6 | Pollio's Paradox: Popular Invective and the Transition to Empire

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Quid enim gladiatoribus clamores innumerabilium civium? quid *populi* versus? (*Cic.* Phil. *1.36*)

'I'll keep quiet. For it's not easy to play the scribe against one who can *proscribe.*' This was Asinius Pollio's retort to the Fescennine verses that Octavian had written about him some time during the triumvirate. Pollio's wit exemplifies the transformation of invective strategies at the end of the Republic that highlighted the political dimension of popular abuse directed at leading figures.[1] This exchange, in which an ex-consul calls attention to a triumvir's tyrannical abuses, continues a long Roman tradition of intra-elite status negotiation via invective sound-bites, but Octavian's increasing consolidation of political and military power had begun to change the parameters of such discourse. Yet popular political invective suffered no such attenuation. I will, thus, be using the term 'popular' in two interrelated ways: first, as the unmarked social opposite of the marked category of 'elite', and, second, as a sign of invective's rhetorical directionality, which (however facetiously) attempts to erode the social status of the target.[2] The first sense will apply largely to the anonymous chants, verses and shouts of mass audiences, which in any given instance may or may not have been fomented by elite agents, but which emerge in our sources as an anonymous, broadly non-elite voice; and the second usage will support my argument that, while the *princeps* constrained the freedom of elite speakers, non-elite invective, because of its diffuse nature, could engage the emperor more freely. In Hall's terms of the dialectic between popular and hegemonic culture, therefore, I see popular invective as a bottom-up admonitory rhetoric that became increasingly important as aristocrats' freedom to chastise Roman leadership decreased.[3]

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[1] Macrobius preserves this anecdote without social contextualization in a list of quips attributed to Octavian/Augustus (*Sat.* 2.4.21): 'Temporibus triumviralibus Pollio, cum Fescenninos in eum Augustus scripsisset, ait: at ego taceo. Non est enim facile in eum scribere qui potest proscribere.'

[2] This definition of 'popular' follows that of Toner 2009: 1.

[3] See Hall 1981 and the Introduction to this volume.

In the coming pages I will first discuss invective in terms of its social register and the difference between literary analysis and interpersonal communication. I will then outline some prominent popular and elite republican patterns of politicized invective before focusing on the imperial situation. I will argue that the presence of the emperor changed the rules of the Roman invective game such that popular invective took on a greater role in Roman life. The two primary reasons for this change were the constraints on elite behaviour and the close relationship between the imperial regime and massive, monumentalized spectacle architecture.

Popular Invective

Invective is a verbal assault upon a target.[4] We can attempt to sub-divide this definition between elite and popular forms – though these categories prove messier than they might first appear, particularly in terms of the question (thoroughly presented in the Introduction) of what groups should be considered 'popular'. In this case, 'elite' and 'popular' function better as poles that define a spectrum than as exclusive categories. Content and context tend to be the best markers of invective register. Ovid's *Ibis*, for example, displays a poetic economy and an allusive erudition in its curse catalogue that derives from the privileged educational elite. By contrast, Xenophon's account of the abusive banter in Cyrus' military camp (e.g. *Cyr.* 2.2.28–31) does not demand such erudition, but it is located within an exclusive banquet held for the top brass and Xenophon targets an audience within the upper echelon of Greek society. In these cases, the verbal aggression centres on the sensibilities, education, or exclusive habits of the social elite in a manner that would tend to exclude non-elite audiences from access to or full appreciation of the invective. From this notion of invective involving elite content or deriving from elite contexts, I suggest that we can approach popular invective as invective that does not satisfy these constraints. Yet content and context can only get us so far. Pollio's response to Octavian, for example, derives from the highest social stratum and treats the forced appropriation of wealth from rich citizens, yet the lilt of his words and the rustic connotations of Fescennine abuse may have popularized his comment among a more diverse audience.[5] One

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[4] See, for example, Dundes *et al.* 1970, Irvine 1992, Pagliai 2009, Neu 2009 and Smith 2013.

[5] For Fescennine *opprobria rustica*, see Hor. *Ep.* 2.1.145–6 and Graf 2005a: 201–3. Such a popularization of Pollio's words suggests a rare example of the little tradition participating in the great (cf. Toner 2009: 5).

aspect of 'Pollio's paradox', therefore, is the manner in which invective often blurs hierarchical categorizations even as it seeks to negotiate statuses.

These examples seek to differentiate elite from popular invective, but at least three major issues thwart this process. First, 'the elite' were not always a unified group.[6] In a *polis* of average size from the classical era, an aristocratic oligarchy could probably be identified without much difficulty as the group with a virtual monopoly on Aristotle's three pillars of elite status: birth, wealth and *paideia* (*Pol.* 1317b39–41).[7] Already in Sarpedon's speech to his cousin Glaucus in *Iliad* 12 we can see how a family's continued claim to birth status is fundamentally connected to its wealth, which, in turn, fosters the cultural skill-sets (such as speech-making, courtly manners and athletic-military training) that distinguished elites from non-elites.[8] Yet, in other circumstances, these three elements could split. Thus, Demosthenes railed against Aeschines' humble origins despite his elite rhetorical training and social prominence. A similar rift typifies the Roman aristocratic disdain for upstarts, who could, through their ingenuity, luck or industriousness, amass phenomenal wealth but who lacked the nobility of birth and/or cultured education. Cicero, a *novus homo*, offers a real-world example of this, and Petronius' Trimalchio presents a more salacious extreme: for all his opulence he remains, in terms of birth and culture, a sub-elite boor.

The second main impediment to neatly demarcating elite from popular invective is that even in exclusively elite circles, a great deal of invective boils down to a handful of abusive typologies decrying the target's body, mental capabilities, family, public and private behaviour and so forth. In this sense, even elite invective often reveals a deeply demotic slant, since it regularly emerges from an inversion of the traits that typify elite pretension. Thus, when Semonides categorizes all wives as corresponding to various animals (*fr.* 7), he distinguishes between the squalorous pig-wife and the regal mare, but both types are slandered according to a calculus of likening humans to animals that can be heard in playgrounds around the world. Centuries later, this same de-humanizing logic informs Dio's claim that the people of Agae and Adana mocked their regional rivals in Tarsus by calling them a bunch of Cercopes (33.8). Or again, Demosthenes' sexual

[6] Nor, of course, were 'the people'. For a parsing of rhetoric invoking the *populus Romanus*, see Morstein-Marx 2004: 119–59.

