

Stage Acting and the Actor in Ancient Rome

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Abstract

The Roman theatre provided a space especially imbued with an aura of performance, power and divine presence. It was in the theatre that the earliest works of Latin literature that survived were performed. The citizens flocked to the arena or theatre by rank, representing the city's political and social reality. To appear on stage and exhibit oneself to the people was never regarded as disrespectful among the Greeks, as it was thought a matter of honour to be proclaimed conqueror in Olympia and also to be sent on important political missions. With the Romans, however, all those acts were regarded as either disgraceful or as base and inconsistent with respectability because public entertainment in the Roman world had its origins in religious observance, and it developed into a crucial and, decisive factor in political manipulation. This essay attempts to put in perspective the attitudes and prejudices of the elite Roman community toward the acting profession and its practitioners during the late republic and early empire. The evidence for this comes from iconography, legal and literary texts.

Introduction

The earliest Roman society was built after the Etruscan model of the division between an all-powerful aristocracy and a large lower order of slaves and artisans. Subsequently, the Romans gradually evolved a further distinct category, the plebs, in addition to the Etruscan division of masters on the one hand, and clients, servants, and slaves, on the other. The early patrician aristocracy took great pains in retaining the strict lines of distinction between the social groups and to avoid further erosion of their separate identities.

Thus, the patrician order was a closed group, based upon birth. Newcomers in Rome could only join the plebs, and marriage was prohibited between the two orders. In time, by way of extending and consolidating their status as an independent order, and to avoid remaining essentially a peasant sub-stratum, the plebs began to involve themselves in urban commerce and crafts. As a result of the social divisions marked by the so-called struggle of the orders, the upper class in Rome developed an attitude that regarded the fine arts as frivolous, foreign, and unsuited to the practice of a serious public figure. The fine arts, practised by foreigners and inferiors, could serve for adornment, occasional entertainment, or public ritual. Such an attitude inevitably conditioned the practice and reception of theatre in Rome (Beacham, 1995:15).

Religion and the Theatre at Rome

Italian theatre, developed first in the south of the peninsula, later spreading to Rome itself. Acting was seen as the inversion of fighting, and actors accomplished nothing. The theatre was an empty show of action without real consequences. Actors were regarded as dissemblers, people who pretended to be what they were not. They were praised precisely for their ability to deceive and this was essentially not a Roman ideal (Edwards, 1993:102). They were banned from standing for election to magistracies and they were denied many of the privileges of ordinary citizens. Yet actors still had an opportunity to command the attention of the Roman people with the words they spoke, an opportunity otherwise denied to all but the governing class. Some scholars have argued that the low status of actors and the ambivalent, or even hostile, attitudes to the theatre expressed by many of the literary elite are to be explained by the low quality of Roman theatre. Theatre in Rome was overblown, grotesque and derivative. The depravity of the Roman theatre is illuminated in terms of the bizarre tastes of the Romans (Edwards, 1993).

The theatre occupied a problematic space in Roman life. Acting was incompatible with *honestas*, honour, and *dignitas*,

'social standing', the qualities which were supposed to mark out those of senatorial and equestrian status above all. Moralists characterised the theatre as a storehouse of obscenity, a place where lust, laughter, and political subversion were incited in almost equal measures. Actors were viewed as base persons, of ambiguous and venal sexuality, whose words could not be trusted. Roman law reflected and reinforced the attitudes of moralists, for actors were subject to numerous legal disabilities, and they were legally and socially marginalised. Many of those who performed in the theatre were metics of servile rank (Edwards, 1993:98).

The Roman theatre was closely associated with the rites of the Roman state religion. Ironically, the Christian authors condemned the pagan theatre excessively and regarded the Roman stage as a striking symptom of pagan degeneracy. The theatrical games began with a sacrifice in the temple of the relevant deity which led to the theatre from the temple bearing the statues of the gods on special chairs to witness the games in their honour from prominent positions in the auditorium. Writers, such as Tertullian and Augustine, had their own reasons for emphasising the link between Roman drama and the worship of pagan gods. According to Livy's account, drama first came to Rome in 364BC. Rome was afflicted with a terrible plague and theatrical games were the last resort of citizens desperate to placate the gods. Therefore, Rome resorted to the encouragement of drama as a communal pastime (Edwards, 1993).

