The Culture of the Roman Plebs

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4. Culture without education; education without school

Popular culture at Rome is best understood in the context of the various ways by which it is acquired; 'education' is clearly not the right word and 'acculturation' is a specialist term with a different meaning. Most of the next three chapters will, though, be taken up by the various activities, music aside, which interacted to inform and indeed to constitute popular culture. A little recognisable education and a fair bit of fun, but surprisingly little inert, passive reception (in a modern, couch potato sense) of ready-provided mass entertainment: even the arena, after all, entailed social contact, political demonstration, betting and the strong, public, mass play of the emotions.

Take, then, military service, in times of war and peace alike: for example, Polybius refers specifically to 8,800 Roman soldiers (including 400 cavalry) stationed at Tarentum and in Sicily, at the same time, in 223 BC. How much Greek did they have to learn? How much could they have learned? Clearly, enough to keep bed and cup filled, means permitting. Or was there at least in some cases a more ample, inevitable acculturation? Modern analogies and ancient linguistic evidence rather suggest that this possibility was not mere sentimental opti-
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is important to our enquiry is not so much active Roman participation in the cultural life of the late Hellenistic world as the slow cumulative effect of prolonged business contacts between Greeks and Romans, both in Greece and in Italy, in the context of business language and the terminology of wares sold. Our studies of Hellenisation at Rome have in general concentrated far too much on the aristocracy, on philosophy, on literature. In a helpfully provocative moment, however, the late Harry Jocelyn remarked that as instrument of Hellenisation a pastrycook was no less important than a philosopher.

The endless discussions of the size of Rome’s population are not essential to this argument; the figure of 150,000 prisoners taken by Aemilius Paullus in his defeat of Macedonia (168 BC) is recorded, and is likely to conceal a fairly substantial number of Macedonians actually shipped to Rome and Italy, an influx meaningless as a statistic but significant as a symbol of a continuous flow of Greek-speaking manpower into Italy. The tendency of immigrants to cluster by place of origin is familiar from our modern evidence (New York, Rome, London …) but for ancient Rome the evidence is less clear. Was an ancient insula (block of flats) a complete racial mix, or not? In modern Rome, for what the analogy is worth, you still quite often get a dominant group in a given palazzo (block), from (for example) Sardinia, still deriving from the great wave of post-war immigration and a vision of (ancient) Roman landings and courtyards as the cradles of linguistic and cultural integration is not to be dismissed as fanciful. Similar acculturation may also have occurred inside a slave familia, but since Greek was in fact the dominant language for many of the

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forms of work in which Greeks, slave, freed, and free, engaged, it is eminently possible that they rather Hellenised their Italian (or African, Gallic, Spanish …) neighbours. Our very copious literary and epigraphic evidence may tend to lead us to an excessively limited definition of the Greeks’ role as vitiorum ministeria, the work-force of the vices; recent studies have indeed given specificity and substance to those specialised trades in which Greeks, or at least Greeks with a natural aptitude in those directions, tended to concentrate—vintners, musicians, jewellers, cooks, architects, actors, prostitutes (of whatever gender). That led naturally to a strong Greek element in the Latin terminology and to a marked element of xenophobia in the Moral Reaction. To talk of luxury, or of sex, at Rome led you naturally to the use of Greek. But apart from titbits and endearments, Greek had a profound impact on the language of medicine, of building, and indeed of farming. We should not forget those hundreds of thousands of Greek slaves who had toiled on the land—and now continued to do so in the appalling conditions of a rural ergastulum, or estate worked by chain-gang (itself from the Greek, ergazein, to toil).

The presence of Greek elements in vulgar Latin entails various complications that rule out swift and simple generalisations. In documents that derive from military contexts—the two principal collections are those from Bu Njem and Windolanda—there is very little Greek influence, for reasons already discussed (see n. 10) and this same state of affairs also obtains in purely commercial contexts—like the pottery works of La Graufesenque in the Tarn valley and the wholesale trading settlement of Magdalensberg in Carinthia, apart
from the Greek names in current use for certain objects. Much more surprising is how little Greek influence there is in the vocabulary of the graffiti of Pompeii,\(^{32}\) in sharp contrast with the world of Petronius’ *Cena Trimalchionis*, a remarkably realistic portrait, so far as we can tell, of nearby Puteoli written some fifteen years before the eruption of AD 79.\(^{33}\) in which the literary representation of the language used by the freedmen over dinner is often a sort of half-Greek patois.\(^{34}\) Naples, on the road from Puteoli to Pompeii, was a *Graeca urbs*,\(^{35}\) a real urban centre of Greek culture, where the whole way of life (*diagoge*) was still strongly Greek according to Strabo, writing under Augustus;\(^{36}\) from Naples, a marked Greek influence spread widely through the Osco-Latin peoples of the hinterland. Juvenal notoriously declared to his fellow-citizens (3.60f.) that he was sick of a Greek Rome (*non possum ferre, Quirites,/ Graecam urbem*). If we were to conclude that at least in some of the cities or towns of central Italy under the early empire the dominant culture was to some extent bilingual,\(^{37}\) we would not be far wrong, even though we cannot establish any sort of solid chronological structure for the growth and decline of the phenomenon.

Above all, the examples cited of significant borrowing of words are not case-studies for refined philological analysis but rather linguistic phenomena which have to be explained by some form of solid, prolonged social contact,\(^{38}\) some context in which humble Romans, of whatever origin, naturally absorb Greek words. Lists of linguistic borrowings (be they unguents, undies, exotic foods or precious stones!) are profoundly exciting, for each presupposes a historical context of acculturation, a social reality towards which we are reaching.