[7] Ober 1989 discusses 'mass' and 'elite' status in classical Athens; for Rome, see Mayer 2012 and Arena 2012.

[8] Tandy 1997: 107–9 explores the economic implications of this scene.

allegations against Timarchus closely resemble those enumerated by Lucian in his attack on an unnamed rival in his *Pseudologista*. And Pollio's pun on the lexical similarities and power discrepancies of the words *scribere* and *proscribere* speaks most directly to property-owners, who stood to lose their land in proscriptions, but the propertyless would have easily understood the pun and may well have circulated it because of its wit or anti-Octavian sentiment. Thus, even this bit of elitist invective can gain popular traction.[9] From this primarily formalist perspective, then, elite invective seems easier to delimit than popular invective, since the former represents the marked and more constrained sub-category, whereas the latter encompasses any invective that does not satisfy the conditions of elite content and/or context.

A final challenge to evaluating invective involves its relationship to insult. The former is a formal category of verbal aggression, whereas the latter represents a hostile communicative exchange. In narrow literary terms invective can be recognized by its 'outrageous speech' or its grammar of attack, but without an understanding of the social context, we cannot hope to understand its impact. Rituals such as the Eleusinian *gephurismos*, Horace's Atellan-Aristophanic exchange in *Satire* 1.5 and the later imperial festival of the Kalends of January all featured licensed invective notionally devoid of insult.[10] Similarly, examples abound of invective that serves to build and strengthen social bonds, like Nagy's claim that archaic *iambos* affirmed *philotês* within a community, or the banter of the Spartan mess-hall.[11] Cross-cultural anthropological studies confirm that thoroughly aggressive and transgressive invective often serves to promote friendships within certain socially designated contexts.[12] These examples demonstrate that the literary record of invective speech does not, in itself, help us access the social experience of invective.

All this points to the importance of social contextualization in evaluating invective. Whether we look to examples of public mockery, such as the abuse Aristophanes heaped upon the likes of Cleon, Socrates and Euripides, or more intimate banter, such as Catullus' savage threats of

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[9]   Graf 2015: 168–75 presents a parallel case involving the late antique Lupercalia: Pope Gelasius (492–6) condemned the revived festival because aristocrats were composing invectives about the clergy, which were then sung in the streets by a motley assortment of non-elite figures. Thus, the invective is elite in terms of composition and popular in terms of performance.

[10] For Horace's invective exchange, see Gowers 2012: 199–200.

[11] Nagy 1979: 251. For the Spartan practice: Plut. *Lyc.* 12.4.

[12] E.g. Dundes *et al.* 1970 on Turkish boys; Wald 2012 on the African American game most often called 'The Dozens'; Askew 2002: 123–56 analyses both the bonding and segregating/chastising power of Tanzanian Taarab music. Smith 2013: 130–2 summarizes several similar examples.

sexual violence in Carmen 16 against Aurelius and Furius, who are else-where described as the poet's friends (11.1), we constantly bump up against our inability to differentiate angry exchanges from friendly banter that is made more enjoyable by adopting a posture of mock hostility. All such cases attempt to generate interest by luring us into the 'persistent tension between fiction and reality' that emerges from directing verbal abuse at recognizably historical figures in ancient poetry.[13] Whether such invective was intended or received as an insult is usually impossible to determine.

We are fortunate to have one ancient text that discusses invective in general terms, and it corroborates this need for fine-grained social con-textualization. Among other topics, Plutarch's *Table-talk* evaluates how to tease (*skōmmata*) without sliding into insult (*loidoria*). Plutarch begins with a warning that holds as true today as it did in antiquity: 'Anyone who can't deliver a joke at just the right moment and with just the right tone should avoid it altogether' (*Mor.* 631 c = *Table-talk* 2.1.4). And later in the same section he admits that our response to rough banter changes depend-ing on our company: 'People laugh at things among friends and colleagues that they would find disgusting (*dyskherainousin*) if spoken in the presence of their spouse or parent or teacher, unless, of course, such banter is pleasing to them as well' (634a = 2.1.11). Plutarch confirms that the difference between humour and offence rests on a razor's edge. Yet even if we hope to use his text as an insider's guide, we often encounter frustration, as when we try to apply its teachings to Horace's *Epode* 3. At one point Plutarch says that 'joking blame' (*skōmma kai mempsis*) deliv-ered with appropriate flair expresses gratitude more elegantly than does straightforward thanks, and he even gives the specific example of a dinner guest who pleasantly sasses a generous host to good effect (632e–33a = 2.1.7). This scenario seems to map precisely onto Horace's poem, which expresses mock outrage at Maecenas for serving so much garlic at a meal. Yet Plutarch goes on to note that people easily accept being teased for baldness but take offence at jokes about their bad breath (633 c = 2.1.9). So when Horace complains about his garlicky dinner and hopes that Maecenas will reek so badly that his girlfriend will turn away, which bit of Plutarchan advice wins out? Is this friendly teasing that positively disrupts the dynamics of patronage or does the hyperbolic comparison of garlic to Medea's poisons provide rhetorical cover for real anger? Does Maecenas take offence at or enjoy this banter? Or does he laugh to counter Horace's dissembled aggression? To none of these questions can we

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[13] Rosen 2007: 27 and, more generally, 3–32.

provide a convincing answer, because we cannot access the subtlest social cues within this exchange and have only the lexical skeleton of communication. As we will see in the next section, during the Late Republic a rich and diverse invective culture flourished, but triumviral and (far more so) imperial politics constrained this repartee in such a way that only popular invective, by which I mean invective attributable only to mass gatherings, spectacle audiences and the perception of a *vox populi*, continued to provide a safe means of commenting upon and resisting the top-down exercise of power.