Among the ancient Romans, religion provided the ideological basis for society as determined by the elite; it exercised direct and decisive control over its expressions and development. The Roman people generally were both the objects of this control and willing participants in its functions, but the organisation of religion at Rome was directed solely by the aristocracy, who appointed the state priests, and took on the task of determining divine will and laying down the measures necessary to fulfil it. Dramatic art by virtue of its role as a function of religion, acquired an aura of sacred magic, which heightened its significance for the audience. The religious element became a part of the spectators'

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experience of the performance. This sense of occasion was enhanced too by the play's actual content, which was frequently based on the same myths that informed religious belief (Beacham, 1995).

The theatre played a very significant part in ancient life, probably more important than it does in contemporary society. The remains of Roman theatres are the impressive evidence that attest to the glorious era of theatre in ancient life. However, the association of the theatre with foreign influence, malicious idleness, and depravity was not unusual in Roman antiquity. In fact, many ancient writers made us realise that the Romans had always had anxieties about the theatre because it was not indigenous to Rome as it was a foreign culture imbibed from the Greeks. Consequently, dramatic performances in Rome became a central part of major religious festivals. The performances were paid for largely from the State treasury, and the rest was made up by individual magistrates and, later, by the emperor. In spite of this, the theatre had become a central Roman institution and yet it was still regarded by many of Rome's upper class citizens with trepidation (Edwards, 1993).

The Romans considered the principles of *fama* and *infamia* as very essential social tools for the parameter of good behaviour. *Infamia* was the formal recognition of the loss of good reputation, *fama*. Initially, acting was acceptable profession among the Romans, but in later years, it came to be regarded as a mean and contemptible profession in Rome, even though individual actors were sometimes acclaimed. Modern scholars generally agree that there were prejudices against the profession but were uncertain if it had already taken root by the time of Plautus (McC. Brown, 2002:225). There is evidence from later periods that Roman citizens who acted, and those who served as gladiators, incurred *infamia*, thereby forfeiting many of the privileges of citizenship because their work was comfortably associated with low forms of sexual behaviour. As a result of their involvement in the provision of unrefined pleasures, they were subjected to public gaze, which required them to put their bodies, like those of slaves, at the service

of others. The uneasy relationship between the most conspicuously degraded members of the citizenry—persons notorious for their sexual availability and those who were supposed to be Rome's most honourable citizens—further elucidates the vital connection between Roman constructions of public honour and sexual pleasure (Skinner, 1997:16).

For more than a century after Roman drama had begun with Livius Andronicus, playwrights were the central figures of Roman theatre life. Actors were subordinate. However, the situation changed at the end of the second century when Roman poets churned out unbelievably large quantities of dramatic literature. Fittingly, actors inevitably became more important than their literature (Lebek, 1996:36). A musical element was present in all Greek and Roman drama. As for the Greeks, they found the origin of their drama in the dance. For them, drama included every kind of significant rhythmical movement. The feeling for rhythm lies deep in human nature and graceful, lithe movement gave pleasure both to the performer and to the onlooker, especially if accompanied by music and song. The theatre would receive a tumultuous crowd of every age and rank of both sexes for a free evening of theatrical delight displaying wild excitement, ululation, ribald jokes, and jostling for seats (Beare, 1968).

