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THE ACTORS AND THEIR AUDIENCE IN THE ROMAN THEATRE[1]

SUMMARY: The paper analyses the role and position of actors in ancient Rome, from the times of the Republic to the principate. Main emphasis is put on the legal understanding of problems such as the special order of seating in Roman theatres and the privileges of senators and *ordo equester*, social position of actors and the question of the citizens' participation (willing or not) in the performances.

KEYWORDS: Roman law, theatre, actors, Roman republic, principate

INTRODUCTION

Ancient Rome was a living city. A city governed by the rules that were not always consistent with each other. One of the most interesting paradoxes was the relationship between actors (or, in fact, the legal position of persons performing on stage), and their audience.

Theatrical performances originally appeared in Rome as spectacles in honour of the gods. An important factor that contributed to their appearance was an epidemic which claimed lives of many Romans,

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including the censor, curule aedile, three of the tribunes of the year 365 BC, and the former dictator M. Furius Camillus (Liv. 7,2,5-6). The next year, therefore, the consuls C. Sulpicius and C. Licinius Peticus Stolo (Broughton 1951: 116) brought actors from Etruria to perform in the *ludi scaenici* which were organized to appease the wrath of the gods and to end the plague harassing the city. From that moment, as Livy wrote (Liv. 7,2,13), the Romans fell madly in love with the *ludi scaenici*. Paradoxically, however, almost all the time when Roman law dealt with actors, and especially with actresses, it granted them a worse position when compared to other citizens (if they were citizens at all, but this is a topic for another discussion).

The reason for it was, *inter alia*, related to the infamy associated with acting profession (D. 3,2,1). As it seems, it was also reflected in social relations. Being in the company of actors was not considered appropriate. This was probably valid only for private life, and, in fact, for private circumstances. On the other hand, both senators and equites, the very elite of Roman society, often viewed the spectacles and expected that they would be guaranteed places in the first rows. This dichotomy is aptly described by Augustine in *De Civitate Dei*:

> Aug., *Civ. Dei* 2,13: Dii eas sibi exhiberi petierunt: quo modo ergo abicitur scaenicus, per quem colitur deus? et theatricae illius turpitudinis qua fronte notatur actor, si adoratur exactor?

A few centuries after the introduction of the spectacles Augustine asked philosophically: how to simultaneously despise actors, if one loves the gods? How is it possible to admire the one requiring performances, but to mark the performers with shame? It is, therefore, worth considering whether this division existed only in the law, or also in practice. Were the actors really condemned by the viewers, or did the contempt for their profession exist only in theory?

AUDIENCE ORGANIZATION

Initially, all the inhabitants of Rome viewed the performances together. Soon, however, the political elite wanted to assert their superiority also

during performances. And so, the situation has been regularized. The first mention of favouring senators can be found in Livy:

> Liv. 34,54: Megalesia ludos scaenicos A. Atilius Serranus L. Scribonius Libo aediles curules primi fecerunt. Horum aedilium ludos Romanos primum senatus a populo secretus spectauit praebuitque sermones, sicut omnis nouitas solet, aliis tandem quod multo ante debuerit tributum existimantibus amplissimo ordini, aliis demptum ex dignitate populi quidquid maiestati patrum adiectum esset interpretantibus et omnia discrimina talia quibus ordines discernerentur et concordiae et libertatis aequae minuendae esse: ad quingentesimum <quinquagesimum> octauum annum in promiscuo spectatum esse; quid repente factum cur immisceri sibi in cauea patres plebem nollent? cur diues pauperem consessorem fastidiret? nouam, superbam libidinem, ab nullius ante gentis senatu neque desideratam neque institutam. postremo ipsum quoque Africanum quod consul auctor eius rei fuisset paenituisse ferunt; adeo nihil motum ex antiquo probabile est: ueteribus, nisi quae usus euidenter arguit, stari malunt.

