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Comic Shackles

Roman Comedy, with its many references and allusions to chained slave labour, is regularly cited to document the use of chains in agricultural field labour in Republican Italy. After discussing Cato's prescriptions for the running of a rural estate, Keith Bradley, for instance, corroborates his argument about the nature of some agricultural labour by stating that "[t]he chain gang (*genus ferratile*) was known [to Plautus]".¹⁾ The phrase—*genus ferratile*—is unique to Plautus, and appears once, and once only, in the *Mostellaria*.²⁾ Yet, as the above quotation shows, it is understood to provide the frame for the interpretation of the many other passages referring to chains and chained labour as pertaining to the use of chained slave labourers in the fields of Roman slave owners. What becomes immediately clear though when looking at the relevant passages is that they all refer to work other than that on the land, including Plautus' famous *genus ferratile*. The aim of this note, then, is to show that the image of the chained slave employed by Plautus (and Terence) in a number of comedies is not identical with the image cherished by much modern scholarship of the cultivation of the vineyards, grain fields or olive groves of the Roman elite by gangs of chained slaves.³⁾

First, there are the Plautine references to *compedes* and the chaining of slaves. In the *Captivi*, Hegio tells Philocrates that he had a disobedient slave fettered and put into the stone quarries as punishment for his behaviour: *in lapicidinas compeditum condidi*.⁴⁾ In the *Menaechmi*, shackles are seen as on a par with other forms of punishment, including, for instance, whippings and work in the mill: *verbera compedes molae*.⁵⁾ The same combination is again used in the *Bacchides*, where images of shackles, whips and work in the mill are once more used to characterise the worst punishments possible: *vincla, virgae, molae: saevitudo mala fit peior*;⁶⁾ and the mill-cum-bakery features also in Grumio's retort to Tranio in the *Mostellaria*: *quod te in pistrinum scis*

¹⁾ Bradley 1998, 28.

²⁾ Pl. *Mos.* 19.

³⁾ The image of the 'chained slave' cultivating the fields of the Roman elite has been a staple of modern scholarship since the beginning of critical analysis of ancient slavery with Henri Wallon's 1879 *Histoire de l'esclavage dans l'antiquité* in three volumes: 2.101. It is going strong up to this day: see, e.g., Spranger 1961, 85; Bellen 1971, 19-23; Étienne 1974; Hopkins 1978, 118-9; Dumont 1987, 391; Backhaus 1989; Stoll 1999.

⁴⁾ Pl. *Capt.* 944; see also *Capt.* 722, 729-30 and 734.

⁵⁾ Pl. *Men.* 974.

⁶⁾ Pl. *Bac.* fr. v; see also *Bac.* 779-99.

*actutum tradier.*⁷⁾ The passage from which this last snippet comes is in fact crucial for understanding better how Plautus uses the image of the chained slave in relation to the countryside, containing, as it does, the phrase employed by Bradley to document the use of chained slaves on the land, and therefore needs to be given in full:

Tu urbanus vero scurra, deliciae populi, 15
 rus mihi tu obiectas? sane hoc, credo, Tranio,
 quod te in pistrinum scis actutum tradier.
 cis hercle paucas tempestates, Tranio,
 augebis ruri numerum, genus ferratile.

You, then, the town scoundrel, the people's pet,
 you hurl the countryside at me? All right, I know, Tranio,
 it's because you know that you'll be handed over to the mill soon.
 By god, Tranio, within a few days,
 you'll be increasing the numbers on the farm, the breed in iron.

As is well known, the farm slave Grumio here replies to the town slave Tranio's insults. And to give his retort force he paints a grim future for Tranio: before long, Tranio will find himself punished by labour in the mill, and he'll thus increase the number of slaves out on the farm whom Grumio calls the 'breed in iron'.⁸⁾ Evidently, Grumio combines work in the mill with chaining, for the slave punished to such work. This combination—of punishment, mill and chains—is of course identical with what we have already encountered in the *Menaechmi* and the *Bacchides*. But neither in the *Mostellaria*, nor in the *Menaechmi* or the *Bacchides*, does Plautus suggest that chained slave labour is employed for the cultivation of the land.⁹⁾ It is in fact crucial for Grumio's reply that the threat he conjures up for Tranio should not be the farm and agricultural labour *per se*: for if that was what he threw back in Tranio's face, he'd actually agree with Tranio's view of rural life that started off their argument. And given that Cato recommends for a decent size estate out in the countryside to be equipped with the necessary set of mills, it makes perfect sense to think that a master wishing to punish a slave by labour in the mill, might send that slave onto (one of) his rural estates.¹⁰⁾ Quarries, mills and bakeries, then, make for a more obvious context for the employment of chained slave labour in the Plautine comedies than vineyards, grain fields and olive groves; and chained

⁷⁾ Pl. *Mos.* 17.

⁸⁾ The expression is coined by Plautus himself: Collart 1970, 34 n. 19.

⁹⁾ Other references in Plautus to the chaining or binding of slaves are even further removed from the context of chained slave labour (on the land): see, e.g., *Capt.* 651-69; *Epid.* 680-730; *Men.* 79-81.

¹⁰⁾ Cato *Agr.* 10.1 and 4; 11.1.

labour in the mill or quarry—but not on the land—is then, quite logically, what Sycnerastus is going on about in the *Poenulus*.¹¹⁾

Not much more can be got from Terence's comedies.¹²⁾ Importantly, Geta's list of possible punishments in Terence's *Phormio* is precisely that, a list: it contains a range of quite different types of punishments that remain in principle unconnected by Geta, including grinding in the mill, beatings, being put in shackles, and, lastly, agricultural labour.¹³⁾ That the town slave Geta should regard farm labour as deeply unpleasant is easy to understand; and his anxiety vis-à-vis such labour is obviously the counterpart to the Plautine dichotomy between town and countryside so beautifully brought to the fore in the above discussed quarrel between Tranio and Grumio. But Geta's concern is not evidence for the employment of chained labour on the land. Both Plautus and Terence, then, do *not* employ the image of the chained slave for work on the land of Roman slave owners.

Whatever the relationship between Roman comedy and the historical past, this conclusion is of course in keeping with the results long gained by Fergus Millar in his study of men, free or slave, who have been sentenced to hard labour by the state: for as Millar states, “[i]t is perhaps the most significant feature of the use of convict labour under the Empire that it seems never to have been employed on the most important work of all, that on the land [...]”.¹⁴⁾ Privately exploited slaves, evidently, are not identical with convicts; but perhaps the reluctance demonstrated by the state to use men in chains in agriculture proper was more widespread in the Roman world than hitherto thought—and shared by Roman slave owners. I argue elsewhere that the prose passages typically unearthed to document the employment of chained slaves in the fields of the Roman elite have, in fact, a quite different meaning; and that, therefore, the time has come to abandon the image of the chained field slave in Roman Italy *tout court*.¹⁵⁾ Here, I have simply tried to show that Roman comedy is not a suitable digging ground for the chained slave in Roman agriculture either.

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¹¹⁾ Pl. *Poen.* 827.

¹²⁾ For a summary account of slave punishment, including chained labour, in Roman comedy, see Spranger 1961, 636-9.

¹³⁾ Ter. *Ph.* 249-50: *molendum esse in pistrino, vapulandum, habendae compedes, opus ruri faciundum*. See also Ter. *An.* 199-200 and 600.

¹⁴⁾ Millar 1984, 142.

¹⁵⁾ Roth 2011; Roth 2005.

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