

A Cute Illness in Epidaurus: *Morbus hepaticus* and other sick jokes in Plautus' *Curculio*

In *Curculio* 216-50 a pimp named Cappadox is in great pain. His stomach is distended, his eyes pale, and his spleen so enlarged he's afraid he will split in two. He has failed in his attempt to heal these ailments by ritual *incubatio* in the great Asclepieion of Epidaurus.

As the pimp moans and groans, the slave Palinurus approaches and asks what is wrong. The question leads to the following exchange (*Curculio* 236-240):

Cappadox: lien enecat, renes dolent,
pulmones distrahuntur, cruciatur iecur,
radices cordis pereunt, hiraes omnes dolent.

Palinurus: tum te igitur **morbus** agitat **hepaticus**.

Cappadox: facile est miserum inridere.

Cappadox: My spleen is killing me, my kidneys hurt, my lungs are being torn apart, my liver is in agony, the deepest part of my heart is dying, all my intestines ache.

Palinurus: Then you must suffer from **a liver disease**.

Cappadox: It's easy to mock a poor wretch. (tr. De Melo 2011)

Opinion splits over whether Palinurus is offering a real diagnosis of liver disease, as in the translation above, or whether he is making a joke. A minority favors the first interpretation (e.g. De Melo 2011, Mazzini 1988), but for two reasons most others believe it is a joke. First is Cappadox's reply, and second is the fact that *hepaticus* is a *hapax legomenon*; the regular term for liver disease in Greek and Latin medical writers was always ἥπατικός (*hepaticus*).

Since Thierfelder 1955, those who see a joke have adopted—albeit hesitantly—his

suggestion to derive *hepatarius* not from ἥπαρ (genitive ἥπατος) “liver” but from ἡπάτιον, “pâté.” On this view, the slave is scurrilously suggesting the pimp has a tummy ache from eating too much pâté.

This paper offers a new interpretation. It agrees that *hepatarius* is a nonce-coinage devised to make a joke, but argues that the word (1) should be divided not *hepati-arius* but *hepat-iarius* and (2) should be derived not from ἥπαρ “liver” but from ἥπατος, the hepatus fish.

On this view, the slave is scurrilously suggesting that the pimp is turning into a fish, a fish that was popularly believed to have some very weird properties.

According to Aristotle (*Historia Animalium* 508b19), nearly all fish have pyloric ceca, or digestive innards, near their stomach. But by a bizarre exception, the hepatus has few or none at all. That absence of ceca made it a mystery how the fish could produce χολή, the gall or bile that in humoral medicine was essential for life. The mystery was proverbial enough that it became the basis of a joke on the two meanings of χολή. In a fragment of Eubulus’s *Spartans or Leda*, a character blusters, “Did you think that I had no guts (χολή), like you were talking to some hepatus?” (fr. 61 KA; tr. Rusten 2011, though replacing “gall” with “guts”).

Just so, in *Curculio* Palinurus’s diagnosis jests that the pimp’s internal organs—the “guts” that produce his body’s bile—are rotting away, disappearing, and hence he’ll soon weaken and die.

This interpretation suits several other pimp-as-fish jokes in Plautine comedy (Gratwick 1990, Fontaine 2010). It also suits the immediate medical context of the Asclepieion in Epidaurus. Furthermore, it explains or brings to light three further medical jokes made at the pimp’s expense, viz.:

- In 240-2, Palinurus cryptically suggests a remedy based on *salsatura* (salting, pickling; salted

fish). The new interpretation suits a man figured as a fish better than the man figured only as patient.

- In 242-3, Palinurus oddly refers to the pimp “being sold.” Since in New and Roman Comedy pimps are not slaves, this jest also better suits a fish than a man or patient.

- In 519, some editors would delete *hoc*, a neuter pronoun Curculio uses deictically for his eye patch. Since the regular word for a patch in Greek and Latin is σπληνίον (*splenium*), a “little spleen,” we can now recognize an ironic allusion to the pimp’s splenetic condition.

The paper concludes with a brief commentary and assessment by a hepatologist practicing at a major research hospital.

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