

Pacuvius

The Fragments

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Ancient Classics Series

The Fragments of

PACUVIUS

(220- c. 130 BC)



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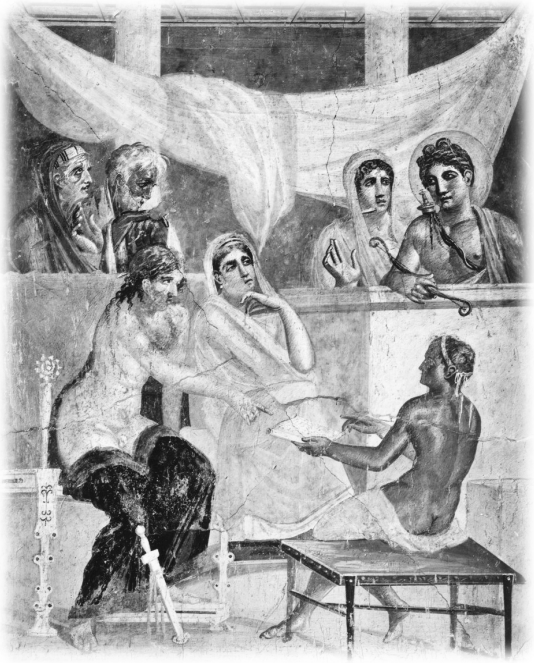
The Delphi Classics Catalogue



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Version 1

The Fragments of

MARCUS PACUVIUS



By Delphi Classics, 2026

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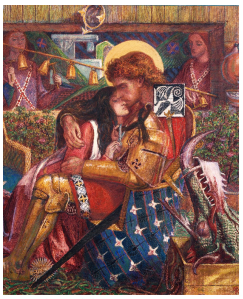
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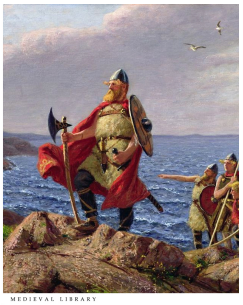
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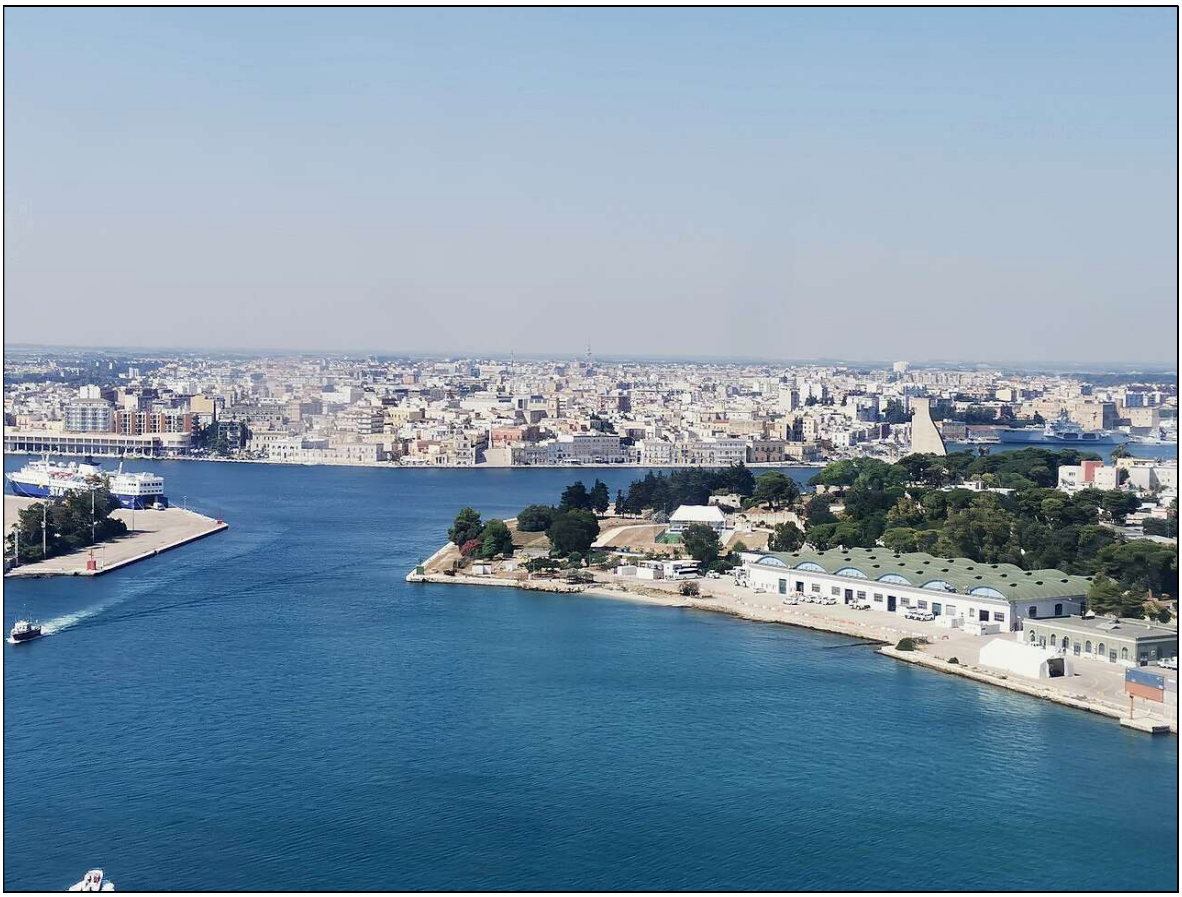


