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*Essere o non essere parte della vita scaenica. Prospettive religiose e giuridiche
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To Be or Not to Be Part of the *vita scaenica*. Religious and Juridical Perspectives on the Status of Dancers and Performers in Late Antiquity

Essere o non essere parte della vita scaenica. Prospettive religiose e giuridiche sulla condizione del danzatore e del performer nella Tarda Antichità

Donatella Tronca

- ¹ Inspired by a late-antique letter that mentions the difficulties experienced by a theatrical performer who converted to Christianity, this article will explore the religious, juridical, and general literary perspectives required to read this kind of source. The underlying consideration is that juridical formulations never lack context as they are the codified reflection of a feeling already widely shared in society. The aim is to restore the late-antique prejudiced imaginary about individuals involved in the *vita scaenica* as dancers/performers.
- ² Some preliminary remarks of a historical-semantic nature are needed to address the terminological problems faced by those approaching these issues equipped with a 'modern' lexicon. Firstly, the term 'dance' is inappropriate for Late Antiquity as words related to the French *danse* and the German *Tanz* are only documented from the eleventh century onwards¹. This terminological problem is of fundamental importance since words are never neutral, and historical contexts influence the meanings attributed to concepts, which are a product of cultural history. A suitable alternative is the term 'performance': despite its even later origins (fifteenth-sixteenth century), it is useful because of the greater flexibility of its semantic reach. Indeed, it first appears in contexts with wildly differing meanings such as *performaunce* in the Middle English translation of Diodorus Siculus's *Bibliotheca historica* by the poet John Skelton in around

1478, or with regard to the endeavours of Prince Edward of Lancaster, narrated by Henry Roberts and printed in London by Thomas Creed in 1598².

- 3 Semantic differences in the sources will be specified on a case-by-case basis when they are significant and employed in order to make precise distinctions. It should always be borne in mind, however, that late-antique Christian sources had little or no interest in technical differentiation when referring to performers. Working as an actor rather than a dancer, for example, was of scant relevance; the main problem was being part of the *vita scaenica*, which was despicable in itself regardless of the role played on stage.

The tale of Tutus

- 4 The story of Tutus appears in a letter written by an unknown author. The text was originally published, associated with the works of Sulpicius Severus, in the seventeenth century by Luc d'Achéry, a French Benedictine from the congregation of Saint Maur and master of Jean Mabillon, among others. Included in Volume XX of the *Patrologia Latina* (cols. 242-243) by Jacques Paul Migne, the letter was subsequently edited by Karl Halm for publication in the first volume of the *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* (253-254) in 1866. The most reliable version, which is worth reproducing in full, was published by Claude Lepelley in 1989³:

Licet domnus et germanus meus de uestra petierit honestate ut Tutum uelitis esse tutissimum, tamen mihi fas fuit eundem litteris commendare, ut conduplicata petitione tutior habeatur. Huic enim nocuerit puerilis culpa et error aetatis incertae, ut annorum suorum initia maculare; sed qui necdum sciret quid bonis moribus deberetur, prope sine culpa peccauit. Nam se ubi ad bonam mentem considerationemque conuertit, intellexit uitam scenicam consilio meliore damnandam. Huic autem plena non posset euenire purgatio, nisi diuinitatis accessu delicta dilueret; si quidem catholicae religionis remedio conmutatus, usum sibi loci turpioris negauit, seque ab oculis popularibus uindicauit. Domini (ut supra), quomodo itaque et diuinae leges et publicae fidele corpus et sanctificatos animos non permittunt inhonestas exhibere delicias et uulgares edere uoluptates, maxime cum castae deuotionis quodammodo uideatur iniuria, si quis sacro baptisate renouatus in ueterem lasciuiam reuocetur, oportet laudabilitatem uestram bonis fauere propositis, ut is qui beneficio Dei pium munus indeptus est, in foueam theatralem cadere non cogatur. Vestrum tamen omnium iudicium non recusat, si alias iniungatis congruas pro necessitate communis patriae functiones⁴.

- 5 Tutus, who came from an unidentified African city, is likely to have lived between the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century. He is described in the letter as someone who was part of the *vita scaenica* or theatrical life. There is no precise definition of the professional role he played, but this might not have been of any interest to the writer. What is stressed, though, is a series of characteristics attributed to the *vita scaenica* with an emphasis on specific negative terms. From the start, the author of the letter shows a level of rhetorical skill that allows him to create a pun around the name *Tutus* – which means ‘protected’, ‘defended’ – using the superlative and comparative forms *tutissimus* and *tutior*. Tutus’s life before his conversion had been tainted (*maculare*) and his sins needed to be atoned for by cleansing (*purgatio*). The choice to become a member of the Catholic religion is contrasted with the decision to lead a *vita scaenica*: in short, the two lifestyles are irreconcilable, which is made clear by both the divine laws (*diuinae leges*) and their imperial counterparts (*publicae*). These

laws forbid Christian believers from performing *inhonestae deliciae* and *vulgares voluptates* that threaten the *casta devotio* which should instead characterise the life of the baptised. This lexicon condemning the *vita scaenica* was frequently used by authors writing in temporal and geographical proximity to the sender of the letter recounting the story of Tutus. One of the most influential of these is undoubtedly Augustine of Hippo, who refers to the obscenities and turpitude associated with theatrical life on several occasions⁵.