The theatre played a central part in the religious rituals of the city; it was also an important arena for the display of power and wealth. During the republic, Roman magistrates were expected to provide dramatic performances and the temporary theatres in which they took place. Dramatic performances were also given as part of the funeral games commemorating the death of a notable, to celebrate a triumph and at the dedication of temples. Under the principate, an emperor's birthday might be celebrated with the performance of plays, as might his safe return from abroad. Roman dramatic festivals lasted several days. Enjoyment of the theatre could function as something which distinguished Romans from barbarians. Popular opinion could be forcefully expressed at the games. The crowd might applaud or hiss not only in response to the show but also to mark the arrival of particular individuals in the

audience. Suetonius records numerous incidents where a theatre audience expressed open disapproval of an emperor. Roman audiences, when they went to see a play, might have valued staging and music more than the words, but the words were important, too. The text of a drama could be given a contemporary political meaning (Edwards, 1993). In particular, members of the Roman elite seemed to have been uneasy about the laughter aroused in the theatre. Juvenal was horrified by the appearance of a Roman noble in a farce, where his antics would be a source of amusement to the common people. The elite marked themselves off by their manners as well as their cultural preferences (Edwards, 1993: 121).

Political Theatre in Ancient Rome

The anxieties displayed by the Roman elite about the theatre were related to the specific socio-political role of the theatre in Rome. Frequent attempts were made to suppress theatrical players. The theatre was a place where power and hierarchy were displayed; it was in the theatre that they could also most easily be subverted. The theatre was often the means for mediating tensions between rulers and ruled in Roman society, but it was also a place where these tensions were at their most obvious. For the Roman elite, the theatre was both alluring and threatening. It was a place where the wealthy and influential could display their riches and power. However, it was also a place with a known potency for challenging political authority. The highly charged nature of social interaction in the theatre had implications for the way people perceived the position of actors, who were regarded at once as among the lowliest members of Roman society and as celebrities (Edwards, 1993: 99).

Acting was associated with political challenge and using the stage for political demonstration was quite common. Actors felt free to make their material pertinent to contemporary issues. The more compelling the actor, the more effectively he could awaken emotions that lay below the surface and outside of the control of the rational consciousness (Easterling, 2002: 339). Performers in

general, but actors in particular, were alleged to have become the friends of emperors. The suspicion with which actors were regarded was perhaps also due to their public voice—an opportunity to command the attention of the Roman people, otherwise denied to all but the political elite. But actors were explicitly in the business of trickery and illusion. While all those who sold their bodies for entertainment thereby undermined the trust one might place in their words, the speech of actors was paradigmatically false (Edwards, 1993:79).

The actor aspires to all the trimmings of the role he is playing although the actor is not pretending to be anything but an actor, he is laying claim to a status to which his profession permits him (Duncan, 2006). It was in the highly stratified society of Republican Rome that the flatterer was felt to be a distinct social threat. Flattery was also employed by some citizens to gain social mobility. Scholars have argued that the evidence from Old Comedy pointed to a widespread anxiety in fifth-century Athens that some aspiring politicians were using flattery, as a means of upward social mobility and political advancement. The connection between acting, flattery, dissembling, servility and gluttony was already in the consciousness of the audience by the late fourth century (Duncan, 2006: 102).

The parallels between the speech of an actor and the speech of a magistrate were potentially compromising for the latter. The *levitas* of the player often bore an uncomfortable resemblance to the *gravitas* of the senator. Seneca suggested that there was little difference between those who held power in real life and those who played the part of rulers on stage. Actors could become persons of any status. They could transcend all the conventions of dress by which members of Roman society were categorised. Roman orators considered with some uneasiness the similarities between their own profession and that of the actor as actors admired their skills and emulated them (Edwards, 1993: 118). Actors could make new meanings for the words they spoke. They had no place in the social and political hierarchy, no *dignitas*. They had no status to lose. Paradoxically, this put them in a position of

great power. They were associated with licence and characterised as dangerous and disruptive (Edwards, 1993: 127).

