

The ‘Roman audience’ of modern scholarly debate is largely a literary construct. Textual explication—what we infer from jokes, asides, and prologues, from the problematic stage history of Terence’s *Hecyra*, and from the very differences in style between Plautus and Terence—commonly plays a larger role in that construction than does social history. Even Matthew Leigh (2004), far more alive to the historical record than most modern critics, still works from essentially literary presumptions. This paper, too, begins and ends with text, but makes two departures from common practice. It focuses on Terence’s putative difficulties with the Roman audience, and in seeking to extend the range of sources, enlists the evidence of Roman topography and the social function of that topography to put a more traditional textual analysis on a new footing.

We begin with two observations drawn from textual evidence. First is the fact that both *Hecyra* (on its second attempt) and *Adelphoe* were performed at funeral games, i.e. in the forum (Jory 1986), and since the games in question were almost certainly those of Aemilius Paullus (*pace* Mattingly 1959), we know something of their scale. Second is that, at least by common consent, Plautus’ *Curculio* 432-85 describes the monuments in the forum visible to an audience during the performance. The accuracy of Plautus’ description is usually illustrated with a plan of the mid-Republican forum (e.g. Moore 1991), but this investigation will press beyond schematic layouts by asking where, specifically, the stage would have been and where the audience sat in order to see what Plautus describes. The hypothetical possibilities, modeled in three dimensions so sightlines are true and dimensions accurate, must also allow for the other known parts of the show, viz. the gladiators and the funeral procession. The venue should keep close to the rostra, where the *laudatio* was delivered, be sufficiently isolated so that the ordinary business of the forum is not disrupted, and be far enough from the open channel of the Cloaca Maxima. In doing this, the modeler’s task is facilitated by growing recognition that ‘the theater’ is something of a misnomer for the improvised performance spaces of the time (Hanson 1959, Goldberg 1998), and that even gladiatorial matches exploited impromptu venues. (On this point, for this period HBO Rome provides a more accurate picture than Welch 2007.) Given these parameters, the possible sites are limited, as illustrations will show.

The discussion then examines features these sites share that might have influenced the staging of plays and, working from these physical realities, compares the dramatic design of the (unsuccessful) *Hecyra* with that of its companion on the bill, the (successful) *Adelphoe*. The result largely confirms the view of Parker (1996) that Terence was a skilled and popular dramatist, but it does challenge monolithic views of the Roman audience by suggesting that different occasions and different venues might influence its composition and, in crucial ways, the audiences’ experience of the plays they gathered to see.