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V – *The Theater as a Factor in Roman Politics under the Republic*

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In our day political opinion finds expression, or enthusiasm for a cause or a candidate is stimulated, through the public press, on the platform with its accessories in the way of processions and receptions, and at the elections. In Rome under the Republic the two last-mentioned methods of testing popular sentiment are to be found, but the place which the press holds with us as an organ for the expression of public opinion on political matters seems to have been taken by the theatre, for, as Cicero says in his oration for Sestius, “in three places especially the judgment and desire of the Roman people can be made known, viz. at the *contio* [or gatherings for public discussion], and when the people come together at the games and the gladiatorial contests.”<sup>1</sup> He then proceeds to discuss at some length,<sup>2</sup> in the subsequent chapters of his oration, the attitude of the people in their public meetings, at the ballot-box, and at the plays and games, and comes to the conclusion<sup>3</sup> that the public opinion found true expression only at the theatrical performances and the gladiatorial contests. Was this true? Was the theatre such an important political factor and the only correct index of public feeling in Cicero’s day? His conclusion cannot be accepted without question because he is not an unprejudiced judge of the matter. The demonstrations in the theater and at the game during the period of his exile, of which he is speaking here, had favored him, but the *contiones* and the *comitia* of that year had been hostile to him.

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<sup>1</sup> Cicero, *pro Sestio* 106. Some of the passages cited in this paper might not be entirely clear apart from the context in which they stand, so that I have thought it wise to give them in translation, and in such an English form as will bring out the points of interest to us.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* 106-127.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* 127.

This situation might account for his view that the real sentiments of the people were best indicated in the theatre. It is worth while considering the correctness of his statement by examining very briefly the condition of the *contiones* and *comitia* under the late Republic, and by glancing at the part which the theatre played in political life. A complete presentation of all the evidence would be out of place here, nor is it necessary for our purpose.

It is convenient to approach the subject from the negative side and to ask, first, if Cicero's low estimate of the political organizations of his day is correct. On this point there can be little doubt. The city of Rome grew at a tremendous rate during the first century B.C., and most of the newcomers were men of little worth. They were discouraged and bankrupt farmers; free laborers, who were driven out of the country districts by slavery; ne'er-do-weels, who wished to live upon the largess of the state; men attracted to Rome by the theatre, the games, and the other amusements and excitements which the city had to offer; people who preferred to live by their wits rather than by the labor of their hands, and found a more promising field in Rome for the exercise of their talents than the small towns and the country offered; the veterans, whose long terms of service in the field had made it wellnigh impossible for them to take up contentedly or successfully the humdrum of life of a farmer or artisan; and, finally the hordes of freedmen who had low standards of political honor and little sympathy with Roman political traditions. All these people had the right to suffrage, and their vote was a saleable article of considerable value. They naturally attached themselves to some political leader; they were organized into companies, and cast their votes as they were instructed. From meetings of the tribal assemblies made up largely of such elements one could hardly expect an honest expression of opinion. The low moral character of the electoral and legislative bodies was not the only charge to be made against them. They were centres of chicanery and turbulence. One sees the consul Metellus slipping into the Campus by a roundabout route to prevent a political

opponent from announcing that the auspices were unfavorable,<sup>1</sup> or Milo anticipating the other party by occupying the Campus with an armed force at midnight on the day before the election, and holding it until noon against the opposite side "to the unbounded delight of everybody and to his own great credit," as Cicero regards the manœuvre. Or sometimes political workers block up the approaches to the ballot-boxes or see to it that ballots of one kind only are supplied to the voters.<sup>2</sup> The honesty of elections was vitiated still more flagrantly by the use of force. For this purpose bands of retainers were organized and drilled,<sup>3</sup> and by their use the *comitia* were overawed and peaceable citizens were kept away from the meetings. The illegal employment of money was even more fatal to honest elections than the use of force. Probably bribery has never been so prevalent as it was during the last century of the Republic. To this fact the bribery laws of 67, 63, 55, and 52 B.C., with their increasing penalties and ingenious devices for securing evidence, abundantly testify.<sup>4</sup> Bribery was reduced to a system. The baser citizens were formed into political clubs, and professional agents were employed in organizing and paying venal voters. The use of money was carried to such an extent in 54 B.C., for instance, that every one of the candidates for the consulship in that year was indicted for bribery.<sup>5</sup>

The state of the *contiones* for the discussion of public questions was still worse. Here the test of citizenship was not applied, and the meetings were packed with freedman and slaves<sup>6</sup> whose *clamor contionalis* became a byword. Companies of bravoës were organized,<sup>7</sup> who drowned the voice of a hostile speaker, drove him from the rostra, or converted the place of meetings into veritable shambles.<sup>8</sup> A frequent concomitant of these public meetings was a demonstration in the streets. Thus, Cicero tell us<sup>9</sup> that Caesar tried to lead the mob from the *contio* to surround the house of Bibulus,

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<sup>1</sup> Cic. *ad Att.* iv. 3.4.      <sup>2</sup> *ibid.* i.14.5.      <sup>3</sup> *pro Sest.* 34; *ad Att.* i.13.3.

