

# Chapter 16: Late Classical Theatre

## Late Roman Theatre

- virtually no evidence for drama/theatre
  - all but no dramatic texts from Rome after Seneca
  - and “popular entertainment” tends to leave behind few very traces in the historical record
- principal high-brow form: **pantomime**
  - introduced to the Romans by **Pylades** and **Bathyllus** (22 BCE)

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- nature of pantomime
  - no words spoken by the soloists
    - though a chorus sings and explains the story
  - a vehicle for dance and gesture
  - pantomime dancers wore masks with no opening for the mouth
- part of the multi-culturalism prevalent in imperial Rome

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- but sports were far more popular, e.g.
  - ***venationes***: wild animal hunts
    - horrific environmental devastation!
  - ***naumachiae***: artificial sea battles
    - introduced by Julius Caesar in 45 BCE
- also mime continued to be popular
  - women provided sexual content
- executions were popular, too

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- one perplexing piece of evidence about late Roman theatre has emerged:

the “Charition” vaudeville

A Greek Man	Woman B	King
Charition	Woman C	Barbarian A
Clown	Woman D	Barbarian B
Woman A	Charition’s Brother	Ship Captain
	<b>CHORUS</b>	

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## **The End of Classical Drama**

- popular entertainment ended only with the collapse of classical civilization
  - the shift to Christian ethics undermined it
- in the East, however, it continued:  
**Byzantine theatre**
  - mostly sporting events, mimes, etc.

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## Classical Drama After Antiquity

- very few texts
  - e.g. *Christus Patiens* (*Christos Paschon*): a patchwork of lines from Euripides recast so as to tell the story of Christ's crucifixion
- in **Islam**, no drama at all!
  - taking the second commandment literally, **Muhammad** forbade all “realistic” art
- in China/India, a different sort of drama

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## Conclusion

- the rediscovery of drama/theatre in the Renaissance
  - classical drama provided the model on which drama/theatre was *rebuilt*
- modern theatre has also “recapitulated” the evolution of classical drama
  - e.g. re-invention of “quiet” Menandrian comedy

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- that begs the question of whether or not Shakespeare will survive the next “dark age” even as well as Sophocles
  - how will he get through the coming change of culture which will denounce him as old-fashioned or profane or prudish or immoral?
  - and what about when his English is no longer understood?

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## **Conclusion**

- is a world without theatre, without Shakespeare or Plautus or Euripides worth living in?