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In the Roman melting-pot, anyone could go to see Greek athletics,\(^{39}\) Greek theatre, and (slightly mysterious) Greek ludi, possibly neither theatre nor athletics, but dance or music.\(^{40}\) The theatre was indeed remarkable: twice\(^{41}\) Suetonius refers to ‘actors of all languages’; you don’t say ‘all’ if you only mean ‘two’ and thus, apart from Latin, we have to take into account\(^{42}\) stage-plays in (1) Etruscan, (2) Greek and (3) Oscan! The first is a scrap of information sent to perplex us, for Volnus ‘wrote Etruscan tragedies’, *tragoediae Tuscas scripsit* (Varro *Ling. Lat.* 5.55). ‘In Etruscan’? ‘On Etruscan topics’? When? For whom? We have really no idea. In the late first century BC, the teenage actress Eucharis Licinia had appeared on the Greek stage, *scaena Graeca*,\(^{43}\) and Cicero casts doubt on the popularity of Greek actors (n. 40), yet it looks likely that such performances, known in Marius’ time, went on until the Augustan period. Writing under Augustus, Strabo tells us (5.3.6) that at certain festivals poems in Oscan were still acted on stage and performed like mimes. Cicero confirms the existence of performances in Oscan,\(^{44}\) presumably something much like the Atellan farce (itself a kind of *commedia dell’ arte*). Were Greek plays put on for the cultivated elite and the immigrants? Was there not much text in the Oscan (?)farces, or were the theatres loyally packed with residents of Oscan origin? One can well understand farce performed in individual neighbourhoods, but less easily plays ‘in Greek’, if that is, literally, what Suetonius implies. Out of this morass of problems, it emerges only that some sort of popular stage performances in languages other than Latin were available in Rome in the late republic, for those who wanted – or were just curious.
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Oscan farces may have seemed rather impenetrable to Syrian immigrants, but we are beginning to learn something of the great range of entertainments on offer, some of a surprisingly high cultural level: it will not have been easy for the man in the Roman street to avoid contact with all and every one, at least between, roughly, AD 50 and 100. These are the years for which we have most evidence for the diversity of popular entertainments available, a density of textual material (Seneca, Juvenal, Martial, Pliny, Petronius, Plutarch, Dio Chrysostom) which might lead us correctly (or wrongly; we just don’t quite know) to the impression of some sort of boom in popular culture in those years.

The theatre is perhaps our focal point for considering the ‘cultural education’ of the plebs, but too much theatre could lead to quite the wrong sort of image of the whole process and for that reason we begin with some rather less obvious channels of the transmission of words, ideas, images, and stories. To begin, then, with the wandering philosopher, first attested, through a fog of obscure polemic, in Cicero’s time: he writes of Epicurean followers of one Amafinius, who have ‘occupied all Italy’,\(^{45}\) while Cassius reproaches him with ‘so many country Stoics’, \textit{rusticos Stoicos}.\(^{46}\) These men were the earliest forerunners of that great crowd of popular preachers of Cynicism (in particular) and Stoicism which seems to have filled Italy under the early empire.\(^{47}\) Cassius’ complaint defies precise definition; the phrasing may point to the countryside, literally, or to some uncouthness of style and thought. But these first hedgerow sages seem actually to have been less rare on the ground than Cicero’s two references suggest, for the mime, a fundamentally popular type of theatre, at a modest intellectual level (p. 60) seems to have been full of allusions to philosophical ideas, at least in simple formulations, with a definite vein of curiosity about Pythagoreanism.\(^{48}\) And not the mime alone, for there is a good deal of philosophy, simplified but recognisable, in the graffiti of Pompeii, on metrical epitaphs, in the inscriptions of boards for \textit{xii scripta} (p. 76f.), in proverbs, on the inscription of a Boscoreale cup and in the tippy meditations of Trimalchio’s guests.\(^{49}\)

Philosophers, and poets. The poets are no less problematic, for what we know of them depends largely upon evidence from the satirists who will not tell us what percentage of the plebs could hear them,\(^{50}\) though I have wondered whether they did not also recite better poets’ pieces when they ran out of their own and whether their labours might help to explain in part the diffusion of metrical graffiti and inscriptions (cf. p. 64).\(^{51}\) It suits the satirists to suggest that such poets were pretty much omnipresent, in the markets, in the baths, in the Circus Maximus and even, according to Martial, in pursuit of a more captive audience in the multi-seater latrines.\(^{52}\) Elsewhere, of course, you were freer to escape the wandering versifier, but their very existence confirms a basic and neglected distinction between contact with literature, generously defined, and direct contact with written texts (of some sort). Indeed scholars have tended to underestimate the contexts in which a plebeian might encounter (willy-nilly, even) literature as performance.\(^{53}\) During the \textit{cena Trimalchionis}, wandering \textit{Homeristae} performed travesties of the epics, such as survive on papyrus scraps;\(^{54}\) the master of the house himself, in some way aware of a fashion becoming daily more fashionable for improvised poetic composition,\(^{55}\) has a go at emulating, in his
own way, such masters of the art as that Archias whom Cicero
defended and the poet Statius and that a rich freedman might do so does not seem absurd to Petronius. If even Trimalchio
might be represented thus, we could begin to wonder what
might, realistically, have happened at a social reunion of the
senior clerks of some imperial secretariat.

If we mount to slightly more ‘respectable’ levels of perform-
ance, we are beset by an abundance of evidence: thus, dramatic
performances of Virgil’s Bucolics began even during the poet’s
lifetime and continued down to the time of St Augustine, not to
touch pantomimes (see below, p. 15) on Virgilian themes. Public readings from the Aeneid went on in Rome until the seventh century AD. But almost more surprising is the
detail preserved for us by Aulus Gellius, that there was a
reading of the Annals of Ennius in the theatre of Puteoli, a busy
port and commercial centre, but set on a coastline sought-after
for fashionable holidays and graced by the presence of occasional
distinguished philosophers. The choice of Ennius, rather than Virgil, makes a point, clearly, at the height of the
Romans’ passion for their archaic literary past, but it is the
choice of a theatre rather than the much smaller odeion that
strikes the reader: this was perforce a performance that
expected the sort of numbers that might ordinarily come to a
pantomime. We can easily imagine Ovid’s Heroides on the
stage, either as some form of dramatic reading of the actual
text or as the basis for a pantomime. It is easy enough to
imagine the popular appeal that Virgil, even Ovid might have
continued to exercise (cf. Shakespeare, or Verdi in Italy).
Readings of Statius’ Thebaid and Achilleid had, I suspect,
much more of an élite appeal, but the fact remains that such

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public readings did exist and the text of Statius was offered for
the enjoyment of anyone willing to enter the auditorium (or
to peer round the doors), illiterates not excluded. That goes
for any reading of any author, of course.