<sup>4</sup> *ad Att.* i. 16.13.      <sup>5</sup> *ad Q. fr.* iii.2.3; *ad Att.* iv.17.2.

<sup>6</sup> *ad Att.* ii.1.8; ii.16.1.      <sup>7</sup> *pro Sest.* 34.

<sup>8</sup> *ad Q. fr.* ii.3.2-4; *ibid.* i.2.15; *pro Sest.* 77.      <sup>9</sup> *ad Att.* ii.21.5.

and during the scarcity of grain Clodius induced his audience to march through the streets and threaten the Senate.<sup>1</sup> The counterpart of these outbursts of popular passion was furnished by the street demonstrations in honor of a political leader. Sometimes they were of an impromptu character, like the great company which escorted Cicero home when he laid down the office of consul, or like the ovation which he received on returning from exile;<sup>2</sup> or they were carefully prepared, like the organized escorts of honor upon which so much stress is laid in the little pamphlet on *Candidacy for the Consulship*. All these facts fully substantiate Cicero's statement that the opinion of the Roman people on political matters did not find free and honest expression in an ordinary meeting of the *contio* or *comitia*.

Is the rest of his assertion equally trustworthy? Was the theatre a political factor to be reckoned with, and did it indicate the real course of the political current? In the theatre the sentiment of the people was indicated on occasions of two sorts, either when a political leader entered, or when a passage in a play applied, or was thought to apply, to a local situation. We have several interesting reports of cases where demonstrations of the first kind occurred. For instance, the popularity of Curio's course in 59 B.C. was clearly shown by the enthusiasm which his coming into the theatre aroused,<sup>3</sup> whereas the faint applause with which Caesar was received<sup>4</sup> when he entered was so significant of the attitude of the people that it created great anxiety in the democratic party, and in the opinion of the conservative Cicero was likely to bring about a political reaction, and this in spite of the fact that Caesar controlled the *contiones* and *comitia*. How Hortensius was received after having taken an unpopular course in a notorious political trial Caelius cleverly describes by applying to the roar of disapproval of the great throng of the theatre when Hortensius entered, and their derisive whistling, an onomatopoetic line from the famous storm passage in Pacuvius,

“The rumbling, roaring, rolling thunder, and the whistling of the cordage,”

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<sup>1</sup> Cic. *ad. Att.* iv.1.6.    <sup>2</sup> *ibid.* iv.1.    <sup>3</sup> *ibid.* ii.18.1.    <sup>4</sup> *ibid.* 19.3.

and he adds this comment: "This was more noticed, because Hortensius had reached old age unassailed by hisses; but on that occasion he was roundly enough hissed to satisfy any man his life long, and to make Hortensius regret at last his victory at the trial."<sup>1</sup> Bribery and the use of force, which made political meetings and elections an untrustworthy indication of the sentiment of the people, could not be used with equal success in the theatre. Honest and peaceable citizens could be kept away from the *contiones* and *comitia*, but no Roman would give up the high privilege of seeing the play. Bands of hired political supporters might try to give their employer an enthusiastic welcome and to convey the impression that an unpopular leader had the support of the citizens, but their applause would be drowned by the hisses of the great mass of people, or would pale into insignificance before the enthusiasm aroused by the entrance of the leader of the opposite party. Under the empire, even after public meetings had been given up and the *comitia* had disappeared, the public clung to their right of expressing in the theatre or at the games their approval or disapproval of the conduct of the emperor.

More interesting still were references from the stage to contemporary persons or events. Sometimes the playwright himself introduced the reference, sometimes the actor applied to the local situation a passage which in the play as it came from the pen of the playwright had no such significance. In proportion as it kept itself free from Hellenizing influences, the lighter forms of the national drama would seem always to have referred to contemporary affairs with considerable freedom. The attitude of Naevius, the first great writer of comedy, is clearly indicated in a passage in the *Agitoria*, "Freedom(of speech) I have always esteemed more highly than money and held as much to be preferred to it";<sup>2</sup> and the following defiant sentiment he puts into the mouth of the people, "Against that of which I have approved in the theatre no tyrant dares transgresses."<sup>3</sup> These statements and other

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<sup>1</sup> Cic. *ad. fam.* viii.2.1.

