
Play in Ancient Rome

An Interview with Garrett Fagan

Garrett Fagan served as a professor of Ancient History at Pennsylvania State University and Andrew G. Mellon Professor-In-Charge at the Intercollegiate Center for Classical Studies in Rome. He taught at York University in Toronto and at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and he held a Killam Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and an Alexander von Humboldt Research Fellowship at the University of Cologne, Germany. Born in Dublin, Fagan trained at Trinity College and later at McMaster University in Canada where he specialized in Roman history and archaeology. Fagan wrote *Bathing in Public in the Roman World* and *The Lure of the Arena: Social Psychology and the Crowd at the Roman Games*, and he coedited *Archaeological Fantasies: How Pseudoarchaeology Misrepresents the Past and Misleads the Public*. His many scholarly articles include “Violence in Roman Social Relations” and “New Perspectives on Ancient Warfare.” Fagan developed three Great Courses for The Teaching Company that appear on disk and as a mobile app, and he has been featured in the PBS series *Nova* and on the History Channel for cable television. In this interview, Fagan ranges widely over Roman play—its toys, spectacles, contests, sports, games, comic literature, and jokes and the nature of Roman leisure and laughter. **Key words:** ancient play versus modern play; games and sport as play; humor in ancient Rome; play in ancient Rome; play in Roman literature; pseudoarchaeology; theater as play; violence in play

American Journal of Play: Was there anything in particular in your childhood experience in Ireland that drew you to the ancient world?

Garrett Fagan: As a boy, I naturally played at soldiers a lot with my friends. We were inspired by whatever we had recently seen in the cinema or on TV, so it would be cowboys and Indians one week, the American Civil War the next, and World War II the week after that. I suppose my first memory of things ancient is seeing *Ben Hur* in the cinema with my parents. It was rather long and dragged in parts, but I thought the ship battle scene was

cool—and the chariot race, too. Then I remember my devotion to the 1962 film *The 300 Spartans* when it appeared on television. (I watched it again with my fifteen-year-old more recently and found it very cheesy.) But the fine film *Spartacus* struck a chord with me then, and I still find its climatic battle scene impressive fifty-five years later.

AJP: Did toys inspire you, too?

Fagan: Yes, indeed they did. In fact, I owned many hundreds of tiny plastic soldiers—Romans and Britons, among others—and I would spend hours setting them up on my bedroom floor. I put the Romans in neat blocks and rows and the Britons in an undifferentiated horde. The Romans always won. This was the 1960s and 1970s, and war and violence were actively marketed to young boys as normal male pursuits. I even subscribed to a comic book entitled, with elegant simplicity, *War!* But after that, I had to wait until senior school (that would be middle school in the United States) before my exposure to the ancient world really began in earnest. That is where things took off, especially when I began to learn Latin and read about the Roman world. But the roots go back to my running around the garden with a garbage can lid and stick playing Spartacus.

AJP: Can you tell us about your training and the direction of your interests? Why do you enjoy studying and teaching ancient history?

Fagan: I suppose there are a few reasons. First, there are the foundational contributions made and the great level of sophistication reached by the ancients in so many fields of endeavor—art and architecture, engineering, literature, philosophy, drama, rhetoric, law, the rational investigation of the world, and so on. It is enormously impressive, even today, to be confronted by the refined majesty of the Parthenon in Athens or the hulking remains of the imperial palace in Rome, or to travel to any Roman site in the empire and find the familiar buildings, even in remote and isolated places. Similarly it is humbling to read the genius of a Thucydides or a Tacitus, whose works are seminal in several fields today, and to appreciate the political brilliance behind the organization of Italy after Rome had conquered it (which provided Romans with the tools to conquer the entire Mediterranean world). This was a world of great complexity, all achieved with minimal technology when people and ideas could travel only as fast as a horse could gallop or a ship could sail. It is really quite remarkable to think about. All that said, there exists the darker aspects of the classical Mediterranean world, the ones that make it a terrifying place in many respects: all-pervasive

slavery that anyone could fall into; high levels of violence and warfare (with some exceptions, of course); horrendous attitudes toward women; individual worth determined by group membership; brutal punishments; and mass spectacles of violence. Looked at from these perspectives, the ancient Roman world seems callous and cruel, not a place for the weak. I find this tension between what is admirable and abhorrent endlessly fascinating. Finally, there is a great advantage in viewing a culture through a very wide-angle lens, from as a great distance as we do the ancient world. You can see how all the constituent parts of the culture work together: how the various systems interlock and how their social and political structures, religious institutions, economy, and value systems all communicated with each other. When you then apply that perspective to modern society, a lot becomes clearer.

