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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Late Roman Theatre

• 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
Late Roman Theatre

• 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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Late Roman Theatre

- 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
CHORUS
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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” Menandrean comedy
Conclusion

• 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?