Republican Roman Patterns of Political Invective

Throughout the Republic, Roman elites and non-elites engaged in invective exchanges that helped shape civic life. At times this discourse brought the two strata (overlooking, for the moment, the shortcomings of a two-tiered model) into close communication. After the murder of Caesar, for example, Cicero asked Atticus to gauge the people's sentiment by noting the crowd's positive and negative reactions to leading figures at the mime shows (*Att.* 14.3.3). Such demonstrations allowed audiences to voice their opinions in a space where elites could hear. Elites also frequently butted heads with each other through invective verse in what seems to have been an expected aspect of a prominent political career.[14] At the end of the Republic, however, this free-flowing game of one-upmanship changed, and popular invective played a key part in the emergence of the new social role that would eventually be called the *princeps*. Although this process was more complex than can be dealt with here, we can see key examples in the careers of Caesar, Octavian and Pompey (whom I postpone for reasons that will become clear).

First, Caesar may have manipulated habits of sexualized invective to create a new role for himself in Roman society. Suetonius records that while Caesar was celebrating his Gallic commission in 58 he boasted that he would 'mount the heads' of his enemies (*insultaturum omnium*

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[14] Lucilius famously attacked the leading men of Rome in his satires; Cato the Younger wrote Archilochean poetry against Metellus Scipio for stealing his bride (Plut. *Cat. Mi.* 7.2); Calvus took aim at Pompey (fr. 18) and Catullus did the same with various figures, including Caesar (e.g. 54 and 93; cf. Suet. *Caes.* 73). Furius Bibaculus wrote iambic poetry (Quint. 10.1.96) and lampoons on Octavian (and perhaps also Caesar) that, according to Tacitus, brooked no response (*Ann.* 4.34.8). C. Trebonius, the henchman-turned-assassin of Caesar, composed an invective poem (*versiculi*) against Antony that he sent to Cicero and which he justified via an appeal to Lucilius' *libertas* (*Ad fam.* 12.16.3).

capitibus); someone quipped that this would be difficult for a woman, and Caesar responded by likening himself to Semiramis and the Amazons (*Caes.* 22.2). This insult connects rumours about Caesar's effeminacy to a standard and simple logic that equates masculinity with power and, in this case, the threat of silencing speech via forced fellatio. Caesar's riposte, however, wins out because he embraced what most would expect to be the disempowered role.[15] With this exchange in mind, we can reconsider the stories about similar taunts directed at Caesar by his troops.[16] Ruffell, stressing the Bakhtinian idea of carnivalesque transgression over the more commonly discussed inversion, suggests that this discourse about Caesar's gender and sexual identity may have proclaimed how anomalous he had become in terms of traditional categories. He proposes that such characterization 'diffuses the Foucauldian equation of penetrated' with passivity, femininity and powerlessness.[17] On this analysis, Caesar emerges as a radically individual figure, much like Derrida's notions, developed throughout *The Beast and the Sovereign*, that autocrat and animal exist outside normative rules; Caesar's troops claim that he is categorically different from earlier charismatic generals and now inhabits a role that would remain underdefined until the aftermath of Actium. Thus, in addition to releasing tensions, inverting hierarchies or enacting apotropaic ritual, this triumphal abuse may also have participated in an ongoing social dialogue about how Caesar had moved outside familiar social hierarchies altogether.[18] Zanker has led the way in showing that Augustan propaganda was not a unidirectional, top-down dissemination of a clearly articulated message but was, rather, a process of negotiation and cultural dialogue.[19] In the invective of Caesar's troops, scurrilous speech may have served as a bottom-up overture in a similar process.[20]

[15] Similarly, Archilochus and Hipponax may have presénted themselves in ways that chafed against normative sexual politics, though the evidence is fragmentary. Cratinus' empowering self-presentation as a drunk and adulterer in *Pytine* and Catullus' endorsement of *otium* over *negotium* parallel Caesar's move, though without such pointedly political implications. Nero's enthusiasm for public performance, Commodus' self-presentation as a hunter and gladiator, and Julian's preference for philosophical austerity over imperial pomp perhaps offer better parallels in terms of leading political figures seeking innovative ways to vaunt their masculinity. Modern examples are easier to adduce; e.g. Lil' Kim's song 'Suck my dick' hinges on a similar gender dynamic, but her words, which repeat the phrase 'if I was a dude ... ', highlight rather than transcend the gendered implications of insults about oral sex.

[16] Extant examples include *versus triumphales* 1–4 (Courtney 1993) upon which Calvus fr. 17 is modelled.

[17] Ruffell 2003: 48.   [18] For the ritual aspects of satirical speech, see Graf 2005a.

[19] Zanker 1988.

[20] Caesar's assassination on the festival of Anna Perenna, a carnivalesque celebration that could have distracted the plebs and thereby facilitated the murderous plot, may also associate Caesar

My second example shows that while Caesar was shaping a new role for himself, intra-elite political invective was declining. Indeed such discourse can rarely exist in any autocratic regime outside carefully delimited parameters of ritual or joking, since the hegemon's authority is by implicit definition inviolate and since unmitigated invective aims to negotiate statuses.[21] We can see how this decline in elite political invective happened in Pollio's response to Octavian. *Fescennini* were ritualized blame poetry, but Pollio does not reply with *Fescennini* of his own. He claims that tyrannical power has made any such response impossible and his quip suggests that Octavian's verses were composed outside a ritual context or that the old rustic licence no longer existed. This retort continues the elite trend of exchanging barbed comments, but Pollio highlights the power differential that split the senatorial elite from the triumvirs, who had authority to proscribe citizens (including Pollio's father-in-law). Pollio shows that inveighing against a triumvir is difficult but not quite impossible, since his words box Octavian into an awkward position. Had he responded violently to Pollio's insolence, Octavian would have confirmed the truth of Pollio's description of him as presiding over a reign of terror.

