

Module #2 - Section A

Lecture Notes 1

THE ORIGIN OF ROMAN LITERATURE AND THE EARLY ROMAN THEATER

In this section we will discuss the origins of Roman literature and understand the important role played by theater (comedies and tragedies) and playwrights in early Roman literature. We will then focus on a playwright in particular, Plautus, and one of his comedies, *Menaechmi* (in English, *The Brothers Menaechmus*.)

The Origin of Latin Literature

After learning about Rome's expansion in the previous module, we can certainly say that by the 3rd century BC Rome had undergone major changes and developments. Among these developments was the production of literary works. The first reference to literary works in ancient Rome dates to around the mid 3rd century BC. (250 BC).

- The ancient Romans believed that a **precise date for the composition of their first literary work** could be established.
The commonly accepted **DATE OF the BIRTH OF ROMAN LITERATURE was 240 BC**, the year when **Livius Andronicus (see below)** put on stage a drama he had written, presumably a tragedy. Before that date Roman literature seems to have been silent for about five centuries (750-250 BC ca). (N.B. A literary text, or a work of literature would be a poem, a novel, a play, etc.)
- **The language spoken by the Romans was Latin. Was truly Livius Andronicus's play the first literary text ever written in Latin? Was there no literary text in Latin before 240 BC?** It sounds almost incredible; however, we cannot produce evidence that we do not have. Maybe previous literary works were written but lost and just did not come down to us.
- Before 250/240 BC, the ancient Romans wrote **other types of texts** (i.e., laws such as the Twelve Tables, records of events, military treaties, official calendars, administrative papers for archives, list of elected officials, etc.), but not texts that could be defined as "literature."
- Let's see **who the first authors of Latin literature were and what kind of literary texts they produced**

The first Latin writer (i.e., the first to write a literary text in the Latin language) was

LIVIUS ANDRONICUS

- a Greek former slave from **Tarentum**, a Greek city in the south of Italy. He came to Rome as a slave at the end of the **war with king Pyrrhus** around **272 BC**. Livius Andronicus was probably among the slaves captured during that war and later freed by his master.
- He wrote **tragedies and comedies** and
- **he translated Homer's *Odyssey* from Greek into Latin** making it accessible to the Romans and contributing to the diffusion of Greek culture in Rome.

Unfortunately, only some lines of his literary works are preserved today.

If Livius Andronicus was the first Latin writer, Gneus **Naevius** was the **first Roman writer**, a writer who was of Roman nationality. He wrote some time later after the First War against Carthage (after 241 BC).

Gneus **NAEVIUS** (270?-201 BC)

- made the earliest attempt to produce a **national epic poem** (= poetic genre modeled after the Iliad and Odyssey, which celebrates the achievements of one or more heroic figure), when he wrote **The Punic War** (*Bellum Poenicum* is the Latin title). This was a long poem on the first war against Carthage (264-241 BC), which celebrated Roman victory and the achievements of the Roman nation in general. Naevius himself fought in the war and directly experienced some of the events.
- In this poem he wrote about **almost contemporary historical events** (those of the First Punic War), but he also inserted **legendary elements** to his work. In fact, we know that in his *Bellum Poenicum* he also narrated the **legend of Aeneas** and his voyages after the fall of Troy, connecting the legends of the early history of Rome with the stories of Homer's *Iliad*.

He also wrote tragedies and comedies, but only fragments of those survive.

Another author whose work has not survived except in fragments is **ENNIUS** (239-169 BC). He is considered by the Romans the **father of Latin poetry because of his great influence on later literature**. He was of Greek origin (from Southern Italy) and received Roman citizenship only in 184 BC.

He wrote **tragedies, comedies and satires** and his major work was the *Annals* (*Annales* is the Latin title), an **epic poem** (once again, like Naevius' *Bellum Poenicum*) **on the history of Rome from legendary Aeneas to the Ennius' own time**. Only 600 lines of this poem survived, quoted by other authors and what survives make us regret the loss of the rest. His model was **Homer** - at the beginning of the *Annals* he claimed to be the reincarnation of Homer.

Beside Naevius's and Ennius' epic poems (clearly influenced by Homer's Iliad and Odyssey and by Andronicus' translation), **comedies and tragedies have a prominent place** in early Latin literature. Livius Andronicus, Naevius and Ennius, all wrote plays and, as we will see soon, **the comedies written by Plautus are the earliest Roman literary works that have come down to us in their entirety (i.e., that can be read from start to finish)**.

Before focusing on the playwright Plautus, we should say a few words about Roman Theater.