- 6 Aside from the rhetorical aspect of the letter, which the anonymous author employed to corroborate his request, there was a more practical concern: having recently converted to Christianity, Tutus was expected to abandon his work in the theatrical world. However, he was prevented from doing so by a *munus*, or public duty, which forced him to honour his profession, as it was classed among the public services⁶. Here too, the high level of rhetoric is maintained as this public *munus* is contrasted with the *pious munus*, the religious duty that Tutus was now bound to comply with. Ultimately, the purpose of the letter was to ask the decurions of the city to exempt Tutus from this obligation on the grounds that it was unsuited to his new faith. The request was made by a figure who could be identified as a presbyter, if not the bishop himself.
- 7 Such an exemption was actually established for female performers in the *Theodosian Code* by two constitutions *de scaenicis*, but it presumably applied to their male counterparts too⁷.

CT 15.7.4. *Mulieres, quae ex viliori sorte progenitae spectaculorum debentur obsequiis, si scaenica officia declinarint, ludicris ministeriis deputentur, quas necdum tamen consideratio sacratissimae religionis et christianae legis reverentia suae fidei mancipavit; eas enim, quas melior vivendi usus vinculo naturalis condicionis evolvit, retrahi vetamus. Illas etiam feminas liberatas a contubernio scaenici praeiudicii durare praecipimus, quae mansuetudinis nostrae beneficio expertes muneris turpioris esse meruerunt*⁸.

CT 15.7.9. *Quaecumque ex huiusmodi faece progenitae scaenica officia declinarint, ludicris ministeriis deputentur, quas necdum tamen sanctissimae religionis et in perenne servandae christianae legis secretorum reverentia suae fidei vindicavit. Illas etiam feminas liberatas contubernio scaenici praeiudicii durare praecipimus, quae mansuetudinis nostrae beneficio expertes muneris turpioris esse meruerunt*⁹.

- 8 Nevertheless, imperial laws almost always had limited influence at a local level and were rarely applied assiduously by officials¹⁰. It is highly probable that in cases like the one concerning Tutus, the civic need for the show to go on took precedence over the decision to convert to a faith that did not allow spectacle in any shape or form. Tutus was thus subject to twofold pressure from the civic community, which expected him to continue to provide entertainment, and from the Christian community, guided by a very strong theoretical framework opposed to performances¹¹.

Juridical insights

- 9 Theatrical life is constantly discredited throughout the history of Roman law. Indeed, dancers and performers were included in the category of *infames* in the Praetor's Edict¹². *Infamia* entailed the loss of political rights and the restriction of civil rights; it represented an ethical and social stigma expressing the disapproval of the dominant

part of the civic body¹³. One of the consequences of this stigma was its association with prostitution, inasmuch as the professions connected to acting and dancing were always associated with transgressive sexual behaviour¹⁴. While addressing the duties that every member of the Republic had to observe in the *De officiis*, Cicero also provided a list of the professions to be avoided at all costs, including degrading occupations involving manual work. The list also featured professions designed to satisfy material pleasures such as mimes and dancers (I, 42, 150: *saltatores, totumque ludum talarium*). The crux of the problem lay in using one's body to earn money by giving others pleasure (even if only visual in nature) and, even worse, making a spectacle of oneself. In Roman law, actors/dancers, gladiators, and prostitutes were placed on the same level as convicted criminals. They were therefore considered untrustworthy and, as a result, their bodies, which were sold for the pleasure of others, were denied the legal protection afforded to the bodies of other citizens¹⁵.

- 10 There is evidence of such legislation in the laws of some Roman jurists included in the sixth-century *Digest* (D. 3.2. *De his qui notantur infamia*). In the second century, the jurist Salvius Julianus listed the categories of people that were branded with infamy, thereby becoming *famosi*, and lost a series of civil rights. These also included those *qui artis ludicrae pronuntiandive causa in scaenam prodierit* (D. 3.2.1)¹⁶. Gaius made a further clarification, specifying that a person who had been engaged for a performance but had not actually appeared on stage should not be branded with infamy (*notatur*), because the *ars ludicra* was not so depraved that the mere intention to practise it deserved punishment: *Qui autem operas suas locavit, ut prodiret artis ludicrae causa neque prodit, non notatur: quia non est ea res adeo turpis, ut etiam consilium puniri debeat* (D. 3.2.3)¹⁷.
- 11 Referring to statements by the jurists Masurius Sabinus and Cassius, Ulpian further specified that although athletes appeared on stage to provide spectacle, they did not practise the *ars ludicra* but rather the *virtus*, namely the characteristic least able to produce infamy: *Athletas autem Sabinus et Cassius responderunt omnino artem ludicram non facere: virtutis enim gratia hoc facere* (D. 3.2.4pr.)¹⁸. These semantic explanations were clearly of fundamental importance given that, for example, the death penalty was prescribed for soldiers who indulged in the *ars ludicra* and appeared on stage: *Quaedam delicta pagano aut nullam aut leviolem poenam irrogant, militi vero graviorem. nam si miles artem ludicram fecerit vel in servitutem se venire passus est, capite puniendum Menander scribit* (D. 48.19.14)¹⁹.
- 12 Furthermore, husbands who caught their adulterous wives in flagrante were allowed to kill the lover if he had taken part in performances as an actor, dancer, or singer:

D. 48.5.25(24). *Marito quoque adulterum uxoris suae occidere permittitur, sed non quemlibet, ut patri: nam hac lege cavetur, ut liceat viro deprehensum domi suae (non etiam soceri) in adulterio uxoris occidere eum, qui leno fuerit quive artem ludicram ante fecerit in scaenam saltandi cantandive causa prodierit iudiciove publico damnatus neque in integrum restitutus erit, quive libertus eius mariti uxorisve, patris matris, filii filiae utrius eorum fuerit (nec interest, proprius cuius eorum an cum alio communis fuerit) quive servus erit*²⁰.

- 13 Elsewhere, it was specified that a gladiator's word could only be trusted during torture: *Si ea rei condicio sit, ubi harenarium testem vel similem personam admittere cogimur, sine tormentis testimonio eius credendum non est* (D. 22.5.21.2)²¹.

- 14 A clear definition of *infamia* can be found in one of Ulpian's laws, which attributes the term *infamis* to anyone who in *scaenam prodierit*, namely anybody that has trodden the boards and made a spectacle of himself:

D. 3.2.2.5. *Ait praetor: 'qui in scaenam prodierit, infamis est'. scaena est, ut Labeo definit, quae ludorum faciendorum causa quolibet loco, ubi quis consistat moveaturque spectaculum sui praebiturus, posita sit in publico privatove vel in vico, quo tamen loco passim homines spectaculi causa admittantur*²².

- 15 Ulpian defines the *scaena* using the words of the first-century jurist Marcus Antistius Labeo, highlighting its function as the appointed place for the performance of *ludi scaenici*, whether public or private in nature. The real issue was the act of *prodire in scaenam*, because such behaviour was perceived as contrary to the aristocratic Roman trait of *prodire in publicum*, which was instead a form of performance with sacred value, maintaining a strong link with political and religious institutions, and the aristocratic class²³.
- 16 We know that the stigma of *infamia* remained intact not only in law but also in the reasoning of most Christian authors. For example, Augustine praises the ancient Roman constitution for having assigned the lowest social ranking to actors and for distinguishing them from respectable people:

optime fecit, omnino optime fecit antiqua disciplina romana, quae omne genus histrionum in infami loco deputavit. non illis ullus honor in curia, non saltem in plebeia tribu: undique ab honestis remoti, et honestis uenales propositi (Ser. 313A = Denis 14)²⁴.

- 17 His words also show the fear of contamination that we often find in Christian polemics against performance and dancing: when speaking out against the Donatist ritual, for instance, he mentions *pestilentia saltatorum* at the basilica dedicated to the martyr Cyprian:

aliquando ante annos non ualde multos etiam istum locum inuaserat petulantia saltatorum. istum tam sanctum locum, ubi iacet tam sancti martyris corpus, sicut meminerunt multi qui habent aetatem; locum, inquam, tam sanctum inuaserat pestilentia et petulantia saltatorum. per totam noctem cantabantur hic nefaria, et cantantibus saltabatur (Ser. 311)²⁵.

- 18 This emphasis on the sense of contamination and pestilence associated with theatrical life seems to be related to the *purgatio* that Tutus was required to practise to redeem himself for the sins he had committed in his previous *vita scaenica*. However, the stress on the turpitude of the gestures made by dancers' bodies is not peculiar to Christianity; it is also an ever-present characteristic among pagan critics of choreutic performances. Numerous changes affected the practice of *ludi scaenici* from the imperial era onwards, when this genre became increasingly grisly, and even capital punishment was transformed into spectacle²⁶.
- 19 Returning to Tutus, although his exact theatrical role is never specified, his case can be contextualised using the Greek term *orchestes*, which will help to cast more light on the late-antique Christian culture that incorporated both the Latin and Greek classical worlds and concepts. This means that we can consider Tutus as a pantomime in the

Latin sense of the word, which in English refers both to the genre and the performer, a dancer as well as an actor, albeit an actor that no longer had any connection to the noble and respectable figure of the *hypokrites* in ancient Greek theatre²⁷. Tutus thus belonged to a vague category of individuals that could be defined as marginal in modern-day parlance²⁸.

- 20 The undeniable link between *pantomimus* and a choreutic form of gesture, namely body movement generally with musical accompaniment, is confirmed by the fact that the genre was also known as *tragoedia saltata*, and some late-antique authors used the terms *pantomimus* and *orchesis* in the same context. This is the case, for example, with the *Historia nova* by Zosimus (I, 6: παντόμιμος ὄρχησις) and the *Misopogon* by Julian the Apostate (351d: Τοὺς παντομίμους ἀκούεις ὀρχηστάς)²⁹.