Describing the events of the year 194 BC (the consulate of Publius Cornelius Scipio the African and Titus Sempronius Longus; see Broughton 1951: 342-343), Livy described the introduction of innovation consisting of the dividing the spectacles' public according to the society strata. Such a change, as reported by the historian, was a result of an order issued by censors Caius Cornelius Cethegus and Sextus Aelius Paetus Catus in the same year (Liv. 34,44,5; see Broughton 1951: 343; Tarwacka 2012: 138, note 482). The text of Livy is extremely interesting because, in addition to the presentation of the new order regulation (it would be too risky to call it legal: no act that regulates the situation is known to be produced, and it is also difficult to describe it as derived from *mos maiorum*), he also quotes the general response to the change in existing custom. The greatest surprise, as one might guess, was in store for those from whom the senators were separated. The reasons for the changes were often believed to be grounded in the arrogance of senators. Livy states that the very same Scipio, whose idea it was to create a separate sector for the senators, regretted the change – perhaps the patricians realized that the new regulation would antagonize the plebeians. Livy mentioned, in passing, that the consequences of departure

from the old ways are often dire because people prefer to stick to what they are accustomed to, if only the circumstances permit. The sources do not agree as to who devised the idea of such a change. Livy, as quoted earlier, suggests the censors, while Cicero – Scipio the consul:

> Cic., *Har. resp*. 24: Nam quid ego de illis ludis loquar quos in Palatio nostri maiores ante templum in ipso Matris Magnae conspectu Megalesibus fieri celebrarique voluerunt? Qui sunt more institutisque maxime casti, sollemnes, religiosi; quibus ludis primum ante populi consessum senatui locum P. Africanus iterum consul ille maior dedit, ut eos ludos haec lues impura pollueret.

The orator does not mention here any command addressed to the organizers of shows, even though it would be more realistic to enforce the words of the consul (who had *imperium*) rather that the censors' (who only had *potestas*). Cicero suggested here that the consul allowed senators to take seats before the people (literally: gave them the seats in front of people). It seems that this statement can be interpreted in two ways, and these do not have to be mutually exclusive – the word *ante* can be understood as denoting not only spatial, but also temporal relations. Therefore, this may mean that senators could sit in the front seats (no doubt they were the best to observe the proceedings of the *ludi*; see Pociña Perez 1976: 437), but also that they could take them earlier than the other members of the public. It is also possible that the censors ordered the aediles to separate the senatorial places from the rest of the audience, and that the consul also allowed them to enter the theatre in advance. Such an interpretation may be strengthened by the words of Cicero concerning the threat for free people, and especially the matrons, caused by the presence of slaves in the *ludi*. Such slaves could appear there – if not for any other reason, then to reserve seats for their owners – but they would not be necessary if senators had the opportunity to enter the auditorium in advance guaranteed.[2] It is true, these words

[2] Cicero also remembers fondly the times of Caius, or Appius Claudius, organizing the *ludi* and commanding slaves to leave the theatre (Cic., *Har. resp*. 26); however, this statement proves mostly the fact that the slaves were present for some reason in the theatres, even though they were not allowed (at least under the aforementioned magistrates) to watch the performances.

refer to the *ludi* organized in the time of Cicero, but it is possible that a similar problem has led to the issue of regulation in the year 194 BC. The fact, and the person of Scipio as the initiator, have been mentioned by Asconius Pedianus, the commentator on Cicero, in whose works the fragments of Cicero's speech *pro Cornelio* are preserved:

> Asc., *In Corn.* 69C: P. Africanus ille superior, ut dicitur, non solum and sapientissimis hominibus qui tum erant verum etiam a se ipso saepe accusatus est quod, cum consul esset cum Ti. Longo, passus esset tum primum and populari consessu senatoria subsellia separari.

In the passage quoted by Asconius, from the speech of Cicero, the orator mentions that Publius (Scipio) Africanus has often been both criticised by others and has scolded himself for having allowed the separation of senatorial seats from the other ones. If such a regulation was indeed enforced, it did not last for long: from the time of Marcus Valerius Messala and Caius Cassius Longinus censorship (154 BCE; see Broughton 1951: 449) until the construction of a permanent theatre in Rome at the request of Pompey, the audience in the theatre was not seated.[3] Further on, Asconius quotes a passage from the speech of Cicero on the responses of the haruspices, which points, in his opinion, to Scipio as the originator of this reform. Asconius gives then a fascinating and very likely cause to two different accounts of the same event by the same person.

> Asc., *In. Corn.* 70C: Nam cum secundum Ciceronis opinionem auctore Scipione consule aediles secretum ante omnis locum spectandi senatoribus dederint, de eodem illo facto Scipionis in hac quidem oratione, quia causa popularis erat premebaturque senatus auctoritate atque ob id dignitatem eius ordinis quam posset maxime elevari causae expediebat, paenituisse ait Scipionem quod passus est id fieri; in ea vero de haruspicum responso, quia in senatu habebatur cuius artibus erat blandiendum, et magnopere illum laudat et non auctorem fuisse dandi nam id erat levius sed ipsum etiam dedisse dicit.

