

Literary History in Fragments: The Transmission and Reception of Roman Republican Literature

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Abstract: This paper looks at the issue of how the fragments of Roman Republican literature have been transmitted (by isolated quotations in later ancient authors) and how this way of transmission has shaped the perception of this phase of Roman literature.

Keywords: Roman Republican literature, fragments, transmission, drama

Introduction

According to the ancient Romans' own tradition (e.g. Livius 7.2, Valerius Maximus 2.4.4), Roman drama (in the sense of performances according to scripted stories with a plot) came into being in 240 BC, in the year after the completion of the First Punic War (264–241 BC), when a play or plays were first commissioned from a playwright for performance at state-organized festivals. From that time onwards a flourishing culture of dramatic performances and production of dramatic scripts developed over the rest of the Republican period until the end of the first century BC. Overall, there must have been a substantial number of dramas since originally new plays were composed for production at each festival as revival performances became only established at a later stage.¹

¹ For overviews of Roman drama see e.g. Beare (1964); Manuwald (2011); on Roman comedy see also Duckworth (1994); on Roman tragedy see also Erasmo (2004); Boyle (2006); on Roman festivals see Bernstein (1998).

The modern view of this vibrant culture, however, is somewhat skewed because of the vagaries of transmission. Out of all the plays that must have been written and performed only a few survive in full (or almost in full), and those come from two playwrights, both active in the same dramatic genre: twenty Greek-style comedies by Plautus (c. 250–184 BC) and six by Terence (c. 195/4–159 BC). The evidence for all other playwrights and dramatic genres (and some further plays of Plautus) has been transmitted as fragments and testimonia. These pieces of information all come from the secondary transmission, that is as quotations and references in the texts of later classical and late antique ancient authors. Thus, when exploring this early phase of Roman literature, one is at the mercy of the quoting authors, who might have selected items following their own agendas and/or misquoted them. A similar situation applies to the transmission of works of most other literary genres from the early Republican period as almost all literature dating to this period is now fragmentary.

Since drama paradigmatically illustrates the issues connected with this transmission situation and also raises further questions linked to the tension between orality, performance and writing culture, this literary genre will be used as a case study to illustrate first the ways of preservation of these dramatic scripts and the engagement with drama in antiquity and then the forms of transmission and their impact on the modern view of Roman drama and on ways of approaching it. The brief overview of these points on the basis of selected examples should allow conclusions on the nature of the transmission of early Roman literature and its consequences for the development and assessment of Roman literary history. As this contribution explores general and systematic questions of transmission and reception for an interdisciplinary readership, the broader context is sketched, but details of the examples given, especially linguistic issues, are not addressed (with references to fuller discussion and documentation provided).

Types of engagement with drama in Republican Rome

Since originally new plays were provided for each festival featuring dramatic productions, dramatic scripts were composed by playwrights for those occasions: these scripts mainly served practical purposes, namely to inform organizing officials of the content of planned plays and then to guide actor-managers, producers, actors and musicians through the process of getting plays ready for production. These scripts were merely texts with the utterances of the characters; they did not include explicit stage directions (other than those implied in comments made on stage); and while the lines were written in varying metres, indicating rhythmical patterns, the scripts did not include the accompanying music, an im-

portant element of early Roman drama.² Thus, details of the staging and the music were added by performers when scripts were transformed into dramatic productions.³ Indeed, once playwrights had handed over the scripts to the production troupe, they basically lost control of them. Actor-managers took charge of the scripts, and it is assumed that the scripts remained in their possession, but would not have entered wider circulation. Thus, most of the public would be able to experience plays only when attending performances (or when hearing reports about performances).

Because scripts must have been preserved by theatre people, it became possible to stage revival performances of popular plays from the middle of the second century BC onwards. Such revivals were not necessarily exact reproductions of the original plays. For one of Plautus' plays (*Casina*), for instance, it is obvious that the surviving prologue is a version written for a later reperformance, when it is said in this prologue that the play has been chosen for performance since audiences like and prefer 'old plays' (Plautus, *Casina* 5–20). In Republican Rome there was no concept of intellectual property and copyright; scripts were regarded as working drafts to enable performances; accordingly, subsequent actors' troupes could revive existing plays and adjust them in line with contemporary needs and requirements. In this period the general public continued to engage with plays by watching performances since the scripts seem to have been kept by theatre troupes.