Between *orchesis*, *choreia* and Christianity

- 21 In the second century C.E., when Lucian of Samosata composed the dialogue known as *Περὶ ὀρχήσεως* or *De saltatione*, the theatre had assumed the markedly spectacular characteristics of pantomime throughout the Empire³⁰. The debate and intellectual prejudices against this new performative style must have been extremely heated, especially within the traditionalist aristocracy³¹. Lucian's rhetoric provides evidence of this, as does the episode documented by Suetonius in which Emperor Domitian expelled a former quaestor from the Senate because of his passion for pantomime and dance: *quaestorium virum, quod gesticulandi saltandique studio teneretur, movit senatu* (*Domit. VIII, 3*). Further evidence is provided in Tacitus's rebuke to orators who are deemed to be what would now be termed – not by chance – drama queens, allowing the spectacular aspect to contaminate their profession:

Neque enim oratorius iste, immo hercle ne virilis quidem cultus est, quo plerique temporum nostrorum actores ita utuntur ut lascivia verborum et levitate sententiarum et licentia compositionis histrionales modos expriment. Quodque vix auditu fas esse debeat, laudis et gloriae et ingenii loco plerique iactant cantari saltarique commentarios suos (*De or. 26*)³².

- 22 What we observe in general is that intellectuals above all always exhibited a somewhat negative prejudice against the profession of performers, even more so if the spectacle corrupted the noble art of oratory. In these cases, the problem was not so much maintaining a certain level of decency in a practice that required behavioural gravitas as the fact that an orator lost his credibility by behaving like a pantomime, thereby giving the impression of playing a part and casting doubt over the relationship between his words and the truth³³.
- 23 Lucian's work offers a defence of *orchesis* (pantomimic performance) by tracing its noble origins in the astral and divine *choreia*. The fact that Lucian was not a Greek native but learned the language perfectly through his studies as a rhetorician might have made him even more sensitive to terminological nuances. The wider use of the word *orchestes* seems to coincide precisely with the growing success of pantomime³⁴.
- 24 In Lucian's dialogue, Crato refers to the pantomime as a despicable figure who pointlessly contorts his body. In defence of dancing, his interlocutor Lycinus compares *orchesis* to the chorus of stars or the ideal Platonic *choreia*³⁵:

ἀλλ' οἷ γε τάλιθέστατα ὀρχήσεως πέρι γενεαλογοῦντες ἅμα τῇ πρώτῃ γενέσει τῶν ὄλων φαῖεν ἄν σοι καὶ ὄρχησιν ἀναφῶναι, τῷ ἀρχαίῳ ἐκείνῳ Ἑρωτι συναναφανείσαν. ἡ γοῦν χορεία τῶν ἀστέρων καὶ ἡ πρὸς τοὺς ἀπλανεῖς τῶν πλανήτων συμπλοκὴ καὶ εὐρυθμὸς αὐτῶν κοινωνία καὶ εὐτακτὸς ἀρμονία τῆς πρωτογόνου ὀρχήσεως δείγματά ἐστιν. κατ' ὀλίγον δὲ ἀύξανομένη καὶ τῆς πρὸς τὸ βέλτιον ἀεὶ προσθήκης τυγχάνουσα, νῦν ἔοικεν ἐς τὸ ἀκρότατον ἀποτετελέσθαι καὶ γεγενῆσθαι ποικίλον τι καὶ παναρμόνιον καὶ πολύμουσον ἀγαθόν (*salt.* 7)³⁶.

- 25 Lucian makes the association between moving one's body well and practising the virtues which later became an integral part of the Christian framework: the practice of virtuous acts is always associated with harmonious gestures, in other words the schemata that were so fundamental to ancient Greek citizens³⁷. Lucian defends the *orchestes* by ennobling him to the extent that he becomes Plato's ideal citizen, foregrounding the paedeutical aspect that the latter deemed a fundamental part of good choreutic practice:

Ὅλως δὲ τὸν ὀρχηστὴν δεῖ πανταχόθεν ἀπηκριβῶσθαι, ὡς εἶναι τὸ πᾶν εὐρυθμὸν, εὐμορφὸν, σύμμετρον, αὐτὸ αὐτῷ εἰκόσ, ἀσυκοφάντητον, ἀνεπίληπτον, μηδαμῶς ἑλλιπέε, ἐκ τῶν ἀρίστων κεκραμένον, τὰς ἐνθυμήσεις ὀξύν, τὴν παιδείαν βαθύν, τὰς ἐννοίας ἀνθρώπινον μάλιστα (*salt.* 81)³⁸.

- 26 The semantic nuances between the terms *orchesis* and *choreia* are also a useful interpretative device for understanding the Christian intellectual stance on choreutic gesture. Through the regulation of dancing, Christian intellectuals acted as spokesmen for an anthropology of gesture which vilified all forms of performative dancing, namely *orchesis* but also, in more general terms, the *vita scaenica*. At the same time, they urged men to reproduce the Platonic *choreia* in order to regulate the behavioural movement and schemata of human bodies. However, in addition to typifying one presumed Ideal City, it also had to be implemented in earthly life – the world's stage on which men performed before God – as a mirror-image preview of the heavenly city. In this way, from a Christian point of view, the *vita scaenica* became completely incompatible with the now Christianised *choreia* in the Platonic framework.
- 27 Indeed, the civic meaning that the term *choreia* – generally rendered in modern languages as 'dance', in particular 'choral dancing' – had in the ancient Greek world persisted after the spread of Christianity³⁹. As the concept of *choreia* also includes elements such as processional movement, like the Latin *chorus*, it should be viewed as embodying a combination of numerous actions featuring musical coordination and harmony. Furthermore, in ancient Greece the term *mousike* had a wider connotation than the meaning now attributed to the word music – it always blended words, melody, and choreutic gesture⁴⁰.
- 28 For Plato, *choreia* was an instrument of *paideia*, which refers to the overall definition of the jurisdiction of the human realm. He felt that moral and civic virtues could be acquired by learning to dance appropriately and executing the suitable constitutive schemata for the relevant role in society. If this role were absent, it would affect the entire civic system by casting doubt on the roles of others. The fact that legislation on musical activity was included in Plato's *Laws* shows the degree of power attributed to choral singing and dancing as an agency of social control for transmitting and

