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SEATING PROBLEMS IN ROMAN THEATRE AND CIRCUS

Saara Lilja

When I recently held a series of lectures on Ovid's *Amores*, two passages had to be left unexplained. One of them is found in *Am.* 2,7, an elegy where the poet accuses his beloved of jealousy, and the other in *Am.* 3,2, which is a flirtatious praise of an unknown beauty who sits in the circus next to the speaker. The various and even contradictory explanations given by dictionaries and commentaries show that both these passages – *Am.* 2,7,3 and *Am.* 3,2,19 – are obscure to other readers as well. While the first passage deals with the question as to where women spectators had their seats in the theatre, the second one is concerned with the exact meaning of *linea* when applied to seating arrangements in the circus. Instead of here aiming at a detailed discussion of these two problems, I only wish to give a few tentative suggestions, which may prove to be helpful in the future.

*

In *Am.* 2,7, when he blames his beloved for repeated fits of jealousy on different occasions, Ovid starts his reprimand by mentioning a theatrical performance:

*Sive ego marmorei respexi summa theatri,
eligis e multis unde dolere velis* (3f.).

Marg and Harder comment on these lines: "die Frauen sitzen im Theater auf den höheren Rängen, anders als im Circus, wo man nebeneinander sitzt" (196).¹ Before dealing with the phrase *respexi summa theatri*,

¹ Marg and Harder, *Publius Ovidius Naso: Liebesgedichte (Amores)*, 2nd rev. ed., Munich 1962; see also Munari, *P. Ovidi Nasonis Amores*, 4th ed., Florence 1964, 156

let me put the following question: where did the woman sit whom Ovid is addressing? If commentators are to be believed, her seat was in the uppermost gallery (to use a modern term), whereas Ovid sat on the groundfloor. But how could she then have seen, from so high up and far away, that he was not looking at her but somebody else?² If the lines cited are read without prejudice, they seem to me to imply that the woman addressed sat beside the poet.

There is a passage in Plautus' *Poenulus* which proves, in my opinion unquestionably, that at least in those early times men and women sat in the theatre unsegregated, as they most certainly did in the circus at all times. The passage in question is found in the prologue, whose first half consists of jests aimed directly at the different classes of the audience. Starting with slaves and prostitutes, the prologus proceeds to address the worthy matrons:

*Matronae tacitae spectent, tacitae rideant,
canora hic voce sua tinnire temperent,
domum sermones fabulandi conferant,
ne et hic viris sint et domi molestiae* (32–35).

I think it is out of the question that the male audience could have thought these lines particularly funny, if the matrons had not been present and sitting close to their husbands.³

A possible objection might be that it is the poet of the original who is speaking to a Greek audience. It should be remembered, however, that Plautus "was moving in the same direction as Terence and dispensed with the Greek prologue as far as possible".⁴ But were women in Greece allowed to attend theatrical performances? When he discusses this disputed question, Navarre refers to three Platonic passages which

n. 2. In the circus, as e.g. *Ov. Am.* 3,2,19f., *Ars* 1,141f. and *Trist.* 2,283f. clearly show, men and women sat where they wished.

² Just out of jealousy? But if she had happened to be right, the poet was so skilful in arguing that he would have invented a complimentary lie immediately.

³ Note also Vitruvius' direction for choosing the site of a theatre (concerning a time slightly prior to Augustus): *eligendus est locus theatro quam saluberrimus ... per ludos enim cum coniugibus et liberis persedentes* (5,3).

⁴ Quoted from *Oxford Class. Dictionary* s.v. *Plautus* (by G.W. Williams).

clearly show that women used to attend tragic performances; this fact, he says, implies that they saw satyric plays too; and a passage in Aristophanes' *Peace* (966) proves that they also attended comic performances – at any rate women "de la classe populaire" if not those "de bonne éducation" (to whom Plato seems to refer).⁵

One might further object that seating arrangements in the nonstationary theatres of Plautus' time were probably different from those in Pompey's theatre, to which the epithet *marmorei* at *Ov. Am.* 2,7,3 must refer.⁶ Friedlaender is one of those who think that it was "seit der Zeit Augusts" that women spectators were discarded higher up to the back rows.⁷ Why should this have been done? The most commonly given answer is that the change took place for the sake of women's safety, theatre audiences being notorious for their turbulence.