Only from the end of the second century BC onwards is there evidence that dramatic scripts became more widely available, and that people not involved in the theatre business were able to get access to written versions of dramas. For instance, in the first century BC Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC), the famous orator, politician and philosopher, includes allusions to dramas in his speeches and seems to assume that audiences are familiar with them as they have watched or read them or done both (especially Cicero, *Pro Rabirio Postumo* 29). That familiarity with early Republican literature was not restricted to Cicero is shown by the fact that he frequently does not mention the names of playwrights or the titles of the pieces or only quotes the beginning of a line or passage, explicitly or implicitly assuming that addressees or readers will recognize these quotations and know what follows (e.g. Cicero, *De divinatione* 2.104; *Pro Plancio* 59; *Pro Sestio* 126; *Tusculanae disputationes* 2.44; 4.77; *Epistulae ad Atticum* 14.14.1; *Epistulae ad familiares* 9.22.1). Moreover, learning by heart Pacuvius' tragedy *Teucer* (instead of the texts of laws) as an element of education and training, a possibility Cicero envisages (Cicero, *De oratore* 1.246), only makes sense if scripts of the play's text are accessible.

² On music in Roman drama see Moore (2012).

³ See Marshall (2006) on staging Roman tragedy; also Brown (2002) on actors and actor-managers.

The second half of the second century is also the period when scholars started to approach questions of literary history, when they obviously have access to written texts.⁴ Hence the beginning of reading dramatic scripts coincides with the beginning of philological work on them, which leads to an appreciation of the 'literary' potential of drama. Those early scholars gather texts, prepare editions and commentaries, consider questions of authorship, assess the various writers and assemble details of theatre history; for instance, they discuss which ones of the many plays circulating under Plautus' name could be regarded as genuine. The genre of drama then remains a relevant entity in literary circles during the late Republic and beyond. In the area of literature, drama (particularly tragedy and comedy) exerts an influence on other poetic genres, as the works of later poets such as Lucretius, Catullus and Vergil demonstrate.⁵

Simultaneously, regular dramatic performances continued until the middle of the first century BC. In this time of the late Republic, it became possible to exploit revival performances of familiar plays by suggesting new readings in topical contexts. Such a method of adaptation is an interesting phenomenon of reception; the transfer is so obvious that it does not compromise attempts at interpreting the original play and rather is a secondary reading in addition. A good example for such a use of existing plays is Cicero's report about dramatic performances taking place after it was agreed to recall him to Rome, which he had had to leave for political reasons. Among other details Cicero reports (*Pro Sestio* 123):

et quoniam huc me provexit oratio, histrio casum meum totiens conlacrimavit, cum ita dolenter ageret causam meam ut vox eius illa praeclara lacrimis impediretur; neque poetae, quorum ego semper ingenia dilexi, tempori meo defuerunt; eaque populus Romanus non solum plausu sed etiam gemitu suo comprobavit. utrum igitur haec Aesopum potius pro me aut Accium dicere oportuit, si populus Romanus liber esset, an principes civitatis? nominatim sum appellatus in Bruto: 'Tullius, qui libertatem civibus stabiliverat'. miliens revocatum est. parumne videbatur populus Romanus iudicare id a me et a senatu esse constitutum quod periti cives sublatum per nos criminabantur?

And since the course of my speech has brought me to this point, the actor wept over my misfortune again and again, while he pleaded my cause with so much grief that this magnificent voice of his was hindered by tears. Nor were poets, whose talents I have always appreciated, lacking in my situation; and the Roman people showed their approval to this not only by applause, but also by groaning. Should Aesopus then or Accius rather have said this for me, if the Roman people were free, or the foremost men in the community? In *Brutus* I

⁴ See Goldberg (2005); Feeney (2016) on the role of the availability and engagement with written texts for the emergence of 'literature'.

⁵ See Manuwald (2019) on the reception of Roman comedy in antiquity; for case studies of the reception of Roman tragedy in some later ancient authors see contributions in Harrison (2015).

was mentioned by name: 'Tullius, who established liberty for the citizens'. Encores of this line were requested countless times. Did the Roman people seem to be not firm enough of the view that I and the senate had established what ruined citizens accused us of having removed?

This scenario refers to a performance of the history play *Brutus*, which dramatized the expulsion of the Roman kings and the foundation of the Republic, written by the late-Republican playwright Accius (170–c. 80 BC) and performed by the famous actor Aesopus.⁶ The play apparently includes a line commenting on the Roman king Servius Tullius (Accius, *Fabulae Praetextae* 40 Ri.^{2–3} = 40 W. = F praet. 13 *TrRF*); and because it does not mention the king with his full name, it is possible to refer the statement to Marcus Tullius Cicero, emphasizing that it is Cicero who ensures liberty for his fellow citizens rather than his opponents. Irrespective of this interpretation of the line against its original meaning in the context of the drama, the passage shows that Accius' play includes mention not only of the last Roman king Tarquinius Superbus (as attested by another fragment), but also of the penultimate one, who was regarded as a 'good' and just king and apparently described as such; such information illustrates aspects of the political dimension of the drama.