maintaining appropriate feelings among citizens:

τῆ δὴ τῆς κινήσεως τάξει ῥυθμὸς ὄνομα εἶη, τῆ δὲ αὖ τῆς φωνῆς, τοῦ τε ὀξέος ἅμα καὶ βαρέος συγκεραννυμένων, ἄρμονία ὄνομα προσαγορεύοιτο, χορεία δὲ τὸ συναμφοτέρων κληθεῖη (Lg. II 664e-665a)⁴¹.

- 29 The Greek term *nomos*, law, also indicates ‘melody’ and ‘musical mode’, and the first melodic repertoires were known as *nomoi* as compliance with the established confines of intonation was essential⁴². In this way, just as *nomos* in the sense of law forms the foundation of social order, the collective *choreia* should guide the social body in a harmonious manner by following the musical *nomos*. The term *choreia* thus denotes a combination of singing and dancing; Plato felt that the association between the two derives from the rhythm and movement of the body. In choral and choreutic performances, just as in social life, voice and body are required to move harmoniously on an individual and collective basis as well as in relation to their performative space. The ability to comply with this harmony is a prerequisite for residents of the Platonic City; an individual that cannot dance is described as *achoreutos* and is excluded from the Ideal City due to his inability to interact with the other citizens or move in harmony with the rest of the civic *choreia* (Lg. II 654a-b: Οὐκοῦν ὁ μὲν ἀπαίδευτος ἀχόρευτος ἡμῖν ἔσται, τὸν δὲ πεπαιδευμένον ἱκανῶς κεχορευκότα θετέον;)⁴³. *Choreia* therefore plays a pivotal civic function in Plato’s work, to the extent that not moving one’s body in harmony with others is perceived to be immoral and depraved.
- 30 As early Christian authors are known to have been particularly influenced by Platonic culture, it is likely that Basil of Caesarea attributed the same Platonic value to the term when he invited Christians to imitate the *choreia* of angels on Earth (Ep. II, 2: Τί οὖν μακαριώτερον τοῦ τὴν ἀγγέλων χορείαν ἐν γῆ μιμεῖσθαι). As Christian society had to strive to achieve this musical harmony, frenetic dancing was prohibited because of its associations with demons and non-Christians. It is thus not surprising that one of John Chrysostom’s homilies observes that Jews danced barefoot in the square, gathering effeminate dancing choruses and prostitutes, and dragging the theatre into their place of worship complete with a troupe. Indeed, he perceived no difference between the theatre and the synagogue:

Οὔτοι δὲ χοροὺς μαλακῶν συναγαγόντες, καὶ πολλὸν πεπορνευμένων γυναικῶν συρφετὸν, τὸ θέατρον ἅπαν καὶ τοὺς ἀπὸ τῆς σκηνῆς εἰς τὴν συναγωγὴν ἐπισύρουσι· θεάτρον γὰρ καὶ συναγωγῆς οὐδὲν τὸ μέσον (Adv. Iud. I, 2).

- 31 The Christian intellectual distaste for dancing is particularly apparent in homiletic texts, namely those that specifically aimed to train and educate believers. This aversion also developed as a result of the sometimes unintentional construction of religious alterity that satisfied the need for Christian self-representation. Christians felt obliged to distance themselves from certain unacceptable practices, including customs associated with pagans, Jews, and heretics, collectively deemed to represent a serious threat⁴⁴.
- 32 It is therefore certainly no coincidence that the latter three groups were branded with the stigma of infamy in Roman-Christian law just as pantomimes and dancers were

placed on the same level as prostitutes and criminals:

Omnes etiam infamiae maculis aspersi, idest histriones ac turpitudinibus subiectae personae, haeretici etiam siue pagani seu iudaei (Registri ecclesiae Carthaginensis excerpta, CCSL 149, 231);

neque omnes infamiae macula adpersi, idest istriones et turpitudinibus subiectae personae, haeretici etiam, siue pagani, siue iudaei (Conciulium Hipponense a. 427, CCSL 149, 252).

