

## *Pestilentia* and Cultural Innovation in Livy's Account of Early Roman Theater

In his account of the origins of *ludi scaenici* ("stage plays") Livy posits a historically integral relationship between an outbreak of pestilence and Roman theatrical performances (Liv. 7.1-3; cf. Val. Max. 2.4.4). This paper examines Livy's account linking disease to the importation of Etruscan music and dance as part of a larger program, sustained throughout *Ab Urbe Condita*, of correlation between contagion and cultural innovation, especially artistic and religious (4.25; 4.30; 5.13-14; 10.47; 27.23; cf. 10.31). His account of the introduction of theater among the Roman populace in 364 BCE has often been cited by historians of Roman literature as evidence for the conditions of early dramatic performances (Duckworth 1952; Oakley 1998). However, aside from recognizing that Roman theater, like that of the Greeks, emerges from a religious context (Gruen 1992), scholars have left the function of these initial performances as a remedy for an especially severe *pestilentia* largely unexplored (cf. Feldherr 1998). Livy does not speculate on why such performances occurred to Romans as a means of propitiation, though it is possible that music here assumes its traditional function as an agent of healing, as has been argued for fifth-century Athenian tragedy after the plague of 430 BCE (Mitchell-Boyask 2008).

In the first part of this paper I demonstrate how Livy's account of *pestilentia* and Roman drama should be read as one of a series of endemic plagues allowing the historian to illustrate ingenuity of the Romans. In contrast to Thucydides' account of the Athenian plague imported from Ethiopia (Thuc. 2.47; cf. Crawford 1914), there is in Livy a distinct ambiguity concerning the origins of plague: the plague that necessitates Rome's *ludi scaenici* simply "arose" (*pestilentia ingens orta*, 7.1.7) during a remarkable period of absence of class strife (*sedition*) or war (*bellum*). With plague, the historian presents a new challenge, a departure from those crises—the struggle between the orders and wars waged against foreign enemies, *metus*

*hostilis*—more commonly identified as agents of Rome’s development (cf. Miles 1995). In so doing, he addresses a different kind of crisis for the fledgling state, one located within the civic body, whose terms cannot be articulated through simple oppositions between social classes or competing nations.

*Ludi scaenici* fail as a remedy for plague, and are only the second of a tripartite attempt to appease the gods, beginning with the *lectisternium* (7.2.2) and ending with a ceremonial driving of the nail into a tablet on the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus (7.3.5-9). Livy betrays his disdain for the popularity of *ludi* in his own day by remarking on the extravagances that accompany them; and yet he posits an initially salutary impulse behind the performance of *ludi* (*...ut appareret quam ab sano initio res in hanc vix opulentis regnis tolerabilem insaniam venerit*, 7.2.13). The juxtaposition of *sanum initium* (a “healthy beginning”) with contemporary *insania* allows the historian, on the one hand, to redirect his excursus on early Roman theater back to the crisis of illness in 364 BCE that frames the account; on the other hand, such references, combined with the language of origins and development (*origo, principia, initium*), recall his programmatic defense of history in the *praefatio*, which implicitly identifies the historian’s craft as one of the few *remedia* Rome’s current conditions will tolerate. In the second half of this paper I argue that, contrary to disparaging accounts of his treatment of the pestilence motif (Grimm 1965), Livy’s treatment of plague prompts readers to view these recurring episodes in light of the larger programmatic metaphor positing Rome as body politic in need of *remedia* (Woodman 1988; cf. Woodman 2009 and Dutoit 1948). As such, the crisis of *pestilentia*, with its various missteps, successes, and innovations that have led to current excess, is offered as a *mis-en-abîme* of the development of Rome itself.

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