

Crossing the Rubicon, and Other Dramas*

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On 7 January 49 BC (pre-Julian calendar) the Senate passed its emergency decree, effectively introducing martial law, and forced the tribunes M. Antonius and Q. Cassius to leave Rome.

Caesar was at Ravenna when he heard the news. He had already sent for his main army from across the Alps, but at present he had with him just one legion (the thirteenth) and his bodyguard — five thousand infantry and three hundred horse. He acted immediately. A group of centurions and other picked men was sent secretly to cross the border into Italy, carrying swords but in civilian dress; their task was to enter Ariminum without being noticed, and secure the city in advance.

Caesar himself was conspicuously nonchalant, in public view all day watching gladiatorial exercises, and then dining with his usual numerous guests. At about sunset, however, he slipped away from the dinner, as if temporarily indisposed. In a carriage drawn by two mules hired from the bakery next door, Caesar and a few of his staff quietly left Ravenna. After first taking the wrong road, he turned south towards Ariminum, with his cavalry following.

When Caesar reached the bridge over the Rubicon, which formed the boundary between Cisalpine Gaul and Italy, he stopped, got out, and stood for a long time in silence, pondering the enormity of his enterprise. He talked to his intimates, arguing the pros and cons.

‘We can still go back; but once over that little bridge everything will have to be done by force of arms. If we don’t cross it, this is the beginning of disaster for me; if we do, it’s the beginning of disaster for the world. But what a story we shall leave for posterity!’

At last, impatiently abandoning rational calculation as if rushing into the abyss, he cried “Let the die be cast!”, and hurried across the bridge like a man possessed. His forces followed, and by daybreak Ariminum was in his hands.

That is the story as we have it in Plutarch, Appian and (in part) Suetonius.¹ There has never been any serious doubt about where it comes from, since

* Thirty-two years ago, Professor Abraham Wasserstein appointed me to my first job, at the University of Leicester. No young scholar could have had a more encouraging or exemplary Head of Department, and it is a pleasure, even while mourning his death, to be able to express my gratitude here.

¹ Plut. *Caes.* 32, *Pomp.* 60, App. *BC* II 35, Suet. *DJ* 31. For ἀνερίφθω κύβος — a proverb, not just a quotation from Menander — see A.W. Gomme and F.H. Sandbach, *Menander: A Commentary*, 1973, 690-1.

Plutarch names Asinius Pollio among those who were present.² Poet, orator and tragedian, Pollio was also a historian with a keen eye for the dramatic moment and the telling quotation.³ Caesar himself, in the more businesslike genre of *commentarii*, passes directly from his speech to the soldiers at Ravenna to the meeting with the tribunes at Ariminum.⁴ He had no motive to dwell on the crossing of the Rubicon, but *historia* proper demanded a scene worthy of the moment, and Pollio duly provided it.⁵

However, in Suetonius the Pollio version extends only as far as the dialogue at the bridge. Then follows a most remarkable passage (*Divus Iulius* 32):

Cunctanti ostentum tale factum est. quidam eximia magnitudine et forma in proximo sedens repente apparuit harundine canens; ad quem audiendum cum praeter pastores plurimi etiam ex stationibus milites concurrissent interque eos et aeneatores, rapta ab uno tuba prosiluit ad flumen et ingenti spiritu classicum exorsus pertendit ad alteram ripam. tunc Caesar 'Eatur' inquit 'quo deorum ostenta et inimicorum iniquitas uocat. iacta alea est' inquit.

As he was hesitating there occurred the following prodigy. A figure of extraordinary size and beauty suddenly appeared, sitting close by playing on a reed pipe. As well as shepherds, many of the soldiers too ran up from their posts to listen to him, including some buglers; whereupon he snatched a trumpet from one of them, sprang forward to the river, and starting with a mighty blast, went straight across to the other bank. Then Caesar spoke. 'Let us go', he said, 'where the portents of the gods and the villainy of our enemies call. The die is cast.'

