and its history than later grammarians and lexicographers. The fact that in later sources the adjective possesses a range of conflicting connotations reflects the ambivalent figure of the slave:³⁹ his actions are at once amusing and alarming; he is an anti-hero in the topsyturvy world of comedy and yet a possible threat to the order of things in a slave society. I have argued that the word *callidus* is markedly comic and the meaning

³⁷ Whether the line is genuine is unimportant, since the interpretation stands without it. Cf. Tarrant 2016, 88 for “collaborative interpolation.”

³⁸ Cf. Ernout and Meillet.

³⁹ This is made abundantly clear the the TLL lemma for *callidus*, which is divided in the following manner: *I in malam aut ambiguum partem... II potius in bonam partem...* For a detailed discussion, cf. Jerue 2016, 55–7 and 72–80.

“clever” arose from the comic slave’s familiarity with the whip and penchant for subversive behavior. The abusive practices of a master have made him hard like an animal and clever indeed: in Plautus the whipped slave does not learn the lesson that his master had intended, but rather he learns to disobey all the more effectively. If we return to *Pseudolus* 724–5 (*malum, callidum, doctum, qui quando principium prehenderit, porro sua uirtute teneat quid se facere oporteat; atque qui hic non uisitatus saepe sit*) we can actually see the proposed semantic development of *callidus* found in narrative form:⁴⁰ The slave misbehaves (*malum*) is beaten and made callous (*callidum*). And it is precisely through this process of “education” that he has learned his lesson (*doctum*). For a disobedient slave, being *callidus* is the necessary condition for acquiring his special type of intelligence. As Segal has put it, “[w]it seems to be the magic armor which protects the clever slave.”⁴¹ *Pseudolus* is not looking for someone who is merely clever (Cicero’s *versutus*), but more specifically for someone who has experience rebelling against the rules.⁴² This is a process of trial and error in which the amount of scars on a slave’s back corresponds to his experience and knowhow. And indeed when *Pseudolus* and his co-conspirator *Simia* are ready to trick *Ballio*, *Pseudolus* reminds us that his companion is both learned (*doctum hominem atque astutum, 907^a*) as well as accustomed to the whip (*verberream statuam, 911*). The description of *Simia* as a statue is apt: his education has been commemorated on his battered body and he is shown to be impervious to the whip that was supposed to break and tame him. Sticks and stones cannot break a statue’s bones.

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Quintilian provides a discussion of the way to discipline students and while beating was a common practice, he does not approve of it (*caedi vero discentis... minime velim, primum quia deforme atque servile est, Inst. 1.3.14*). Part of his rationale for avoiding the practice employs the same reasoning we have just discussed in relation to the rebellious slave:

Deinde quod, si cui tam est mens inliberalis ut obiurgatione non corrigatur, is etiam ad plagas ut pessima quaeque mancipa durabitur.
(*Inst. 1.3.15*)

Beating is not only ineffective, but it will actually harden the resolve of those who cannot be persuaded by verbal means. Here, perhaps without realizing it,

⁴⁰ I thank Christina Kraus for discussing this neat point with me. Strings of adjectives, however, are not always arranged in such a striking manner (cf. *Ps.* 384–6).

⁴¹ Segal 1987, 145.

⁴² This is not to say that slaves cannot be *versutus*, which in fact they are (e.g. *Ps.* 1243–4).

Quintilian succinctly provides the logic of comic *callidus*: the body hardened by blows only hardens the resolve to disobey. The master's logic of submission through beating, as Ballio had put it (*Ps.* 149–150), does not pan out. Quintilian goes on to say that the only thing you can do with such a pupil is keep a close eye on him to make sure that what needs to get done gets done (*ne opus erit quidem hac castigatio, si cui adsiduus studiorum exactor adstiterit*). This is exactly where those fooled by Plautine slaves consistently go astray.

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