AJP: Is there an element of play in ancient history?

Fagan: Oh yes. Doing ancient history—while technical and difficult in many ways—is an enormous amount of fun. It is not as much fun as running about with a garbage can lid in the garden, but it comes close. The cardinal feature of doing ancient history is dealing with a restricted body of evidence. A rich and enthralling corpus of data it is, yes, but restricted nonetheless. Scholars estimate that of all the ancient literature that once graced the shelves of ancient libraries, perhaps 5 percent has survived. The rest is lost, or known to us only in brief quotations found in surviving authors. The situation with regard to archaeology is not dissimilar. Many thousands of ancient sites are known, and hundreds have been closely investigated. But most of these are left untouched (for reasons of funding or to leave sites for future generations of researchers), and many are of a type, cities mostly. Very few humble villages or farms have been investigated, but these would have provided the context for the lives of the vast majority of the ancient world's ordinary inhabitants. My point is this: where there are limits in the evidence, we find greater interpretive scope for analysis and thus a freer rein for creativity in formulating ideas. These ideas are still answerable to the evidence, of course, but the interpretation of the evidence is itself often malleable and demands creative interpretation.

AJP: Why are classicists, archaeologists, and ancient historians interested in play and leisure? Is there an element of play in ancient history?

Fagan: For a long time, they were not. They saw games and sports and spectacles as interesting diversions, a curious sidewalk on the highway of real history.

Part of the reason for this may come from the ancient writers themselves, the overwhelming majority of whom were upper-class men who looked down their noses at games and spectacles as the mind-numbing province of the unwashed masses. There are some marvelous and toweringly snooty critiques of things like dice games and chariot racing and the theater penned by Roman snobs. But with the rise of the New Social History in the 1960s and 1970s, which sought, in E. P. Thompson's immortal words, to rescue the ordinary person "from the enormous condescension of posterity," things changed. Thompson was a historian of England, but his approach—often dubbed "history from the bottom up"—rippled across the profession, even into the byways of ancient studies. Now the very pursuits condemned by Roman aristocrats became objects of study, and we began to see publications on, say, Roman arena spectacles, life in taverns, and chariot racing. The ancient writer Pliny notes that "our leisure gives us away," in the sense that you can tell the worth of a man by how he spends his leisure time. You can make much the same observation about how a society goes about play and leisure, since cultural currents run deeply through games. In studying the Romans at play, we can perceive aspects of their world that might otherwise have remained obscure, and identify links across the cultural nexus that we might otherwise not have seen. We might even happen upon transhistorical links, as I argue we do with violent spectacles in *The Lure of the Arena*.

AJP: How do we know that Romans played?

Fagan: They tell us they did, and we have direct physical evidence that they did. Among the upper classes, the primary form of leisure (or *otium*) was the dinner party, which might be accompanied by recitals or performances. It could also degenerate into a wine-fuelled orgy, in which case it was (ostensibly) frowned upon. Spending time reading and writing was also deemed fine, and this produced what I suspect was a horrendously tedious corollary: attending formal readings of a friend's latest literary production. As I just mentioned, the aristocratic writers like to contrast this so-called worthwhile brand of *otium* with the mindless pursuits of the plebs, such as watching horses pull chariots driven by guys with colored shirts around a track over and over, arguing over the throw of a die in a pub, or drinking heavily in the public bathhouse. In condemning such activities, of course, these writers attest their existence. As corroboration for their comments, we have the physical remains of the pubs and snack bars, the arenas for gladiators, and

the chariot-racing circuses themselves. Interestingly, these larger entertainment structures were invariably built by the very same socioeconomic elite that, in their writings, condemn the activities the buildings were designed to accommodate. This raises the suspicion that, perhaps, the rhetorical pose struck by condemning common play and games was not entirely sincere; indeed, a lot of the time the writers doing the condemning seem to be awfully familiar with the activities they excoriate. Another possibility is that their condemnations were sincere but that the provision of entertainment (and other) structures for the masses was an expected part of being rich in the ancient world. This cultural system—called *euergetism*, or spending one's private wealth for public benefit—has been closely studied and pretty much accounts for all the Roman buildings that have survived to this day. In return for the sometimes vast expenditures involved, the elite earned social capital in the form of prominence and respect (traits covered by the term *dignitas* in Latin). In such cases, the personal feelings of the benefactor for or against particular modes of play would be irrelevant: if building a theater would enhance you and your family's *dignitas*, up went a theater.