A remark made by Apuleius has not received due attention:
if you go to the odeion (?) you will see a mime, a ropewalker,
a juggler, a comedy, a tragedy, or a philosophical discourse.
Was the whole programme known in its entirety to the whole
audience before the show began? It is odd that we have lots of
gladiatorial programmes, and even some lists of market-days
in the towns of a given area, but no hint – unless I have been
looking in the wrong places for ten years – at the form or
content of the programme for a theatre or odeion. Recent
discussions of what was offered in the theatres of Pompeii and
Ostia take refuge in general statements; Dio Cassius tells us
that under Commodus a prostitute dressed as a leopard was
on show in the Ostia theatre. And that is all.

Recently, the circulator has been tried out as a magic key to
unlock several mysteries of Roman literary history (cf. p.
98f.); the bare facts, though, are interesting enough: the
circulator is a street entertainer or busker who draws about
him a circulus, even in the Forum; the circulus is, literally,
the little circle of hearers and they are held by a wide variety
of turns; such circulatores would seem, naturally, a key
element in any definition of the ‘culture of the common
people’, but when a circulator reads a text, prose or poetry,
sings, or recounts a myth, he acts as a link between his
hearers and the world of theatre and books, after the manner
of the actor, or the professional lector (reader), or the areta-
logus (storyteller; literally, ‘teller of marvels’).
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By this point, we may be a little less disconcerted by the idea that the Roman theatre might have had (not deliberately, of course!) some kind of actual pedagogic function. Thus we return to the public of Plautus and Terence in the playwrights’ lifetime and to the revival of second-century drama of which Cicero tells us so much; for the period 210-160 BC, we have the texts of the plays and virtually nothing else; for the revivals, anything but the texts; as a result, the social history of the Roman theatre is not easily written. The plebeian who really wanted to see Miles Gloriosus or Eunuchus was able to do so, though perhaps not always at the first performance (p. 13). The public was rich and varied, including (ex-)soldiers, women, children, nurses, tarts, slaves, magistrates’ escorts. However, that at least a good part of the audience understood a fair bit of Greek mythology is a necessary inference from the allusions in the texts and from the extravagant variations upon more orthodox versions of familiar myths. Without widespread understanding of the originals, far too large a part of the mythological references would have been little more than a tedious show of useless erudition, and such understanding is easily explained if the public of comedy also regularly frequented the tragic theatre. Plautus Bacchides 925ff. presupposes Ennius’ Andromache, and indeed verse 933 actually cites the earlier play. Nor should we forget either mythological art (p. 90) or epic poetry, publicised by circulatores or public readings, though neither seems remotely as credible a means of painless mass coaching in Greek myth as a programme of regular visits to the theatre.

This is not to suggest that the mass public went to the theatre so as to learn Greek myth. There were indeed attractions of a very different order, but there is no profound incompatibility between unblushing delight taken in the most lurid special effects, flames, storms, battles, droves of animals, ghosts and a genuine love for the old tragedies. Had Aristotle lived to see Ennius performed at Rome, he might not have written of the collective purging of the spectators’ emotions, but the cool observer could hardly have failed to miss a deep and genuine enthusiasm, perhaps seen most clearly in the revivals of the Ciceronian age: when Pompey’s theatre was opened in 55 BC, Accius’ Clytemnestra and (?)Naevius’ Trojanus were performed, with, predictably, lavish special effects, spectacular proof of a deep-rooted cultural conservatism.

It should not be thought that aristocratic magistrates were stuffing unwelcome old plays into the maws of a reluctant public; such plays can hardly have been chosen at random, or to bore the audience, and some degree of active concern to meet popular taste is overwhelmingly likely, even though the conventional view of the outlay entailed as being an investment towards re-election is now vigorously challenged. The ample scale of the late-republican revivals of comedy and tragedy meant, naturally, that just as 150 years before, tragedy taught the public the mythology that comedy presupposed; that public was moreover ever more familiar with the Greek world of the comedies thanks of course to immigration, to military service, and to commerce. But it is generally agreed that this revived enthusiasm for the old plays began to decline very noticeably in the first years of the empire and this decline went hand in hand with an altogether new popular enthusiasm for the pantomime, a ballet for soloists, with a
strong mimetic element, accompanied by a text performed by
the chorus. It is very likely that the new form – new, that is, at Rome – simply pushed out the old. Pantomime clearly contained far less text than traditional tragedy and comedy and made less strictly intellectual demands upon its public, but that reduction entailed no corresponding loss of the ability to arouse (and to satisfy) strong collective emotional reactions or to take root as strongly as the old plays had done in the social memory. The titles of very numerous pantomimes on mytho-
llogical themes are preserved. The popularity of the genre lasted half a millennium, roughly, on a prodigious scale; its spread was unlimited and effectively unchallenged (Caesarius after all kept trying, to little effect, p. 16f.); that entailed the mass diffusion of the mythological stories retold and the general memorisation, under ideal circumstances, of the songs (p. 15).

But if we return to the late republic and early empire, it
would be quite wrong to imagine that a popular audience
reacted only when faced with lurid effects and extravagant emotionality. We have seen that there was a philosophical vein even on gaming-boards and in the mime (p. 55); a certain ethical severity on the comic and tragic stage was also ap-
preciated (even if not always followed at home); a good
sententia, the pithy formulation of a moral truth, aroused applause; grief could spread throughout the auditorium; the magnanimity of Orestes and Pylades in Pacuvius’ Chryse aroused ‘the greatest expressions of admiration’, admirationes maximas, and the audience stood to applaud. This is not the moment to attribute to the Roman plebs widespread and profound moral seriousness, or a universal interest in abstract

thought, but there does really seem to be evidence to confirm a certain general interest in moral or ethical issues, so long as they were pitifully expressed and not too shocking. The mime also offered its audience sex in abundance (p. 80); a single, Roman, public relished both the elevated and the horizontal.