The spectators seating arrangements at the theatre were a vivid reflection and reaffirmation of the social hierarchy. Leading members of the elite were missed if they did not put in an appearance as their seats would be vacant. Magistrates and, later, emperors were expected to be in attendance. There was reservation of special places for the senators who sat separately from the rest of the audience in the front rows, after a tribune of the plebs, L. Roscius Otho, in 64 BC proposed the *lex Roscia theatralis* (Roscian law on the theatre) under which the first fourteen rows of seats in the theatre were reserved for senators and equestrians, despite the complaints of the *plebs*. The front seats would naturally fill up speedily. Even after the play had begun the ushers might still be seen escorting late arrivals to their places. People at the back had difficulty in hearing. Ladies were warned not to chatter; nurses must not bring squalling children to the theatre as the actors had to make themselves heard over this din (Beare, 1968: 174). The theatre was a place to parade distinctions. After his military accomplishments in the east (66-63 BC), Pompey was granted, as a special mark of honour, the right to wear the purple-bordered toga and golden crown of the triumphant general in the theatre. In appearing at the circus, arena or theatre, an emperor was parading the fact that he shared the tastes of his people, demonstrating his *civilitas*. The poorest citizens, those who could not afford a toga, sat at the back and those of low origin sitting in seats intended for their betters were presented as an obvious symptom of the malaise of the social order.

In Roman antiquity, theatre was regarded as a dangerous phenomenon as plays attracted large and volatile gatherings of people. Drama often provided the medium for public expressions of sentiments contrary to governing regime. Players were frequently travellers, not especially susceptible to local authorities (Edwards, 1993: 112). For politicians, the theatre was a means to an end, not a place for direct political debate, or the explication and exploration of ideas of immediate public concern. Magistrates and

even emperors could find themselves the objects of subtle or not so subtle mockery in the theatre. According to Tacitus, Tiberius expelled actors from Italy because of the crimes of sexual and political licence. Actors' ability to arouse laughter seemed to have been considered particularly disturbing, especially by moralising critics. Martial played on this association, making an actor boast that he could have made Cato and "the stern Curii and Fabricii" (archetypes of old-fashioned sobriety) laugh. The Atellan farce was a long-established tradition of Roman comedy. Under the Principate, the form of drama known as mime, which also appeared to have been a kind of farce, became increasingly popular, too. Juvenal's excoriation of members of the elite who appeared onstage focused particularly on the shame aroused by their comic gestures and offensive jokes (Edwards, 1993:79).

Economic Benefits of Stage Acting to the Actor in Ancient Rome

Ancient Rome was a plutocratic society. Being rich was a boon, being poor a disgrace. However, not all sorts of profit making were fit for every individual. Cicero pointed out that it was not respectable to be paid for one's services—*operae*—because that was regarded as disguised slavery. But things were different, according to Cicero, if a person was being paid for his knowledge and art, for his *artes*. If playwrights or poets received money for dramas or poems, either they received it for their art, or, under certain circumstances, the exchange of poetic product and money could be interpreted as a mutual exchange of gifts, as tokens of friendship, of *amicitia* or *officium*. Although the profession of a playwright was free from moral aspersions, there could be doubts as far as actors were concerned. For, writing for the stage was respectable; the social risk lay in acting, for the ancient Romans regarded the art of entertaining and the act of appearing on stage in general as abominable. In 45 B.C., *lex Julia municipalis* forbade professional actors to become members of a city's council. After a decade of the *de Officiis*, Cornelius Nepos remarks that "appearing

on stage and being watched by the people" was quite respectable to the Greeks but not so to the Romans (Lebek, 1996:39).

The Roman attitude toward Roman citizens acting on stage was not quite free from inherent contradictions—whoever appeared on stage for pay was infamous. But Roscius, a freeborn Roman citizen from a wealthy family, was paid for acting on stage. He only stopped receiving payment when Sulla knighted him and he turned to teaching would-be actors. Actors courted the patronage of the powerful Sicilian tyrants as early as Hieron in the fifth century, Macedonian kings, the Ptolemies, Roman generals and emperors. Winning the admiration and lavish gifts of monarchs must have been an indicator of success in the sphere of theatrical performance (Easterling, 2002: 332). In later times, at Rome, Roscius achieved a degree of fame that made him the most celebrated actor of all antiquity, while the pantomime actors, Pylades and Bathyllus, founded an overwhelmingly influential new genre which was so strongly associated with these two performers (Easterling, 2002: 334).

