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Performance, prostitution, and "playing the Roman":

The Roman Floralia and the social construction of performing women.

C. Edwards (Cambridge, 1993) has recently reevaluated the rhetoric surrounding actors and the theater in Rome, emphasizing the tension between the prominence of the *ludi scaenici* in political and religious life, and the general disapproval of actors and the theater in Roman sources. For Edwards, this tension arises from the public voice given to actors, and their license to "play Romans" of any social standing; she documents Roman audiences' habit of connecting the action on the stage to the outside world and reacting accordingly. The elite approbation and eroticization of performers is thus a reaction against their potential power. In this paper, I discuss a variation on this rhetoric in a series of literary treatments of the Floralia, a festival which paints this eroticization of performers in broad strokes by making female prostitutes perform naked in mimes. As with the male entertainers discussed by Edwards, the erotic availability of female entertainers in Rome is a commonplace (cf. Hor. *Sat.* 1.2.56-58; Cic. *pro Planc.* 30-31; Plut. *Sull.* 36). As a public and official dramatization of this equation between performing women and prostitutes, the Floralia presents a forum for thinking about the social constructions of performing women in Rome. I argue that Martial (*Epigrams* I. *pr.*; 34; and 35), Juvenal (VI. 246-67) and Tertullian (*de Spec.* 17) all focus on the moral effect of the interaction between the women on display and the Floralia's audience, and are particularly concerned with the possibility of an assimilation of the women in the audience to the women on the stage. The rhetoric surrounding the Floralia thus supports Edwards' assertion of a dynamic relationship between the stage and the audience, but with an important variation: the dangerous equation made between the two is not between the action of the play and political or social realities, but between the *mimae et meretrices* on stage and the *matronae* in the audience.