[3] Val. Max. 2,4,2: *Quae inchoata quidem sunt a Messala et Cassio censoribus. Ceterum auctore P. Scipione Nasica omnem apparatum operis eorum subiectum hastae uenire placuit, atque etiam senatus consulto cautum est ne quis in urbe propiusue passus mille subsellia posuisse sedensue ludos spectare uellet, ut scilicet remissioni animorum * standi uirilitas propria Romanae gentis nota esset*.

Cicero, as an excellent orator, adapted his speech to the tastes of the audience whom he speaks to. As he spoke to the people, he argued that Scipio regretted that he allowed the separation of senators from the rest of the people, and when he delivered a speech in the Senate, he argued not only that the same Scipio was the initiator of the change, but also that he personally enforced it. Asconius, however, had no doubt that, according to Cicero, the consul introduced the change by the right of his auctoritas.[4] The information provided in the source texts about the audience's reaction to the changes can also reflect the reasons for which the organizers of the *ludi Romani* made this decision. It was, obviously, well received by the senators, for whom it was profitable. The organization of the shows in Rome belonged to curule ediles – and so it was also in this case, according to the text of Livy, as the games were arranged by Aulus Atilius Serranus and Lucius Libo Scribonius. The position of an edile was the second step in the *cursus honorum*[5] after that of a quaestor.[6] At that time, not all officials were guaranteed their place in the Senate; it is also not known what was the property qualification for ediles mentioned in the text (to be equites they would require assets worth over 400 000 sestertii). Thus ediles did not necessarily have to be members of the elite, to whom they assured a better chance to see the show. They paid with their own money for the organization of the *ludi*, but the cases have been known when the magistrate borrowed money to organize sumptuous games. They might, however, want to ingratiate themselves to the elite to secure the future among its members for themselves. Of course, the suggestion to make changes in the organization of the audience could have been made by the censors, and Scipio, as the consul, may have given advice to the ediles (Val. Max. 2,4,3.); it seems, however, that the final decision was made by the ediles themselves, who wanted a specific

[4] Asc., *In Corn.* 70C: *Nam cum secundum Ciceronis opinionem auctore Scipione consule aediles secretum ante omnis locum spectandi senatoribus dederint*.

[5] *Lex Vilia annalis*, the plebiscite regulating the question, was voted some time later, in 180 BCE; one may, however, speculate that it was sanctioning the existing legal order of things rather than modifying it.

[6] It was, however, not necessary in the regular course of career to achieve the position of edile, as there were only four elected every year, two plebeian and two curule ediles; see Astin 1958: 6, note 3.

setting of the viewers. It can be assumed that the senators were customarily guaranteed the best places since then. M. Kocur, in his monograph about the Roman theatre (Kocur 2005: 157), writes that the senators were entitled to the places in the front row not later than since 194 BC; he concedes that there is a possibility of an even earlier regulation on this issue. G. Rotondi suggests a probable (according to him) *lex theatralis* of 146 BCE (Rotondi 1912: 294); his research, however, was based on the findings of other researchers, not on the sources. However, two main acts that guaranteed the elite the best seats in the theatre are (confirmed by sources) the *lex theatralis* (Rotondi 1912: 374) of 67 BCE and the *lex Iulia theatralis*, probably passed in 5 BCE (Rotondi 1912:462). Unfortunately, no texts of these laws have been preserved. They are, however, mentioned in literary texts. Livy reported that the *lex theatralis* was proposed by the plebeian tribune Lucius Roscius:

> Liv., *Per*. 99: L. Roscius trib. pl. legem tulit ut equitibus Romanis in theatro XIIII gradus proximi adsignarentur.

He held his office of the tribune in 67 BCE (Broughton 1952: 154), which allows to set the date of the *lex theatralis*. The plebiscite of Roscius Lucius Otho was to guarantee places in the first 14 rows of the audience to the equites. It is extremely interesting that this privilege was clearly not granted to all the members of the *nobilitas*, only to the equites. Senators have, therefore, continued to sit on the orchestra[7] – but it is unknown if a senator could sit on one of the seats reserved for equites. This plebiscite's enactment date is confirmed by Asconius' mention in his commentary of Cicero's lost speech in defence of Cornelius. It was delivered in the year 65 BCE. Cicero mentions *lex Aurelia* and, indeed, *lex Roscia*. Asconius commented:

> Asc., *In Corn*. 78-79C: Aurelia lege communicata esse iudicia inter senatores et equestrem ordinem et tribunos aerarios quam L. Roscius Otho biennio ante confirmavit, in theatro ut equitibus Romanis XIIII ordines spectandi gratia darentur.