Similar examples of cornering an autocrat are nearly impossible to adduce from antiquity, and our evidence for republican-style political invective all but disappears with Octavian's consolidation of power.[22] Cicero's *Philippics*, delivered during 44–3, represent the last extant outburst of robust Roman oratorical invective, and Antony's assassination of Cicero underlines the danger of using republican strategies to influence triumviral politics. Less formally, we hear of Octavian being pilloried (in uncertain performance contexts) for effeminacy and sexual improprieties by Sextus Pompeius, Antony and Antony's brother Lucius, but their actual words do not survive; Suetonius pairs this account of slander among elites with a story about a theatre crowd cheering maliciously at a line about a eunuch that they understood as a reference to Octavian's unmanliness (*Aug.* 68).[23]

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with bottom-up movements. The best historical sources do not connect the festival and the killing, though it seems that Ovid has done so at *Fasti* 3.523–696, as argued by Herbert-Brown 2009:131–2. Parenti 2003: *passim* takes such a view of Caesar to an extreme.

21   Analyses of the annual Swazi Ncwala ritual, in which carefully scripted invective against the king provides apotropaic security and promotes fertility, bear out this basic point. Most fundamental is Kuper 1944; most relevant to my discussion is Dirks 1988. Smith 2013: 129 offers a similar analysis of the connection between invective and egalitarianism.

22   The exchange between Diogenes and Alexander at Dio Chrys. 4.59 offers perhaps the closest parallel.

23   Suet. *Aug.* 53 preserves a different sort of interaction between actor, crowd and an elite target. Sometime after Actium a comic actor spoke the line *O dominum aequum et bonum*, 'O great and gracious master', which the crowd (perhaps sycophantically) took to be a reference to

Suetonius thus connects elite and non-elite attacks as part of the overall discourse of anti-Octavian sentiment.[24] Yet these seem to be among the last examples of elite political invective in the republican mould, and not surprisingly the final extant example of such compositions comes from none other than Octavian himself (fr. 1 = Martial 11.20, against Antony).[25] As Octavian's control of Rome increased and solidified into the early Principate, popular political invective continued, however, since it could be voiced through the anonymity and traditional *licentia* of the crowd.[26] Yet although this anonymity existed in terms of the officials' logistical challenge of identifying individual speakers, Fagan has shown that the subjective experience of members of a crowd rarely leads to a loss of identity. Instead Fagan argues that the 'crowd might ... be one of the few places where people can freely express who they really feel themselves to be, where an "imagined community" can share an expression of how they see the world'.[27] Part of Fagan's thesis is that audiences in the arena (as opposed to the rowdier theatre audiences) so rarely rioted because they primarily saw the arena as divided between stands and sands, with the in-group of Romans (from *editor* to plebs) above and out-group performers (animals, criminals, gladiators) below. Yet at moments when that sense of in-group solidarity became untenable, what Fagan calls the 'spasms of divisiveness', sub-groups may well have perceived the organization of performance spaces differently, with representatives of the imperial regime looking more like an out-group than the head of the in-group. Such moments, amid the heightened sense of sub-group identity that Fagan describes, could lead to outbursts of invective against the imperial leadership.

My third and final example of the shift in the politics of invective deals with the trend towards monumentalized spectacle venues. As is well known, throughout most of the republican period, spectacle venues in Rome, such as theatres and the Circus Maximus, lacked permanent monumental structures.[28] Particularly successful generals could, with senatorial

Augustus himself. The *princeps* quickly quieted the unwanted flattery and issued an edict chastising such obsequiousness.

[24] Suet. *Aug.* 70 offers a similar pairing of elite and popular censure in its description of Octavian's mock *theoxenia*, which is corroborated by reference to a bitter letter from Antony and the full quotation of a popular lampoon.

[25] Dated by Courtney 1993: 282 to the end of 41. Later examples of invectives delivered against living emperors by named individuals are few and problematic, with Philo's speech against Caligula being the best example (for a reaction to which, see Eusebius *HE* 2.5.1–2).

[26] The standard discussion of *theatralis licentia* is Bollinger 1969.   [27] Fagan 2011: 279.

[28] This may, though with no certainty, be connected to Valerius Maximus' story of a senatorial ban on spectacle seating in Rome, supposedly intended to display Roman manliness by forcing audiences to stand (2.4.2).

permission, build temples or other monuments to commemorate their achievements, but these building projects did not include spectacle venues. Extraordinary spectacles, such as funerary commemorations or the fulfilment of a battlefield vow, could be staged in dual-use venues, such as the Forum or, later, the Saepta, or held in temporary structures. The annual cycle of fixed shows, the responsibility of the aediles, took place in just such temporary venues. This costly habit of constructing and dismantling buildings each year probably reflects the Senate's desire to avoid connecting any individual's name and reputation to a permanent structure designed to entertain the people, and sponsors of shows clearly sought to surpass their peers with the extravagance of their displays.[29]

Yet in 55 BCE, not long after Caesar's riposte about Semiramis, the ground rules of spectacle architecture fundamentally changed when Pompey dedicated his monumental theatre complex, an innovation that set him above his rivals. His phenomenal military successes allowed him to transcend senatorial conservatism regarding entertainment venues, and he ushered in a new architectural era by attaching his name to a permanent stone structure where the public could connect their enjoyment directly and enduringly to him. Once the Empire had become a reality, the *princeps* alone had the authority to sponsor such public works, a privilege modelled on Pompey's precedent. Caesar, too, had planned to build a theatre, which Octavian eventually completed. This project, the Theatre of Marcellus (dedicated in 12 BCE), and the transfer of Caesar's dream to Octavian's sponsorship in the name of Marcellus, demonstrates the dynastic implications of this venue.[30] Yet it was Pompey who first broke through in this arena, and the consequences, in terms of popular invective, were immediate and in some cases quite probably unanticipated.[31]

Surely Pompey expected his architectural triumph to earn him great popularity, since his lack of popular support had been painfully revealed at shows.[32] In a letter from 59 BCE, Cicero demonstrates some of the

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[29] See, for example, Tate 2008: 85–7; Beacham 2007: 217 presents a different view. Pliny describes the mind-boggling opulence of the temporary structures built by Aemilius Scaurus in 58 and Curio the younger in 52 (*HN* 36.114–20).