It is true that Plautus' audience is suitably characterized as "the Roman populace ... rude ... the common folk",⁸ and Terence's prologues – above all those of *Hecyra* (29–42) and *Phormio* (30–32) – testify to the wild agitation of his audience. But I think it hard to believe that things in the theatre should have become so much worse under Augustus. This, however, is exactly what Cameron maintains: "with the introduction of the pantomime under Augustus the situation went from bad to worse" (223).⁹ After mentioning the disturbances at the *ludi Augustales* of A.D. 14 and the more serious riots the following year, he says that "there is no evidence for rowdyism of this order among circus partisans in the early Empire" (225). Might this not be an *argumentum ex silentio*? For my part I am inclined to imagine circus

⁵ O. Navarre, *Le théâtre grec*, Paris 1925, 243–245; see also T.A. Sinclair, *A History of Classical Greek Literature from Homer to Aristotle*, London 1934, 224. The Platonic passages in question are *Laws* 2,658 d and 7,817 c; *Gorg.* 502 d.

⁶ Pompey's theatre, "l'unico stabile e in pietra sino al 13 a.Chr." (Munari 156 n. 2), was inaugurated in 55 B.C.

⁷ L. Friedlaender, *Darstellungen aus der Sittengeschichte Roms I*, 9th rev. ed., Leipzig 1919, 288. See also Hollis, *Ovid: Ars Amatoria*, Book I, Oxford 1977, 54; *Suet. Div. Aug.* 44, to which he refers, is discussed below.

⁸ Quoted from W. Beare, *Plautus and his public*, *CR* 42 (1928) 106–111.

⁹ A. Cameron, *Circus Factions: Blues and Greens at Rome and Byzantium*, Oxford 1976. While the passages he quotes from Cicero (158f.) are rather mild, Horace's description in *Epist.* 2,1,177–207 is far more vivacious.

audiences to have been even more tumultuous, since they were divided by an eager support of different factions.¹⁰ Yet in the circus, in spite of all excitement, male and female spectators continued to sit together.

Let us now return to the phrase *respexi summa theatri* at Ov. Am. 2,7,3.¹¹ Suetonius' detailed account of the new seating arrangements in the theatre laid down by Augustus (Div. Aug. 44) includes a brief comment on female spectators: *feminis ne gladiatores quidem, quos promiscue spectari sollemne olim erat, nisi ex superiore loco spectare concessit; solis virginibus Vestalibus locum in theatro ... dedit*. According to Suetonius, then, women were enjoined to occupy the back rows at gladiatorial combats, with the exception of Vestal Virgins who were allowed to sit on the groundfloor. I think that the embarrassing *ne ... quidem* refers to the subsequent sentence, which deals with athletic events: *athletarum vero spectaculo muliebri secus omne ... summovit*.¹² If theatrical performances are implied by Suetonius' words, one possible reason for the new seating arrangements might be the exceedingly erotic character of the pantomime which was introduced under Augustus; the emperor is known to have been (or, rather, pretended to be) morally prim.¹³

After all these complicated and partly contradictory reasonings – supposing I have above interpreted Am. 2,7,3f. correctly to mean that the woman addressed sat beside the poet – there follows my cautious provisional suggestion: the back rows in the theatre may have been occupied by those women who came unaccompanied (perhaps mostly females of the lowest class, such as slave-girls and prostitutes), whereas

¹⁰ See also Friedlaender I 288: "wo Pöbelmassen von Parteileidenschaft zur Raserei entflammt gegeneinander tobten". The deplorable football calamity at Brussels Heysel stadion in May, 1985, may be compared.

¹¹ On *respiciunt* at Ov. Ars 1,109, a passage which also deals with the theatre, see Hollis 54. Note further Cynthia's jealous admonition: *colla cave inflectas ad summum obliqua theatrum* (Prop. 4,8,77).

¹² In the light of these pieces of information it is all the more amazing that men and women continued to sit unsegregated in the circus.

¹³ See also Friedlaender I 288 and Cameron 223. The fact that Vestal Virgins were allowed to sit downstairs seems truly comical, but of course they did not come to see the notorious pantomime at all.

matrons with their husbands and other women accompanied by their *virī* may have sat together next to each other.¹⁴

*

Am. 3,2 is a young man's long monologue in which he endeavours to ingratiate himself with the beautiful girl who sits next to him in the circus:

*Quid frustra refugis? Cogit nos linea iungi;
haec in lege loci commoda circus habet* (19f.).

In Bornecque's translation, "séparation" corresponds to *linea* and "disposition matérielle" to *lex loci* (73).¹⁵ Translating *linea* "die Reihe" and *lex loci* "des Ortes der Brauch" (111), Marg and Harder explain that the *linea* is "der Einschnitt, der die – engen – Platzgrenzen anzeigte; Ovid dreht die Funktion der Platzgrenze um" (214). Munari makes a similar comment on "la linea": it is "il taglio inciso nel legno delle panche per delimitare i singoli posti a sedere" (185 n. 3).¹⁶ The phrases *linea* and *lex loci* are used in connection with the circus also in Book I of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*:

*Et bene, quod cogit, si nolis, linea iungi,
quod tibi tangenda est lege puella loci* (141f.).