[7] It is difficult to estimate since when these particular seats were reserved for the senators, but both Suetonius (*Aug*. 35,2; 44,1) and Vitruvius (6,2) testify to the existence of the practice.

This message, in addition to specifying the date, confirms the content of the *lex*. Lucius Roscius Otho introduced it two years prior to Cicero's delivery of the speech, and therefore, in the year 67 BCE. According to B. Sitek (2011: 333ff.) the *lex* was also used to enforce order and increase security by fixing the scheme of taking seats in the theatre. Perhaps the distribution of people in an organized manner was also to provide for effective evacuation, if necessary. The *lex* also decided that separate (this time probably rather worse) places in the theatre were to be reserved for bankrupts (as it seems, both those who have lost property from the judgment of Fortune and squanderers). The evidence for such a regulation can be found in Cicero's *Philippics* delivered against Mark Antony.

> Cic., *Phil*. 2,44: Illud tamen audaciae tuae, quod sedisti in quattuordecim ordinibus, cum esset lege Roscia decoctoribus certus locus constitutus, quamvis quis fortunae vitio, non suo decoxisset.

Mark Antony was theoretically entitled to sit in the first rows, according to his birth and position. However, according to Cicero, he should not, having lost his property at an early age (Cic., *Phil.* 2,44: *Tenesne memoria praetextatum te decoxisse?*) sit in the better seats, since the *lex* placed bankrupts on separate places – even those bankrupts whose misfortune was no fault of their own. Probably they were seated at the back of the audience (Edmondson 2002: 10). Another regulation concerning the order of sitting in the theatre was introduced by Augustus before 4 CE (Rotondi 1912: 462):

> Suet., *Aug*. 40: Cum autem plerique equitum attrito bellis civilibus patrimonio spectare ludos e quattuordecim non auderent metu poenae theatralis, pronuntiavit non teneri ea, quibus ipsis parentibusve equester census umquam fuisset.

It seems that *lex*[8] *Iulia theatralis*,[9] in general, was repeating the pro-

[8] The name *lex* for this regulation is commonly used by scholars (see e.g., Rotondi 1912; Rawson 1987: 86; Edmondson 2002: 12), but is not undisputable. Suetonius (*Aug.* 4) writes about an emperor's decree; Pliny, on the other hand, calls it explicitly *lex* (Plin., *NH* 33,8).

[9] Rotondi 1912:462; it is, however, difficult to state whether the bill was enacted as a *lex* or was the form of plebiscite, often used by Augustus, applied.

visions of the previous *lex*. This time, it was decided that the right to sit in the first fourteen rows should be given to freeborn men whose father or grandfather had assets greater than 400 000 sestertii. This allowed the equites who lost their fortune in the civil wars to keep the privilege. Another author who mentions the *lex Iulia theatralis* is Pliny the Elder. In his *Natural History*, while describing properties of the minerals, he mentioned gold, which led him to reflections on the golden ring, specific to the equites.

> Plin., *NH* 33,8: Hac de causa constitutum, ne cui ius [anulorum – EL] esset nisi qui ingenuus ipse, patre, avo paterno HS CCCC census fuisset et lege Iulia theatrali in quattuordecim ordinibus sedisset.

During the reign of Tiberius, in the ninth year of his principate (Plin., *NH* 33,8: *Tiberii demum principatu nono anno*), in the consulate of C. Asinius Pollio and C. Antistius Veterus the criteria for belonging to the equites were standardized. Pliny stated that the *ius anulorum aureorum* was reserved for the freeborn people whose father or paternal grandfather owned assets of more than 400 000 sestertii. These are the same criteria that are deemed sufficient, ever since the appearance of the *lex Iulia theatralis*, to sit in a privileged rows. The person applying for this status of *eques* did not have to obtain the same census himself – at least the source text is silent on the subject. There is also a theory that, under the *lex Iulia*, a person who was allowed a seat in the privileged places automatically gained the status of *eques*, if they previously did not have it (Sitek 2011: 335). This assertion, however, does not seem to be justified in the source texts. It seems that the same policy of Augustus, the result of which was the famous marital legislation (see Biondi 1965; Astolfi 1986, Zabłocka 1987; Mette-Dittman 1991), has also influenced the organization of the theatrical audience.