- 33 Just like the Platonic *achoreutoi*, they danced outside the Christian chorus and were not allowed to contaminate the only possible true reality in any way. This Christian reality only permitted performative forms in which men acted on the world's stage before God. By processing an anthropology of choreutic gesture, Christian intellectuals in Late Antiquity aspired to build a chorus of perfect dancers who would achieve cosmic harmony through their gestures on the world's stage. The cosmos symbolised the only possible order and the implementation of the Pythagorean and Platonic macrocosm. This chorus did not permit excess or dissonance. In other words, anyone who moved in accordance with the wrong schemata and did not keep the right rhythm would be associated with demonic turpitude, and therefore had to be excluded from the Christian chorus⁴⁵.
- 34 The infamy and danger of contamination perceived in individuals such as Tutus are clearly revealed in a letter sent by Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage. The missive advises a colleague, Eucratius, how to behave towards a theatrical performer (*histrione*) who has converted to Christianity but needs to teach his profession to others in order to survive:

Pro dilectione tua et uerecundia mutua consulendum me existimasti, frater carissime, quid mihi uideatur de histrione quodam, qui apud uos constitutus in eiusdem adhuc artis suae dedecore perseuerat et magister et doctor non erudiendorum sed perdendorum puerorum id quod male didicit ceteris quoque insinuat, an talis debeat communicare nobis cum. Quod puto ego nec maiestati diuinae nec euangelicae disciplinae congruere, ut pudor et honor ecclesiae tam turpi et infami contagione foedetur (Ep. II, 1, 2)⁴⁶.

- 35 Cyprian's verdict is categorical: he feels it is totally unacceptable for the ecclesiastical community to be infected by such depraved and infamous contamination⁴⁷. To support his argument, Cyprian refers to the passage in *Deuteronomy* that forbids women to wear male clothing and vice versa:

Nam cum in lege prohibeantur uiri induere muliebrem uestem et maledicti eiusmodi iudicentur, quanto maioris est criminis non tantum muliebria indumenta accipere sed et gestus quoque turpes et molles et muliebres magisterio inpudivae artis exprimere? (Ep. II, 2)⁴⁸.

- 36 What he underlines is the perversion of gestures and bodily posture, namely schemata. Abandoning the right schemata is just as unacceptable in the Christian chorus as it is in the Platonic *choreia*; breaking out of the mould is always associated with turpitude and contamination. Professions connected with the theatrical world, namely the *vita scaenica*, become even more dangerous when they are taught because they should not be disseminated. For this reason, Cyprian offers the following solution to sustain the

new convert: the community should provide for him as long as he is prepared to settle for the bare minimum and not feel entitled to a salary:

Quod si penuriam talis et necessitatem paupertatis obtendit, potest inter ceteros qui ecclesiae alimentis sustententur huius quoque necessitas adiuuari, si tamen contentus sit frugaliioribus et innocentibus cibis nec putet salario se esse redimendum ut a peccatis cesset, quando hoc non nobis sed sibi praestet (Ep. II, 2, 2)⁴⁹.

- 37 The *scaenicus*, dancer, performer, *histrion*, *orchestes*, or pantomime was therefore seen as both infamous and a potential defiler, always on the fringes. The individual in question could be greatly loved and worshipped as an idol, but at the same time might be considered despicable and depraved for his ability to gesticulate and for selling his body. In conclusion then, it could be said that if the question ‘to be or not to be part of the *vita scaenica*’ ever arose in Late Antiquity, the second option was definitely preferable.

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NOTES

1. See ARCANGELI 2000, 47.
2. See the entry in the historical dictionary *Oxford English Dictionary. The definitive record of the English language* (1989 et seq.).
3. See Lepelley for the detailed reconstruction of events regarding the rediscovery, manuscript transmission, publications, and attribution of the letter: LEPELLEY 1989, 236-239, 258-262. See also LIM 2003, 88; JIMÉNEZ SÁNCHEZ 2006, 96-98.
4. LEPELLEY 1989, 258.
5. For example, Augus. *De civ. D. I*, 32; VIII, 14. For an in-depth analysis of Augustine's thinking on spectacles, see LUGARESI 2008, 535-694.
6. See NERI 1998, 240. On *munera* see CT 11.16.4: *Extraordinariorum munerum distributio non est principalibus committenda, ideoque rectores provinciarum monendi sunt, ut eam distributionem ipsi celebrent manuque propria perscribant adque encauto nomina adnectant, ea forma servata, ut primo a potioribus, dein a mediocribus adque infimis quae sunt danda praestentur. Neque umquam sationibus vel colligendis frugibus insistens agricola ad extraordinaria onera trahatur, cum providentiae sit opportuno tempore his necessitatibus satisfacere. Quae res neglecta vicariorum tuorum verecundiam tangit, ad rectorum autem officiorum capita venietur. Manu autem sua rectores scribere debebunt, quid opus sit et in qua necessitate per singula capita vel quantae angariae vel quantae operae vel quae aut in quanto modo praebendae sint, ut recognovisse se scribant, exactionis praedicto ordine inter ditiores mediocres atque infimos observando* ("The assessment of extraordinary public services shall not be entrusted to chief decurions, and therefore the governors of the provinces shall be admonished that they duly perform this assessment, and with their own hand they shall write out and in ink annex the names of the taxpayers. The following general rule shall be observed, namely, that the payments to be made shall first be rendered by the more powerful and then by the middle class and the lowest classes", transl. by PHARR 1952, 306).
7. An interesting discussion about these laws can be found in French 1998, 305-307.
8. "If a woman who is sprung from the lower class and obligated to the compulsory performance of the spectacles should seek to evade the compulsory duties of the stage, she shall be assigned to theatrical services, provided that contemplation of most holy religion and reverence of the Christian law have not yet bound her to their faith. For We forbid women to be dragged back, if a better mode of living has released them from the bonds of their natural condition. We also direct that such women shall remain free from the ignoble bond of any prejudice that is derived from the stage, if they have obtained exemption from this compulsory public service of an indecent character by a special grant of imperial favor of Our Clemency" (transl. by PHARR 1952, 434).
9. "If any women sprung from such dregs should seek to evade the compulsory duties of the stage, they shall be assigned to theatrical services, provided, however, that they have not yet been vindicated to the Christian faith by reverence for holy religion and for the secrets of the Christian law that shall endure forever. We direct that those women also shall remain free from the ignoble bond of any prejudice derived from the stage, if they have obtained exemption from this compulsory public service of an indecent character by a special grant of imperial favor of Our Clemency" (transl. by Pharr 1952, 434).
10. LIZZI TESTA 2011, 467-468.
11. The issue was analysed in detail by LUGARESI 2008 and BINO 2015.
12. A detailed historical and juridical perspective on the matter is provided by BIANCHI 2013 and COMAND 1999.
13. NERI 1998, 197. See also SEMIOLI 2003, 106-109; HUGONJOT 2004; ARENA 2016.
14. On the comparison between the acting profession and prostitution, see: EDWARDS 1997; WEBB 2008, 49-50.

