

**AN INTRODUCTION
TO OCTAVIA
PRÆTEXTA**

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An Introduction to Octavia Prætexta by Edward Conner Chickering

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EDWARD CONNER CHICKERING

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OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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I

The Tragedy of the Romans

By most writers upon Latin literature the opinion has been held, and defended with more or less vigor, that Roman tragedy was very inferior in quality, and of little importance in comparison with other productions of the Latin writers. This view is due in part to the almost complete disappearance of the works of the tragedians, in part to the idea that the value of such Roman productions may be estimated by applying to them the standard imposed by Greek environment, or by modern. A sympathetic study of the development of the Latin drama cannot fail at least in some degree to modify this view.

That the Greek influence was strong, and that Latin tragedy derived its main outlines from Hellas, is not to be denied. There were plays before foreign influence was felt at all: the word *hister* is Etruscan, and the Atellanes, Oscan dialect pieces, were familiar long before 240 B. C. But the very fact that Livius Andronicus, Nævius, Ennius, and Pacuvius were none of them Roman citizens by birth would make an autochthonous Roman tragedy out of the question. The mimes and other native performances remained essentially undeveloped, and con-

tinued to enjoy the patronage of such part of the people as also remained undeveloped in taste and education.⁽¹⁾

In support of the theory that Rome had no real tragedy, a series of arguments has been made to show that such production would have been absolutely at variance with the conditions.⁽²⁾ It is claimed that Rome had no epic to compare with the Homeric poems that the Greek tragedians found ready at hand: but Livius Andronicus had translated at least the *Odyssey* into Saturnians, and it was used by the young Romans as a school book. One essential purpose of the Roman tragedians was didactic, for the conquerors were eager to learn of the history and mythology of the people they had vanquished.⁽³⁾ It is said that poets at Rome occupied an inferior position: but this view is much weakened when we consider the friendship of Scipio with Ennius, of Africanus and Lælius with Terence. The Metelli would hardly have spent as much energy as they did in subduing Nævius had he been of no importance. By Cicero's time, indeed, even the actors were fêted by the great.⁽⁴⁾

Again it is claimed that Rome had no national religion. True, the Roman worship was formal—an es-

(1) Cf. J. C. F. Bähr, *Geschichte der römischen Literatur*. (Carlsruhe, 1868.)

(2) By Nisard, *Études Morales et Littéraires sur les Poètes latins de la Décadence*. (Paris, 1877.) The opposite view is excellently presented by Gustave Michaut, *Le Génie Latin*. (Paris, 1900.)

(3) Cf. Th. Ladewig, *Analecta Scenica in Gymnas.-Prog.* (Neustrelitz, 1848.)

(4) Cf. Cicero, *De Divin.* I. xxxvi. 79; *Pro Archia*, viii. 17, etc.