This scene is evidently *not* from Pollio. There is no sign of it in Appian or Plutarch, and its version of the famous phrase differs from theirs by being in the indicative: '*iacta alea est*'.

It is not impossible that this tale of an apparition was invented by a historian; one thinks of the authors who earned Polybius' contempt by having 'gods and heroes' appear to Hannibal and guide him over the Alps.⁶ But the 'stage-business' of shepherds and soldiers makes a dramatic source much more likely. As Livy remarks, 'the theatre delights in marvels'. Ovid says much the same, and both authors were evidently referring to plays on Roman historical subjects.⁷

One can even hazard a guess about the *type* of drama that may have been involved. A larger-than-life figure playing the pipe to shepherds must surely be Pan;⁸ Pan belongs in the company of Dionysus and the satyrs; and there is clear evidence, notably in Vitruvius and Horace, that some form of satyr-play was

² H. Peter, *Historicorum Romanorum reliquiae* II, 1906 (repr. 1967), lxxxxiii; J. André, *La vie et l'oeuvre d'Asinius Pollion (Études et commentaires* 8), 1949, 58.

³ E.g. fr. 2P, the 'hoc uoluerunt' speech at Pharsalus.

⁴ Caes. BC I 8.1: *cognita militum uoluntate Ariminum cum ea legione proficiscitur ...*

⁵ E. Badian (*Gnomon* 62, 1990, 30) takes it as Caesar's own self-publicising: 'for the record, and no doubt, as Asinius Pollio seems to have thought, for posterity'.

⁶ Pol. III 47.6-9 (Chaereas, Sosylus, Silenus?).

⁷ Livy V 20.8-9, on an episode during the capture of Veii (*haec ad ostentationem scenae gaudentis miraculis aptiora...*); Ovid, *Fasti* IV 326, on Q. Claudia and the Magna Mater in 204 BC (*mira, sed et scaena testificata, loquar*).

⁸ For Pan playing a *harundo* see for instance Ovid, *Met.* XI 154.

current on the Roman stage in the first century BC.⁹ Satyric drama had come a long way since the days of the Attic tragedians: already by the fourth century we find it being used for topical plots with contemporary characters.¹⁰

One of Caesar's most prominent partisans, very possibly present at the crossing of the Rubicon, was C. Vibius Pansa, whose *cognomen* alluded to a legendary descent from Pan. The coins struck by his father in 90 BC, and by Pansa himself in 48, prominently feature the head of Pan, portrayed as a *mask*.¹¹ Pansa may well have issued his coins as aedile,¹² in which case he would have been among those responsible for the *ludi scaenici* of the first year of Caesarian Rome. What better context for a play presenting Pan as Caesar's divine authority at the Rubicon? 'Let us go, where the portents of the gods and the villainy of our enemies call. The die is cast!'

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Plays on contemporary themes are attested from the very beginning of literary drama at Rome, with Cn. Naevius' *Clastidium* (on M. Marcellus in 222 BC).¹³ It is often assumed that the genre fell into disuse,¹⁴ but that is hard to believe in view of the close connection between the *ludi scaenici* and the political élite. Plays were regularly put on to celebrate triumphs; or at the dedication of temples, which were themselves often triumphal *monumenta*; or at funerals, where the *res gestae* of the defunct would naturally be celebrated. How better than with a *fabula praetextata*?¹⁵

It is not surprising that few titles and fragments survive. Since topical subjects soon go out of date, no doubt only a few such plays, by the greatest practitioners, survived into the canon. We happen to know, from a letter of Pollio's in Cicero's correspondence, that one of the plays put on at the provincial *ludi* in Cordoba in 43 BC was a *praetextata* by the quaestor L. Cornelius Balbus, on the subject of his own experiences in the civil war, which moved him to tears as he watched it.¹⁶ When casual evidence like that reveals the genre still flourishing in the theatre, the paucity of references to library texts of classic plays need not be significant.