That vast public in the Roman world unable, for whatever reason, or (though formally literate) unwilling to read those prose and verse texts which have survived down to modern times (which are largely of high literature and of fine quality) nevertheless brought home a wide and varied amalgam of words and notions heard in the street (p. 98), in the inn (p. 15), in the theatre (ib.), at a banquet of his collegium (p. 33): None of this of course was performe solidly memorised or deeply absorbed, but what stuck was the result of mass culture; of a kind, was a real Roman social memory, however barren, slender, pre-modern. There emerge both some rather surpris-

ing links (cf. further ch. 5) with the cultural world of the élite and some perhaps less expected distancing (in a superior direction!) from the glorious portrait, parody, travesty of nouveau riche mores that we get in Petronius’ Cena Trimalchionis.

But I have no desire to offer an impression of the Roman
plebs as prim and virtuous in their theatregoing: at most, I
offer some evidence to be borne in mind which should suggest a certain open-mindedness on popular tastes, and not always towards the low and lewd. To conclude this chapter, though, we must look at the classic anecdotes, however tricky to interpret, which have hitherto served to block attempts to upgrade our views of popular preferences in Rome’s theatres.

The theatre public’s show-stopping cries of ‘Bears, bears,
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now' or ‘Stop; bring on the boxers', or 'Gladiators!!!' or even 'We want tightrope-walkers' still ring in our ears; we do not know if the scenes were unusual, or typical, organised or spontaneous, of political origin (to embarrass the magistrate responsible for the show), or cultural (a straight protest against tedium, a call for simple fun). But it is worth looking briefly at the alternatives requested to see what elucidation of the scenes they offer. Bears and tightrope-walkers do not conventionally belong to the theatre at all; their affinity is rather with the world of circulatores, buskers or travelling entertainers (p. 98). There are tightrope-walkers in Horace, but he does not locate them; indeed they are first solidly attested in a theatre at the time of St Augustine. And that cry for bears is not attested quite as solidly as we might wish, for behind Horace's *aut ursum aut pugiles*, there lurk the eagerly-awaited boxers of Terence *Hecyra* 33, onto whom Horace, who knew and loved his Terence, has stitched bruin, by way of a modest variation or 'improvement'. Boxers likewise stagger a little when examined: apparently coming from Etruria, they had long been known at Rome, and belong solidly to the world of ludi publici or to the semi-organised brawling of the back streets. Gladiators, in turn, expected by the *Hecyra*'s public (or so the rumour went) on the second performance (38ff.), belong originally to improvised enclosures in the Forum and then to amphitheatres, not theatres. Terence seems (as does Horace, if his evidence is to be treated as independent) to be lamenting behaviour by a crowd determined upon entertainment which they could never hope to get, however long they sat and booed, in their theatre. A preference for bears over the *Hecyra* might even count as fair criticism, were the two entertainments comparable; as it is, try to imagine the expression of a preference for baseball over Bach in the auditorium of your choice. The crowd bawls very deliberately for the impossible, to create chaos and to prevent the performance; Terence was appreciated in his age, and *Hecyra* is not so profoundly inferior to *Andria* and *Eumachia* (the favourites). There is something else going on that we have lost: word has gone out to block the performance and to make it look good. Why, we do not know; the key to the episode, whether political, social, financial or literary, is lost.
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Fun for all

If you follow Latin literature (as conventionally understood) on its (arguably downhill) path towards popular culture, you are struck, amid much else, by a marked and initially disconcerting increase of anonymity. Many names of actors and pantomimes are known, whereas if you ask who wrote the songs sung in the sausage-shops of Bordeaux (p. 137, n. 4), or indeed of Rome, not to mention theatre-songs, triumphal chants, salacious epigrams on the vices of consuls and emperors, and unsigned metrical epitaphs, along with those hypothetical but seductive pattern-books of epitaphs which probably hung from nails in the corners of many stonemasons’ workshops across the empire and, lastly, those thousands of graffiti, many in verse and quite a few genuinely witty, recovered from the walls of Pompeii and elsewhere, ephemera fossilised in the hands of epigraphists, there are no named authors, but at last a few fairly persuasive hypotheses. I had thought not so much of signed epitaphs (for such authors are not necessarily authors by trade) as of the not very many epitaphs we have of ‘So-and-so, poet’, that is to say one who exercised the business of being a local poet (and perhaps never wrote that vast epic upon the defeat of Boadicea). ‘Poet’ that is, as a recognisable label under which to pass a life; perhaps too a part-time label, as the analogy of Inscr. Lat. Sel. 7763 might suggest: a schoolteacher who drew up wills after work. That does not really bring us any closer to understanding just who really prepared for mass use the wonderful range of chants, insults, acclamations and ‘songs’, whose potential for being organised and launched we have already discussed (p. 38f.). Certainly under the empire, our really quite substantial surviving remains of – let us call it, the ephemeral poetry of protest, show definite, visible traces of linguistic and metrical skill, which do suggest the activity of one or more expert hands in preparation before they were put into circulation. Another line of approach, potentially most rewarding, lies in the metrical unity (p. 38) of carmina triumphalia, riddles, children’s songs (p. 46) and numerous proverbs, enriched by alliteration, rhyme, wordplay and the like: lines wonderfully well-suited to memorisation and performance, as we have seen reason to suspect. It may seem paradoxical, but while we have a fair idea of what there was in the ‘social memory’ of the Roman plebs, we are only now trying to work out how that memory was awakened and fed; ‘alternatives to literacy’ (p. 48ff.) are not easy to track down for a society we have now to try to understand chiefly on the basis of written materials.

