



1996

Speculations of the Death of Roman Theatre

Anne Barker '96

Illinois Wesleyan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev>

Recommended Citation

Barker '96, Anne (1996) "Speculations of the Death of Roman Theatre," *Undergraduate Review*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev/vol9/iss1/5>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Speculations on the Death of Roman Theatre

Anne Barker

Ancient Roman theatre is a continuation of the Greek theatre. Between these two periods drama had survived and flourished for well over 1,000 years. Yet by the seventh century, theatre in the Western world had ended and didn't reappear until the birth of liturgical drama in the tenth century. How could such a long-standing classical tradition die? Many scholars believe that the death of Roman theatre was a result of Christian influence.

However, the Church was not opposed to drama per se. It was opposed to the immorality at the core of Roman theatre. The true death of theatre took place over centuries of artistic decline. The Church had a large part in its legal death, but the theatre itself had already deteriorated to such a point that its collapse was inevitable.

Roman drama had never been much more than a plagiarism of Greek tragedy and comedy. Very little original drama was developed in the Roman Republic, but there had at least been some interest in literary drama. Unfortunately, as far as Roman drama on the whole is concerned, it is clear that "no one wrote for the stage except to make money" (Beare 235). Cities such as Pompeii, in which the majority of people were slaves and foreigners, showed a distinct lack of interest in the literary theatre. For this reason "something cruder developed" (Chambers 3). The aesthetic tastes of the Roman people centered on the sensual; by the first century AD, "mime and pantomime had replaced literary drama" (Vince 79). Mime was a completely separate entity from true tragic drama. Farce and pantomime came to replace comedy and tragedy in the Roman Empire.

These mimes were centered around themes of murder and adultery: the amount of indecency was incredible. In a warped sense of Realism, emperors could command a real sex act to take place on stage. Emperor Heliogabalus was one such ruler who desired real adultery in his theatre (Beare 240). In addition, the

regular street audience member claimed the right to make an actress strip and perform in the nude (Harris 14). In general, “the sordid theme and the startlingly indecent language seem to be characteristic of the mime” (Beare 239). Individual actors gained primary importance in the eyes of spectators; audience members would often take the side of their favorite actor and engage in huge fights during performances (Chambers 6-7). What was once seen as sacrilege in the Greek theatre was now commonplace and exciting.

Over the course of the years, the mimes became so disgusting that even the emperors had ethical problems with them. Some examples include Tiberius, who rejected them in part because of their lack of morality; Marcus Aurelius, who would sit dutifully in his theatre box with his eyes on a book or state papers, refusing to watch the spectacle; and Julian, who ordered that the priests of the Sun avoid the theatre (Chambers 10). The common people of Rome embraced the mimes, and the emperors had to tolerate them as part of their “bread and circus” program for social complacency. However, this did not require that they enjoy the spectacle themselves.

This deterioration in quality of theatre was seen to reflect the greater lack of morality throughout Rome by both Christian and Roman thinkers alike. “Charges of licentiousness and immortality” of the theatre were made by both Christians and non-Christians (Vince 84). Christians saw the support of theatre by the rulers and by the general population as proof of the moral collapse of the State as a pagan institution (Beacham 194). Beare comments that even Livy “regarded the theatre of his day as a danger to public morals and the existence of the state” (238). Livy, whose real name was Titus Livius, wrote *Historiae ab Urbe Condita*, a complete history of Rome from its founding until the death of Drusus in 9 BC.

Even from such an early stage of Roman theatre, conservatives saw the mimes as a threat to the morals of the the people. In his book *Germania*, Tacitus compares the immorality and corruption of the Empire with the “unsophisticated vigor of the Germanic tribes” (80). Despite the threat these barbarians presented, he considered them better than the immorality that presently ruled Rome. Both Tacitus and Juvenal complained that the princes were now starting to act in mimes. In the past only “infames” (slaves and the like) were a part of these spectacles (Chambers 9). They saw the inclusion of royalty in lists of performers as one more example of the corruption that had seeped into the upper ranks of the government.

