

Gesine Manuwald, *Roman Republican Theatre*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2011. Pp. xii + 390. ISBN 978-0-521-11016-7 (Hb).

This impressive and substantial monograph is a work of literary history, rather than literary criticism. It gives a comprehensive account, as far as is allowed by the fragmentary evidence in all media, of all aspects of scripted Roman theatre, from its evolution close to the beginning of Roman culture (at least insofar as this phenomenon left literary and related material remains), through its heyday in the late third and second century BC, to the end of the republican era. The cut-off point means that there is no room in this book for the only Roman tragedies the scripts of which we have in their entirety, those of the Imperial politician and philosopher, Seneca, but his absence from the volume is itself a monument to its nature (Seneca is acknowledged on page 137, but does not make the index). This is a work thoroughly grounded in the performance-culture in the Roman Republic – Seneca’s texts, for all their influence on later European drama, were works of literature written under Nero, probably not for what we would recognise as dramatic performance, and therefore could not be more different from their generic cousins two centuries and more earlier.

The book is a goldmine for historians of republican culture and should be of great interest to any theatre historians with an interest in cultural embeddedness and cross-cultural comparison. Chapter 2, on the context of production (including reproduction and early reception), gives an account of all aspects of performance, including the politico-cultural opportunities for drama and the role of the civic authorities, with its necessary religious aspects, theatre buildings, as many details as may be teased out of our sources about those aspects of performance that are extraneous to the preserved script (staging, acting, costumes, masks), plus also the nature of that essential player in theatrical performance – the audience.

I think it would be fair to describe this book as largely an extraordinarily learned work of synthesis, rather than being concerned frequently to advance new arguments. It is rarely concerned to challenge the scholarly *status quaestionis* on particular matters, but rather to gather together everything under one roof. This is not to suggest, however, that the work is in any way secondary. Rather, a huge range of ancient source material has been garnered in the exploration of the questions it raises. Perhaps inevitably, given the scope, the effect of this, it seems to me, is that sometimes the rhetorical purposes of the ancient witnesses are given insufficient consideration when their words are used to suggest facts about ancient theatre. For a couple of examples among many, on page 93 there is a report of a situation “when poets could be accused of receiving literary support from noble friends”, without consideration of whether a poet such as Terence (*Haut.* 22–4, the reference given) might be using the language of accusation precisely in order to give a compliment to his friends and/or indeed to raise his own standing as someone who moves in the highest circles; or on page 112, and elsewhere, where insufficient credit is given to the rhetorical force, especially in Roman culture, of praise for “the good old days” by comparison with the present. It is important to remember that nostalgia has never been what it used to be.

A great strength of this work is its goal, successfully realised, of presenting the totality of Roman republican scripted theatre performance, precisely as part of a totality. Chapter 3 is organised according to dramatic genre. The one genre regularly read in modern universities, *fabula palliata*, or comedy wearing a little Greek cloak, being the only genre of which entire play-texts survive in the form of some of the works of Plautus and the works of Terence, is the subject of just one out of seven sections of this chapter. The other six are: serious drama in both Greek and Roman dress (which includes what we call tragedy, a term usually reserved in antiquity for the Greek variety); light drama in Roman dress (the directly Roman-themed version of the Greek-themed drama we know as “Roman comedy”); Atellan drama in its literary form (the pre-literary, improvised form of *fabula Atellana* is generally regarded as one of the forerunners of “Roman comedy”); and the more visual but still scripted forms of entertainment which developed later in the period, mime and pantomime. The picture thus presented of Roman dramatic entertainment in this period is far richer than that depicted in our conventional notions of “Roman comedy”, even broadened as it has been recently by the increasing awareness, among Romanists who are not specialists in the area, of the significance of “Roman tragedy” (i.e., *fabula crepidata*, drama wearing a Greek tragic shoe). Particular insights are the extent to which stylistic features, including the metrical and the verbal, are shared or creatively developed across forms; the confidence of (what we perceive of as) early Roman literature both in borrowing from other cultures (as is well-known, though often seen as a sign of weakness rather than confidence) and in indigenous creation (less widely acknowledged); the Romanness of Greek-themed drama (and to some extent vice versa). Noting the substantial roles of Cicero and Horace in the story of republican drama offered here, I would point out in particular one comment from the final chapter, “Overview and conclusions”: “[w]hat characterises Roman drama overall, therefore, is the mixture of two aspects: presentation of themes that concern the life of individuals or the community in Rome on the one hand and provision of enjoyable entertainment and spectacle on the other hand; in other words Horace’s ‘to offer something of use’ and ‘to provide pleasure’” (page 342, the reference being to Horace *Ars Poetica* 333–4, 343–4).

For some kinds of potential audiences of this book, its very strength might also be a weakness, in that Plautus looks little different from Pomponius. Chapter 4 gives bibliographical and professional information on 17 dramatic poets, plus a section of “‘minor’ playwrights”: while it is good for us to see Plautus and Terence just as numbers six and nine respectively in the chapter, the fragmentary nature of the other poets and the laudable desire to treat all equally does make for some slightly odd reading. For those students and teachers involved in courses based largely on the texts of Plautus and Terence, the book perhaps offers little more than background, and that indeed in too much detail. While undergraduate students (not the primary audience of this volume, even though Latin and Greek is translated) might find the work heavy-going, however, teachers should certainly use it thoroughly to readjust their notion of the context in which our surviving texts arose.

In the opinion of this reviewer, admittedly from the literary-critical end of the spectrum, the weakest chapter is chapter 5, “Dramatic themes and techniques”,

which gives an overview of a number of contemporary literary-critical questions about Roman drama, including the vexed problem of its relationship with Greek drama (here, as in much of this chapter, we are really talking mostly about the texts of Plautus and Terence), plus metatheatre, intertextuality, and dramaturgy. While these are indeed all subjects of considerable current interest, it would be difficult to make space for a really nuanced account of such matters within the book of the scope. I limit my complaint to one aspect: although Manuwald uses the contemporary terminology of “intertextuality”, her discussion looks much more like its critical older sister “allusion”, or even its disapproving parent “source-criticism”. Intertextuality should not just identify parallels, but should make a difference to reading, and it is readings of passages that this book particularly lacks.

I would not like, however, to end on a negative note. This is an extraordinarily learned work from which scholars of Roman Republican culture and of theatre history can derive a great deal of knowledge, including in some obscure byways, made obscure not by their cultural unimportance but by the accidents of survival.

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