We were raised on ‘the cultural horizons of the aristocracy’, and it comes naturally still to Roman historians to write (I select, strenuously) ‘there was no such thing as “popular literature” in the Roman empire’ or ‘how far down the ladder one has to go before reaching those to whom books were wholly inaccessible it is hard to say’; in such a context, it would seem natural to study only (for example) the Hellenisation of the super-literate. But there have now been a few
faint utterances of protest against this apparently unchallengeable chorus of received wisdom,\textsuperscript{16} and it might at last be time to offer a first tentative sketch to define the Romans' 'culture of the underprivileged'.\textsuperscript{17}

There is, behind the quotations just offered, a widely-credited model of Roman cultural life which still haunts our studies: of an unquestionable and irreversible hierarchy, with, in the remote distance at the top end, an aristocratic minority which exercises complete control, politically, economically, and therefore culturally. This minority enjoys full and instant access to all literary forms and indeed controls most aspects of literary production, while the vast majority is bullied, exploited, poor and therefore naturally condemned by economic circumstances, aristocratic bullying and political manipulation to – if not illiteracy proper,\textsuperscript{18} then at least to a profound degree of intellectual impoverishment inevitably imposed by the accumulation of political and financial handicaps, with, as an inescapable result, ignorance of political life and further electoral manipulation. We might be allowed to except a handful of the 'poor but able' – grammarians, vets, accountants and surveyors\textsuperscript{19} – but they are not thought seriously to affect the vast Us/Them divide. Those who have read this far will realise that that such a model is losing its capacity to convince – and not me alone (cf. n. 16). The \textit{plebs} are re-acquiring a powerful role in late republican politics (p. 20f.), and not without difficulty there begin to emerge the outlines of a 'parallel' culture, in its own way rich, varied and robustly vigorous: it has little enough to do with those literary texts which have bequeathed to us such a magnificent set of cultural and social blinkers (p. 28ff.), but rests rather on theatre, games in various

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senses, music, songs, dance, memory and has amply demonstrated its ability to survive almost unaltered at least into late antiquity (p. 23f.). Horace's infinitely memorable Volteius Mena (p. 28) was not, I suspect, fascinated by the subtleties of elegiac diction, nor by the Greek erudition hidden in the texts of Livius Andronicus and Naevius,\textsuperscript{20} but that did not condemn him to a bottomless pit of boundless cultural inferiority. Horace tells us (\textit{Epist.} 1.7.59) that Volteius enjoyed the \textit{ludi}; I could believe that such a man might have visited the theatre, have enjoyed the mime, have sung songs as he cleaned his fingernails, even have visited a dramatic performance of that recent hit, Virgil's \textit{Bucolica}. At dinner with Marcus Philippus, why should he not have quoted some \textit{carmina triumphalia}, some irreverent political epigrams, even a handful of cherished couplets of Catullus?\textsuperscript{21} Cicero's speeches to a popular audience reveal after all, flatteries apart, a thoughtful and considered sense of their actual intelligence and knowledge (p. 85f.).

Hitherto, we have not considered the Romans' ample and varied 'common fund' or 'middle ground'\textsuperscript{22} not only of entertainments both public and private but of activities not unreasonably to be described as 'cultural' and enjoyed at all levels of society. No optimistic, democratic hypothesis, this: at the theatre (amphitheatre, circus) there was division of the seating by status, grudgingly considered, then reconsidered, and meticulously prescribed,\textsuperscript{23} a visible discrimination rendered yet more important by the extraordinary popularity and huge crowds these occasions could attract, but all were united by venue and by the spectacle, whether race, fight or play: tarts and empresses could share, and were seen to share emotions,
in public, even though huge variations in upbringing and education will have led to some variations even in reaction to the unifying spectacle. Augustus was careful not to repeat Caesar’s mistake of taking official business to the various entertainments;\textsuperscript{24} he went to be seen, and apparently to relish too. Equality before the spectacle might seem less dramatic, though, than equality in the water: an extreme sign of imperial \textit{comitas}, graciousness, was to visit the public baths;\textsuperscript{25} no doubt status could even there be expressed by towels, nails, haircut, grooming, number of attendants, comportment, to be weighed up against the simple facts of shared nudity and shared water.

Of course similarly nuanced and stratified reaction will emerge, at whatever entertainment, game or cultural experience we choose to look. For though the soldier after his couple of years in garrison at Tarentum (p. 48) is likely to be a bilingual, in some sense, he is not to be compared to Publius Licinius Crassus Mucianus, consul 131 BC, who is said to have had perfect command of five versions (\textit{genera}) of Greek: classical, \textit{koina} (standard post-Classical usage), and three dialects, I imagine.\textsuperscript{26} The amount of Greek (words, things, ideas) in Plautus’ plays shows that he did not reckon the soldier a spectator at home solely and exclusively in the Roman world (p. 49). Stratification emerges very clearly in the unlikely terrain of works on farming: Virgil’s \textit{Georgics} are not about farming at all, in a didactic sense, as an infinitely refined and difficult poem about the country and about ethical values.\textsuperscript{27} They contain a little good counsel for the farmer, unhelpfully arranged. Varro’s \textit{Res Rusticae} were written, I suspect, for a class of new proprietors, men who had emerged on top after the civil wars and proscriptions and wanted to make the most of their new holdings, though ignorant of the countryside, of the technical jargon, of the right way to go about doing things, and perhaps above all of the gentle art of not leaving everything in the bailiff’s hands.\textsuperscript{28} Moving down, we come to the head-goatherds (\textit{magistri pecoris}) to whom Varro refers (\textit{Res rust.} 2.3.8), who are to carry written instructions (\textit{quaedam scripta}) to consult in case of wounds or sickness among their beasts. As a result, a wide range of manuals (on farming, accountancy, veterinary medicine, and so on) at all cultural and economic levels were available.\textsuperscript{29}

The wide range of Latin proverbs presupposes, as has been clear for a while, an analogous range in the level of their users;\textsuperscript{30} expressions like ‘mules in the ditch’ or ‘playing \textit{morra}\textsuperscript{11} in the dark’ do clearly imply a cultural background markedly different from ‘harder than adamant’ or ‘Hylblaean bees’. But we need to look at such hierarchies with some degree of scepticism and humanity, to take account of the landowner who enjoyed his farm bailiff’s colourful speech,\textsuperscript{32} or the dealer in used clothes (it is hard to forget Volteius Mena) who happened to be in the theatre when Ovid’s \textit{Heroides} were performed (p. 56) and remained struck by the comparison (2.137) with the hardness of adamant. We are not, therefore, going to be able to shuffle and sort all our proverbs by income brackets.

Cicero lavished heavy mockery upon a kind of dramatic banquet in which Euripides, Menander, Socrates and Epicurus took part, though not, apparently, all at once:\textsuperscript{33} ‘figures separated not by years but by centuries’ he grumbled, ‘an author no less ignorant than his public’. And so on. But if the anachronism had actually been the key to the whole comical, and
promising, encounter? The occasionally humourless statesman may simply have preferred to miss the point. Under Tiberius, one Asellius Sabinus was richly rewarded by a delighted emperor for his humorous dialogue between a mushroom, a fig-picker, an oyster and a thrush; if you want to argue from, or for, cultural hierarchies, there are problems when the emperor himself is a man of limited, even of coarse tastes.