The Early Roman Theater

In early Rome plays were performed during religious festivals. Public spectacles (*ludi*) were held in occasion of public religious ceremonies (or holidays – when everything in Rome stopped) and among these spectacles or other forms of entertainment were theatrical performances. This has a clear parallel in Greece, where theatrical performances were also connected to public religious festivals.

At the time of Plautus and Terence there were **five main festivals**: in April, May, July, September and November. Festivals including drama were called ***ludi scaenici*** and the best known of them were the September ones, the ***ludi Romani***.

- It is quite amazing that until 55 BC there was **no permanent theater in Rome**, but temporary **stages made of wood** were erected on the occasion of public performances during festivals. The first permanent theater **made of stone** (the Theater of Pompey) **was built in Rome** in 55 BC.

See PowerPoint presentation on Roman Theater

- Slide #1 Title slide

- Slide #2 Early Roman Theater

We know that early comic performances (Atellan plays) in Oscan language (another language spoken in Central Italy) were performed before the earliest reference to written plays (such as those of Livius Andronicus and Naevius). These together with popular improvised performances, such as the Fescennine verses, had often obscene elements.

After 240 BC the principal Roman dramatic genres were originally imported from Greece.

The Latin word *fabula* means ‘play’ (as in theatrical play).

Fabula PALLIATA is a Latin expression that describes a play (*fabula*), and more specifically a comedy written in Latin, that is an adaptation of a previous Greek comedy, where the plot is set in Greece and the characters are portrayed as Greek. Literally the expression could be translated as “comedy in Greek dress.” The Latin word *palliata* derives from the word *pallium*, which was a kind of cloak used by the Greeks. Plautus and Terence wrote *palliatae* or *palliatas*.

The only plays written in Latin that survived are comedies in “Greek dress” or *palliates*. The playwrights Plautus and Terence wrote comedies ‘in Greek dress’, set in Greece and with Greek characters.

- Slide #3 Roman theater: structure

Here is a picture of an exceptionally well-preserved Roman theater in Bosra, Syria, and a diagram of a typical Roman theater.

At the back of the stage was the **stage building**.

This had usually **three doorways** in it and the stage normally represented a street.

In fact, the **scene** was usually imagined to be outside, **in front of two or three houses upon a street**; the street was imagined to be leading towards the center of the city (the forum) and to the opposite direction towards the country or the harbor.

Seating area for the audience is called **CAVEA** in Latin.

In front of the stage was a **flat semicircular space** called **ORCHESTRA**, which was hardly ever used by actors. It was left empty or reserved for seats for distinguished visitors.

- Slides #4-5 Roman theater of Pompeii –

Photo of the restored theater of the Roman town of Pompeii – view of the stage and what is left of the stage building – the orchestra and the cavea = seating area (the colonnaded structure in the background was - used during intermissions)

- Slide #6 Reconstruction drawing of a Roman theater

Reconstruction drawing of a Roman theater

Note the **stage building** embellished by marble columns, niches, statues and the **velarium** (a retractable canopy over the seating area used to protect the spectators from sun and rain)

- **Slide #7 Roman Theater at Orange, France**

The best preserved Roman theater in Europe is at Orange in France. You can get a good idea of what a stage building looked like in ancient times, although once again the marble slabs and statues that decorated the façade are gone.

- **Slide #8 Actors and Masks**

Left of slide:

actor holding the mask of an old man

representation of two masks (maybe a woman and a slave?) from a mosaic

Center:

mosaic from house in Pompeii representing actors getting ready to perform (getting dressed, their masks on a stool or table ...)

Right of slide:

statuette of an unhappy slave

marble mask

Who were the actors in ancient Rome?

Often former slaves or slaves. Women were not allowed to perform on stage. Acting was a profession that was considered so low in Roman society, that actors were not allowed to run for public office.

Use of masks

These had fixed features which represented the stock characters of Roman comedy, such as the old man, the young man, the slave, the young girl... Old men wore masks with white hair or bald heads, young men with dark hair, slaves often had red hair and round noses, etc...

Their purpose was **to make clear immediately the type of the mask**, the characters that were on stage.

Masks, probably made of stiffed linen, had wide opened mouths to help the actor's voice carry to the back of the theater.

They could be replaced easily **to allow the actors to play more than one part**.

The disadvantage was that **they showed only one expression**. Change of expression was described in the dialogue.

- **Slide #9-10 Description of a troupe**

Passage from Amy Richlin's book *Slave Theater in the Roman Republic*, which provides a vivid picture of an actors' troupe at the time when Plautus wrote his comedies. We should keep in mind that the plays we are reading were written at a time when Rome had been fighting wars constantly for decades (against Pyrrhus, against Carthage, against the Greek cities of Southern Italy and against Greece itself). These are actors come from different parts of the Italy and other Mediterranean countries affected by these wars...