

Classics | Book Review

The mask of Apollo

A fresh look at Roman theatre

By **Edith Hall**



A mosaic of theatre masks at Palazzo Nuovo, Capitoline Museums, Rome, second century CE | © DeAgostini/Getty Images

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The Lost History of Roman Theatre

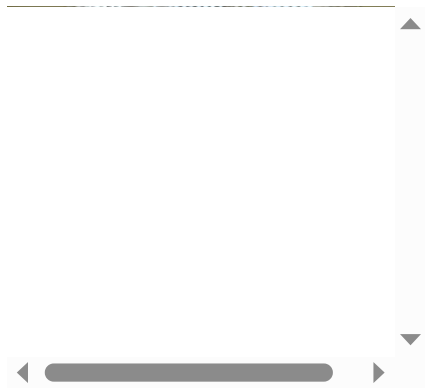
328pp. Princeton University Press. £38 (US \$45).

T. P. Wiseman

A New History of Ancient Roman Theatre

304pp. Liverpool University Press. £125.

Jessica Clarke



The interdisciplinary study of Roman theatre, combining archaeological and historical evidence with literary analysis of the comedies of Plautus and Terence, and the tragedies of Seneca, was inaugurated in 1939 - on the publication of Margarete Bieber's *The History of the Greek and Roman Theater*. Bieber was a brilliant Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany who had found employment at Columbia University in New York, and her book introduced anglophone scholars, who analysed Latin drama from a narrowly philological perspective, to the German tradition of contextualizing Roman performance culture within public and political life. (This had begun with Theodor Mommsen's focus on festivals and spectacles in *Römische Geschichte*, the first volume of which was published in 1854, and which won him the Nobel prize in literature in 1902.)

Bieber's other achievement was to present Roman theatre as parallel to Greek theatre, rather than as its inferior sibling. Sixty-five years after her still useful, enlarged second edition appeared in 1961, two splendid new books by British scholars at opposite ends of their working lives have significantly advanced our understanding of theatre performances in ancient Italy. Jessica Clarke's *A New History of Ancient Roman Theatre* developed out of her doctoral dissertation. She defines her project as "a systematic and comprehensive study of the archaeological remains of the theatre in Italy" between the fourth and second centuries BCE, but it goes beyond that. She is particularly interested in visual culture - clay figurines representing actors, replica comic masks and pottery painted with theatrical scenes. As she rightly insists, some of these date back to the fifth century BCE, when dramatic performances were still young in Athens, a fact that subverts the traditional narrative that drama in Roman Italy is a successor to the Greek. She also draws on architectural decorations that use the conventions of theatre design, such as mosaics, frescoes and relief panels. Her two free online databases, cataloguing both types of evidence, can be consulted alongside the book.

Clarke is resourceful and multitalented (she has drawn several of the informative figures and diagrams); her writing is stylish and lucid; and she is commendably unafraid of challenging orthodoxies. Her study of the spectacular stone theatres in Sicily emphasizes that they are at least as early as those in Greece: this seems to confirm Aristotle's genealogy of drama in *Poetics*, which sees Sicily, rather than Athens, as the birthplace of comedy. Her incisive discussion of the relationship between the list of comic masks in Julius Pollux's *Onomastikon* (a Greek dictionary dedicated to the emperor Commodus) and the incomparable hoard of terracotta masks and figurines found on the Italian island of Lipari shows that their makers, far from revealing a weak grasp of mask typology, supplemented the Greek repertoire with local mask types used in their own communities. She disputes the claim of most recent scholarship that early Latin tragedy was a result of

Roman promotion of theatre in the third to second centuries BCE by examining the efflorescence of theatre building in central Italy and Campania long before the first permanent theatre was built in Rome by Pompey in 55 BCE. This section explores the delightful range of gods to whom performances were dedicated at this time - so different from mainland Greece, where theatre was the province of Dionysus. Italian theatre deities included Fortuna, Juno, Apollo and the eponymous god of the River Sarno, which flows into the Bay of Naples.

