

Rough Music in Republican Rome

This paper revisits the evidence for mass chanting as a ritualized form of popular protest in ancient Rome. It seeks to rehabilitate the arguments of Usener (1901) that prohibitions against *occentatio* in the Twelve Tables and later against *convicium* in the Praetor's Edict represented official attempts to curtail traditional practices of public shaming in which crowds harassed perceived transgressors of social norms. Evidence for these practices can be found not only in the *Digest* and other legal sources but also in passages from Plautus' *Curculio* (144-56), *Mercator* (404-11), *Persa* (564-73) and especially *Pseudolus* (357-75).

Although these traditions of *occentatio* and *convicium* are recognized as probable vestiges of a pre-literate, popular song culture (Zorzetti 1991, cf. Horsfall 2003), scholars nevertheless tend to overlook and/or underestimate the social and political implications of these practices. Such neglect is the result of a confluence of factors. Among legal historians, the significance of *occentatio* and *convicium* have been subsumed as ancillary issues within broader debates about the status of magic in the Twelve Tables on the one hand and the regulation of defamatory speech under Roman private law on the other. The evidence of Plautus, meanwhile, has received limited attention since Hendrickson (1925) dismissed it as a Greek literary *topos*, focusing especially on *Curc.* 144-56 as a variation on the theme of *paraklausithyron*.

A reappraisal of these passages reveals that the kind of singing denoted by Plautus' use of the verb *occentare* was directed not only at the closed doors of a particular household, but also—and more significantly—at the moral reputation (*pudor*) of its inhabitants. This impact also aligns with the legal evidence for *convicium*, which Ulpian (*Dig.* 47.10.1.2) defined as an injury against someone's *dignitas*. Taken together with the ridiculous spectacle of Calidorus' and

Psdeudolus' failed attempt to discipline the shameless Ballio with chanted insults (*maledicta*) at *Pseud.* 357-75, the cumulative evidence makes it possible to reconstruct a culture in which public harassment could be used to call out individuals for perceived moral lapses.

Drawing on more recent studies of comparable practices of *charivari* and 'rough music' in Early Modern Europe (e.g., Davis 1975, Thompson 1991; cf. Forsdyke 2012), this paper goes on to explore the significance of these rituals as a vehicle for the *populus Romanus* to participate in the public discourse of moral censorship. Whereas the bulk of the available evidence for this discourse centers on accusations of immorality as a function of intra-elite status competition (cf. Edwards 1993), *convicium* and *occentatio* point to an underlying foundation for these concerns within the lived experience of ordinary Romans. Efforts to outlaw (or at least curtail) these practices mirror those of more recent eras, and reflect both the increased politicization of these issues as well as a resulting desire on the part of Roman elites to assert greater control over the regulation of private morals.

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