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The Translations



Brindisi, a city in the region of Apulia, southern Italy — Marcus Pacuvius was born in Brundisium, which had become a Roman colony in 244 BC.



Ancient ruins near Brindisi

The Fragments of Pacuvius



Translated by E. H. Warmington, 1936

Regarded as the greatest of the Latin tragedians prior to Lucius Accius (c. 170-c. 86 BC), Marcus Pacuvius (220-c. 130 BC) was an ancient Roman tragic poet, who was born in Brundisium (modern-day Brindisi), a southern Italian town of Oscan heritage that had recently become a Roman colony. Pacuvius grew up in a multilingual environment, likely receiving his education in Tarentum, which allowed him to become equally fluent in Oscan, Greek and Latin. His maternal uncle was the pioneering epic poet and dramatist Quintus Ennius (c. 239-c. 169 BC), who soon recognised his nephew's potential and took him under his wing. As a young adult, Pacuvius followed Ennius to Rome, where he initially gained recognition not just for his literary aptitude, but also as a highly talented painter. In fact, Pliny the Elder later recorded that a celebrated fresco by Pacuvius hung in the Temple of Hercules in the Forum Boarium, marking him as one of the very few elite Roman figures of his era to win prestige as both a writer and an artist.

Once established in the capital, Pacuvius was embraced by the Scipionic Circle, an influential elite group of politicians and intellectuals surrounding Scipio Aemilianus, who passionately promoted Greek culture and literature. Immersed in this sophisticated environment, Pacuvius focused his career almost exclusively on writing tragedies, adapting complex Greek mythological cycles into heavy, powerful Latin verse. He continued to dominate the Roman theatre scene deep into his old age. A famous historical account by the grand orator Cicero (106-43 BC) notes that in 140, an eighty-year-old Pacuvius staged a tragedy in direct competition with a thirty-year-old Lucius Accius, effectively passing the torch to the next generation of Roman dramatists. Shortly after this milestone, facing declining health, he retired from public life and moved back to southern Italy, passing away in Tarentum in c. 130 at nearly ninety years of age.

Pacuvius' epitaph, said to have been composed by himself, is quoted by Aulus Gellius, with a tribute of admiration to its "modesty, simplicity and fine serious spirit":

> "Young man, though you are in a hurry, this stone asks you
> To look at it, then to read what is written.
> Here are placed the poet Pacuvius Marcus's bones.
> I wished you to know this. Farewell."