AJP: What evidence of ancient Roman play exists?

Fagan: Again, there are comments and asides in the surviving corpus of ancient literature, which includes plays staged in theaters. But there are also very direct indications. Mosaics from a house in Pompeii appear to show a troupe of street mimes in action. Then there are gaming boards carved into the steps of public buildings and in other locations—I once found one etched into the tiles on the roof of the Baths of Diocletian in Rome, which must have been created by support staff shirking their duties. We are not sure what the rules of these board games were—one looks like the board for mancala, another for backgammon—but they most often involved dice, and so they were called simply *alea* (die). As with backgammon, the interplay of skill in moving game pieces and the luck of the dice throw was what enthralled the players. (One such board, by the way, from Algeria has a telling inscription on it: “Hunting, bathing, gambling, laughing—that’s living!”) A tavern in Pompeii has a typical bar scene painted on its wall: two men are playing dice and calling the numbers as they roll, they get into argument over a roll, and the barman comes over and says “You’re going outside—enough kerfuffle!” That’s pretty direct evidence of Romans at play.

AJP: Where do we find images of ancient play?

Fagan: Images of chariot races and gladiatorial combats in particular span a wide

range of media. There are, at the upper end, expensive mosaics commissioned by the elite sponsors of games (the *editores* or *munerarii*) who laid the art in their houses to commemorate their great day in the sun. Games were expensive spectacles to put on, but they lasted only a few days at most. So it is understandable that some sponsors wanted a permanent record of their outlays for the public good. At the lower end of the spectrum are images of gladiatorial combats on common oil lamps or even in graffiti etchings on plaster. These speak to the popularity of the shows among the common Romans.

AJP: Are these images accurate pictures of Roman play?

Fagan: There is no reason to think otherwise. Different types of gladiators, for instance, appear in the expensive mosaics and the humble graffiti, suggesting that both are accurate portrayals of what the performers looked like. Similarly, there is no reason to suppose that the quarrel depicted in the painting from a tavern in Pompeii is not a fair representation of a typical argument over a dice game in a bar. It is these sorts of vignettes of everyday life, in fact, that most bring the ancients closest to us.

AJP: Does Roman literature offer examples of leisure and play?

Fagan: The literature itself is a product and subject of upper-class Roman leisure. As Seneca put it, “Leisure without literature is death, a tomb for the living man.” In one’s quality *otium*, one read the works of others and composed one’s own. This is how our surviving corpus of Roman literary works came into being, and it is why it is restricted in terms of class (written by the elite), gender (by men), and space (in Rome). Several genres of Roman literature, not just individual works, are inherently playful: satire and the novel come to mind immediately, but humor and playfulness abound in the elegies of Ovid, for instance. His *Ars Amatoria* offers something like a handbook on how to meet girls in Rome, circumventing the more limiting social constrictions. His *Metamorphoses* cast the august stories of classical mythology in a decidedly humorous light: Daedalus, in building the labyrinth, almost getting lost in his own creation or Andromeda unable to cover her face chastely with her hands when addressed by Perseus—because she is chained to a rock. My personal favorite is when Orpheus—that classical, souped-up Dr. Doolittle, who could beguile even inanimate objects with his songs—finds his music drowned out by the cacophony of noise raised by a Dionysiac revel, thus rendering the Bacchantes immune to his charms. They then proceed to tear him apart (as Bacchantes were wont to do, at least

in mythology). The surviving portion of Petronius' *Satyricon*, which offers a scathing look at nouveau riche ex-slaves at a dinner party, is a literary analogue of modern television's cringe comedy, like *The Office* or *Extras*. The *Epigrams* of Martial offer a rich fare of biting and vulgar social satire. Even the speeches of Cicero contain wonderful examples of playfulness, such as a passage in the *Pro Caelio* (delivered in 56 BCE) where the orator parodies the prosecutors' conspiracy theory by rendering their scenario as a bumbling farce. I could go on, but my point is that the literary elites of the Roman world were not as stodgy and serious as many today might think them to be.