Even without so much as sketching a social stratification of Roman humour, it will soon become clear enough that several ‘popular’ forms of humour enjoyed surprising upward mobility. The *parasitus*, or professional scrounger, in Plautus’ *Persa* claims to have a hamper full of books of jokes; just possibly such books reflect actual Roman usage (and in that case they will hardly have been for general circulation), but more probably they reflect upon the *parasitus*’ lack of mother wit. More promisingly, the coarse humour of the *scoura*, or buffoon seems to have been adopted (at least that is what our possibly biased sources claim) by a number of minor figures in the political life of the late republic, such as Sextus Naevius, *scoura* and auctioneer, adversary of the Quintius whom Cicero defended in his first surviving speech, or Granius, both auctioneer and *familiaris*, companion of Crassus the orator (father of the triumvir): Granius’ wit Cicero analyses favourably in the *De oratore*. Let us not forget that the *scoura* Sarmentus is part of Maecenas’ suite, along with Horace, Virgil, Plotius and Varrius, on their famous journey to Brundisium. Horace offers us a literary reworking of his clash with the Oscans, let us call him, stand-up comic Messius Cicirrus. Clearly, the context is significant: Horace presents Sarmentus as a sort of (perfectly acceptable) ‘court buffoon’ in a text which clearly enough tries to idealise the life-style of Maecenas and his companions. Statesmen are to be seen to enjoy the company of leading poets, and likewise of stand-up comics.

A century passes, and we reach Petronius: my attempt to explain that the humour of the freedmen in the *Cena* is portrayed as not altogether deserving of the elite reader’s lofty contempt has been received quite generously: Petronius has indeed a certain – slightly appalled, perhaps – sympathy with the freedmen and if we leap to the usual conclusion that the ‘educated reader’ (even worse, the reader at court) will, naturally, of course, have found the entire episode grotesque and boorish in tone, then we risk debasing and trivialising the entire episode. The play of sympathies and satire is intricate and merits reading as such. There is no doubting that the freedmen are represented as truly loving their language and way of speaking; their relish for life and for words far outstrips their grammar. They are not represented as linguistically handicapped or economically disadvantaged by their cultural backwardness and the entertainments offered at dinner make us suspect that Trimalchio has heard how things are done in the real, cultivated world and seeks if not to imitate that world, then to show that he is well able to provide the same sort of thing. Thus he knows – not clearly or correctly, but he knows – that during and after dinner all his guests shall enjoy an entertainment, *acroma*, or indeed several, and that in this context, actors are much appreciated. Trimalchio’s *acroamata* constitute a sort of heroic approximation to polite usage; ‘imitation’ might suggest a certain seriousness of intent which I am not sure he is to be allowed. Because of the odd, confused way in which our sources are transmitted, we find
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that chance has focused our attention on two opposed cultural extremes, the world of Trimalchio and, in contrast, that monument to commitment, seriousness and correct good taste which we find in Pliny's Letters or Plutarch's Quaestiones conviviales. Thus, on account of the hand of chance in transmitting our evidence, we tend to forget that between the extremes there once ran a long sequence of gently declining (or ascending) cultural correctness, represented by (for example) the banquets of the collegia (p. 33), or the centurions' mess in a legionary camp (p. 110). Quite serious, culturally, quite ambitious – or not; there are too many uncertainties that make it impossible for us to guess or to generalise. But the existence of many kinds of troupe of travelling actors in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds makes it possible for us to view in slightly more concrete terms the existence of a long sliding scale of 'cultural values' on which a shrewd troupe of actors could judge upon the moment the precise level at which they would be performing that evening, at least if all went according to plan.

Appendix: the issue of literacy

An acute reader of Horsfall (1995) remarked to me that I had said nothing about literacy. Was the culture of the plebs literate or not? It was not a text-based culture, and rested upon memory rather than active literacy (whether as writer or as reader); the latter was indeed, if I am at all right, in some measure irrelevant. So, in passing, Horsfall (1998). It was a great merit of W.V. Harris' book of 1989 to open up energetic debate on the issue of literacy at Rome; Horsfall (1991) is one of a number of responses gathered in a single volume while Thomas (1992), 158ff. presumably appeared too soon to realise how controversial the issue had become. Harris, in terms of sociology and statistics, makes a very powerful case for a strikingly low level of literacy in the period under discussion, while I suggested that such an approach inevitably skewed, and was skewed by the peculiar state of our (ample) evidence and the way it was transmitted. Now that the passion seems to have gone out of the discussion, we may even wonder whether any real progress was made, except in bringing a lot of evidence to more general notice; see e.g. J. Bodel in (ed. J.B.) Epigraphic evidence (London 2001), 15f. for a polite summary. More evidence has come to hand (and of course yet more will be uncovered, thanks to excavations and by sitting in libraries): the acute reader cited above (Nicholas Purcell) drew my attention to Tac. Ann. 16.22, the acta diurna read in the provinces and in the army to find out what Thrasea Paetus did not do. So too, the recently-published S.C. de Pisone patre contains elaborate provisions for its publication throughout cities, provinces and legions (lines 170ff.; see e.g. H. Flower, Class. Ant. 17 (1998), 156f.). But any two competent players starting from precisely these positions on this particular intellectual chessboard will necessarily draw. Neither text specifies the scale of its anticipated readership (cf. Thomas (1992), 164ff. for an introduction to the issue of the publication of official documents). The scale of public meetings in the Forum is not at all clear (p. 87); the scale of the anticipated readership of publicly-posted documents in the city of Rome is equally uncertain (cf. Horsfall (1991), 70). The dramatic descriptions of crowds 'reading the lists of the names of the proscribed' do
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not specify how large a proportion of the crowd could see the list, or could read it if they could see it (Horsfall (1991), 70, M. Corbier, in L'Urbs (Coll. Ec. Fr. Rome, Roma 1987), 43ff., Dio Cassius frag. 109.14 (Loeb ed., vol. 2, 492ff.); cf. Nepos, Atticus 10.4 with my note, Oxford 1989). But active participation in political life in the city requires, in practice, minimal literacy (Millar (1998), 130f., Harris (1989), 167ff., Nicolet (1976), 333ff., E.E. Best, Historia 23 (1974), 428ff., L.R. Taylor, Roman voting assemblies (Ann Arbor 1966), 34ff.), while Mouritsen (2001), 37, n. 75 forgets how very little literacy was required to vote and thus dismisses far too swiftly the ‘illiterate masses of Rome’, who needed only to remember a couple of letters or to stick closely to their friends. Naturally, the literate could take a more informed role, but their presence at votes and elections cannot be quantified and I have preferred not to try to introduce the factor of literacy in our study of a fundamentally oral (and even memory-based) popular culture.