Confirmation of this dimension is relevant in connection with another known revival of Accius' *Brutus*, this time only planned. According to another set of comments in Cicero's works a performance of Accius' *Brutus* was scheduled for a festival in 44 BC soon after the assassination of C. Julius Caesar; however, a brother of Mark Antony, who at that point had the political office responsible for organizing the festival, replaced this historical drama with a mythical tragedy, Accius' *Tereus*. Yet, as Cicero says, even that performance led to reactions from the audience, though it is unclear to what extent these had to do with the content of the play or rather the overall situation (Cicero, *Epistulae ad Atticum* 16.2.3; 16.5.1; *Philippicae* 1.36).

These reports demonstrate that the theatre remained a productive venue for engaging with drama, to which both performers and audiences contributed. At the same time, since a proportion of all performances were revivals of well-known plays, the productive role of the theatre changed: it was not so much that audiences needed to be attracted to the theatre by the promise of new and exciting dramas. Instead, organizers, performers and audiences knew what to expect; as Cicero notes, some connoisseurs recognize the song or play to be performed as soon as a musician strikes up the first bars (Cicero, *Academica* 2.20; 2.86). Thus, organizers, performers and audiences could give plays or parts of plays an additional meaning in the contemporary context or could try to avoid a transfer of the play's content to the current situation.

⁶ On Roman history plays (*fabulae praetextae*), see Manuwald (2001).

Types of transmission

The active tradition of producing new dramas for regular festivals basically ceased at the end of the Republican period, presumably due to changes in conventions and audience tastes. While revival performances and the production of pieces without a complex plot continued for a while, this development apparently meant that interest in the early plays faded and that their transmission as complete scripts was discontinued at some point (though the precise time is difficult to determine). Thus, modern knowledge of details of early Roman dramas depends on what other ancient authors say about them; a further complication is that the later of these authors might no longer have taken their information directly from the original scripts.

Among the ancient authors transmitting information two groups can broadly be identified. On the one hand there are writers such as Cicero and other scholars of the first century BC who typically quote longer passages, and in complete sense units, since they engage with the content of the excerpts; however, their comments on the content might be determined by their own argumentative aims and their own interpretation of the plays, rather than informed by what playwrights might have originally intended; and they might misquote texts if they reproduce them from memory and/or integrate lines into their own writing and thus adjust structures. On the other hand, there are late antique commentators, lexicographers, grammarians and scholiasts who quote passages for interesting linguistic phenomena, usually unchanged and with no further agenda other than producing illustrative examples; yet they do not always provide complete sense units, and the textual transmission of the works of these authors is often problematic.

As a result, for some playwrights and plays information is only provided by one of these quoting groups, depending on the topics, style and popularity of their pieces, and for some plays there is a combination of evidence from both sources. This limited, selective and mixed basis of information has led to a lot of speculation about the text of individual fragments and the plot of entire plays over the course of scholarly history.

For instance, from the comedies of Gnaeus Naevius (c. 280/60–200 BC), apparently the most successful comic playwright before Plautus, information about a comedy called *Ariolus* ('*The Soothsayer*') is transmitted, of which two fragments survive.⁷ The first fragment is *deprandi autem leoni si obdas oreas* ('if you apply a bit to a starving lion', transl. FRL), quoted to illustrate the meaning of 'bit' (Festus, pp. 196.36–198.3 Lindsay: Naevius, *Comoediae* 20 Ri.²⁻³ = 21 W. = F 14 FRL). The second one is a conversation, quoted to illustrate the phrase 'Praen-

⁷ On this play, including discussion of details and difficulties of these fragments, see Spaltenstein (2014: 64–76).

estine nuts' (Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 3.18.6: Naevius, *Comoediae* 21–4 Ri.²⁻³ = 22–6 W. = F 15 FRL):

(A) *quis heri apud te?* (B) *Praenestini et Lanuvini hospites.*

(A) *suapte utrosque decuit acceptos cibo;*
altris inanem volvulam madidam dari,
altris nuces in proclivi profundier.

(A) Who dined with you yesterday? (B) Guests from Praeneste and Lanuvium.

(A) Each of them should have been welcomed with their own food. To one lot you should have given cleaned and boiled sow's womb, and for the other lot you should have poured an abundant shower of nuts.