AJP: Did riddles or puzzles figure in Roman play?

Fagan: Of course. The evidence for these is more restricted, but we have word play inscribed into Roman gaming boards. I noted one earlier where the words are spelled out on the board in three pairs of six-letter words in three rows, so that the individual letters mark the playing field. These are not riddles or puzzles per se but witty comments: "The grudging dots [of the dice] force the expert to play with luck" or "The board is a circus [for chariot racing]. If you are beaten, go home. You do not know how to play!"

AJP: When Romans played by pretending, who or what did they pretend to be? Did ancient tales inspire ancient play?

Fagan: There are plenty of cases of playful pretending in ancient literature. When it comes to the emperors, about whose activities we are very well informed, we have some revealing stories. Augustus, as a younger man, was infamous for participating in a party in which the guests donned the guises of gods. This caused something of a stink at the time, but not much more. Tellingly, when Augustus's rivals Antony and Cleopatra appeared in Alexandria dressed as Osiris and Isis, they were accused (by Augustus, whose perspective has indelably shaped our views of these ill-starred lovers) of sacrilege and blasphemy. And even more tellingly later, when Gaius (Caligula) took to dressing up as a god, he was accused of thinking he was a god. These are fine examples of how the ancient sources spin our understanding of events. There is no doubt that Roman children, like all children, engaged in pretending when playing. Some child burials include the child's favorite toys, often rattles or dolls. Seneca notes boys playing at being magistrates. That gladiators appear on infant nursing bottles, in graffiti, and on humble, mass-produced clay lamps attests to their popularity among the lower classes. It is not hard to imagine children playing at being

gladiators—and, in their parent’s eyes, learning the so-called useful skill of swordplay. I recently came across a great example of Roman children at play. The Palace Mosaics from Constantinople (dated to the sixth century CE) contains an image of four boys playing at chariot racing. They hold two wheels on the ends of sticks in their hands and race around a make-believe circus, represented by the turn posts that in a real circus stood at either end of the central *spina*. The boys, who appear to be teenagers, even wear tunics with broad stripes in the colors of the two real circus “factions,” the Blues and Greens (a Green takes the lead).

AJP: How does the nature of the surviving evidence restrict what we know about Roman play?

Fagan: Of course we have only snippets and glimpses, often from sources wildly divergent in nature and disparate in provenance, both in time and space. The Roman world was a very big place and the empire endured for centuries. So, the best we can do is compose an amalgam, gain an impression of Roman play that may or may not reflect social realities in any given time or place. But, what can you do? You have to work with the facts you are given. Even with this caveat, there are some constants.

The shape of entertainment buildings and theaters are pretty consistent across the empire and over the ages, for instance. Then there are suggestive differences between and among building types. In the Greek East, for example, we find a form of building called a bath-gymnasium, a leisure complex that united the long-standing traditions of the Greek gymnasium with the new procedures of the Roman bath. Such hybrid structures are not found in the Latin West, where there was no pre-Roman gymnasium tradition. What is more elusive, however, is determining whether or not there were specific ways the bath-gymnasium was used and enjoyed by the inhabitants of the eastern empire that differed in marked ways from the bathing routines and leisure time of, say, a Roman in Gaul. To my mind, it depends on what sorts of activities we are talking about. In all likelihood, the basic bathing and leisure activities on offer in both were probably much the same. But in Greek cities, the gymnasium was a center of education and learning. It was a major gathering place for the citizenry; the Antony-Osiris and Cleopatra-Isis parade I mentioned earlier took place in the gymnasium of Alexandria. We read in an inscription of Hadrian sitting in state in a gymnasium in an eastern city, issuing rescripts and edicts. In contrast, the Roman bath complexes in the Latin West, even the largest and most lavish,

do not seem to have served quite the same functions as this. Even if they contained lecture halls, libraries, and art galleries—as some of the very largest ones did—they never played the same role as centers of learning in western cities that the bath-gymnasium did in the Greek East. But a Syrian or an Egyptian just looking to have a bath while visiting North Africa or Spain would have likely encountered a pretty similar environment and set of options in the non-bath-gymnasium complexes there.