<sup>2</sup> Ribbeck, *Com. Rom. Fr.*, Naev. 9-10.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* Naev. 72-73.

bold ones to be found elsewhere in the extant fragments of his comedies,<sup>1</sup> the story of his imprisonment for his freedom in criticising men and things,<sup>2</sup> as given by Gellius, and the epigram upon him which emphasizes his “superbia Campana,”<sup>3</sup> show clearly enough the freedom with which he spoke of prominent men and events of his own time, even if his daring fling at the scandal connected with Scipio’s birth<sup>4</sup> and his bold hint that the Metelli owed the consulship to good luck rather than to personal merit<sup>5</sup> had not come down to us. Plautus refers frequently to general conditions in his own time, but either warned by the fate of Naevius, or in obedience to the tendency which becomes more and more apparent in Caecilius and Terence, says little or nothing which could give offence to specific individuals. Whether references were made to political affairs in the *toga-tae* it is difficult to say, because of the scanty fragments which we have of this form of the drama, but that they were a characteristic feature of the mime seems to be clear from the famous passage at arms between the actors and playwrights, Laberius and Syrus,<sup>6</sup> and from Cicero’s mock anxiety lest Laberius make his friend Trebatius the hero of one of his farces. An interesting passage in one of Cicero’s letters from 44 B.C.<sup>7</sup> shows what an important political factor the mime was. Cicero remarks to Atticus: “I received two letters from you yesterday. From the first one I learned about the theatre and Publilius [Syrus the playwright] — encouraging indications of a united populace. The applause, in fact, given to Lucius Cassius seemed to me at any rate a delicate compliment.” That writers of mimes occupied themselves with political matters may be inferred also from other statements in the Letters of Cicero. In one of these he hints at passages descriptive of Caesar’s exploits in the plays which Laberius and Publilius Syrus brought out at the dramatic festival given by the dictator to celebrate his victory at Thapsus. Speaking of his own philosophical acceptance of

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<sup>1</sup> Ribbeck, Naev. 20, 111-112.

<sup>2</sup> Gellius, iii.3.15. <sup>3</sup> *ibid.* i.24.1.

<sup>4</sup> Ribbeck, Naev. 108-110.

<sup>5</sup> Ps. Ascon. p. 140, ed. Or.

<sup>6</sup> Macrobian. *Sat.* ii.7.

<sup>7</sup> Cic. *ad Att.* xiv.2.1; *ad fam.* xii.2.2.

the political situation, he says, "In fact, I have already become so callous, that at the games given by our friend Caesar, with perfect equanimity I gazed upon Titus Plancus and listened to the production of Laberius and Publilius."<sup>1</sup> In another letter he remarks to Atticus, "You will write to me if you have anything to practical importance; if not, describe to me fully the attitude of the people [in the theatre] and the local hits in the mimes."<sup>2</sup>

We have noticed that all the extant passages in which playwrights refer to contemporary politics are to be found in the lighter forms of the drama. On the other hand, the verses which actors apply to politicians or public events of their own time occur mainly in tragedy. How frequently lines were applied in this way and how quick the audience was to see the application is clear from a passage in Cicero's oration in defence of Sestius, "Not to pass over even this point, among the many and varied utterances [on the stage] there has never been a passage in which some sentiment expressed by a poet seemed to apply to our own time, which either escaped the whole audience or which the actor himself did not bring out."<sup>3</sup> An illustration of the alertness of the people in this respect is furnished by an incident mentioned in the same connection.<sup>4</sup> The *Andromacha Aechmalotis* of Ennius was being given, and when the passage, "I have seen it all enveloped in flames," which describes the burning of Priam's palace, was reached, the actor and audience applied it to the destruction of Cicero's house by Clodius, and the people burst into tears at the thought of the wrong done their great leader. The passage from Accius,<sup>5</sup> "You permit him to be an exile; you allow him to be driven out; you put up with his banishment," brought to the dullest minds the picture of the exile in Thessalonica, while "Tullius who had been the bulwark of the liberty of the citizens" was encored again and again; and when, in giving the *Simulans* of Afranius, the entire company of actors turned toward the place where Clodius sat and thundered at him the lines, "This, O foul,

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<sup>1</sup> Cic. *ad fam.* xii.18.2.

<sup>2</sup> *ad. Att.* xiv.3.2.

<sup>3</sup> *pro Sest.* 118.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* 121.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* 122.

base man, is the outcome and conclusion of the life of a libertine,"<sup>1</sup> even the stormy petrel of politics was aghast at the probable effect of the incident on popular sentiment. Pompey felt the same anxiety at the *ludi Apollinares* in 59 B.C., when the tragedian Diphilus applied to him some lines from a play in which he was acting,<sup>2</sup> and Pacuvius' line, "To think that I have saved them that they might destroy me," which Caesar's followers, after his death, put in the mouth of their leader, probably played no small rôle in arousing the wrath of the people against the conspirators.<sup>3</sup> Now and then a player who found he had struck a popular chord followed up his success by improvising a line, as an actor in a play of Accius did on a certain occasion.<sup>4</sup>

A study of the theatre as a political factor under the Empire lies outside the scope of this paper, but the theatre or circus continued to furnish almost the only means which the great mass of the people had for expressing their opinion on public men or public questions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cic. *pro Sest.* 123.      <sup>2</sup> *ad Att.* ii.19.3.      <sup>3</sup> Suet. *Iul.* 84.

<sup>4</sup> Cic. *pro Sest.* 121.      <sup>5</sup> Suet. *Aug.* 53; *Tib.* 45; *Nero*, 39; *Galba*, 13.