

Cicero on Theater and Games



Roman Theater at Merida, Spain

Excerpts from a letter which Cicero wrote to his good friend Marius on the opening of the Theater of Pompey (Ad. Fam. 7.1) 55 BC

M. Cicero sends greetings to M. Marius

If some infirmity of body or of health gripped you so that you could not come to the games, I give more credit to your good luck than to your wisdom. But if you despised things which others wondered at, and although you were healthy, you chose not to come, I rejoice doubly, because you are both free from bodily weakness and of sound mind, as you stayed away from things which others admired without cause . . .

Altogether, if you ask, the plays were very grandiose, but not to your taste; I make that estimate from my own (taste). For first for the sake of their honor there returned to the stage those who for the sake of their honor I believed would have departed from the stage. What more can I say? For you know (about) other plays which do not even have the charm found in mediocrity. For the spectacle of such elaboration destroyed all amusement — a spectacle which I do not doubt you could forego without regret (with a calm mind). For what is pleasing about six hundred mules in “Clytemnesta” or three thousand mixing bowls in “The Trojan Horse” or various arms of infantry and cavalry in some battle? Such things have the admiration of the crowd, but would not please you. But if through these days you gave work to your reader Protogenus, provided only that he read anything other than my orations, you had no less entertainment than we did.

For why should I think you want (to see) athletes, you who despise gladiators? Indeed on these Pompey himself confessed that he had wasted his effort and his oil.

The rest of the time was given to hunting, ten days of it — impressive — no man denies it — but what pleasure is there for a civilized man when either a weak man is mutilated by a very strong beast or a magnificent beast is transfixed by a spear? Indeed, if such things must be seen, you have seen them; and we who watched saw nothing new.

The last day was a day of elephants, for whom there was great admiration among the common people, but no pleasure (in the hunt) arose for the crowd. Instead there was a certain pity and this opinion, that there was a certain fellowship (similarity) between these (unfortunate) beasts and the race of man.

I myself during these days of theater, so that I may not appear to have been not only happy but also free, nearly burst myself in the defense of Gallus Caninus, your friend . . .

Text from Latin Library:

**I. Scr. Romae a.u.c. 699.
M. CICERO S. D. M. MARIO.**

Si te dolor aliqui corporis aut infirmitas valetudinis tuae tenuit, quo minus ad ludos venires, fortunae magis tribuo quam sapientiae tuae; sin haec, quae ceteri mirantur, contemnenda duxisti et, cum per valetudinem posses, venire tamen noluisti, utrumque laetor, et sine dolore corporis te fuisse et animo valuisse, cum ea, quae sine causa mirantur alii, neglexeris . . .

Omnino, si quaeris, ludi apparatusissimi, sed non tui stomachi; coniecturam enim facio de meo; nam primum honoris causa in scenam redierant ii, quos ego honoris causa de scena decessisse arbitrabar . . .

Quid tibi ego alia narrem? nosti enim reliquos ludos, qui ne id quidem leporis habuerunt, quod solent mediocres ludi; apparatus enim spectatio tollebat omnem hilaritatem, quo quidem apparatu non dubito quin animo aequissimo carueris; quid enim delectationis habent sexcenti muli in Clytaemnestra aut in Equo Troiano creterrarum tria milia aut armatura varia peditatus et equitatus in aliqua pugna? quae popularem admirationem habuerunt, delectationem tibi nullam attulissent. Quod si tu per eos dies operam dedisti Protogeni tuo, dummodo is tibi quidvis potius quam orationes meas legerit, ne tu haud paullo plus quam quisquam nostrum delectationis habuisti . . .

Nam quid ego te athletas putem desiderare, qui gladiatores contempseris? in quibus ipse Pompeius confitetur se et operam et oleum perdidisse. Reliquae sunt venationes binae per dies quinque, magnificae — nemo negat —, sed quae potest homini esse polito delectatio, cum aut homo imbecillus a valentissima bestia laniatur aut praeclara bestia venabulo transverberatur? quae tamen, si videnda sunt, saepe vidisti, neque nos, qui haec spectavimus, quidquam novi vidimus. Extremus elephantorum dies fuit: in quo admiratio magna vulgi atque turbae, delectatio nulla exstitit; quin etiam misericordia quaedam consecuta est atque opinio eiusmodi, esse quandam illi beluae cum genere humano societatem. His ego tamen diebus, ne forte videar tibi non modo beatus, sed liber omnino fuisse, dirupi me paene in iudicio Galli Caninii, familiaris tui . . .