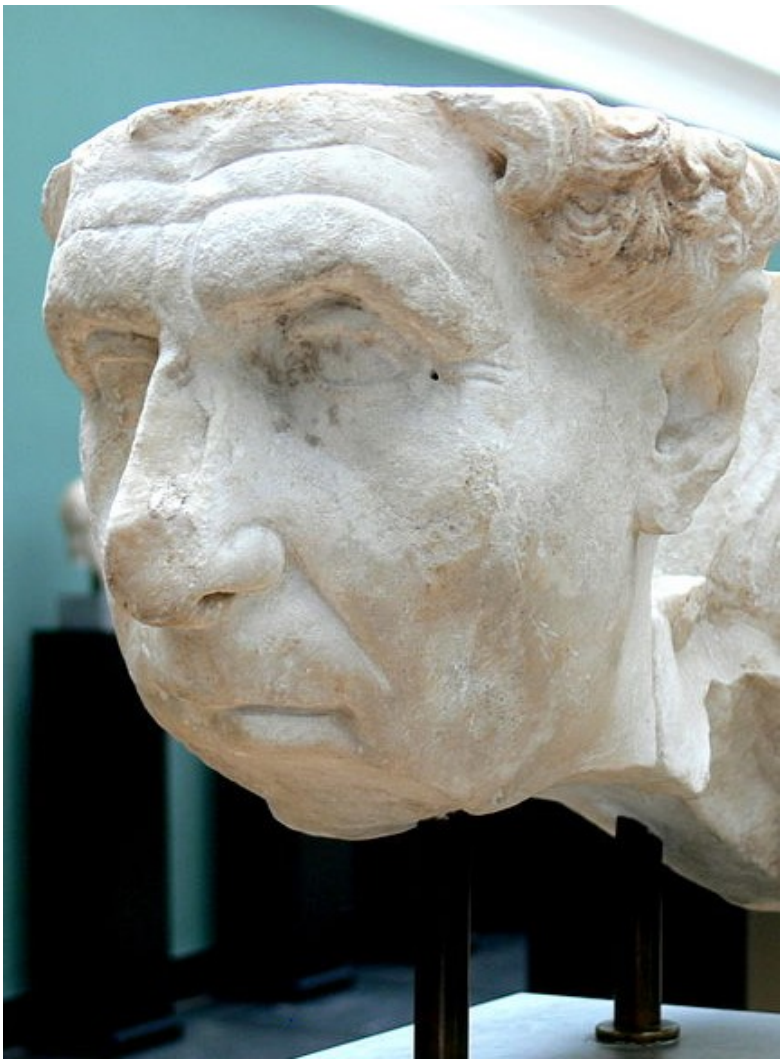
Pacuvius' tragic output consists of approximately twelve Greek-subject plays (*fabulae cothurnatae*) — such as *Antiopa*, *Armorum Judicium* and *Chryses* — and one Roman historical drama (*fabula praetexta*) titled *Paullus*, which celebrated the Roman military victory at the Battle of Pydna. Instead of merely translating Greek classics, he actively reshaped his source material to focus on obscure mythological variations, intense philosophical dilemmas and themes of mistaken identity ending in final recognition. His dramatic style was defined by deep emotional pathos and elevated ethical questions. A famous scene from his *Chryses* reportedly drew tears from Roman audiences, which depicted two friends competing to die in place of each other. The reception of his plays in Rome was overwhelmingly positive among

contemporary intellectuals, elite Roman statesmen and public audiences, cementing his legacy as one of Rome's greatest tragic playwrights. While later imperial satirists occasionally critiqued his heavy, over-ornate approach and complex, compounded Latin vocabulary, his dramatic works remained a permanent staple of the Roman theatrical repertoire, noticeably influencing the literary styles of poets like Virgil and Ovid.

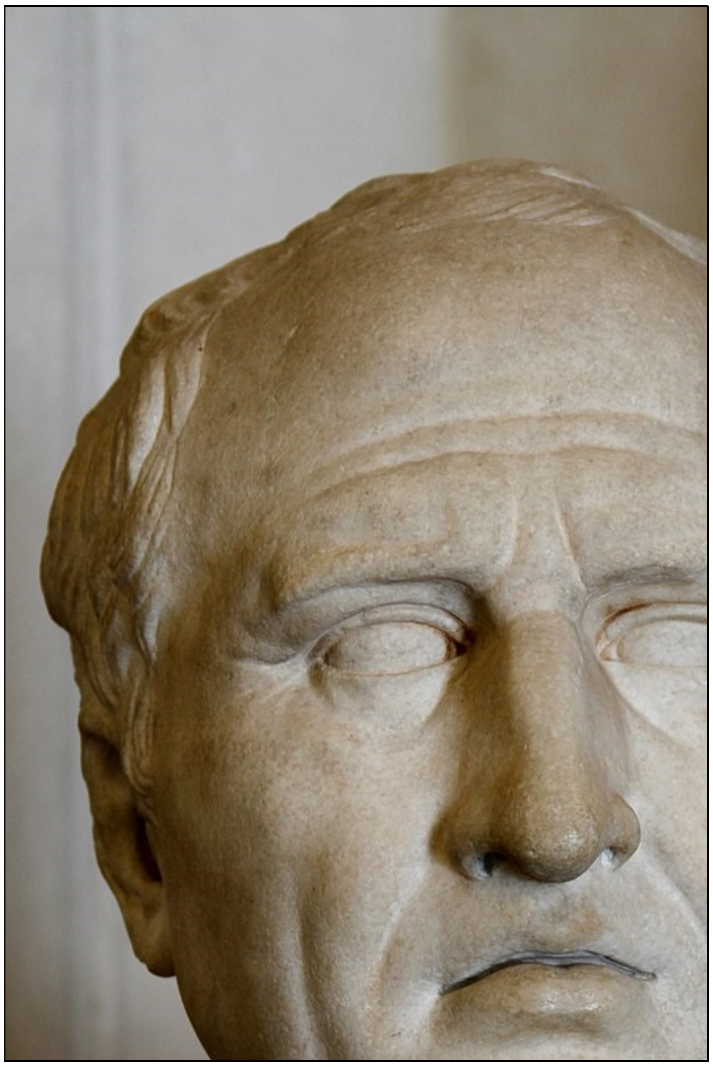
Today, his works only survive in fragments from later authors, usually serving as examples of ancient grammar or religious practice. Cicero quotes Pacuvius in illustration or enforcement of his own ethical teaching appeal, by the fortitude, dignity and magnanimity of the sentiment expressed in them, to what was noblest in the Roman temperament. Pacuvius' extant works are inspired by a fervid and steadfast glow of spirit and reveal a gentleness and humanity of sentiment blended with the severe gravity of the original Roman character. His poetry is believed to have anticipated Lucretius in using the conclusions of speculative philosophy as well as of common sense to assail some of the prevailing forms of superstition. Many of the fragments reveal a taste both for physical and ethical speculation, while others expose the pretensions of religious imposture.

