PART I

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PRE-ELIZABETHAN THEATRE

I

From Roman to Renaissance in drama and theatre

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Roman remains: the Phantom limb

phantom limb, the sensation that an amputated limb is still present, often associated with painful paresthesia. (Syn. *stump hallucination*)
(*Stedman's Medical Dictionary*, 26th edition)

Patients recovering from amputations often report that during post-operative healing – in some cases long after convalescence is over – they feel twinges of pain or itching from the lost limb, an odd misfiring in the central nervous system and cerebral cortex indicating that life continues to haunt what is now clearly empty space. This phenomenon, a medical condition commonly known as a 'phantom limb', compounds the body's wistful remembrance with something less than material fact. It may be a useful condition to keep in mind as we approach the Roman theatrical tradition in Britain from a place and time as far removed as the present. Like a phantom limb, Roman drama in Britain continues to send signals of its once vital life long after all but stony remnants of its presence have disappeared, long after the vast civilisation that spawned and nurtured it passed on into history. Our experience of the Roman theatrical tradition, poignant, incomplete, perhaps suspicious, has its roots in that vibrant, vanished, phantom culture.

Today, in the early dawn of the twenty-first century, the rise and fall of the phantom Roman empire and its cultural dominion, spanning five hundred years of British history over two millennia ago, seem far-off events in a sequence hard to imagine, hard to suggest as even tangentially important to a modern history of British theatre. The past is passed by so easily. With the single blink of an eye, a contemporary theatre aficionado with interests in scripts, stages and costumes might quickly bypass whole centuries of Roman invasion, occupation and cultural colonialism. Worse, the fragmentary nature or sheer lack of historical evidence ensures that even when the tremendous project of Roman colonisation and its later collapse come under close scrutiny, the

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difficulties of detail prove almost impossible to catalogue. And how relevant might such ancient events be, in any case, to our understanding of current theatrical practices? And yet, whatever modern misgivings may come into play, clearly in those unimaginably distant days, sponsored by that astonishing Roman civilisation, the first true performances of drama in Britain took place, the first true theatres were built, and the heritage of the modern stage began. For us it represents a necessary starting point, the first seeds of a future that continue to flower today.

As usual when we are discussing plays and performances, whatever we know about early practices is necessarily linked to a larger story, since the genre of drama always functions not only as a literary archetype but as a social artifact as well. The meanings and impulses of staged events depend not only upon texts but also upon cultural contexts. For our purposes – tracing the earliest theatrical traditions in the country – this generic feature of drama proves a mercy, for we lack any playtexts specific to the Roman province of Britannia. We can, however, still explore collateral kinds of evidence to derive some sense of what the beginnings of drama here may have entailed. Mercifully too, although many details are in dispute, the main contours of the larger story of Roman occupation and withdrawal are relatively well known and easily related. Those chronologically distant Roman traditions, combined with architectural ruins from Roman times and other physical evidence from antiquity, can provide us with oblique but suggestive contemporary testimony about early British theatrical habits.

First, the familiar story. During the middle of the first century before Christ, in 55 BC, a Roman expeditionary force of some 10,000 foot soldiers and 500 cavalry under the command of Julius Caesar arrived in Britain. It took only a few successful skirmishes to impress resident Celtic tribal inhabitants with the ruthlessness and efficiency of Roman military power, and then Caesar and his reconnaissance troops sailed back to Gaul. The Romans, for their part, seem to have been impressed with the possibility of an easy conquest, for a year later they returned with an even larger military contingent: 25,000 legionaries and 2,000 cavalry. This time, although the Celtic tribes offered fiercer resistance, once again they proved unequal to the seasoned and disciplined Roman troops. Having conquered the most powerful regional tribe, the Catuvellauni, Caesar forged a convenient peace with its leaders, arranging for regular tribute to be paid to Rome. Then the Romans disappeared from Britain again for nearly a century. Back in Rome the government was in tumult, and civil war threatened to break down the republic itself, so for generations in Britain a succession of tribal representatives maintained trade with

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the empire and the Romans ruled loosely, *in absentia*. Celtic tribes in the south and east of Britain seem to have struggled amongst themselves for power, and early minted coins – one of the few kinds of evidence surviving from this period – suggest a sequence of Celtic rulers. Tribal fighting finally led to fully consolidated rule in those areas the Romans had conquered, and during the course of time, Britain (or a large part of it) became established as a client state of Rome. For the time being tribes managed to retain their Celtic identities, maintaining an only partially Romanised culture. But this situation would soon change.