⁹ Vit. *Arch.* V 6.9, VII 5.2; Hor. *AP* 220-50; T.P. Wiseman, *Historiography and Imagination*, 1994, 68-85.

¹⁰ Python's *Agen*: Athenaeus *Deipn.* XIII 596a; B. Snell, *Scenes from Greek Drama*, 1967, 99-138.

¹¹ M.H. Crawford, *Roman Republican Coinage*, 1974, 346, 464; nos. 342.1-2, 449.1a-c; plates xlv.15-16, liii.10.

¹² T.R.S. Broughton, *The Magistrates of the Roman Republic* III, 1986, 220-1.

¹³ O. Ribbeck, *Die römische Tragödie im Zeitalter der Republik*, 1875, 72-5, 207-11, 326-34. See now H.I. Flower, *CQ* 45, 1995, 170-90.

¹⁴ E.g. W. Beare, *The Roman Stage*³, 1964, 41-44: 'we must conclude that the introduction of the historical play by Naevius proved comparatively sterile' (p. 43).

¹⁵ Diomedes in *Gramm. Lat* I 490K: *togata praetextata a tragoedia differt, quod in tragoedia heroes inducuntur, ... in praetextata autem quae scribitur Brutus vel Decius, item Marcellus.*

¹⁶ Pollio in Cic. *Fam.* X 32.3, *de suo itinere ad L. Lentulum proconsule sollicitandum.*

A century ago, scholars were much more open than they are now to the possibility of Roman plays on contemporary subjects, and prepared to infer their existence from the dramatic treatment of particular episodes in historical narratives. Karl Meiser, for instance, in his *Festrede* to the Bavarian Academy in November 1887, offered as examples the death of Sophoniba, the plot of Pacuvius Calavius of Capua, Perseus and Demetrius in 182, and the tragic end of Gaius Gracchus.¹⁷ However, Henry Bardon would have none of that:¹⁸

Bel effort d'imagination, louable désir de ressusciter des fantômes; mais de ces songes philologiques ne naissent que des ombres palpables. À ce compte, que de tragédies ne taillerait-on pas chez Tacite!

It is true enough that historians were quite capable of writing vivid and dramatic scenes on their own account.¹⁹ Understandably, therefore, Bardon's scepticism has prevailed.

Understandably, but in my view wrongly. Bardon's own argument from Tacitus is a two-edged weapon, since the one *praetextata* that survives, the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia*, is precisely a tragedy on Tacitus' own subject-matter, and one with which he may well have been familiar.²⁰ The *ludi scaenici* of the Principate still dealt with topical themes; normally, of course, the performances were concerned with honouring or flattering the emperor,²¹ but the *Octavia* shows that once it was safe to do so, playwrights could handle the domestic dramas of the house of Caesar just as their predecessors had handled those of the house of Atreus or the house of Tarquin.²²

The *Octavia* is in fact a very interesting play from our point of view. It is unlike any surviving tragedy in having a chorus (of Roman citizens) which takes a direct part in the action, nothing less than an attack on the imperial palace itself. It is also a very symmetrical play, in that there are two empresses (Octavia and Poppaea), two nurses (one for each empress), and two choruses (the empresses' respective supporters). It was clearly written for a fully-developed Roman *scaenae frons* with three doors — Octavia's quarters on one side, Poppaea's on the other, and the 'royal door' (from which Nero and the Prefect emerge at line 437) in the middle.²³

¹⁷ K. Meiser, *Über historische Dramen der Römer*, 1887, 23-36; Livy XXX 12-15; XXIII 2-10; XL 2-16, 20-4, 54-6; Plut. *C. Gracchus* 14-17.

¹⁸ H. Bardon, *La littérature latine inconnue* I, 1952, 327.

¹⁹ For 'tragic history', see the classic study of F.W. Walbank, *Historia* 9, 1960, 216-34 (= *Selected Papers: Studies in Greek and Roman History and Historiography*, 1985, 224-41).