15. EDWARDS 1997, 84.
16. “who appears upon the stage for the purpose of acting, or declaiming” (transl. by SCOTT 1932).
17. “He who hires himself for the purpose of appearing in public exhibitions, and does not do so, is not branded with infamy; because the offence is not so disgraceful a one that even the intention to commit it should be punished” (transl. by SCOTT 1932).
18. “Sabinus and Cassius have given their opinion that athletes should not by any means be regarded as exercising the profession of an actor, because their object is to exhibit their strength” (transl. by SCOTT 1932).
19. “Certain offences, if committed by a civilian, either entail no penalty at all, or merely a trifling one, while in the case of a soldier, they are severely punished; for if a soldier follows the calling of a buffoon, or suffers himself to be sold in slavery, Menander says that he should undergo capital punishment” (transl. by SCOTT 1932).
20. “A husband is also permitted to kill a man who commits adultery with his wife, but not everyone without distinction, as the father is; for it is provided by this law that the husband can kill the adulterer if he surprises him in his own house, but not if he surprises him in the house of his father-in-law; nor if he was formerly a pander; or had exercised the profession of a mountebank, by dancing or singing on the stage; or had been convicted in a criminal prosecution and not been restored to his civil rights; or is the freedman of the husband or the wife, or of the father or mother, or of the son or the daughter of any of them; nor does it make any difference whether he belonged exclusively to one of the persons above mentioned, or owed services to two patrons in common, or was a slave” (transl. by SCOTT 1932).
21. “Where the circumstances are such that we are compelled to accept a gladiator, or some person of this kind as a witness, his evidence is not to be believed, unless he is subjected to torture” (transl. by SCOTT 1932).
22. “The Praetor says: ‘He who appears upon the stage is infamous’. The stage, as defined by Labeo, means any place whether public or private, or on the street, where anyone appears or moves about making an exhibition of himself; provided that it is a place where persons, without distinction, are admitted for the purpose of viewing a public show” (transl. by SCOTT 1932).
23. NERI 1998, 237.
24. “It was an excellent act of the ancient Roman discipline, altogether an excellent act, to relegate every kind of showpeople to the place of infamy and shame. Not for them any post of honor in Senate or assembly, not even in one of the tribes of the common people; in every respect kept apart from the decent and respectable – and put up for sale to the decent and respectable!” (transl. by HILL 1994, 93).
25. “Once, not so many years ago, even this place was invaded by the aggressive rowdiness of dancers. Such a holy place as this, where the body lies of such a holy martyr, even this holy place, I repeat, as many of you who are old enough will remember, had been invaded by the pestilential rowdiness of dancers. Throughout the night impious songs were sung, and people danced to the singing” (transl. by Hill 1994, 73). See CACITTI 2006, 135-136; RESTA 2020.
26. On this aspect and the practice of *ludi* in general, see SAVARESE 2015², 15, 43-45.
27. See LANZA 1992. With regard to issues of terminology, see MANZONI 2017 and ZUCHELLI 1964.
28. NERI 1998, 233-250.
29. On pantomime dancing, see GARELLI 2007; HALL-WYLES 2008; LADA-RICHARDS 2010; JORY 1996; KELLY 1979.
30. This work by Lucian is analysed in detail by LADA-RICHARDS 2007.
31. Using a literary and philosophical approach, SCHLAPBACH 2018 analyses numerous texts from this period, grouping them together under the label ‘dance discourse’.
32. “There is a fashion much in vogue with quite a number of counsel nowadays that ill befits an orator, and is indeed scarce worthy even of a man. They make it their aim, by wantonness of

language, by shallow-pated conceits, and by irregular arrangement, to produce the rhythms of stage-dancing” (transl. by PETERSON 1970, 301).