Aesopus was another Roman citizen who was so passionate about performing that it was recorded that he struck a slave so brutally that he killed him when he was acting the role of King Atreus (Lebek, 1996:40). Aesopus died a rich man. He left his son an inheritance of 20 million sesterces, all gained by acting. It may be useful to compare the economic situation of the greatest of Roman poets. Ancient sources have it on record that apart from having a house in Rome, Virgil was worth nearly 10 million sesterces. He accrued his immense wealth from gifts and donations that he had received from friends. Virgil had reached the highest level of economic success a Roman poet could attain. Still, his poetry paid less than Aesopus' acting; besides, the poet was more dependent on patron friends than the actor was. Aesopus was already a financial legend in antiquity. But tragic actors, who in the course of time became more and more singers of solo parts, continued to receive great rewards. When Vespasian restored the stage of the Theatre of Marcellus, he celebrated the event with theatrical presentations. There were records of the honoraria the

emperor paid: the tragic actor Apelles was awarded the highest sum, 400,000 sesterces, exactly the equestrian census, but nobody received less than 40,000 sesterces. Even slave actors could earn far more than 700,000 sesterces during their career and use this sum to buy their freedom (Lebek, 1996:42).

There were also poor tragic actors. A Greek epigram from Neronian time mocks at a representative of that profession who was forced to sell all his theatre props for five obols, the value of about five sesterces. Seneca vividly describes the poverty of tragic actors who acted on stage as proud and mighty kings. One of them was a slave who received five measures of grain and twenty sesterces. The other one only got his daily meal and slept in rags (Lebek, 1996:43). Performers—whether actors, gladiators, or charioteers—acquired followings of very ardent fans and admirers. Both men and women were often attracted to strong, good-looking, and courageous performers and idolised them as people today frequently idolise hip-hop musicians or movie stars. Despite the adulation received by a few, however, performers as a group remained very much at the bottom of the social ladder (Shelton, 1998).

Acting and Female Sexuality in Ancient Rome

Actors and actresses were regularly assumed to be prostitutes; not because many actors and actresses sold their sexual services, rather, by the way in which they made their living, exposing themselves to public view, their bodies, objects of cupidity and desire, similar to the way in which prostitutes made their living. Like prostitutes, their bodies had to please as did those of gladiators (Edwards, 1993: 74). These connections suggest an association in the Roman cultural imagination between sexuality, public life, and performance. Essentially, both prostitutes and actors were thought to be people who imitated others for a living. The stigmatisation of both groups by the upper classes as being inferior worked to constitute both prostitutes and actors as objects of desire in Roman law. Numerous early Imperial statutes ascribed to both professions the status of *infamis* which was designated in

Roman comedy by the stock character of the duplicitous, self-serving prostitute; and in Roman clothing conventions, by the customary cross-dressing of both female prostitutes and male actors. Female prostitutes wore the *toga*, and actors regularly costumed themselves as women to play female roles. In fact, some aristocratic Roman men kept actors as boyfriends. Also it was believed that because prostitutes and actors flaunted their insincerity, that was the major reason they were terribly appealing to the upper orders as objects of lust or identification (Duncan, 2006:157).

Actors and prostitutes were both *infames*; they were both versions of the Roman masculine inferior Other. Actors operated under the sign of the fictional, the impersonator and the unrealistic. Actors and prostitutes could thus be perceived as switching roles with each other: the actor could easily be a prostitute, the prostitute, an actor. The fact that the *meretrix* in Roman comedy is so often accused of lying is another sign of interrelatedness of prostitutes and actors; the genuineness of her affections is ever suspect (Duncan, 2006). The *meretrix* functions as a figure for the actor; she feigns for a living. Therefore, the *adulescens*, who oscillates between rapturous delight and desire for his beloved special girl, and bitter, disillusioned contempt for his mercenary whore, functions as a figure for the theatrical audience, oscillating between delight in theatrical pretence and suspicion of the performance and the performers that they are watching. Clearly, the very traits that were used to marginalise prostitutes and actors in terms of their social status also worked to establish them as central to the Roman cultural imagination, and that the qualities imputed to them that were used to justify viewing them as objects of suspicion also served, not coincidentally, to make them objects of desire (Duncan, 2006: 124).