The chapter on the early Roman comic dramatist Plautus is an enticing exploration of his favourite characters - he loved talkative cooks - and his penchant for making slaves clever, often giving them prominence in plotlines and having them deliver his prologues. Clarke relates these literary phenomena to the increase in figurines representing actors playing slaves found in central Italy (not Rome), and skilfully contextualizes this against the influx into central Italy of enslaved North African people during the Punic Wars. By the time Clarke turns to theatres in Rome itself, she is in a strong position to argue, against the scholarly consensus, that there was little new about the Theatre of Pompey or those built under Augustus, except scale, grandeur and ideological purpose. Her book is a commanding debut.

T. P. Wiseman, on the other hand, has published more than thirty volumes on Roman literature and history, as well as many celebrated articles, some of which reappear in revised form in *The Lost History of Roman Theatre*. He has been transforming the field of Roman cultural history for over five decades, illuminating how, in the hands of Roman statesmen, myth was deployed as a political instrument, and stressing the importance of reconstructing unwritten or patchily documented cultural activity to retrieve Roman lived experiences. His new book is a collection of enquiries into theatre-related cultural phenomena across a period of more than a millennium, from Rome in the sixth century BCE to the precious antiquarian information preserved by the Byzantine civil servant John Lydus ("the Lydian") in the sixth century CE.

Wiseman's line on early Italian theatrical performances differs from Clarke's, in part because it is more focused on the city of Rome itself. It is based on a cogently argued case that Rome was originally part of the Greek cultural world. He points out that, following the expulsion of the last Roman king, Tarquin, public games (*ludi*) were organized at temples in temporary wooden auditoria at the start of the fifth century BCE; Dionysiac imagery proliferated by the fourth century; and festivals of Dionysus, the *Liberalia*, featured theatre games from the third. Wiseman's patchy sources occasionally necessitate speculation, but some of his conclusions are paradigm-shifting: satires and literary versions of Aesopic fables were designed for stage performance; the *ludi scaenici* (theatrical "games") functioned as forums for debating contemporary politics; Livy's narrative of the death of Rome's sixth king, Servius Tullius, was based on a stage play, complete with Tullia's bloodstained chariot. (In the story, his daughter drove her chariot over Servius' dead body.)

The word "lost" in Wiseman's title points to a potentially depressing emphasis. We simply cannot access numerous pieces of invaluable evidence: not only the plays by the republican dramatists Livius Andronicus, Naevius, Ennius, Pacuvius and Accius that have not survived, but also the sorely missed comedy *Phormio* by the poet Catullus, Varro's satires and Suetonius's treatise on Roman shows. The cumulative effect, however, is of a scholar in command of a staggering range of authors, painstakingly assembling isolated musical phrases to play us a whole symphony, combining diverse lost chords of Roman life. Its theatrical culture embraced indigenous performance types that did not fit into Greek categories, especially the "seriocomic" genres. We meet a parodist of Pythagorean lore whose stage persona claims to be Homer reincarnated, choruses of naked

girls singing obscenities at the *Ludi Florales* and a professional *scurra*, or dispenser of outrageous jests, who specialized in imitating pig noises. Respect is paid to the variety of languages in which Italian theatre performances took place, including Oscan and Etruscan. Wiseman is also on top of recent discoveries such as the site of the spring sacred to Anna Perenna on the outskirts of modern Rome, rediscovered in 1999 - bringing to life a cult and associated games previously known mainly from literary sources.

The only drawback to these authors' project of enmeshing theatre within wider Roman history is that the field becomes perilously large. It would be impossible for a single scholar to wield perfect control of the literary evidence as well as archaeological developments at the more than 1,000 sites and buildings described in Frank Sear's inestimable *Roman Theatres: An architectural study* (2006), in which examples from Italy itself are in the minority. Sear documented hundreds of theatres across the western provinces of the Roman Empire, in Greece, Asia and North Africa, from Lisbon (Olisipo) in the west and Catterick in the north to Comana in Cappadocia. No fewer than fifty-three theatres are attested for one of the six North African provinces - Africa Proconsularis - alone. While artefacts found in "theatre cities" such as Orange or Trier in the Gallic provinces are used by Wiseman to illustrate arguments, the issue of what they were doing there remains unaddressed. So does the environmental impact of the construction of all those theatres, which required incalculable amounts of timber, textiles, paint and stone. But these last remarks are not intended as criticisms. They are evidence for the extent to which both these fine books left this reader thirsting for more.

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