

Demography is a dangerous science, as its conclusions are inevitably hedged within a myriad of assumptions. Still, if we are to understand the composition, or the potential composition, of the audiences of Roman comedy in the decades immediately following the Second Punic War, some attempt must be made to wrestle with the issues surrounding the size of the Roman population, and its changes in the mid-Republic. The Hannibalic War was devastating for Rome and for the entire economy in the Italian peninsula, and the impact is carefully documented in the census figures recorded by the historian Livy. The high incidence of violent death among the military-age citizen males created a huge shift in population demographics, from which it took decades to recover.

This paper presents an overview of the evidence from Livy and its implications, and begins to map the impact of violent death on the potential audiences of the comedies of Plautus. The change over time is what is relevant: in an environment in which the adult male population had received repeated significant catastrophic losses, the population of Rome was restoring itself throughout the first half of the second century. Building on the work of Brunt and Scheidl, and incorporating the change in slave demographics documented by Scheidl, Volkmann, and Welwei, it is possible to make certain discrete but general claims about the potential audiences for a Roman comedy.

There are a number of methodological problems, in part because it is not clear to what the figures provided by Livy refer: just citizen males? citizen males and their families? everybody? Further, as Roman territory expanded, an increasing number of individuals fell under Roman authority, shifting the frame of reference. Comparisons with Polybius are also problematic; and that assumes that the numbers aren't simply fictional, as has been suggested for some of the population figures before the fourth century. All of these issues can be addressed, however, and while meaningful for understanding overall population trends, are of minimal significance for the specific period immediately following the war with Hannibal. In this period, which for the most part coincides with extant books of Livy, assumptions about population measurement at least are likely to remain constant.

Understanding the nature of the actual population of Rome pertains directly to the specific theatrical audience of Roman comedy: the rate of change in the population is evidence of the rapidly changing nature of the Roman population at this time. Even though the audiences were a subset of the whole (with no more than a few thousand individuals seeing any given play, according to Marshall), references within the plays assume that the full range of the population could be present, from slaves and nurses to senators and prostitutes. Reader-response theory provides a hermeneutic tool that allows us to associate the "implied reader" of these texts (who Plautus and Terence expect to be in attendance, since the actual attendance is beyond the playwright's control) with the shape of the larger population in Rome.