> SC de ludis saecularibus CIL VI 877 quod tali spectaculo [nemo iterum intererit – lu]/dorum eo[ru]m [dieb]us qui nondum sunt maritati.[10]

[10] Riccobono 1941: 40,1: *tali spectaculo* [*nemo iterum intererit, permittendum videri* […] *Lu*]|*dorum eo*[*ru*]*m* [*diebu*]*s qui nondum sunt maritati.*

Suet. *Aug*. 44,2: Maritis e plebe proprios ordines assignavit, praetextatis cuneum suum, et proximum paedagogis.[11]

Unmarried men did not have access to some spectacles,[12] for example to the *ludi saeculares* organized in 17 BCE (Tac., *Ann*. 11,11). In turn, the marriage allowed one to get better places – it is not explicitly written in the text, but it seems that the assignation of seats makes sense only in the case of the privileged ones. According to E. Rawson (1987: 98-99), a supplement to this regulation was Augustus giving seats in the theatre to the soldiers – even though by law they could not get married, they could get a good place in the theatre because of their importance for the state.[13] The source, which is supposed to support the interpretation of the author, is very short and concise (Suet., *Aug*. 44,1: *Militem secrevit a populo*): it only proves the fact that Augustus allowed the soldiers in the theatre and that he separated them from the rest of the people. A considerable reason for such a solution could be, however, a desire to maintain order in the theatre, not necessarily the recognition and reward for their role. A good place in the theatre was believed to be a valuable asset, as indicated by the anecdote of the Emperor Augustus, quoted by Quintilian:

Quint. 6,3,63: Hinc eques Romanus, ad quem in spectaculis bibentem cum misisset Augustus qui ei diceret: "ego si prandere volo, domum eo", "tu enim" inquit "non times ne locum perdas".

Once, the princeps saw that, during a performance, one of *equites* was drinking in the audience. He sent him a message, "If I want to eat breakfast, I go home". But the viewer replied "But you're not afraid of losing your place". This exchange indicates at least two things. Firstly, the performances enjoyed considerable popularity since one leaving the theatre was in danger of losing their place; therefore, some savvy viewers

[11] Suetonius, in the same passage, also mentions proper clothes worn to the theatre and special seating for women during gladiatorial games.

[12] This can be inferred *a contrario* from Augustus' decision allowing the unmarried to participate in the games in his own honour, DC 54,30,5.

[13] Undoubtedly, a soldier given a *corona civica* for saving the life of a citizen could sit in the close proximity to the senators, but it is unknown who and when introduced such a privilege. Plin., *NH* 16,6: *ludis ineunti semper adsurgi etiam ab senatu in more est, sedendi ius in proximo senatui*.

brought food so that they did not have to go out. Secondly, eating a meal or drinking in the theatre was something not entirely acceptable, since the princeps paid attention to it. What the frequency of this practice was, and why it could be unwelcome, is unfortunately difficult to determine due to lack of sources on the subject. It is not known whether the cause of this was supposed to be the respect for the actors, for the rest of the audience, fear of littering the theatre or, in the worst case, riots. At the time of Domitian, the rules of sitting in the audience were apparently not respected. According to Suetonius, the emperor saw fit to fix this:

> Suet., *Dom*. 8,3: Suscepta correctione morum, licentiam theatralem promiscue in equitem spectandi inhibuit.

Emperor expressly prohibited viewers not belonging to the *ordo equester* to sit on the seats allocated to that group. Interestingly, the decision to restore to the equites the exclusive right to sit in the better rows was dictated, according to the historian, by the general need to return to good old traditions – therefore a violation of this order was a violation of the *mos*.

THE ACTORS IN SOCIAL SITUATIONS

The actors, of course, could not spend their entire life on the stage. Then how did the audience treat them outside the theatre? The issue is very comprehensive; it seems necessary to give a few examples. At the time of Tiberius who, as reported by Suetonius, did not like performances in any form (Suet., *Tib.* 34 and 37), a rather weird prohibition was introduced:

> Tac., *Ann*. 1,77,4: de modo lucaris et adversus lasciviam fautorum multa decernuntur; ex quis maxime insignia, ne domos pantomimorum senator introiret, ne egredientis in publicum equites Romani cingerent aut alibi quam in theatro spectarentur, et spectantium immodestiam exilio multandi potestas praetoribus fieret.