As it happens, both fragments seem to deal with ways of eating and with eating specific items; hence, one may be tempted to assume that this theme is a major aspect of the plot: this might be the case. At the same time, it is equally possible that these two comments are in no way related, that they each represent remarks in particular contexts (perhaps for comic effect) and that they are of no particular importance for the plot. Unfortunately, it is not possible to determine which of these scenarios applies. This example therefore shows how suggestive perceived similarities between a random selection of fragments might be and how cautious one has to be when dealing with them.

At the other end of the spectrum, the early poet Quintus Ennius (239–169 BC), who wrote tragedies, comedies, history plays, a historical epic, satires and other works, and was regarded as 'father Ennius' (Horace, *Epistulae* 1.19.7) and by some Romans as the true founder of Latin literature, was a well-known figure in antiquity, and some of his plays seem to have become famous. For instance, his tragedy *Medea*, modelled on the homonymous tragedy by the Greek playwright Euripides and set in Corinth, appears to have been so well known that the opening lines are quoted frequently by a range of authors, often without mention of the author or the title of the play from which they are taken, since it is assumed that identifying the source of the quotation is not necessary (Ennius, *Tragoediae* 205–13 Ri.²⁻³ = 246–54 Va.² = 253–61 W. = 208–16 Joc. = F 89 TrRF / FRL; full documentation in TrRF II).

Moreover, from this play a large number of fragments survive, so that, along with the pointers provided by Euripides' play, it is possible to get a sense of the potential plot. This situation has led earlier scholars to reconstruct the plot of Ennius' tragedy in detail, assuming that it was broadly identical with Euripides' extant version. However, from those passages that are long enough to allow for comparison, it is obvious that there are subtle differences between the Greek and the Latin versions: for instance, the organization of a speech might follow divergent principles or there are more obvious allusions to Roman ideology and values in Ennius' play.

In particular, the fragments surviving for Ennius' play include one that asks someone to contemplate Athens (Ennius, *Tragoediae* 242–3 Ri.^{2–3} = 287–8 Va.² = 294–5 W. = 239–40 Joc. = F 94 TrRF / FRL):

*asta atque Athenas anticum opulentum oppidum
contempla et templum Cereris ad laevam aspice*

stand and look at Athens, an ancient and wealthy city, and behold the temple of Ceres to the left (transl. FRL).

Such a scene does not feature in Euripides' play as it does not have any section set in Athens. Therefore, some earlier scholars have assumed that Ennius might have written two plays featuring *Medea*, one following the plot of the extant piece by Euripides and another one possibly based on a lost piece by Euripides. Modern scholars mostly no longer posit two different plays and rather tend to assume a single play by Ennius on *Medea*, which differs from the Greek play in some respects.⁸ Whatever the true situation is, this evidence should caution against the view that Latin plays can be recovered by reconstructing them on the basis of presumed Greek models. Cicero attests that Ennius' *Medea* is based on Euripides' version (Cicero, *De finibus bonorum et malorum* 1.4); and this is true in a general sense, but this does not mean that all details of the plot will be the same. Instead, while Greek parallels are helpful for getting a sense of the underlying story, one has to explore a range of possibilities for the Roman plays, which may show greater or lesser similarities to the Greek pieces.

The fact that often short extracts are quoted without indication of the work from which they have been taken means that it is sometimes not even clear to which dramatic genre an extract belongs or whether it is a dramatic fragment at all. A line transmitted for Ennius has been variously ascribed to Ennius' tragedies or comedies by scholars (Ennius, *Tragoediae*, Inc. F 207 TrRF = Inc. F 12 FRL):⁹

heu, mea puella, † spe † quidem id succenset tibi

oh, my girl, he is indeed (?) angry with you about that (transl. FRL).

Since the extract is quoted by Varro to illustrate the use of an interjection (Varro, *De lingua Latina* 7.93), there are no separate notes about the context, and all information about the fragment can only be inferred from the line itself. The text is corrupt, but it seems clear that the piece displays a dramatic metre that can be used in both tragedies and comedies. Thus, the decision on generic attribution rests on the question of whether such a statement

⁸ For discussion see Jocelyn (1967: 342–46); TrRF II: 209.

⁹ For documentation see TrRF II: 396–7.

is regarded as more plausible and appropriate in tragedy or comedy in view of the few parallels available, which cannot be answered for sure. Such passages and questions can thus be the source of circular arguments, when such lines are assigned to a particular genre due to similarity with lines themselves only conjecturally attributed to the same genre, and when such placements then form the basis for conclusions about the character of particular dramatic genres.