²⁰ Compare Tac. *Ann.* XIV 63 (*meminerant adhuc quidam Agrippinae a Tiberio, recentior Iuliae memoria obuersabatur a Claudio pulsae*) with the observations by the chorus of citizens at *Octavia* 924-57.

²¹ E.g. Suet. *Aug.* 89.3 (Augustus), Pliny *Paneg.* 54.1-2 (Domitian).

²² Livy I 46.3 (on Tullia): *tulit enim et Romana regia sceleris tragici exemplum*. Cf. Tarquin and Lucretia in the Brutus plays of Accius (Cic. *Div.* I 43-5) and Cassius (Varro *LL* VI 7), respectively.

²³ *Valuae regiae*: Vit. *Arch.* V 6.3. My argument here is much indebted to comments by Roland Mayer at a seminar in London in January 1995.

Bearing that in mind, let us try to visualise a scene from one of Meiser's hypothetical tragedies, *Gaius Gracchus*. The date is 121 BC. Opimius, the hawkish consul, has just ordered the Senate and *equites* to take up arms against C. Gracchus and his *popularis* ally M. Fulvius Flaccus. Imagine a stage set: the central door, let us suppose, is the temple of Diana; on one side, a house with a statue in front of it; on the other, a house hung with weapons and trophies from a triumph. Here is Plutarch's narrative,²⁴ in the Langhorne brothers' 1770 translation:

Gaius, as he returned from the Forum, stood a long time looking upon his father's statue, and after having given vent to his sorrow in some sighs and tears, retired without uttering a word. Many of the plebeians, who saw this, were moved with compassion; and declaring that they would be the most dastardly of beings if they abandoned such a man to his enemies, repaired to his house to guard him, and passed the night before his door.

This they did in a very different manner from the people who attended Fulvius on the same occasion. These passed their time in noise and riot, in carousing and empty threats, Fulvius himself being the first man that was intoxicated, and giving in to many expressions and actions unsuitable to his years. But those about Gaius were silent, as in a time of public calamity, and with a thoughtful regard to what was yet to come, they kept watch and took rest by turns.

Fulvius slept so sound after his wine that it was with difficulty that they awoke him at break of day. Then he and his company armed themselves with the Gallic spoils which he had brought off in his consulship, upon his conquering that people, and thus accoutred they sallied out, with loud menaces, to seize the Aventine hill. As for Gaius, he would not arm, but went out in his toga as if he had been going upon business in the Forum; only he had a small dagger under it.

At the door his wife threw herself at his feet, and taking hold of him with one hand and of her son with the other, she thus expressed herself:

'You do not now leave me, my dear Gaius, as formerly, to go to the Rostra in capacity of tribune or lawgiver, nor do I send you out to a glorious war where, if the common lot fell to your share, my distress might at least have the consolation of honour. You expose yourself to the murderers of Tiberius, unarmed, indeed as a man should go who had rather suffer than commit any violence; but it is throwing away your life without any advantage to the community. Faction reigns; outrage and the sword are the only measures of justice. Had your brother fallen before Numantia, the truce would have restored his body; but now perhaps I shall have to go a suppliant to some river or sea to be shown where your remains are to be found. For what confidence can we have either in the laws or in the gods after the assassination of Tiberius?'

When Licinia had poured out these lamentations, Gaius disengaged himself as quietly as he could from her arms, and walked on with his friends in deep silence. She caught at his toga, but in the attempt fell to the ground and lay a long time speechless. At last her servants, seeing her there in that condition, took her up and carried her to her brother Crassus.

²⁴ Plut. *C. Gracchus* 14.4-16.5.

Fulvius and his men try to fight it out; Fulvius is killed; Gaius, who has taken no part in the fighting, retires to the Diana temple.

There he would have dispatched himself, but was hindered by Pomponius and Licinius, the most faithful of his friends, who took away his dagger and persuaded him to try the alternative of flight. On this occasion he is said to have knelt down and with uplifted hands to have prayed to the deity of that temple, that the people of Rome, for their ingratitude and base desertion of him, might be slaves for ever.