[30] During Octavian-Augustus' reign Pompey's theatre complex received other neighbours: in 29 BCE the relatively small amphitheatre of Statilius Taurus and in 13 BCE the Theatre of Balbus.

[31] For discussions of Pompey's theatre complex within the history of Roman spectacle architecture, see Tate 2008: 80–98 and Kuttner 1999. For broader assessments of spectacle architecture at this time, see Welch 2007: 38–71, 108–26, Bomgardner 2000: 32–120, and Coleman 2003 on the surprising absence of a large monumentalized amphitheatre in Augustan Rome.

[32] Cic. *Q. fr.* 2.3.4 reveals Pompey's anxiety in 56 that his popularity was bottoming out.

complexity of theatre politics when he claims that Pompey was booed, Caesar's entrance was met with prickly silence and, to the irritation of the triumvirs, cheers of approval greeted Curio's arrival.[33] Cicero adds a parallel incident in which the crowd erupted into applause when they interpreted an actor's line as a reference to Pompey: *miseria nostra Magnus es*, 'through our misfortune you are Great'. So in 55 BCE, Pompey aimed to overawe his audience with a spectacle like no other. He even sought to forestall objections to his architectural innovation by claiming that it was primarily a temple to Venus Victrix to which the theatre was a comparatively minor accessory.[34] Yet both Cicero and Pliny record how the crowd disliked the extravagant elephant hunt in the Circus, and Cicero adds that his theatrical shows were generally a flop.[35] Although such negative reviews may not reflect the general response to Pompey's shows, they do reveal one of the dangers associated with his innovative theatre complex, namely that crowds could attach negative, as well as positive, sentiments to their architectural patron.

To be sure, Roman crowds had often expressed themselves at spectacles, but Pompey's theatre reconfigured crowd response in several ways.[36] First, it provided a more focused visual arena than did many dual-use venues, such as the Forum or the Saepta. Theatre and circus designs offered clearer lines of sight and better acoustics to more people than was possible at these other locations. This, in turn, must have fostered a more cohesive sense of Fagan's 'imagined community'.[37] And so it must have been easier for the audience to work together at cheering, jeering, chanting and generally expressing themselves than at, say, a gladiatorial show in the Forum. Second, compared to temporary structures, Pompey's building complex overcame the Senate's conservatism and therefore made a more impressive statement than did the structures built within, rather than in transgression of, senatorial tradition. And finally, Pompey's theatre was simply much

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[33] Cic. *Att.* 2.19; cf. Val. Max. 6.2.9.

[34] Tac. *Ann.* 14.20.4–6, Plin. *HN* 8.7.20, Tert. *De spect.* 10.

[35] Cic. *Ad fam.* 7.1; Plin. *HN* 8.20–1.

[36] Cicero (*Sest.* 106–24) pairs spectacles with elections and assemblies as the three typical occasions for expressing popular sentiments, but he notes that elections and assemblies had already become a sham and that spectacle crowds offered the best indication of popular opinion. Tacitus provides an imperial-era parallel in describing the theatres and circuses as the places *ubi plurima vulga licentia*, 'where most of all the crowds have licence' (*Hist.* 1.72; cf. Tert. *De spect.* 16).

[37] Pliny the Younger (*Pan.* 51) emphasizes that the Circus layout fostered visual communication between Trajan and the audience. Yavetz 1969 discusses the idea of group identity in spectacle venues. Gunderson 1996: 115 compares the Roman arena (generally) to 'a social organ of sight on the order of Foucault's Panopticon'.

bigger. His was the largest theatre in Rome, and that scale meant that crowd responses of any sort involved more people and created a larger stir than had been possible previously.[38]

As we leave the triumviral era and move into the Empire, we can see that popular invective participated in the transition from Republic to Empire in at least three significant ways. First, it seems to have had a role in the dialogical articulation of new social roles, as in the triumphal chants of Caesar's troops. Second, the move towards the Principate curtailed the elite game of vying for status via invective poetry. Once the figure of the emperor had fully emerged, pre-eminent status was no longer a matter of debate, and intra-elite invective became a dangerous game with fewer tangible benefits. This, in turn, meant that anonymous popular invective was the only form of verbal critique and aggression that the emperor would hear. And third, the rise of massive, monumental, permanent spectacle venues that were associated with specific individuals (first Pompey, soon the imperial family) meant that mass audiences had larger and better venues in which to express themselves. And because the emperor became the only visible civic benefactor, he was all but obligated to attend the spectacles and thereby acknowledge and respond to the crowds. With this changed apparatus in place, we can now move into the imperial era to survey this new invective landscape in which elites were significantly constrained from inveighing against leading figures and the emperor heard both praise and blame at the shows that afforded the autocrat and the masses a direct, if blunt, line of communication.

Popular Invective and the Emperor

For roughly the last half-century, historians have been developing new strategies for understanding the Roman *plebs*. Rostovtzeff took a traditional line in noting that with the rise of the Empire, the urban population of Rome 'readily acquiesced' to losing official political influence but 'insisted on their right ... to be fed and amused by the government'.[39] Ste. Croix saw the emergence of the Empire as the curtailment of 'all

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[38] Pliny claims that Scaurus' theatre seated about 80,000 spectators whereas Pompey's only held about 40,000. Both figures are suspicious, but we can at least surmise that Pompey's permanent theatre soon welcomed cumulatively far more spectators than Scaurus' temporary venue could boast.