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To help pass the time

If, therefore, the humour of Trimalchio’s guests is not incompatible with that of Petronius’ readers, along with theatre, amphitheatre and circus, where site and show unite all those present (p. 67), it may stand as yet another element of some kind (at least in a wide sense) of ‘common fund’ of culture.¹ This chapter continues to seek out venues in which some Volteius Mena could (and sometimes did) have fun alongside an ex-consul. Cicero did indeed speak ill, consistently enough, of the mime,² but that reveals him as less tolerant and more of a snob than certain other very distinguished senators of the period.³ He was, in short, irrelevant, out of step with a general passion. These passions, of which the ‘common fund’ was made up, were of fundamental importance not just as occasions to visit and view, but as topics of passionate, partisan conversation at all levels: thus when Horace makes a show of revealing to his readers the topics of his first conversations with Maecenas during their travels together, he teases us by specifying ‘The Weather’, ‘The Time’ and ‘Is Gallina the Thracian a match for the Syrian?’.⁴ And not only Maecenas, with Horace, but Echion the rag-dealer in Petronius, who discusses a forthcoming gladiatorial munus at length.⁵ A risk, if you are a philosopher, and the man with whom you enter
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into conversation wants to talk about gladiators or horses, another topic dear (though less so) to the freedmen in the Cena Trimalchionis. The extraordinary enthusiasm for the arena at Pompeii and among the traders at Magdalenberg (p. 51) has often been noted. We have also noted the socially widespread enthusiasm for song, music and dance (p. 31ff.) and the general appeal of the scurna, or stand-up comic; indeed, the full catalogue of all the elements which made up the ‘common fund’ at Rome might be extended to imposing length, but the topic of what all (or nearly all) Romans enjoyed in their spare time, largely neglected by scholars, does not naturally lend itself to exhaustive treatment and I prefer to sketch some outlines of the topic and to dwell on a few particularly interesting elements. Notoriously, Trimalchio played at ball before dinner; compare, if you will (and the list could be drawn out further) Julius Caesar, the younger Pliny, Cicero (perhaps), Augustus, the younger Cato, Sextus Titius, Vestricius Spurinna, C. Calpurnius Piso and the professional star, Urso. Several types of ball-game are known, but it would be tiresome to distinguish them.

More familiar are dicing (alea) and the whole range of table-games for which dice were used, notably xii scripta, an identifiable ancestor of backgammon; note that modern Greek tavlì, not to mention Arabic tawulah, backgammon, derive from Latin tabula, board. Not all the identifications made between the games described by authors and the archaeological and epigraphic remains are entirely convincing and not all those who write on the topic are familiar with the main historical classifications of board-games. It is, though, certain that the Romans played not only in taverns but in every corner of the city of Rome and throughout the empire (for Jerusalem, cf. p. 114). The evidence for Rome has recently been surveyed admirably by Nicholas Purcell. The literary evidence is confirmed by the number of boards found all over the city, in Italy, North Africa, and the north-west of the empire (Purcell, 18ff.); I have had to manhandle one which in its prime had weighed 300 lbs (suggestive of the chessboards in European parks); others were made for travel. A popular passion, clearly, and one widespread in taverns and also in the army, at the foot of the Cross and in barracks on Hadrian’s Wall; in the palace, likewise, for on the heels of such distinguished players as Catiline and Mark Antony, note Augustus, Caligula, Nero, and, above all, Claudius. In the first century AD, rich young aristocrats, not to mention the odd Bad Emperor, took a sort of pleasure in sharing the life of the plebs in the city of Rome; these drunken voyages of exploration through a new range of simpler vices do not count as evidence in favour of an enlarged ‘common fund’, any more than does the custom of mixing guests from all social levels at dinner, sometimes, but not always undertaken from a spiteful delight in provoking unease and confusion. As hard evidence, the accusations often made against political foes that they frequented low taverns (p. 153, n. 17) likewise leave much to be desired.

Let us briefly imagine the scene, however, in the one tavern of some small port far down the Adriatic coast of Italy; blocked by unfavourable winds, we find thrown into each other’s company for several days an importer of garum (fish sauce, made from rotting entrails, similar to that now imported from the Philippines), a senator, a centurion, and the poet Horace
(the list, clearly, is easily extended): what do they do to pass four days together? It should at least be clear by now that there is no fixed correspondence between high rank and high-mindedness; note too that there are no professional aides to culture present, no grammarians, copyists, or readers, no librarians or papyrus-repairers, men whose very existence depended on the productive perpetuation of serious literary culture. We would also do well to recall the amply-attested simple tastes of certain famous public figures (p. 70): Augustus is perhaps the most interesting, and best-documented, case. Some time c. 1988 I recall seeing a front-page newspaper photograph of Giulio Andreotti, then as often prime minister of Italy, returning from – might it have been Portugal, in company of the national football team. Andreotti, who has also contributed to Ciceronian studies, was playing cards with the footballers. Was this subtly calculated populism or a harmless way of passing a couple of hours, or both? Maecenas took care that it should be known that he enjoyed the company of a scura (p. 70f.) when he travelled and likewise some mild exercise in Horace’s company on the Campus Martius. Augustus would have been the easiest of additions to the company, for, along with the company of Virgil and Horace, he enjoyed a tune, dice, ballgames, fishing, games with nuts, playing with small children, watching boxing, storytellers (of various kinds), and buskers.