Nearly midway through the following century, by about AD 40, a renewal of violent tribal clashes in Britain turned Rome's attention once more in that direction. The famously unbalanced emperor Caligula contemplated invasion, though in the end seems to have lost interest and called the project off. After he was murdered, his successor Claudius moved the plan forward once again, and in AD 43 a force of some 40,000 men arrived in Britain, overwhelming any opposition. The new emperor, in need of the popularity that a military conquest might bring at home, quickly made his way across the channel to appear in full martial splendour – including, memorably, his fighting elephants – impressing the locals and celebrating victory before returning triumphantly to Rome a few weeks later. Claudius left behind his commander, Plautius, to serve as governor and to extend and consolidate colonial rule. Clearly, this time the Romans had come to stay. Within two generations legionary expeditions vigorously extended their military presence and pushed the edges of occupied territory into the south-west as far as Exeter, west into Wales, and north to the Scottish lowlands. Better equipped and trained, the Romans were facing essentially bronze-age enemies, and victory was in many senses foreordained. The experienced troops quashed tribal revolts and uprisings handily, often brutally. With the exception of the uprising of Boudicca, queen of the Iceni, who joined with the Trinovantes in a nearly successful bloody revolt in AD 60, the script of Roman conquest was reenacted across the countryside, setting the scene for commercial exploitation and the spread of the Roman way of life. Colonisation came fast on the heels of conquest. Roman troops were quickly joined by Roman bureaucrats buttressed by Roman workers and artisans. Together they brought new fiscal policies, trade, social discipline and order to the conquered land, conveniently adapting local customs to their own practices.

As they secured the frontiers of the new province of Britannia, the Romans established towns in strategic locations: places like Colchester (Camulo-dunum), where a group of veterans set up the first *colonia*, or chartered town,

in AD 49, extending the legionary fortress which had itself been built across from the former capitol of the once powerful Trinovantes tribe. The settlement soon became an elaborate regional centre for Roman citizens, complete with a temple and a forum, public buildings, tessellated walkways, and, according to Tacitus, a theatre. Urban planning and architecture were patterned on Roman models here as in other early towns. These were established at St Albans (Verulamium, former capitol of the Catuvellauni tribe), at the three *coloniae* of Lincoln (Lindum), York (Eboracum) and Gloucester (Glevum), at trading communities like London (Londinium), Canterbury (Durovernum), Silchester (Calleva) and a host of other places. The Roman military forces spread scores of fortified settlements thickly across the countryside, many of which eventually developed and flourished as major population centres with local markets and governments. All these centres, and most military sites as well, were linked by the ongoing construction of more than 5,000 miles of skilfully engineered roads, completed in the main by the end of the first century (see figure 1).

Within two or three generations the Romans had successfully imported an elaborate network of institutions to serve colonial Britannia: not only military but social, political, economic, religious and ceremonial, signalling utter change in every arena of life. They developed markets, farms, villas, baths, vineyards, systems of transportation and communication, and they brought a new rule of law. They introduced a true money economy and other economic structures profoundly different from the tribal practices of the indigenous Celtic peoples. However remote and provincial Britannia may have seemed from the centre of action, in a surprisingly short time it had taken on much of the colouring of the bustling Roman empire. And over time the conquered people not only took part in the advanced material culture, they also came to share Roman habits of mind, ideologies, pleasures and pastimes. Tacitus, son-in-law to Agricola, the distinguished Roman general and governor of Britannia from AD 77–84, saw this cultural imperialism as a kind of cruel colonising trick. Writing just after the end of the first century AD, he noted that

> . . . they who lately disdained the tongue of Rome now coveted its eloquence. Hence, too, a liking sprang up for our style of dress, and the 'toga' became fashionable. Step by step they were led to things which dispose to vice, the lounge, the bath, the elegant banquet. All this in their ignorance, they called civilisation, when it was but a part of their servitude.[1]