[39] Rostovtzeff 1957: 80. On the Roman plebs see, in this volume in particular, Courrier and Rosillo-López.

protection against exploitation and oppression by the powerful, and indeed of all effective opportunity of even voicing [popular] grievances by constitutional means'.[40] Yet a different perspective had already arisen with Yavetz's *Plebs and Princeps*, the title of which announces a new attention to the role of the people that goes beyond condemning (Rostovtzeff) or lamenting (Ste. Croix) their plight and begins to see them as an important player in imperial history.[41] In a similar vein, Alan Cameron's inaugural lecture at Kings College gave a preview of his soon-to-be-published *Circus Factions* by asserting that 'the man to whom [the urban population] now turned for help in their troubles and redress of their grievances was the emperor – a more accessible and a more responsive patron than ever the consul or praetor had proved'.[42] Two decades later Millar claimed that the collapse of the Republic must be understood in terms of the 'two-way relationship between *plebs* and *princeps*'.[43] This shift in attitudes bespeaks a fundamental transformation in conceptualizing Roman history, and my goal here is to bring the role of popular invective into that discourse.

Millar has promoted the study of republican expansion in terms of how it satisfied 'the interests of the voters, the *populus Romanus*'.[44] Yet the evidence for invective permits the extension of this exercise into the imperial era, when the *populus Romanus* were no longer voters. In the last section I showed how the tradition of intra-elite invective disappeared with the rise of the emperor, as a natural reaction to the new monopoly on violence. Tacitus, showing how careful elites now had to be, describes Agricola spending his tribunician year 'unobtrusively in private pursuits', because he knew that under Nero *inertia pro sapientia fuit*, 'inactivity was a sign of wisdom' (*Ag.* 6).[45] Yet politicized popular invective continued largely unchanged, even as the venues became larger and the marketplace of targets shrank from the republican oligarchy of political powerhouses to a single monarch. Thus, even as Agricola was ducking his way through the *cursus honorum*, Nero showed himself remarkably lenient towards popular abuse. As Suetonius notes: 'it was particularly amazing that amid [political setbacks] he bore nothing so patiently as the curses and abuses of the people and he endured nothing more mildly than those who attacked him in conversation and verse' (*Ner.* 39.1). Although it is certainly true that

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[40] Ste. Croix 1981: 317.   [41] Yavetz 1969.   [42] Cameron 1973: 4.

[43] Millar 1995/2002: 107/176.   [44] Millar 1995/2002: 97/168.

[45] Under particularly volatile emperors, even seemingly insignificant acts could become grounds for punishment, as when Commodus executed someone whom he caught reading Suetonius' biography of Caligula (*HA Comm.* 10.2–3). The problems of relying upon the *Historia Augusta* are well known, and I use such anecdotes in this piece because at the very least they reflect the attitudes that connect certain types of emperors with scenarios involving popular invective.

mass spectacle venues provided crowds with the cover of anonymity, in this case the Senate identified the individuals accused of composing or propagating these invectives and yet Nero forbade their punishment (*Ner.* 39.2).

It is also true that even if the people could exert some influence via invective, the *princeps* maintained his monopoly on violence. We have the clearest evidence in the case of Caligula for how an emperor could try to restrain popular dissent by use of force: Josephus, Dio Cassius and Suetonius offer parallel accounts highlighting his efforts to curtail popular criticism.[46] But Caligula was far from alone. Domitian happened to over-hear a barbed comment from a spectator and had the unfortunate man thrown to the beasts (Suet. *Dom.* 10). The fanciful author of the *Historia Augusta* depicts Commodus as so paranoid that he mistook the crowd's cheers for taunts and in response had soldiers carry out wholesale slaughter in the Colosseum (*HA Comm.* 15.6). And, most horrifically, Justinian had thousands butchered in the Hippodrome at Constantinople during the Nika Riots (Procop. *Pers.* 1.24).[47] Even this handful of examples serves to underline that that it was the emperor who always maintained the upper hand in terms of the use of force.

With violent repression representing one extreme limit to the effective-ness of popular invective, we can now examine how popular rhetoric could work in less extreme situations. In several cases, verbal abuse seems to emerge from deeply held popular opinion and generate effective responses. For example, when a crowd believed that Claudius had been assassinated, they shouted curse-laden accusations at the army and Senate until official representatives convinced them that their favoured emperor was safe (Suet. *Claud.* 12). Domitian changed his plan for agricultural reform because of anonymous verses that threatened his death (Suet. *Dom.* 14). And when Didius Julianus, who ruled for only nine weeks in 193, came to power, urban crowds demonstrated in various locations including the Circus Maximus, where they pilloried him despite his offers of largesse (Cass. Dio 74.13.2–5 and *HA Did. Iul.* 4.2–7). Surely such staunch popular opposition contributed to Julianus' failure to ensconce his regime more securely. Much later, Valens (ruled 364–78) was ridiculed in the hippo-drome of Constantinople for failing to provide sufficiently energetic

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[46] J. *AJ* 19.24; Cass. Dio 59.28.11; Suet. *Calig.* 27.

[47] Amid the complexities of the Nika Riots, we should note that at one point crowds were abusing (*hybrizon*, 1.24.17) two officials while running amok in the streets, and Justinian promptly fired the two men. Although this is not a simple case, invective was part of the popular tactics and the emperor tried to avert escalation by responding to popular demands.

leadership in defence of the city, which was then being threatened by an army of Goths; the emperor responded with abuse of his own, promising to level the city altogether, but he did march against the Goths, only to die in the battle of Adrianople (Soc. *HE* 4.38). From these examples, we can see that popular invective could be used as a direct and effective tool for influencing imperial politics. Such cases are rare, to be sure, but they show that the extra-constitutional power of popular invective could be used to the people's benefit.

Even in cases when we do not hear of such dramatic outcomes as Valens' deciding to lead out his army after being heckled by the people, popular invective may well have been a tool with real, if limited, power to influence an emperor's behaviour. For example, Suetonius claims that during Tiberius' reign some people turned to invective verse (*nonnulli versiculis . . . exprobrarent*) such as the following (59.1–2):

> Asper et immitis, breviter vis omnia dicam?
> Dispeream, si te mater amare potest.
> Non es eques; quare? non sunt tibi milia centum;
> Omnia si quaeras, et Rhodus exilium est.
> Aurea mutasti Saturni saecula, Caesar:
> Incolumi nam te ferrea semper erunt.
> Fastidit vinum, quia iam sitit iste cruorem:
> Tam bibit hunc avide, quam bibit ante merum.
> Aspice felicem sibi, non tibi, Romule, Sullam
> et Marium, si vis, aspice sed reducem,
> nec non Antoni civilia bella mouentis
> non semel infectas aspice caede manus,
> et dic: Roma perit! regnavit sanguine multo,
> ad regnum quisquis venit ab exilio.