The Romans consistently placed actors and prostitutes at the bottom of the ladder in terms of their legal status. During the Republican period, prostitutes could marry freeborn men, although the man would then share his wife's *infamia*; after Augustus' marriage legislation, even retired prostitutes were forbidden to

marry freeborn male citizens. As a sign of actors' low status, a law existed during the Republic that empowered magistrates to beat actors at any time, onstage or off, for any reason, although protection from corporal punishment was one of the symbols of Roman citizenship. Freedom in Rome was primarily conceived in terms of the right to protection from arbitrary use of power. This protection separated Roman citizens from noncitizens. Public performers, even if Roman citizens, were traditionally liable to corporal punishment (Edwards, 1993:73). This was, however, restricted by Augustus around 10 BC to allow beatings only at the times and places of performances. Yet the legal infamy in which actors and prostitutes lived and worked did not function entirely without being regarded as a social stigma. All of these laws suggest the paradoxical allure of social stigma and cross-class desire (Duncan, 2006: 128). Those who followed infamous professions were systematically limited in their civil rights. Legal disqualifications were justified with reference to the moral shortcomings of the persons stigmatised—the ways in which they earned their living were incompatible with being full Roman citizens. Actors, gladiators and prostitutes were treated like condemned criminals, as being utterly untrustworthy. Those who sold their bodies for the pleasure of others forfeited the protection Roman law accorded to the bodies of other citizens. What made the infamous similar to slaves was that they too served the pleasures of others, they too had no dignity, and their bodies too were manipulated and configured for the purpose of gratifying the lusts of others (Edwards, 1993:76).

As various professions developed in the late fifth and early fourth centuries BCE — for example, medicine, banking, acting, oratory, philosophy — so did the problem of people impersonating professionals. The fourth century saw the emergence of dishonest practices and, with these, came deceitful professionals and professional frauds. A good deal of anxiety arose in the fourth century over differentiating the genuine actor from the impostor, as witnessed in philosophical texts from the fourth century. The *alazon* represents the Greek world's perceptions of actors, and the

parasitus, those of the Roman world. The Fraud, or Impostor, or Braggart, and the Flatterer, or Toady, or the Parasite, have significance beyond their brief appearances onstage in which they trouble the hero: they can both be read as meta-characters, figuring the Actor. They come to stand for related negative stereotypes of the actor in society: that the actor lays claim to a position or a relationship that he does not merit, that he is, by one means or another, a social climber. Thus, the stock comic character of the *parasitus*, the impostor or fraud, provides an avenue through which both the general problem of impostors and the specific problem of the actor as a professional impostor, can be viewed. The impostor was a theatrical dissembler, a fraud who was a threat to the social, moral, and ontological order (Duncan, 2006:91).

Roman Attitudes Toward Entertainment and Public Life

Roman society was driven by social status, and thus loss of status, for any reason, meant being treated ignominiously with the loss of a number of public rights. This was *infamia*, which was originally something suffered by an individual as a result of his or her own wrongdoing, and which would be recorded in the census register of citizens. By the end of the second century BC, anyone who had fought in the arena or appeared on the stage was tainted with *infamia*, creating the paradox that is so clear in the context of gladiators: such people provided important social activities and came to be much acclaimed and celebrated by the crowd, yet were also viewed with contempt by society as a whole (Dodge, 2011:12).