It was into this theatrical environment that the early Christians were introduced to Roman theatre. By the time of the early Christian fathers, theatre was “devoted to sex and sensationalism” (Harris 10). For a people whose religion was based on purity and moral integrity, the Roman theatre never stood a chance. The early Christians saw the theatre as an institution based in paganism and rooted in the ideals of hedonistic immorality. It is no wonder that the Christian Church, whose only experience with theatre was the Roman mimes, condemned theatre in Rome and in general. With its attack on the Roman mime, the Church brought forth another development in the mime itself. The mime actors retaliated by mocking the Church and its most sacred institutions, the sacraments. Nicoll writes that the most popular mimes that mock Christianity included a depiction of baptism (121). The rite of baptism was a source of great amusement to Roman citizens and was frequently mocked in the new mimes.

The Church, seeing the tolerance of theatre by the emperors, took it upon itself to abolish the practice. However, they had to be very careful in their attacks against the mimes and the actors. Most of the newly converted Christians were members of the lower class,

usually slaves or freemen. This was also the class most the actors came from (Harris 15). The Church couldn't make brash comments about the actors without the possibility of offending most of their congregation. It was decreed that no Christian could be a performer. Although they probably wished they could exclude the actors from their fold altogether, it was allowed that Christians could marry actors, but only if the actor had been baptized and had forsworn acting (Chambers 12).

Church fathers made several appeals to their converts to give up the spectacles on their own. In 200 AD, Tertullian wrote *De Spectaculis* in which he used three arguments against the involvement of Christians in the theatre. He believed that the mimes represented pagan gods, that they ministered to the baser passions of man, and that they occurred in festivals honoring Dionysus (Harris 15). Tertullian also argues that, because the mimes developed from pagan practices, it is "impossible for a Christian to participate in them without being guilty of idolatry and without injury to his faith," and that attendance at these spectacles "excites violent passions and therefore undermines moral discipline" (Vince 84). He believed that Christians forswore such entertainments by renouncing the devil at Baptism. Tertullian admonished Christians to find their entertainment in the writings of the church. He states that "here are nobler poetry sweeter voices, maxims more sage, melodies more dulcet, than any comedy can boast, and withal, here is truth instead of fiction" (Chambers 11). Church practice could be just as exciting as any mime, and the audience would not have to worry about being deceived.

The Church realized that the theatre was far too popular to prohibit laymen from going to mimes. Were they to threaten excommunication for simply going to a show, they ran a sizable risk of losing all of their new flock. They began by forbidding clergy

men from entering a theatre. In addition, they prohibited laymen from going to the theatre on Sundays and other Church holidays and festivals with a threat of excommunication (Chambers 12). They continued their attacks on actors and in 309 AD, an assembly of bishops met in Spain at the Council of Elvira. Here they decided that “those who had offered spectacles would be treated as adulterers (because of the immorality of the theater) or murderers (because of the gladiators)” (Chuvin 15).

Throughout the rest of the fourth century AD, the State also began to pass laws of increasing severity in an attempt to suppress pagan practices. This was relatively easy because most actors were slaves and freemen; they had no legal rights. It was impossible for the actors to fight these laws. In 346, public worship of pagan gods was banned and, in 356, the pagan temples were closed. In 391, pagan cults were banned entirely. People were forced to convert to Christianity in 395. (Beacham 194-195) During the late fourth century, Theodosius passed several laws aimed specifically at actors.

He banned performances on Sunday and during the most sacred times of the Christian year. He also forbade actors from dressing as nuns, which suggests that the mimes had not stopped their mockery of the Church. It was also decreed that actors could not be in the company of Christian women and boys (Harris 16). These new state laws demonstrate the growing power of Christianity and they made it much easier for the Church to fight the theatre. However, despite all of these victories, the Church still had battles before them. Theodosius still tolerated the theatre. Despite all of his laws restricting theatre, he also passed some laws to protect the actors. He would not allow them to be deported simply because they were actors. He also relaxed the marriage laws, which stated that an actor could not marry outside his or her class.

The State had not yet outlawed the mimes and their popularity continued unabated.