Comparable issues occur on a smaller scale when one has to choose between different readings without being clear about the context. Another fragment from Ennius, which some have attributed to the tragedy *Erectheus*, is transmitted by the Vergilian commentator Servius (Servius auctus on Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.62: Ennius, *Tragoediae* 383–4 Ri.^{2–3} = 135–6 Va.² = 140–1 W. = 397–8 Joc. = F 198 TrRF / FRL):

*ut vos nostri liberi
defendant, pro vostra vita morti occumbant obviam*

that our sons defend you, meet death for the sake of your life
(transl. FRL).

In the first line of the fragment the main manuscript of the text of the transmitting author (C) has *nostri* ('our') and a corrected version of this manuscript (C²) has *vestri* ('your'); in combination with possible adaptations of the other pronouns in these verses this has led to a number of versions. While some editors introduce a conjecture, which is a problematic method as the context is not known and the transmitted text can be construed to make sense, others choose one of the transmitted versions (*vestri* C²), which yields a plausible sense (all second person): someone says to a group of people that their children defend them and die for them. Another group of editors chooses another transmitted version (*nostri* C), which gives a slightly unexpected sense: someone says that their own children defend and die for others. Situations in which this could be said might be envisaged, and because this is a less obvious statement, it could be regarded as a *lectio difficilior*, with the manuscript having been corrected to produce a more straightforward version. Therefore, the more perplexing variety might be preferable, but a definite decision is impossible in the absence of further context. Hence, while it is tempting to draw conclusions on Roman attitudes from such a fragment, one has to be cautious since the basis is uncertain; again, one can only explore a range of possible hypotheses.

Conclusion

These examples could be multiplied with instances from other plays and playwrights, but the material presented so far should be sufficient to illustrate the main issues affecting the transmission of early Roman drama as well as the consequences for scholarship and literary history.

Later extant texts clearly show that scholars and writers in the first centuries BC and AD (in the time usually regarded as the 'classical' period of ancient Roman literature) knew early Roman Republican plays and engaged with them. While they apparently regarded the very first Latin plays composed by the pioneers as somewhat crude, the later ones were seen as literary compositions in their own right, worth engaging with by means of quotations, allusions or scholarly investigation. Therefore, since influential writers of classical Latin literature were familiar with the early stages of Roman literature and engaged with it, it is important for modern scholars to be aware of the beginnings and get a sense of their characteristics so as to be able to assess features of later Roman literature appropriately. Because of the transmission situation for some genres of Roman literature it is not possible to get an objective view of the early stages unaffected by the opinions of later authors, since only through their engagement with this material does it survive at least in excerpts. Accordingly, modern scholars must use these sources and at the same time be extremely self-aware and methodologically conscious, avoid circular arguments, constantly question their assumptions and be clear about the basis of certain views.

For instance, it is important to take the contexts in which fragments are quoted into account since they might provide additional information about the texts (for instance, the play they are coming from) and indicate intentions of the quoting authors, which might again reveal something about the status of the piece within its original context. At the same time, one must not accept the aims of the quoting authors and rather look at each fragment in its own right and be open to all options, including that it could come from any point in the plot and be of major or minor importance. The process is further complicated by the fact that some fragments have been transmitted in rather corrupt form; potential emendations are then often not only guided by grammatical and metrical considerations, but also by presumed views of the context.

Before one now despairs completely and concludes that it is impossible to gain an understanding of early Roman literature, one has to acknowledge that the survival of these fragments needs to be valued since they enable modern scholars to get a sense of this literature. Despite the selectivity and the corruptions in the transmission, extant fragments give insight into the language used at the time and the themes aired in the plays; the comments of later authors provide information about an element of reception of these texts; and, while

plots often cannot be recovered, the recurrence of specific motifs in a sample of fragments collected randomly enables an understanding of what themes may have been of relevance to playwrights and audiences at particular times. Thus, it is worth making the effort of extracting as much information as possible and as unbiasedly as possible from the transmitted material, so that the early influential and undoubtedly formative stages of Roman literature can be given their due weight in the assessment of the development of literature in ancient Rome.

Abbreviations

FRL: *Fragmentary Republican Latin*, Manuwald et al. (2018–).

Joc.: Jocelyn (1967).

Ri.²: Ribbeck (1871) and Ribbeck (1873).

Ri.³: Ribbeck (1897) and Ribbeck (1898).

TrRF: *Tragicorum Romanorum Fragmenta*, Schauer and Manuwald (2023).

Va.²: Vahlen (1903).

W.: Warmington (1935) and Warmington (1936).

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