Actors, gladiators, and prostitutes in ancient Rome were symbols of shame. Their apparent lack of reputation was reflected and reinforced in the law, which classified them as *infames* that is, lacking in reputation. They were regarded with profound ambivalence and associated with forms of transgressive sexual behaviour by their fellow citizens and the law (Edwards, 1997). It is surely no coincidence that all professions that incurred *infamia* were associated with transgressive sexuality. These figures were the objects of other people's desires. They served the pleasure of

others. They were tarnished by exposure to the public gaze. Persons so classified were stigmatised by the law as examples of the dishonourable; yet some members of the senatorial elite and even the imperial family were said to have voluntarily wanted to join their ranks. Individuals in occupations tainted with *infamia* were prevented from enjoying the full rights of citizenship because their work was intimately associated with low forms of sexual behaviour (Edwards, 1997: 68).

The legal status of those who followed stigmatised professions was equivalent to that of soldiers dishonourably dismissed or convicted criminals. But for convicts, this status and the legal disabilities that it entailed, were not necessarily permanent. For actors, gladiators and prostitutes, by contrast, *infamia* was an inescapable consequence of the way they earned their living. While disgraced soldiers and criminals, marked with shame, withdrew from public life, actors, gladiators, and prostitutes took on their degraded status when they embarked upon their public roles. Those who followed professions associated with public performance and prostitution were utterly devoid of honour. Actors, gladiators, and prostitutes were paraded as examples of what those who sought officially sanctioned *dignitas* should avoid at all costs (Edwards, 1997: 67).

Roman attitudes toward pleasure, as well as toward honour and public life, were displayed in the theatres, arenas, and brothels of Rome, the infamous sold their own flesh. They lived by providing sex, violence and laughter for the pleasure of the public, a licentious affront to Roman *gravitas*. But at the same time, the life of vulgarity and excess that they stood for was as authentically Roman as the consulship, triumphs, and temples to the gods (Edwards, 1997: 67). Debarred from official public life, actors, gladiators, and prostitutes were nevertheless conspicuous public figures, made more so by the stigma that attached to them. Hand in hand with official stigmatisation went the increasing allure that surrounded these professions (Edwards, 1997: 69).

The practising of a disgraceful profession was one of the many possible grounds for dismissal from the senatorial and

equestrian orders. The censors were also responsible for assigning citizens to tribes for the purpose of voting in elections. Actors were not assigned to a tribe and were thus unable to vote. Censors might ban individuals from standing for magistracies on the grounds that they were not morally worthy. Actors, gladiators and prostitutes were banned from standing for local magistracies in the legislation recorded. The pagan Romans themselves felt public performance to be disgraceful and banned performers from participating in state functions (Edwards, 1997: 72).

The edict set out lists of persons who might not represent others in legal actions before the praetor (women, the blind, and those who were *in turpitudine notabiles*, "infamous due to the shamefulness of their lives"). Persons who might represent others only under exceptional circumstances included actors and pimps, besides soldiers who had been dishonourably dismissed, bigamists, and those who had failed to obey certain rules relating to mourning (Edwards, 1997: 73).

The sexual ambiguity of male actors was unsettling. Their ability to imitate women is the point of Juvenal's ire. Actors were often represented as extremely attractive to both men and women. In fact, the dictator, Sulla, was recorded by Plutarch to have had a lengthy affair with an actor called Metrobius. So also the wives of the emperors Claudius and Domitian who also had illicit sexual relationships with actors.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to establish that the love-hate relationship that existed between the Romans and the theatre including the odium for actors was peculiarly Roman. The Romans enjoyed a variety of stage shows, but much of their theatre was improvised. The Roman idea of theatre was unlike the Greek theatre, which was much more text-based and dissimilar to the great Athenian plays of fifth-century Athens. At Rome, where direct democratic expression was far more circumscribed, drama was to provide entertainment not enlightenment; it could please and impress, but ought not to unsettle the audience by raising troublesome issues or

questioning fundamental principles as understood by those exercising social and political hegemony. Roman conceptions of the theatre were also very different from modern ones. In the modern theatre we pay gate-fees and we receive a natural inducement to our money's worth. We enter a building, and we are oblivious of the outside world for the next two hours, or so. We are ensconced in artificial lighting which fixates our eyes and our thoughts on the stage. This was quite contrary to what operated in the earlier Roman theatre.

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