Since that time, senators could not visit the actors in their homes. The source mentions only the pantomime actors, but perhaps the ban

also applied to other types of artists, which seems to be suggested in the further part of the text. The decree also banned the equites from following the outgoing (as it seems from home or from the theatre) actors, and it forbade the actors to play anywhere outside the theatre. The same fragment contains, at the end, a rather enigmatic statement. Namely, Tacitus states that the praetor was granted authority to punish the spectators behaving indecently with exile. It is difficult, however, to assume that for such a trivial offense one would be threatened with banishment from Rome. It seems, therefore, that it may simply mean a right to ban the viewer from a particular show, combined with imposing a fine on him. In turn, Aulus Gellius, in his *Noctes Atticae*, described a case of a young man who was a devoted admirer of the actor's craft – and therefore, although rich (and probably well-born), he would show up in the company of actors, both tragic and comic, as well as musicians. The philosopher Taurus Calvisius (Holford-Strevens 2005: 90) who was the teacher of the anecdote's hero, was also responsible for the education of Gellius himself.[14] This places story in the second century CE, thus after the regulation introduced by Tiberius. The very title of book 24 of *Noctes Atticae* says a lot about Gellius' attitude towards the subject:

> Gell. 20,4: Artificum scaenicorum studium amoremque inhonestum probrosumque esse.

Thus, to know and love the performing artists was, according to Gellius, indecent and shameful. Unfortunately, Gellius did not give explicit reasons for this statement, leaving a lot in the realm of conjecture. The next section shows that the actors whom the philosopher's student was spending time with were slaves:

> Gell. 20,4,1: Comoedos quispiam et tragoedos et tibicines dives adulescens, Tauri philosophi discipulus, ut liberos homines in deliciis atque in delectamentis habebat.

Since the young man was having a good time in their company, as if they were free people, then they probably were not. It is not entirely possible, therefore, to determine on this basis whether being in

[14] See Zabłocki 2007.

their company was wrong because they were actors, or because they were slaves. The first reading is justified by the fact that in support of his claims about the impropriety of the actors' company Gellius cited the words of Aristotle, referring to οἱ περὶ Διόνυσον τεχνι ται, that is the craftsmen of Dionysus.[15] Essentially, this was not strange, since Dionysus was regarded as the patron of the theatre. But the ascribing of such an epithet does not bode well, as the Greek Dionysus was also the god of wine and debauchery. His Roman equivalent was Bacchus whose cult was prohibited in Rome. It is significant that Gellius did not give any factor that would incriminate the actors, apart from the fact of their company. The only thing the young student did wrong was to give attention and admiration to the wrong (in the opinion of his master and teacher) people. This shows that in Gellius' times the notoriety of appearing on stage was already so well established that it did not require any reminder – neither the infamy itself, nor its cause. Excerpt from Aristotle (Prob. 30,10), cited by Gellius, is extremely interesting. It shows that the philosopher believed the people acting on stage (mostly) worthless, because they had neither education nor the knowledge of philosophy, and most of their lives was devoted to the things necessary for their profession; this, in turn, meant spending most of their time in bad company and in poverty. Both these things, according to the philosopher, tended to cause evil. It is very interesting that the Romans often contrasted the Greek perception of the theatre with that of themselves:

> Nep., *Praef*. 5: Magnis in laudibus tota fere fuit Graecia victorem Olympiae citari; in scaenam vero prodire ac populo esse spectaculo nemini in eisdem gentibus fuit turpitudini. Quae omnia apud nos partim infamia, partim humilia atque ab honestate remota ponuntur.

Cornelius Nepos, at the beginning of his *Lives*, stressed the fact that the Greeks held the winners of Olympia in great esteem, and that appearing on stage did not have any bad connotations for them. He compared it with the Roman approach to the actors: his countrymen were ascribing infamy

[15] Gell. 20,4,4: Διὰ τί οἱ Διονυσιακοὶ τεχνῖται ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ πονηροὶ εἰσὶν ἢ ὅτι ἥκιστα λόγου καὶ φιλοσοφίας κοινωνοῦσι δία τὸ περὶ τὰς ἀναγκαίας τέχνας τὸ πολῦ μέρος τοῦ βιοῦ εἶναι, καὶ ὅτι ἐν ἀκρασίαις τὸν πολὺν χρόνον εἰσιν ότε δὲ ἐν ἀπορίαις ἀμφότερα δὲ φαυλόντὸς παρασκευαστικα.

to the actors and they held them in contempt, believing them deprived of any honesty. It is therefore possible that Aristotle had a different opinion about the actors than the one later presented by Nepos, perhaps because of his own education and activity. It is also possible that the Greeks' opinions on the theatre and the performers were not as uniform as we think, or as it seemed to Nepos. The aforementioned passage from Aristotle was sent by Taurus to the young man with an order: he should read it every day. This was undoubtedly meant to reinforce in the mind of the unfortunate devotee to the art of acting that he should give up such a perilous hobby.

