Chapter 13: Early Roman Theatre

The Phases of Roman Theatre and Drama

• **Native Italian drama** (pre-240 BCE)
  – Fescennine verses, *phlyaces*, Atellan farce

• **Literary Drama** (240-100 BCE)
  – Plautus and Terence, Republican tragedians

• **Popular Entertainment** (100 BCE-476 CE)
  – circuses, spectacles, mime (Seneca)
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The Evidence for Roman Theatre and Drama

• there is a major discrepancy between the textual and material evidence
  – the majority of Roman drama comes from the late Republic (late 200’s/early 100’s BCE)
  • Seneca’s tragedies are later but it is questionable whether they were designed for performance
  – all existing Roman theatres—and depictions of them!—date to after the 100’s BCE
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The Evidence for Roman Theatre and Drama

- there is a major discrepancy between the textual and material evidence
  - moreover, the shows presented in Roman theatres were aimed at the lower classes
    - those interested in sports, circuses, mimes
  - conversely, all existing dramas—even those of Plautus—were aimed at the higher social strata of Roman society
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The Evidence for Roman Theatre and Drama

• it comes down to a difference between “readers” and “viewers”
  – that is, a literate nobility as opposed to an uncultured mob
  – cf. Greece where the aristocrats and Intelligentsia ruled the stage

• thus, Roman literary drama rose and fell quickly
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Native Italian Drama

• the earliest attested forms of Roman entertainment come from the Etruscans, e.g. gladiatorial combat
  – Etruscan *ister* > Latin *histrio* (cf. histrionics)
  – Etruscan *phersu* > Latin *persona* (cf. person, personality)

• n.b. the Etruscans dominated the early Romans (600’s/500’s BCE)
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Native Italian Drama

cf. scenes of merriment on Etruscan tombs
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Native Italian Drama

- **Fescennine verses** (from Fescennium)
  - crude clowns improvising alternating verses
  - cf. early Greek *komos*—is this a “history” concocted in the absence of real data?
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Native Italian Drama

• *hilarotragodia* (or *phlyaces/phlyax plays*)
  – no scripts preserved
  – and only one author’s name and play titles are cited: *Rhinthon of Syracuse*
    • but he lived in southern Italy and wrote in Greek, so how “Roman” can he have been?
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Native Italian Drama

cf. vases from southern Italy
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Native Italian Drama

• phlyax plays or Aristophanes exported?
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Atellan Farce

• also at this time, **Atellan farce**
  – from the Oscan city of **Atella**
• **focus**: Atella’s crazy ways
• repeating cast of characters
  – very broadly drawn, e.g.
  • **Maccus** the clown
  • **Bucco** the braggart
  • **Dosseus** the glutton
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Atellan Farce

• also Pappus, the foolish old man
  – cf. Pantalone in commedia dell’arte
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Atellan Farce

• cf. scenarios as well, e.g. balcony scenes
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Atellan Farce

• how could Atellanae have been preserved from antiquity until the early modern age?
  – very popular in early Rome
    • only eclipsed during the height of fabulae palliatae (“Greek-attired [literary] drama”)
  – revived in the first century BCE by Novius and Pomponius
    • literary Atellan farce?
  – again during the reign of Hadrian (2nd c. CE)
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Native Italian Drama

• after *Atellanae*, “Literary Drama” arose

• we’ll study this in greater depth in the next chapter when we examine Plautus and Terence
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Roman Theatre

- no permanent (stone/concrete) theatre in the city of Rome until 55 BCE
  - the Theatre of Pompey
- before that, all theatres were “temporary”
  - i.e. made of wood, but not necessarily cheap!
  - these are now impossible to reconstruct
- all the same, theatres existed throughout the rest of the Roman world
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Roman Theatre

• all extant theatres date to the first century BCE and later
• when the Romans began to use concrete
• thus, they could be situated downtown
• **major question**: how representative are the extant structures of Roman theatre design in general?
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Roman Theatre
Chapter 13: Early Roman Theatre

Roman Theatre
Chapter 13: Early Roman Theatre

Roman Theatre

- Cavea
- Orchestra
- Scaena
- Versurae
- Scaenae Frons
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Roman Theatre: Scaenae Frons
Chapter 13: Early Roman Theatre

Roman Theatre: Scaenae Frons
Chapter 13: Early Roman Theatre

Roman Theatre: Versurae
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Roman Theatre

- do the plays which have been preserved tell us anything about the theatres in which they were performed?
  - and do the data which the plays provide accord with the structures which survive?
- e.g., was there an altar on stage?
  - no altars in surviving Roman theatres!
  - but cf. the end of Plautus’ *Mostellaria*
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Roman Theatre

• in general, Roman theatre reflects the age in which it lived, i.e. Hellenistic tastes
  – focus on spectacle
  – cf. late Republican scaenae which rotated or were made of marble/glass/gilded wood

• also, Roman plays were produced at a number of festivals, even funerals
  – and huge budgets — but for sets, not drama!
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Roman Theatre

• acting was also Hellenistic
  – with emphasis on pathos
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Roman Theatre

• actors were often slaves
  – belonged to a *grex* (“flock”)
  – led/owned by a *dominus* (“master”)

• no three-actor rule!

• thus, were masks used?
  – Yes! masks allowed some role-sharing,
    though nothing as regimented as in Greece