The literary language of Rome was undergoing a process of formation during the second century BC, and it was in the latter part of this century that the series of great Roman orators, with whose spirit Roman tragedy has a strong affinity, commenced. However, this new creative effort in language was accompanied by considerable crudeness of execution; and the novel word-formations and varieties of inflexion introduced by Pacuvius exposed him to the ridicule of the satirist Gaius Lucilius, and, long afterwards, to that of his imitator Persius. Notwithstanding the attempt to introduce an alien element into the Roman language, which proved somewhat incompatible with its natural genius, failing to attain the idiomatic purity of Naevius, Plautus or Terence, Pacuvius' fragments reveal the important service that he rendered to the formation of Rome's literary language, as well as to the culture and character of his contemporaries.

Pacuvius holds an important place in the history of Roman theatre as the foremost tragic dramatist of the mid-Republic. As the nephew and pupil of Ennius, he served as a crucial cultural bridge, ensuring the continuity and elevation of serious Latin drama in the decades preceding the rise of Lucius Accius. Revered by contemporaries and later writers as *doctus* (learned) due to his sophisticated grasp of Greek myth and poetics, he was no slavish imitator nor mere translator of the Greek originals. Instead, he actively reshaped them by enriching the narratives with philosophical depth, intense emotional pathos and distinctively Roman moral values. His ground-breaking craftsmanship proved that the Latin language was capable of sustaining high tragedy, which did not always have to look back to Greece for its subject matter. This monumental achievement earned him the title of Rome's greatest tragic poet from Cicero and directly paved the way for the later brilliance of Seneca's tragedies.



Double herm featuring a portrait believed by some to be of Ennius, Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek



A first century bust of the orator Cicero in the Capitoline Museums, Rome — Cicero highly regarded Pacuvius' works and is one of the key authors to have preserved many of his famous quotations.

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Bronze statue of a Hellenistic prince, attributed to be Scipio Aemilianus, early second century BC, found on the Quirinal in Rome, Palazzo Massimo alle Terme



Roman tragedy mask from the second century BC, Museum zu Allerheiligen

Antiopa

PACUVIUS' MODEL WAS Euripides' *Ἀντιόπη*, and Cicero implies (de Fin., I. 2, 4) that Pacuvius translated Euripides' word for word.' There was a chorus of Theban elders, and the scene from the prologue and action of Pacuvius' play. Cf. B. Biliński, 'Contrastanti ideali di cultura sulla scena di Pacuvio', in Accad. Polacca di Sci. e Lett., Bibl, di Roma, Conf. 16; R., 281 ff.; L. Strzelecki, in Tragica, I, Trav. de la Soc. des Sc. et Lettres de Wroclaw, Sér. A., XLI, 1952, 67.

Hyginus (on the story of Antiopa): The plot of Euripides' play is the same as that of which Pacuvius treats.

From the prologue:

Hyginus:

Nycteus a king in Boeotia had a daughter Antiopa. Jupiter, attracted by the beauty of her person, made her heavy with child. When her father would have punished her for her disgrace, Antiopa fled from the danger which threatened her. It happened that Epopeus of Sicyon was standing at a place whither she too had come; he conveyed the woman home and united her to himself in marriage. Nycteus bore this ill, and on his deathbed made a solemn agreement with Lycus his brother, to whom he at that hour was bequeathing his kingdom, entrusting to him the task of preventing Antiopa from going unpunished. After Nycteus' death Lycus went to Sicyon. He killed Epopeus and took Antiopa away in bonds. On Cithaeron she gave birth to twin boys and deserted them.

1

Probus:

Euripides, together with our own poet Pacuvius, says that Amphion and Zethus were —

Sons of Jupiter by Antiope, Nycteus' daughter;

and that Amphion could by his singing call his cattle to him Thebes is a witness.

Hyginus:

These boys a shepherd brought up, and named Zethus and Amphion.

Controversy between the twins on music and wisdom:

The author of 'To Herennius': Again we must fight shy of talking about a matter which is irrelevant to the subject of controversy... like the case of Zethus and Amphion in a play of Pacuvius; between them it was a controversy about music which the poet staged, yet Zethus takes up all the dispute with thoughts on the theory of wisdom and the utility of virtue.



End of Sample