1 Tacitus, *The Complete Works*, 21.

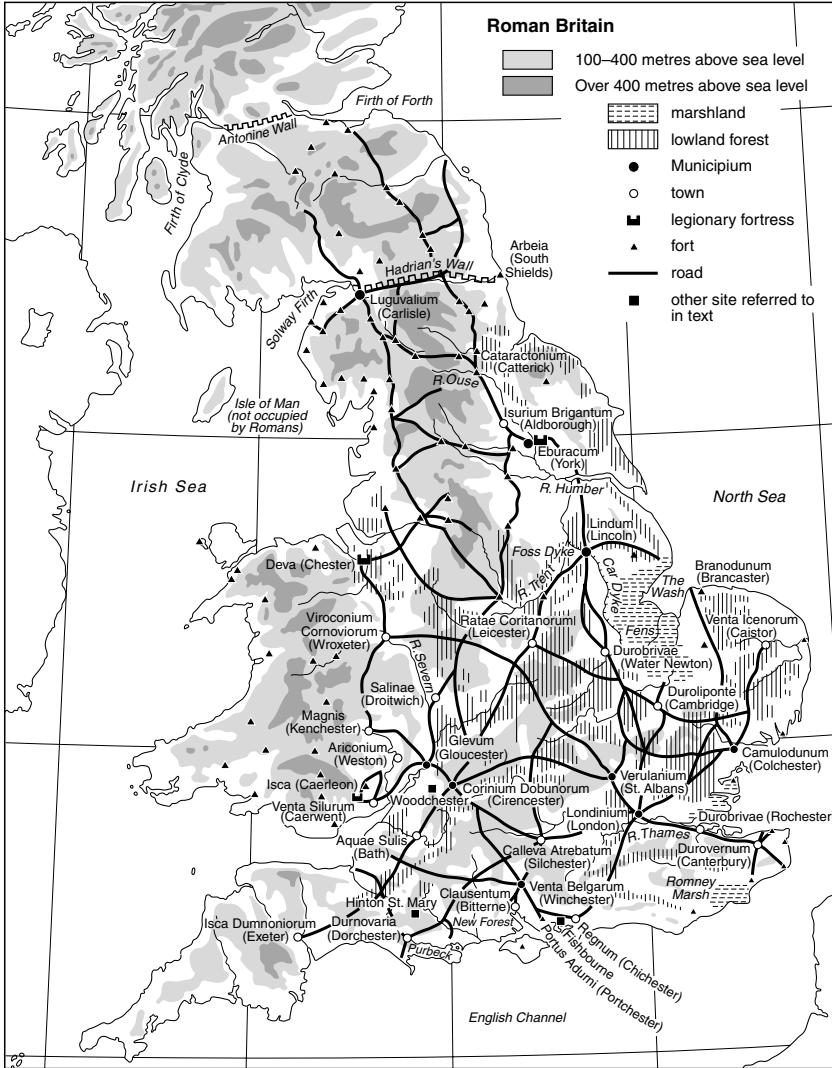From Roman to Renaissance in drama and theatre

Figure 1 Roman Britain, roads and settlements

But by then the project had such enormous momentum that it could hardly be slowed. In the year 130 Hadrian had completed his stupendous eighty-mile fortified wall running sea to sea in the north of the country, from the Tyne to the Solway. Within the next twenty years his successor put up the turf-and-ditch Antonine wall even further north, along the Forth–Clyde line. Occasional

breaches of these fortified boundaries occurred, but Hadrian's wall proved most durable, and Romanisation continued within the protected territory to the south at an astonishing pace. Turning back raids from Scotland and Wales and the south-west, legionary troops forced the borders of occupation outwards, and for generations the growth and development of the burgeoning society under Roman military rule went on virtually free from serious challenge.

And so time passed, a good deal of it, centuries. It would be hard to overestimate the transformative power and importance of Romanisation during this era. Now a distinct province of Rome, Britannia prospered while the phenomenal growth of the empire itself continued unabated, apparently invincible, inevitable, expanding across most of the known worlds of Europe and the near east. And in Britannia, through all of the four centuries of Roman glory, generations flourished, increasing in number and wealth. The population then is estimated to have reached between three and four million people, about as great a number as were alive before the Black Death struck in the fourteenth century.[2] And clearly the powerful Roman culture put down deep roots during the time it ruled Britain. As new towns and villas were founded, older communities settled in for the long haul, consolidating, spreading, investing in public amenities, building and rebuilding civic structures central to the Roman way of life: temples, basilicas, forums, baths, amphitheatres and theatres.

During the second and third centuries, Roman domination tamed the landscape of Britain. Over six hundred villas arose in rural settings – some of them, like Chedworth in Gloucestershire, or the palatial quarters at Fishbourne, quite spectacular – marking the homes of successful chieftains, or centres of large agricultural holdings, sometimes acting as regional leisure retreats. But the main thrust of Romanisation was felt in urban development. Towns were platted along the recognisable Roman grid system, and they thrived within other fully articulated systems of protection, support, transport and trade. The positioning of these towns did not, of course, occur by happenstance. From the beginning, they were situated about a day's march apart, along an increasingly developed network of roads radiating out from London – a settlement that had evolved early on as the main commercial centre for the province. These roads, with post and relay stations along the way, acted not only as a means of military transport, but as the main arteries for trade and information, for such foreign goods as wine, pottery, bronzeware and glass. Smooth, strongly built and well maintained, the roads offered easy access to every corner of the land.