But perhaps the evidence of Pliny the Younger is more impressive, in view of his normal commitment to remorseless cultural seriousness (p. 72): in order to tell a good (and contemporary) anecdote (something he in fact did often and very well), he tells his friend Calvisius ‘get your copper ready and you’ll hear a tale of gold’. That has to be the cry of professional storytellers (p. 98), who busked with a joke (in this case a joke from Homer) to keep their boxes filled, and it deserves to be added to our little collection of Roman street-cries (p. 43). Pliny tells the story of the boy and the dolphin as one that he’d heard at dinner, while the guests on all sides recounted wonders (tall stories, we might say), dum ... varia miracula binc inde referuntur. When he asks his friend Licinius Sura what he thinks of ghosts, he asks as one convinced, in this case by the story of what had happened to Curtius Rufus.

Naturally, our quartet stuck in the harbour bar could have gambled, or played catch. They could also have told stories, very possibly blue, as were appreciated at all levels: what changed with the environment (the Senate, or a school of declamation, say) was not so much the topics permitted (no taboos, that one can see), as the language that might be used: a number of registers of obscenity have been identified, and something can even be said about variations of lexicon by social level, by age and sex of speaker/audience, by context and by attitude. When Octavian chose to say exactly what he thought of Mark Antony, he used language familiar from the walls of Pompeii. To return to our Apulian bar, some unwritten laws on levels of plain speaking presumably applied in socially mixed conversation, without women present, in a public place, though we have no idea what the precise ‘laws’ in question were! Pornography written as such did exist, remote though it is from the expertly-told dirty story and little though we know of it and its readers: Tiberius was said to enjoy it, but his name attracted that sort of attribution; a medical treatise

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proposes the therapeutic use of porn in the case of failing sexual powers, and the Parthians, according to Plutarch, were shocked (or pretended to be) by the ‘Miletian tales’ of Aristides, found among the booty after the Romans’ defeat at Carrhae in 53 BC. In the mime, actresses might undress, all the way, even there might be a bed on stage, and sexual acts, not always necessarily feigned, were permitted; in the language of the fragments, predictably, there were no restrictions on primary obscenity. That does not prove that a senator would necessarily feel free to use the full range of primary obscenities in the company of a garum-seller, or vice versa.

That brings us very close to the familiar elements of wonder and the fabulous (mirabilia, thaumata) that we find in paradoxography (collections of surprising ‘facts’), in natural history, geography and history (or at least round history’s less grave and more lurid fringes, as two exceptional papers, in English, by Emilio Gabba have made clear). Let us start further down the ladder: in Petronius, we find the novella of the werewolf told by Niceros and that of the witches by Trimalchio himself; the ‘Miletian tale’ of the ephebe of Pergamon has no context, while that of the widow of Ephesus is told during a sea-voyage and the sailors welcome it with marked enthusiasm. Perhaps the most interesting instance of an inset tale in Petronius is that of the unbreakable glass, ‘invented under Tiberius’: this ‘natural wonder’, as told by Trimalchio is a travesty of a known anecdotic tradition, as we see from the ‘flexible glass under Tiberius’ that we find in the elder Pliny and the story in Cassius Dio of the miraculous repair of a cup of crystal, at the same period. We do thus have a continuous chain of association, at least this once, between conventional history and the sort of anecdote that could be represented as fit for telling at a gross dinner of nouveaux riches at Puteoli.

It might be well to return for a moment to proverbs; we have seen that there are numerous social levels to be distinguished within the whole patrimony of Latin proverbs, but the actual use of proverbial expressions in conversation seems to have been universal, attested as it is from Julius Caesar to Trimalchio and his friends. One might begin to wonder whether some aspects of the ‘common fund’ actually belonged to a ‘lowest common denominator’ at the level of lullabies, nursery wisdom and certain types of folktale about witches and bogeymen. Stories of bogeys are actually criticised by Quintilian and Tacitus and we might even suspect that the infant Tacitus had quivered with alarm in his nurse’s lap on hearing of the Lamia. Riddles belong at the same sort of cultural level: Plutarch says that they belong in the world of the ‘coarse and unlettered’ (phortikoi kai archilioi, Mor. 673A); after dinner (are we at Rome or in Greece? It is not clear, so this is not necessarily a clue to the banquets of the collegia) they turn to riddles and, well, riddles (for a grifhos is much like an ainigma!) and to correspondences between numbers and letters. Riddles spread wide, in the cena Trimalchionis, on the walls of Pompeii, and behind a number of familiar proverbs, but they also ‘belong’ in the world of high literature, on the lips of Virgil’s shepherds and at least in the more elaborate, worked-up versions we have of the Roman historical tradition (Livy, in short). In a rather similar way, fables straddle the elementary school and the poetry of Horace. When Phaedrus explains that the fable was devised
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under the necessity of finding a way for slave to communicate frankly but safely with slave, that is, alas, no more than a rather pretty 'aetiological' invention; some sort of explanation ('aetion') of how fables began to be told that takes into account the great Greek fabulist Aesop's origins as a slave: 49 no evidence, then, for a special class of 'slave literature' 50 but yet another literary form enjoyed at Rome at all levels.

Hypocrisy and evidence: the case of Cicero

In the end, there is no alternative: we must face up to Cicero's evidence and the many problems it poses: its mass is vast and complex and it reveals profound inconsistencies of outlook. Cicero has been called liar, hypocrite, and worse, but here it will be enough to bear clearly in mind the subject matter, the genre and the original public of the various texts cited. 'Inconstancy of judgement' may in the end do as well as 'hypocrisy'. A handful of less contentious instances may help clarify the weakness, for that it is indeed present and a weakness is hardly deniable:

Thus Cicero can pretend that he is ignorant of the most elementary details of the history of theatre and art, to play up to a dully brutish chauvinism (call it haughty isolationism) never quite absent from the armoury of traditionalist Roman prejudice. He can feign ignorance of the theatre, can lament its triviality or unreality, its falsehoods (or immorality, in the case of comedy), almost in the manner of Cato (or Plato), 3 and can at the same time express a real, genuine admiration for a handful of the very best Greek actors, not merely as artists but as models for the Roman orator to imitate. 4 Naturally, in another vein, he is peculiarly well informed on ample stretches