This time Bornecque translates *linea* "dimension des places" and *lex loci* "dispositions du lieu" (7).¹⁷ Hollis comments on line 141 that "a line marks the space for each individual on the bench" (59).

Georges' dictionary gives the following explanation to the word *linea* as used in the two Ovidian passages: "die tiefen Einschnitte unten in den Sitzreihen des Theaters, wodurch die einzelnen Sitze voneinander getrennt wurden, etwa 3/4 m breit" (s.v. *linea*, B 3). Lewis and Short

¹⁴ Some information about female spectators in the theatre is found in J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *Roman Women: Their History and Habits*, London 1962, 278f., whereas E. Paratore, *Storia del teatro latino*, Milan 1957, and M. Bieber, *The History of the Greek and Roman Theater*, 2nd rev. ed., Princeton 1961, are silent about the topic.

¹⁵ Bornecque, *Ovide: Les amours*, 2nd ed., Paris 1952.

¹⁶ See also Bertini, *Publio Ovidio Nasone: Amori*, Milan 1983, 128f.

¹⁷ Bornecque, *Ovide: L'art d'aimer*, Paris 1951.

explain this word, as used by Ovid, in a similar way: "a barrier or line in the theatre, by which the seats were separated from each other" (s.v. *linea*, II 2). The Oxford Latin Dictionary, too, speaks of "a line or rope marking off a block of seats in the theatre" (s.v. *linea*, 6 b).¹⁸ All these dictionaries thus make the same mistake in referring to the theatre, instead of the circus; only Castiglioni and Mariotti (s.v. *linea*, 7) correctly speak of the circus. Lastly, ThLL suggests (s.v. *linea*, col. 1437) that the *linea* in the two Ovidian passages might be a terminus technicus like that used by Vegetius (1,24), but Vegetius is speaking of the upper margin of a military trench, which is very far from what *linea* means in Ovid.¹⁹

Supposing that the *linea* in question would have separated one seat from the next one as all dictionaries and commentaries claim, the breadth given by Georges would have been downright luxurious; yet Ovid repeatedly describes an extreme lack of space.²⁰ I wonder where the exact measure 3/4 m or 75 cm comes from – Vitruvius' treatment of the theatre (5,6–9) does not include such particulars – but if the figure is right, it must refer to the space measured for two. This would also finely explain Ovid's choice of the phrase *cogit nos iungi* (Am. 3,2,19; Ars 1,141), with its welcome opportunity for coining a sexually ambiguous joke.²¹

As regards *linea* when used as a term in the circus, Georges only mentions "die vor den Schranken und am Ziele der Rennbahn gezogene Linie, eine Querfurche, die mit Kalk oder Kreide angefüllt war" (s.v.

¹⁸ The question as to whether the *linea* was an incision (Georges and most commentaries) or a rope (Oxford Latin Dictionary) or perhaps another kind of barrier (Lewis and Short) must be left unanswered here. ThLL does not help: "terminus ... quo quid definitur, ab alia re separatur" (s.v. *linea*, B).

¹⁹ Of course, this remark does not prevent the *linea* as used by Ovid from being a terminus technicus.

²⁰ In addition to the phrases *cogit nos iungi* (Am. 3,2,19; Ars 1,141) and *tibi tangenda est puella* (Ars 1,142), note Am. 3,2,21–24 and Ars 1,140.

²¹ Marg and Harder also comment: "dazu steckt in der pointierten Formulierung wohl eine Zweideutigkeit" (214). Note the similarly ambiguous jokes in Ars 1, *iunge tuum lateri ... latus* (140) and *tibi tangenda est puella* (142). On the sexual sense of *tangere* see J.N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, London 1982, 185f., 208, and S. Lilja, *Homosexuality in Republican and Augustan Rome*, Helsinki 1983, 21–26, 54.

linea, B 2); in each case it could be used metaphorically, "die Schranken überspringen" and "das Ziel, Ende". This metaphorical use of *linea* invites me to suggest, though hesitantly, that the *linea* as found in the two Ovidian passages might also have a metaphorical tinge of meaning. Since in elegiac couplets, as is well known, the pentameter tends to repeat the thought expressed in the hexameter, *linea* and *lex* thus might be more or less synonymous. Such a development in meaning would not be unprecedented : there is another close terminus technicus, *regula*, which went through the same course of development.²²

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All these scattered ideas are admittedly too vague to be regarded as a scientifically solid contribution towards solving the two problematic passages of Ovid. Yet I hope that my tentative suggestions might be of some help for those who will possibly try to find a final solution.

²² Meaning a plumb-line used by masons and carpenters, *linea* is often combined with *regula*, as by Vitruvius (e.g. 7,3). As regards *lex* "de consessu", see ThLL s.v. *lex*, II A 1 a, entitled "vitae, morum regulae".