2 See Jones, *The End of Roman Britain*, 13–14.

The three main routes out of London extended to Lincoln, York and the north, to Chester and up to Carlisle, and to Gloucester, Wales and the south-west. Facilitated by these conduits, the final quarter of the first century saw a surge of public building and development in such centres as Verulamium, Silchester, Cirencester, Winchester, Canterbury, Chichester and Exeter.

As early as the second century, Christianity slowly began to make inroads in the culture, though it was not until after Constantine was hailed as the Augustus of the west in 312 that the entire Roman empire would become nominally Christian. In Britannia certainly no overnight conversion occurred, though some Christian liturgical remains from the second and third centuries testify to its vitality. During these same centuries, however, a serious political storm was in the making for the empire and for Britannia. In the third and fourth centuries, Roman military expansion in Europe shaded imperceptibly into over-extension, while in Rome itself power corrupted the social order and the privilege of citizenship was regularly abused. Ultimately the centre could no longer hold. By the fifth century – certainly by the year AD 400 – the long golden afternoon of empire had faded, though there was no sign of the utter darkness that lay ahead. As imperial energy drained, all forward movement ceased. In the northern and western European provinces, local resistance to the Roman legions became more successful: tough Germanic tribes – themselves pushed by pitiless nomadic raiders coming out of the Asian steppes – presented strong military challenges. Tasting success, the Germanic tribes went on the offensive and began to storm the empire itself. The conflict increased over two or three generations until at last a fatally weakened Rome fell before triumphant but ignorant Visigoths. The rough barbarians wrested control and booty from the helpless centre of the empire, and by AD 463, Rome had been sacked twice. Almost overnight its far-reaching accomplishments became merely history. In AD 467 the last of the Roman emperors died, and the civilisation that once stretched from far northern and western Europe to the far east collapsed utterly before the invaders. Only the eastern part of the empire, the prosperous Byzantine world centred in Constantinople, remained intact. The crude conquerors of the western Roman world made poor governors, and in succeeding decades they greedily proceeded simply to dismember the empire and to pick clean the bones of the classical world. The gutted remnants, clearly spectacular even today, can still be seen in widespread ruins familiar to us mainly as tourist attractions: bleached pillars of temples, impressive stretches of aqueducts, suggestive shapes of amphitheatres, public baths, forums, and a host of other public and private buildings scattered across the face of two continents.

Through this whole time of development, expansion, over-extension and collapse, we know that theatrical practices of all kinds were a mainstay in Roman culture. In Rome, the heart of the empire, theatre ruled. Plays and farces filled the stages, mimes and acrobats roamed the streets, and wildly popular sporting events jammed the amphitheatres. Public spectacle attended events large and small: military triumphs, political victories, milestones in emperors' personal lives, the many feast days associated with gods. It is hard for us, at this remove, to imagine just how thoroughly performance permeated the Roman world. And not only in Rome did one do as the Romans, but in the provinces too. The almost numberless ruins of buildings dedicated to performance, found wherever the Romans set up a town of any size, provide ocular proof of their love and cultivation of spectacle.

For our project of tracing the history of theatre in Britain, these last three or four centuries are both too easy and too hard to generalise about as a local phenomenon, given the real dearth of evidence. We can say little about the lives of individuals in the more than fifteen or twenty generations of people who lived and died during the course of those years. We know that the Romans transformed material and imaginative landscapes in ways that archaeologists and cultural historians are still trying to reconstruct. Of the plays, shows and spectacles performed in Britain over this long span of time, no texts or scripts survive other than those more generally associated with Roman theatre proper. Today only oblique witnesses to the nature of the performances are available: a few historical references, some mosaics, inscriptions, a mask or two, and the mute remains of stone theatres and amphitheatres found in a number of Roman towns whose skeletal forms still dot the countryside. In one way or another, however, it is certain that the history of the empire, of Britannia, and of individual communities was played out in the theatres of this province. And we know too that theatre played an important part in the social lives of its earliest practitioners.

We might begin to develop some picture of the place of theatre in Roman life by picking over one of those ruins ourselves. Within an easy day's journey north out of London, following Watling Street to where it passed along the banks of the meandering river Ver, lay the first true administrative capital of the province, Verulamium (now St Albans). Here the Romans established one of their earliest settlements, making it a *municipium* in Claudian times. Let us pay it a visit now, since Verulamium also happens to be one of the few sites in Roman Britain where a public theatre is known to have been built; indeed, its ruins have survived for our inspection. Other theatres existed elsewhere, without doubt: Colchester apparently had two of them, one within the town