O you harsh and hard one, should I briefly say all I can?
Let me die, if even your mother can love you.
You're no knight. Why? You don't have the hundred thousand.
If you want the whole tale, it's your exile on Rhodes.
You've degraded the Golden Ages of Saturn, Caesar.
For while you're alive, they'll always be iron.
He turns from wine, since he now thirsts for gore.
He drinks it as greedily as before he drank straight wine.
Behold, Romulus, Sulla is happy – for himself, not for you –
And, if you'd like, behold Marius, though in his re-conquest,
And the hands of Antony rousing up civil wars,
Behold, hands stained with slaughter more than once,

> And then say: Rome is dead! Whoever has come to the throne from exile,
> has ruled by blood.

Suetonius claims the source of such poetry is the indefinite *nonnulli*, which means that whatever its actual provenance he presents it as non-elite commentary. What is more, Suetonius' description of the emperor trying to explain away these lines as the result of impatience over his pace of reform indicates that they were known to the *princeps* and that he sought to respond in a manner indicative of an ongoing dialogue.[48]

Similar anecdotes can be adduced from across the Empire (both in time and space). Suetonius claims that Vitellius harboured lasting irritation towards astrologers and satirists because, in response to an edict banishing all astrologers from Italy, a mock counter-edict circulated predicting the day of his death (*Vit.* 14). In Alexandria, where citizens expecting a gift became angry at an imperial tax hike, Vespasian endured anapestic mockery at some mass gathering, quite possibly in the city's theatre (Cass. Dio 65.8).[49] Dio provides many details, including Titus' efforts to moderate Vespasian's position, which shows that the emperor's heir, although ultimately unsuccessful, interceded on behalf of the Alexandrians in response to their combination of complaints and insults. Opellius Macrinus (ruled 217–18), the first emperor from the equestrian class, was derided for his stern and stuffy demeanour in a particularly creative way: in the Forum someone posted both a satirical epigram on the emperor by a certain (*quisdam*) Greek poet and an accompanying Latin translation; as with Suetonius' anonymous poem on Tiberius, the anonymous (*nescio qui*) but public presentation of the Latin version means that it emerged as part of a popular, rather than an elite, discourse. Macrinus responded with a Latin epigram of his own, and the author of the *Historia Augusta* claims that both the emperor and the unknown Latin translator were derided for the quality of their verse (*HA Op. Mac.* 11). Macrinus was also so harsh in his disciplining of the army (at whose hands he eventually met his death) that he supposedly coined the term 'centimate' as a lenient respite from his frequent decimations; and his brutal and degrading treatment of the army, no doubt a matter of popular concern, earned him derogatory taunts from the crowd in the Circus Maximus (*HA*

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[48] Tac. *Ann.* 6.13 describes the breakdown of communication between Tiberius and spectacle audiences.

[49] The anapestic rhythm suggests a procession, so it could be that a group marched through the streets voicing their complaints in this metre. Fritz Graf has suggested to me that such anapestic abuse could be equivalent to the *versus quadratus* used by soldiers to abuse their general during Roman triumphs. On the popular uses of the *versus quadratus*, see Gerick 1996: 37–42.

Op. Mac. 12).[50] In a similar expression of popular discontent, the people of Antioch lampooned Julian in anapestic verses during the festival of the Kalends of January in 363. With this example, we can recall Plutarch's warning about the need for careful social contextualization of invective. It can easily be argued that the Antiochenes' ridicule of the emperor was merely meant as a permissible part of a carnivalesque festival that featured such raillery. Yet either this abuse went too far (whatever that means) or Julian was too sensitive or some combination of both. In any case, these chants (and Julian's strange, self-mocking response in his *Beard-Hater*) participate in a well-documented exchange that went from bad to worse between a civic population and an emperor.[51]

It is no surprise that in most cases our sources for popular invective directed at Roman emperors provide some explanatory motivation for the verbal assaults (e.g. high taxes), but in a few instances we can wonder if something else was at work. Thus, before he seems to have lost general support, Nero butted heads with Otho (the future emperor) over the affection of Poppaea Sabina; Suetonius tells us that although Nero was more embarrassed than angry and tried to deal with the incident quietly, a lampoon circulated that made fun of the whole situation (*Oth.* 3 = *vers. pop.* fr. 16). Or again, Marcus Aurelius was supposedly ridiculed because his wife conducted her adulterous affairs so openly (*HA Marc.* 29.2). In such cases, the people may have felt that the emperor's personal relationships were a matter of direct concern to them. Yet whether or not such scrupulous concern for *Romanitas* is at issue here, I would like to suggest another model, namely that the people bruited about these gossipy titbits as part of ongoing political negotiations between *plebs* and *princeps* in which imperial peccadillos could be used to popular advantage.

'Political Language *Is* Political Reality'

If we keep in mind Certeau's description of 'the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong', we can see that the emperor and the plebs (and, of course, other groups, such as the army and the Senate) constantly

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[50] Although the important division within the army between citizens and non-citizens had effectively disappeared after Caracalla's massive expansion of Roman citizenship in 212, the general demographic make-up of the military must have remained largely the same: most soldiers came from humble backgrounds and therefore policies that impacted the rank and file must have been matters of some popular concern.

