

## History and the *Histrion*

The theater, like other places of entertainment, has been linked to political displays throughout Rome's history. Elites sought (and often failed) to control theatrical applause (Horsfall 2003, 41-2). Attempts to understand the rapport between authorities and the people, however, has sometimes eclipsed the political relevance of theatrical actors, who were necessarily involved in spectacles at the theater. Ancient historians may also dismiss actors as *infames*. Despite these obstacles, I argue, evidence from early imperial histories, especially those written by Tacitus and Suetonius, suggests that actors had a significant part in contemporary politics. In addition to their public appearances, actors appeared in the retinues of the powerful, including in the imperial household. Their private influence parallels that of freedmen and astrologers, while conflict in the theater may have been a precursor to the circus riots of the later empire (Cameron 1976, 225-6). Early imperial historians' hostility toward actors was not simple elite prejudice, but a reflection of concerns about actors' political influence.

The reigns of Tiberus and Nero saw riots begun by theatrical *factiones* (Tac. *An.* 1.54.2, 1.77.1-4, 4.14.3; Suetonius *Tiberius* 37 and Tac. *An.* 13.24-25, 13.28.1; Suetonius *Nero* 16, respectively). These riots were not sparked by political conflict but created such unrest that emperors addressed them by having actors banished. Although a complete ban would have been difficult to enforce, the declaration speaks to the seriousness of the issue. Actors and the leaders of theatrical factions were understood to pose a serious risk. The ban is paralleled by expulsions of astrologers from Italy, which were meant to curb political danger without eliminating the practice of astrology and which may even have helped astrologers' careers (Ripat 2011, 136). Like astrologers, actors may have seemed politically dangerous within certain contexts.

Actors also parallel astrologers in their close connections to aristocratic households. Tacitus remarks disdainfully on the influence of astrologers in Tiberius' and Poppaea's households (*An.* 6.20-21, *Hist.* 1.22.1), in part because of their assumed fraudulence, in part because of their unearned influence. Actors fell into a similar category. Classified as *infames* by the Roman census, actors were assumed to be available for illicit sex. Mnester, who was Caligula's favorite and Messalina's adulterer, represents one intrusion of actors' sexuality into politics.<sup>1</sup> Mnester's involvement with Caligula is described as scandalous (Suet. *Caligula* 36, 55), although Mnester himself is not blamed. In his affair with Messalina, Mnester presents a threat to the emperor, albeit a much smaller one than that posed by her bigamous marriage to Gaius Silius (Tac. *An.* 11.28.1). As passive love-objects, actors might remain "in their place," but the spectacle of a prominent person in love with an actor could encourage public unrest, as Tacitus suggests happened even in Augustus' time (*An.* 1.54.2). These relationships were not just morally scandalous but liable to create political disturbances.

Historians record a few instances in which theatrical professionals became involved in overtly political matters. Tacitus attributes the incitement of the Pannonian mutiny to "a certain Percennius, formerly leader of a theatrical clique [...] taught to stir up crowds with his actorish enthusiasm"<sup>2</sup> (*Percennius quidam, dux olim theatralium operarum [...] miscere coetus histrionali studio doctus, An.* 1.16.3). Percennius' "actorish" qualities lead directly to his profound disorderly influence in the military. Another actor, Paris, acts as a legal agent of Domitia Lepida in a dispute with Agrippina (Tac. *An.* 13.19.4). Paris' task appears to have little

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<sup>1</sup> Mnester's identification as a *histrion* at *Annals* 11.28.1 is textually problematic. Suetonius repeatedly calls him a *pantomimus* (*Caligula* 36, 55, 57). I include him because Tacitus and Suetonius both conflate different types of performers (e.g., Tac. *An.* 1.73.2-3, Suet. *Augustus* 45).

<sup>2</sup> Translation from Woodman 2004.

to do with acting. Instead, a man of low status supports the political conflict of two high-status women, a reflection of elite fears of both women and actors. The actor's performance in the role of legal advocate is especially ominous, in that it reverses elite men's longstanding fear that their rhetorical skills may make them resemble actors. Here, the actor has literally assumed an elite role.

In conclusion, the evidence of Tacitus and Suetonius suggests that their criticisms of actors were based on political concerns beyond typical elite moralizing. The theater was contentious enough to cause serious disturbances in the city and individual actors attained status and personal influence as celebrities or associates of the imperial household. Although they were minor players in imperial politics, actors appear to have occupied a semi-coherent political category akin to that of astrologers or freedmen, and their place merits further study.

#### Works Cited

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- Ripat, Pauline. 2011. "Expelling Misconceptions: Astrologers at Rome." *Classical Philology* 106 (2): 115–54.