A very similar warning can be found in the *Satyricon* of Petronius:

Petr., Sat. 5:

Artis severae si quis ambit effectus
mentemque magnis applicat, prius mores
frugalitatis lege poliat exacta.
Nec curet alto regiam trucem vultu
cliensve cenas inpotentium captet,
nec perditis addictus obruat vino
mentis calorem; neve plausor in scenam
sedeat redemptus histrioniae addictus.

The text is placed in the context of the education of children and youths, proper for achieving greatness in life. In the earlier passage, Petronius indignantly criticises parents who do not follow strict discipline in raising their children, preventing them from profiting, in the future, from proper education (Petr., *Sat.* 4: *Parentes obiurgatione digni sunt, qui nolunt liberos suos severa lege proficere*). Then he moves on to lecturing, it would seem, young people themselves on shaping their character according to the norms of behaviour, if they want to devote themselves to serious tasks. They should therefore not wallow in luxury – one should avoid lavish feasts and clogging one's mind with wine, especially in a suspicious company. And, what is most important for these considerations, the man aspiring to greatness should not be sitting in front of the stage to applaud actors for money, and moreover to be addicted to the admiration of acting.[16] Worse, also women could admire actors:

[16] There is also a variant of the text with the last line *sedeat redemptus histrionis ad*

Petr., *Sat*. 126: Quaedam enim feminae sordibus calent, nec libidinem concitant, nisi aut servos viderint aut statores altius cinctos. Arena aliquas accendit, aut perfusus pulvere mulio, aut histrio scaenae ostentatione traductus.

An actor, who is an object of desire, was placed together with slaves, servants of the officials (probably freedmen), gladiators and muleteers. This is not surprising, since an actor defames himself by showing up on stage. Incensed with desire, women could also forget about the dignity of their position and rise up from among the fourteen rows to look for a lover among the baser part of the audience:

Petr., *Sat*. 126: Ex hac nota domina est mea; usque ab orchestra quattuordecim transilit, et in extrema plebe quaerit quod diligat.

These words are said by the slave Chrysis about his lady, which adds to their malice. The slaves should not defame the names of their owners; yet insinuating sexual adventures with plebeians, gladiators and actors of a woman belonging to the equites does not seem to praise her morality. Belonging to a group of the lovers of acting art could also be associated with very real punishment:

Suet., *Ner.* 16,2: pantomimorum factiones cum ipsis simul relegatae.

At the time of Nero the pantomime actors along with their followers were expelled from Rome.

Another issue was the use of slurs based on familiarity with actors. Cicero especially excelled in such a demeanour: among numerous invectives, which he threw at his political opponents, the theme of supporting actors appeared repeatedly. The object of such criticism was Publius Clodius (Cic., *Sest.* 116). Also in the speeches against Mark Antony the orator emphasized his misconduct; the crowning proof of it was an affair with an actress (Cic., *Phil.* 2,61; 8,26).

rictus. According to this reading, it would be a mistake to watch an actor who laughs artificially (*rictus*) for money on stage. Nevertheless, it seems obvious, whatever the version of the text, that watching stage performances is not something a well-bred person should do.

THE AUDIENCE ON STAGE

There is also a third side, from one should take a look at the actors--audience relationship. From time to time it would happen that the members of the elite were not content with the role of the viewer and wanted to actively assert their sympathy to the theatre. No doubt the same may have happened to the people of lower status, but it did not arouse legal controversy – probably that is why the source texts are silent on this issue. The source texts have also preserved the information on the situations when the rulers of Rome, for various reasons, would order members of the elite to appear on stage. It is very interesting, because it is otherwise known, from a tablet discovered in 1978 in Larinum (which preserved the text of the *senatus consultum* from the first half of the year 19, that is from the time of Tiberius; Levick 1983: 97), that there were regulations prohibiting members of the higher orders of the society from performing on stage. Not only does the decree of the Senate prohibit the equites (under the penalty of public disgrace) to appear on stage and in the Olympic gladiatorial, but also bases its authority on the earlier rulings in this regard.