[51] Gleason 1986 analyses Julian's text in terms of its carnivalesque festival context. Hawkins 2012 and 2014: 262–99 provide updated discussions.

jockeyed with one another to achieve their respective goals.[52] The emperor wanted praise, continued wealth, a minimum of domestic headaches and immunity from 'regime-change'; the people wanted low taxes, cheap and plentiful grain, economic stability and personal safety. Yet in this scenario, the optimization of all these desiderata comes not from exclusionary competition (as, for example, between sports teams involved in a contest that only one can win) but from some amount of compromise and cooperation (as with two people who get over a high wall quickly by taking the time to help each other). Roman spectacles were a primary means of negotiating and experiencing cooperative compromise (often called 'symmetric compromise').[53] In some (perhaps most) cases, these spectacles may have worked their magic largely on their own. The emperor sponsors a show, the crowd cheers; the imperial ego is stroked, the masses forget the daily grind; the event keeps the urban population satisfied and everyone is reassured by the pageantry of power. Yet our sources make it patently clear that in many cases one side or the other needed to work a little harder to grease the skids of cooperative compromise and thereby optimize the situation for everyone. In these circumstances each party had certain tools available. The emperor, for example, could put on particularly impressive shows and offer particularly generous donatives, as Pompey did at the dedication of his theatre complex in 55 BCE and Titus at the Colosseum in 80 CE, and as many an emperor did at the beginning of his reign. But he could also make choices about how to display himself at shows (at the circus, Augustus watched from the *pulvinar*, whereas Caligula sat in the front row and Trajan sat among the audience);[54] he could opt to present himself as an impartial sponsor (Marcus Aurelius) or as a devoted fan (many emperors supported the Greens, a few the Blues; Anastasius favoured the Reds), and he could adopt popular behaviours connecting him to his subjects (Claudius distributed gifts to the people with his left hand exposed 'in the plebeian style'; Titus argued with the crowd about the superiority of Thracian gladiators).[55] By carefully adjusting his approach to spectacles (particularly in relation to that of his imperial predecessor), an emperor could earn for himself more cheers than jeers, but to achieve such an end, he had to participate according to

[52] Certeau 1984: 25.   [53] E.g. Weinberger and Rosenschein 2004.

[54] Augustus: Suet. *Aug.* 45; Caligula: Cass. Dio 59.7.4; Trajan: Plin. Min. *Pan.* 51.

[55] Marcus: *Med.* 1.5; for emperors as fans, see Cameron 1976: 45–73; the case of Anastasius is particularly interesting, since Malalas (p. 393, Bonn) suggests that he favoured the Reds as a strategy for political negotiations with the Greens and Blues; Claudius: Suet. *Claud.* 21; Titus: *Tit.* 8.

the basic rules of engagement. Emperors who withdrew from the spectacles, disdained them (such as by doing work while in attendance), or used violence to obliterate discourse would lose popular support and thereby make things harder for themselves.

For crowds, the options were fewer: essentially they could use their voice as a carrot or a stick. They could cheer, which would gratify the emperor, and this would be a safe strategy for expressing thanks or coaxing benefits from their patron, though it might convey a sense that they were satisfied and thereby weaken their leverage. Or they could use invective.[56] This option could rouse imperial ire, though *licentia theatralis* provided some protection; more optimistically their heckling could prompt the emperor to act, as when Valens decided to march towards Adrianople. On countless other occasions, the crowd must have won smaller benefits by teasing an emperor and putting him in the position of being able to buy a thunderous ovation. Such a dynamic may lie behind the examples of emperors proactively courting favour with the people, such as when Claudius called them *domini* or Titus promised to refuse no request made to him during a gladiatorial show.[57] But an emperor who did not seek popular favour might have to contend with popular abuse. This is all to say that if we take the crowd's invective directed at the *princeps* as an example of 'working with force' rather than seeing it as mere carnivalesque inversion or as a release of pent-up social tensions, then we can recognize such slanders and calumniations as a fundamental part of Roman politics. As Edelman puts it 'political language *is* political reality'.[58]

To claim that the chants of the crowd are political language necessitates expanding traditional delimitations of this concept. The responses of republican crowds to the words and actions of the elite figures in the Forum (studied incisively by Millar and Morstein-Marx) are more directly and obviously political, but the voice of the people at other venues could 'do things' in Austin's sense of performance and they gain power through

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[56] In the most extreme cases, they could riot, though this was likely to prompt brutal reprisals.

[57] Suet. *Claud.* 21 and *Tit.* 8. Claudius' use of *domini* pairs with Juvenal's description of the authority of crowds in the amphitheatre (3.36–7): '[sponsors] put on shows and, when the crowd gives the order with a turn of the thumb (*verso pollice vulgus cum iubet*), they kill populistly (*populariter*)'.

[58] 'Working with force': Fowler 1911: 264. This concept is closely related to 'skilled crafting' as discussed by Helms 1993: 91–170 and brought into classical scholarship by Kurke 2011: 98–101. Edelman 1988: 104. The emphasis is original, but Edelman probably did not expect that the shouts and chants of a crowd would be understood as falling under his rubric of 'political language'. Besnier 2009, however, has already broadened Edelman's phrase in an extreme way by applying it to his study of gossip.

repetition, as Butler has shown.[59] In the case of Pollio, with which I began, his elegance in drawing attention to Octavian's role in the proscriptions protected him from any violent response, and his clever turn may have become widely known. In the case of mass audiences, their numbers and tradition provided similar cover, allowing them to engage in crowd-sourced political discourse on the model of social insects, who exhibit 'swarm intelligence': not mindless group-think but a heightened sense of purpose deriving from group or sub-group identification.[60] That is to say that an individual member of a Roman crowd could do little either to engage the emperor personally or to shape the reaction of the entire crowd, yet as Cicero knew when he sought to judge the political landscape immediately after Caesar's death, crowds conveyed simple, clear and important information expressed through a collective voice. It would be wrong to extend this argument so far as to suggest that this voice of Roman crowds amounted to a form of direct democracy in any strong sense. But we may have gone too far in assuming that popular discourse at massive gatherings had virtually no influence on Roman imperial politics.

[59] Austin 1962; Butler 1997. Morstein-Marx 2013 builds upon his earlier work in interesting ways and suggests that 'plebian "insubordination" did not represent a breakdown in the [republican] system but was integral to the functioning of the system itself' (46).

[60] An approach explored in terms of modern business practices by Miller 2010.