33. On the possible connections between acting and oratorical skills and the gestures that every Roman politician was expected to make to honour his *habitus*, there are some interesting considerations by CORBEILL 2004, 109-115.

34. BETA 1992, 29.

35. On the concept of *choreia* in Plato, see LONSDALE 1993, 8, 20-23.

36. “those historians of dancing who are the most veracious can tell you that Dance came into being contemporaneously with the primal origin of the universe, making her appearance together with Love – the love that is age-old. In fact, the concord of the heavenly spheres, the interlacing of the errant planets with the fixed stars, their rhythmic agreement and timed harmony, are proofs that Dance was primordial. Little by little she has grown in stature and has obtained from time to time added embellishments, until now she would seem to have reached the very height of perfection and to have become a highly diversified, wholly harmonious, richly musical boon to mankind” (transl. by HARMON 1936, 221).

37. On the concept of *schema*, see CATONI 2008².

38. “In general, the dancer should be perfect in every point, so as to be wholly rhythmical, graceful, symmetrical, consistent, unexceptionable, impeccable, not wanting in any way, blend of the highest qualities, keen in his ideas, profound in his culture, and above all, human in his sentiments” (transl. by HARMON 1936, 283).

39. On the importance of *choreia* in ‘performing citizenship’, see PRAUSCELLO 2014. See also NAEREBOUT 2017 and the essays in PEPONI 2013.

40. See GENTILI 1988, 5. On the concept of *choreia* in relation to *mousike techne*, see ROCCONI 2017.

41. “and that the order of motion is called ‘rhythm’, while the order of voice (in which acute and grave tones are blended together) is termed ‘harmony’, and to the combination of these two the name ‘choristry’ is given” (transl. by BURY 1926, 129).

42. PRETAGOSTINI 1998, 45.

43. “Shall we assume that the uneducated man is without choir-training, and the educated man fully choir-trained?” (transl. by BURY 1926, 93).

44. See TRONCA 2017.

45. See TRONCA 2019.

46. “From our mutual love and your reverence for me you have thought that I should be consulted, dearest brother, as to my opinion concerning a certain actor, who, being settled among you, still persists in the discredit of the same art of his; and as a master and teacher, not for the instruction, but for the destruction of boys, that which he has unfortunately learnt he also imparts to others: you ask whether such a one ought to communicate with us. This, I think, neither befits the divine majesty nor the discipline of the Gospel, that the modesty and credit of the Church should be polluted by so disgraceful and infamous a contagion” (transl. by Wallis 1886, 356). On this letter, see LUGARESI 2008, 7-8 and DELÉANI 2003.

47. The influence of this attitude throughout the Middle Ages is confirmed by the fact that Cyprian’s verdict is also found in the *Decretum Gratiani*, III 2, 95.

48. “For since, in the law, men are forbidden to put on a woman’s garment, and those that offend in this manner are judged accursed, how much greater is the crime, not only to take women’s garments, but also to express base and effeminate and luxurious gestures, by the teaching of an immodest art” (transl. by WALLIS 1886, 356). *Dt* 22, 5: “The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God”.

49. “But if such a one alleges poverty and the necessity of small means, his necessity also can be assisted among the rest who are maintained by the support of the Church; if he be content, that

is, with very frugal but innocent food. And let him not think that he is redeemed by an allowance to cease from sinning, since this is an advantage not to us, but to himself” (transl. by WALLIS 1886, 356).

ABSTRACTS

Drawing on a letter from Late Antiquity explaining the difficulties experienced by a performer who recently converted to Christianity, the article explores the religious, juridical, and literary perspectives required to read this kind of source. By analysing the Christian polemic against theatrical performance and the Christian anthropology of choreutic gesture, it underlines that the connotation attributed to the profession of actor/dancer/performer inevitably conflicted with the entire Christian theoretical framework of performance, which only allowed forms of exhibition in which men acted on the world’s stage before God. Consequently, anyone who converted to Christianity had to stop practising the profession forthwith because members of the *vita scaenica* belonged to another reality excluded from the Christianised Platonic framework of the *choreia*.

Avendo come punto di partenza una lettera di età tardoantica che spiega le difficoltà incontrate da un *performer* di recente convertito al cristianesimo, l’articolo esplora le prospettive religiose, giuridiche e letterarie che sono necessarie alla comprensione di questo genere di fonti. Analizzando la polemica cristiana contro gli spettacoli e l’antropologia cristiana della gestualità coreutica, si sottolinea come la connotazione attribuita alla professione di attore/danzatore/*performer* si trovasse inevitabilmente in conflitto con l’intero sistema teorico cristiano della *performance*, che permetteva unicamente forme di esibizione in cui gli uomini agissero sulla scena del mondo al cospetto di Dio. Di conseguenza, chi si convertiva al cristianesimo avrebbe dovuto necessariamente smettere di esercitare quella professione, dal momento che i membri della *vita scaenica* appartenevano a un’altra realtà, esclusa dalla *choreia* cristiana di matrice platonica.

INDEX

Keywords: *vita scaenica*, *choreia*, laws, Christianity, Late Antiquity

Parole chiave: *vita scaenica*, *choreia*, leggi, cristianesimo, Tarda Antichità

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