Exit, pursued by Opimius' men; perhaps his flight and eventual death were reported in a messenger's speech.

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The two doors in Plutarch, like the Pan apparition in Suetonius, seem to me to be *prima facie* evidence for real drama as the ultimate source, rather than merely dramatic writing by a historian. In which case it follows that at some point a non-theatrical author — either the biographer himself or one of his sources — took a dramatist's scenario as true, or at least as 'true enough' for his own purposes.²⁵

There is nothing improbable in that. Plutarch is explicit in accepting as historical the tragedians' story of Phaedra and Hippolytus, in the absence of any alternative version in a historian.²⁶ Similarly, both he and the elder Pliny, who was a historian himself, report as fact episodes that are known to have been invented in the rhetorical schools as exercises in declamation;²⁷ one of them was about the murder of Cicero, which shows that even recent events, in the full light of history, were subject to the creation of instant legend.

The great historians understood the process perfectly well. As Tacitus observed, it was particularly the deaths of the great that encouraged the conversion of truth into fiction. He took it for granted that historians would present *fabulae*, to astonish their readers.²⁸ Thucydides referred to alleged events 'winning over into the mythical', a phrase explained in a wonderful passage of Francis Cornford's chapter on 'mythistoria and drama':²⁹

It suggests that transformation which begins to steal over all events from the moment of their occurrence, unless they are arrested and pinned down in writing by an alert and trained observer... The facts *work loose*; they are detached from their roots in time and space and shaped into a story. The story is moulded and remoulded by imagination, by passion and prejudice, by religious preconception or aesthetic

²⁵ See C.B.R. Pelling, 'Truth and Fiction in Plutarch's *Lives*', *Antonine Literature*, ed. D.A. Russell, 1990, 19-52, esp. pp. 43 and 49 on 'true enough'.

²⁶ Plut. *Thes.* 28.2; cf. C. Gill and T.P. Wiseman (eds.), *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World*, 1993, 130f.

²⁷ Plut. *Cic.* 48.1, cf. Sen. *Contr.* VII 2.8; Pliny, *NH* VII 141, cf. Sen. *Contr.* II 4; T.P. Wiseman, *Clio's Cosmetics*, 1979, 31-7.

²⁸ Tac. *Ann.* III 19.2, IV 11.2 (*fabulosa et immania*), 11.3 (*ueris in miraculum corruptis*), XI 27 (*fabulosum ... miraculi causa*).

²⁹ Thuc. I 21.1 (τὰ πολλὰ ... ἐπὶ τὸ μῦθῶδες ἐκνευικηκότα); F.M. Cornford, *Thucydides Mythistoricus*, 1907, 130-1: his italics.

instinct, by the delight in the marvellous, by the itch for a moral, by the love of a good story; and the thing becomes a legend.

The stage was certainly one of the ways by which passion and prejudice could effect that transformation.

In the very 'primal scene' of ancient historiography, the story of Gyges, Candaules and the queen, Herodotus offers his audience a play in two acts, each consisting of a dialogue followed by a dramatic bedroom scene. He introduces it with Candaules' observation that the eyes are more reliable witnesses than the ears, inviting us in effect to watch it happen, as if on the stage. Since 1949 we have known that the story was indeed a play; and it is not impossible that Herodotus knew it.³⁰ So if, as I suggest, Suetonius' source transcribed as history what he had seen played at the *ludi scaenici*, he may have been doing no more than the Father of History himself had done, nearly four centuries before.

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³⁰ Hdt I 8-12 (8.2 for eyes); *Ox. Pap.* XXIII 2382; E. Lobel, *PBA* 35, 1949, 207-16. Play predates Herodotus: B. Snell, *ZPE* 12, 1973, 197-205. *Contra*: J.A.S. Evans, *GRBS* 26, 1985, 229-33, etc.