Roman Tragedy and Philosophy

Christopher Star

The study of tragedy and philosophy in the Roman world presents several difficulties. For many today, the great philosophical thinkers and dramatists of the antiquity were Greek. The modern philosophers who have looked to tragedy, from Hegel and Schopenhauer, to Nietzsche and Bernard Williams, have all mined Greek tragedy for insights and inspiration.¹ The Romans would likely not be particularly surprised or bothered by this fact. Both tragedy and philosophy were imports from the Greek world that came to Rome as part of the city’s growing political and military domination of the Mediterranean. To many Romans, the acceptance of drama and philosophy ran the risk of corrupting what they saw as their native and superior traditional society. During the middle of the Republican period, Cato the Elder went so far as to say that Rome would lose its empire if it ever allowed Greek literature to become part of its society (Plutarch Cato Maior 23.2). In reality, the opposite proved to be true. The more Rome conquered, the more it integrated Greek culture and ideas. As victims of a reverse form of cultural imperialism, the Romans would remain deeply suspicious of both practices.

The ‘origin’ of tragedy at Rome likely came soon after Rome’s victory over Carthage in the First Punic war with a performance of a Greek play translated by the former slave Livius Andronicus in 240 BC for the Roman Games (Ludi Romani) honoring Jupiter Optimus Maximus.² Throughout the Republican period, several more festivals were added to the calendar, during which dramas would be performed along with several other forms of entertainment.³ Unlike classical Athens, where tragedies were only staged as part of the yearly competition at the festival of Dionysus each spring, there came to be several opportunities for drama to be performed in Rome, in both public and, particularly

² We know very little about the life of Livius Andronicus. He was possibly from the southern Italian town of Tarentum, which was originally part of Magna Graecia, but came under Rome’s orbit by 272 BC. Andronicus may have come to Rome around this date. He became the freedman of Livius Salinator, hence his Latin praenomen. He also translated the Odyssey into Latin using the Italic Saturnian meter, and wrote a hymn in celebration of Juno, which is traditionally dated to 207 BC. Only a few fragments of his compositions survive.
³ For example, soon after the Ludi Romani, festivals celebrating Apollo (Ludi Apollinares 212 BC) and the Great Mother, Cybele (Ludi Megalenses 204 BC), were added.
during the imperial period, in private settings. Also unlike Athens, where the Theater of Dionysus was a central part of the civic landscape, for most of the Republican period, the Roman authorities insured that drama could only be performed on temporary stages, and would even halt and tear down attempts at building stone theaters. The first permanent theater in Rome, the Theater of Pompey, was not built until 55 BC. Actors as well were stigmatized. In 115 BC, “theatrical personnel” were expelled from the city. Citizens generally were not professional actors (Livy 7.2). This prejudice continued well into the imperial period. Seneca calls on his readers to remember that the man who struts about the stage claiming to be king of Argos is in fact a slave (Epistulae morales 80.7–8). Pliny the Younger, in his panegyric for Trajan, insultingly calls Nero the “actor emperor” (Pliny Panegyricus 46.4).

During the Republican period, perhaps no military victory contributed more to the cultural development of Rome than the defeat of Perseus, king of Macedonia, by the Roman general Lucius Aemelius Paullus in 168 BC. This event brought the wealth of the Greek world to Rome and also led to an influx of Greek intellectuals into the city. Some, such as the historian Polybius, came as hostages; others, such as the Stoic philosopher Panaetius of Rhodes, came by choice. Nevertheless, there remained a strong anti-Hellenic sentiment, which has come to be personified in the figure of Cato the Elder. In 155 BC, after being ordered to pay a heavy fine for attacking the neighboring city of Oropus, the Athenians sent an embassy of philosophers to Rome in order to appeal the sentence. While the youth of Rome relished the opportunity to listen to these eminent philosophers lecture—the Athenians sent the heads of three schools, the Academic Carneandes, the Stoic Diogenes of Babylon and the Peripatetic Critolaus—Cato the Elder put a motion before the Senate to have the philosophers expelled from the city (Plutarch Cato Maior 22.5). Although Cato’s hostility did not keep Greek philosophers and their ideas from influencing Romans, it would take nearly one hundred years for Romans to start writing philosophy in Latin. Lucretius’s magisterial Epicurean poem, De rerum natura, and Cicero’s first forays into philosophy, De re publica and De legibus, date from the 50s BC. After these two, only Seneca wrote philosophy in Latin during the classical period.

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5 Boyle (2006: 111).
6 See the discussion of Morford (2002: 19–20). Aulus Gellius (NA 15.11) discusses several instances in which philosophers were expelled from Rome.