The most apparent example of the continuing war occurred in 399 AD during Easter. This year, Easter fell in the same week as the Ludi Romani festival. Throughout the weekend of Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday, the theatres were full; and the churches were empty. During the most sacred event of the Christian religion, celebrating its very foundation, the theatre had drawn away all of the Christian converts. The theatre had won a major battle. During his sermon on that Easter, St. Chrysostom preached about the corruption of the theatre and threatened to enforce the punishment of excommunication on anyone who ever went to the theatre rather than to church again. In 400 AD, another State law was passed prohibiting any performances from taking place during Holy Week (Chambers 15-16).

The Christian Church was a force dedicated to the destruction of the Roman theatre. However, not all high ranking Christians were opposed to drama itself. In the Western Empire, there was a revival in literary interest in the fifth century. The bishop Sidonius read plays by Menander and Terence with his son (Chambers 17). St. Augustine also distinguished between the higher and lower forms of drama, arguing that it was acceptable for plays to be read in an effort to further a person's education (Harris 16). It was to the performances of mimes that these men objected, not to classical drama in its literary form. However, many church leaders could not overlook the immorality prevalent in Roman theatre. St. Jerome argued against St. Augustine, protesting the reading of comedies by priests. Eventually, this view became Roman Ecclesiastical law (Harris 17). It is evident, however, that the debate about and the concern over the theatre continued for centuries after the battle was begun.

When all things are said and done, it was barbarian attacks that finally killed the theatre in both the Eastern and the Western Empires. The last known protest against theatre came in the fifth century from the French father, Salvian. He wrote that with the barbarians literally at the gates of Carthage, its inhabitants were still going to the theatre (Harris 17). After centuries, the Church still had not defeated theatre. Salvian believed that theatre ended because of the barbarian hatred of it, not from the effects of Christianity (Chambers 18). Half of the Roman Empire had been attacked by the barbarians; no one could afford to go to the theatre anymore. When the Lombards took over the Western Empire in 568, they had no interest in the theatre or in any other aspect of Roman culture (Harris 17). In an effort to try to restore the morale of a defeated people, Pope Gregory made the Church central to their lives. Theatre was removed as a necessity and all the theatre buildings were converted to barracks or government storehouses (17).

Despite popular belief that Christianity was the force that killed ancient theatre, many other aspects played a part. The aesthetic decline in the Roman mind and theatre lead to an institution with many enemies, including top State officials. The Fathers of Christianity fought a long hard battle against theatre in Rome, but they were mainly opposed to the mimes which they saw as a threat to the moral fabric of society. In all those long years of fighting, the theatre never lost to the Church. The fight continued until the barbarians removed the need completely. If any one thing can be pointed to as having caused the collapse of Roman theatre, it is the Roman mind set itself.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beacham, Richard C. *The Roman Theatre and Its Audience*.
Harvard University Press. Cambridge, MA : 1992.
- Beare, William. *The Roman Stage*. Methuen & Co Ltd Rowman
and Littlefield. Totowa, NJ : 1977.
- Chambers, E. K. *The Mediaeval Stage* Vol 1. Oxford University
Press. New York : 1967.
- Chuvin, Pierre. *A Chronicle of the Last Pagans*. Harvard University
Press. Cambridge, MA : 1990.
- Dill, Samuel. *Roman Society in the Last Century of the Western
Empire*. Meridian Books. New York : 1962.
- Gibbon, Edward. *Christianity and the Decline of Rome*. Collier
Books. New York : 1962.
- Harris, John Wesley. *Medieval Theatre in Context : An
Introduction*. Routledge. New York : 1992
- Jeffers, James S. *Conflict at Rome : Social Order and Hierarchy in
Early Christianity*. Fortress Press. Minneapolis, MN :1991.
- Mann, David. "The Roman Mime and Medieval Theatre".
Theatre Notebook V46 : 1992. 136-144.
- Molinari, Cesare. *Theatre Through the Ages*. McGraw-Hill Book
Company. New York : 1975.
- Nicoll, Allardyce. *Masks Mimes and Miracles*. Harcourt, Brace and
Company. New York : 1931.
- Vince, Ronald W. *Ancient and Medieval Theatre : A
Historiographical Handbook*. Greenwood Press. Westport, CT
: 1984.
- Watson, Alan. *The Law of the Ancient Romans*. Southern
Methodist University Press. Dallas : 1970.
- Williams, Arnold. *The Drama of Medieval England*. Michigan
State University Press. 1961.