> SC Larinensis l. 5-6: ad eos qui contra dignitatem ordinis sui in scaenam ludumv[e prodirent seve? auctora]/[rent?] u(ti) s(ancitur) s(enatus) c(onsultis) quae d(e) e(a) r(e) facta essent superioribus annis (Lebek 1991: 54).

Also, as it seems, a new regulation was introduced: it prohibited the appearing on stage of every freeborn young person – a woman under 20 years of age, a man below 25[17]; exception were made for those who had received a permission of the princeps.

> SC Larinensis l. 17-18: ne cui ingenuae quae] | [minor qu]am an(norum) XX neue cui ingenuo qui minor quam an(norum) XXV esset auctorare se operas[ue suas in scaenam turpesue] | [ad res alia]s locare permitteretur.

[17] It is worth considering whether the age limits given here were made so in order to comply with Augustus' marriage law, which set those very same ages for people to be already married, or is it a coincidence; an analysis of the problem, however, is beyond the scope of the present paper.

But despite the long existence of the ban prohibiting acting on stage, the senators and equites did occasionally perform in theatre plays, sometimes willingly, sometimes not quite so. Several such cases seem worth mentioning.

An *eques* Laberius apparently performed on stage voluntarily: he was also the author of a mime in which he starred, as Suetonius states:

> Suet., *Iul*. 39,2: Ludis Decimus Laberius eques Romanus mimum suum egit donatusque quingentis sestertiis et anulo aureo sessum in quattuordecim e scaena per orchestram transiit.

In this case it seems interesting that there was no doubt as to affiliation of Laberius with the *ordo equester*, because, having left the scene, he went straight to his place in one of the fourteen rows, which have long been reserved for members of the *ordo equester*. Other source texts for this event[18] may raise doubts as to whether Laberius really appeared on the scene completely voluntarily; however, even if he was forced to act, he received a reward for his labours. Conversely, in the time of Tiberius,[19] the dissolute youths of both sexes, not to be limited with the aforementioned decision of the Senate prohibiting stage appearance, would voluntarily demand the note of infamy. Tiberius punished their conduct with exile. On the other end of the spectrum we find the procedure of forcing members of the elite to perform. The ancestor of emperor Nero, Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus, made matrons and equites play in a mime.[20] Nero himself, it seems, did not require active participation in stage activities from others, but many people would do so anyway to please the princeps (Suet., *Ner*. 11,2), which in principle can be regarded as a similar situation.

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[18] Sen. Rh., *Contr.* 7,3,9; Macr., *Sat.* 2,3,10; Macr. *Sat.*, 2,7,2 (*Laberius a Caesare coactum*); Macr. *Sat.*, 7,3,8; Macrobius seems to suggest that, prior to the performance, Laberius did not belong to the *ordo equester*.

[19] Suet., *Tib*. 35,2: *ex iuventute utriusque ordinis profligatissimus quisque, quominus in opera scaenae harenaeque edenda senatus consulto teneretur, famosi iudicii notam sponte subibant; eos easque omnes, ne quod refugium in tali fraude cuiquam esset, exilio adfecit*.

[20] Suet., *Ner.* 4,1: *praeturae consulatusque honore equites R. matronasque ad agendum mimum produxit in scaenam.*

CONCLUSION

While the appearance on stage constituted disgraceful behaviour or was presented as such, the desire to watch the performances was believed quite normal. There have been instances when the actors were helped to achieve the status of an *eques*; later also members of the elite happened to appear on stage. Still, these were exceptional situations. One may suspect that both the decrees prohibiting the members of the elite to act on stage and those forcing them to appear (often aimed at humiliating them) had a common goal. Namely, the goal was to discourage the mixing of the two worlds – the world of power and the world of fiction. Good Roman citizen, and so the more a member of the elite close to the ruling spheres of Rome, must have been a man whose word can be trusted. On the other hand, we have the actors – unserious, frivolous, often suspected (sometimes rightly) of sexual excesses. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that these spheres were kept, by all means, separate, and any attempt to combine them was viewed negatively. The key issue, therefore, seems to be the preservation of the limits – while the actors remain on stage, and the elite in the first rows, social hierarchy and customs are preserved. But if one exceeds this boundary – voluntarily or forced by circumstances – when an actor tries to enter the elite, or a member of *nobilitas* takes to the stage – this threatens the established order of things. It is, however, thanks to such excesses that any information concerning the relationship between the audience and the actors, and the legal position of the latter, was preserved. The dichotomy in perception of the actors by the Romans is truly fascinating, especially if you look at today's position of the actors, especially those more popular in the general society.

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