AJP: Would Romans have endorsed modern beliefs in the benefits of play?

Fagan: Modern thinkers, child psychologists, and anthropologists among them, consider play in childhood, especially pretending and mimesis, critical to proper development. Through play, children learn the rudiments of cooperation and identification. The Romans knew this. Quintilian, writing on education in the first century CE, specifically recommends play as laying a firm foundation for later learning. “Let the child play,” he recommends simply. Elite children would have played with their nurses, care givers, and other children in the household, while children in the crowded apartment blocks of the commoners would have had no shortage of playmates. As to what sort of games children played, we have seen that dolls surely imply forms of role play in their use—gladiators, chariot racing, and magistrates, too, as I have mentioned. But we also see or hear of children playing with hoops, balls, nuts, knucklebones, and dice. Some of these—ball games in the baths, for instance, or dice—were games played also by Roman adults and were a very direct avenue into aspects of adult life. So, to the limited extent our sources allow us to see Roman life, it does appear that in some respects Romans would have endorsed modern views of the benefits of play. Although I doubt they would be enamored of the modern emphasis in some quarters on nonviolent play among boys.

AJP: Do the Latin synonyms for play and playfulness translate well into English or do the words themselves sometimes hamper our understanding of ancient sensibilities?

Fagan: You raise an interesting conundrum, since to a large degree the act of translation embraces the act of interpretation. When moving a concept from one cultural context to another by translating the word expressing it, the concept naturally has to be reinterpreted to become intelligible in the translator’s context. For this reason, there is no one-to-one direct correspondence between our concepts “play” and “playfulness” and Latin ones. The Latin word for “play” is *ludo*, and it covers much the same territory

as our word (we see the root in “ludicrous,” for instance). But the noun for “play, game” was *ludus*, and this extended into the realm of education: a *ludus* could be a game, a play, or a sport. But it also denoted a school, a place of learning or training. It may be that the connection developed in the Greek world, where the gymnasium accommodated both physical exercise (sport) and mental training (education). Or it was just that games and sport required training, so that the activity and the place where it occurred were denoted by the same word. We see the same process for *spectaculum*, “watching” and “arena,” or *balneum* “bathing” and “bath.” From there a *ludus* became anywhere where people, from elementary school children to gladiators, were trained. This word always retained its connection with play and games, so that chariot races were *ludi circenses* and plays *ludi scaenici*. (Gladiatorial games, by the way, were not dubbed *ludi* but *munera*, “duties,” from their original function as performing a duty to commemorate and honor a dead relative.) Other words semantically connected to *ludus* are the adjective *ludicer*, the neuter form of which, *ludicrum*, often stood in for “a game, play” or *ludibrium*, which meant “mockery, derision, laughing-stock.” A less commonly used word was *iocus* and its relatives. This denoted a joke or jest.

AJP: Was bath time “play” time in ancient Rome?

Fagan: Bath time was certainly leisure time for the Romans, and they spent a good part of the afternoon at the bath. Part of the bathing process involved exercise and playing ball games in the exercise yard (*palaestra*) of the bathhouse. Various forms of ball games appear in their art, but how they are played is often unclear. Perhaps bathing was not regarded as play. Maybe it was just downtime. The ball games, while a sort of play, were part of this leisure time. The rest of the bathing process involved sweating and immersion in communal pools, and it might be accompanied by drinking and snacking but not play proper. So I would say that, to some degree, the baths were venues for play, but not to the extent of the buildings specifically erected to stage *ludi*, such as circuses or theaters.

AJP: Have you found Roman cautionary tales or maxims that deal with play or playfulness? Was play ever regarded as a physical or moral danger?

Fagan: Ancient Rome had its fair share of public moralizers and, like all examples of that species, they too were hypocrites. They would rail at length against the plebs wasting their time at board games and drinking, watching chariot races, lolling at the baths, and cheering at the theater. But they then par-

ticipated in the same activities themselves. I have touched on the elite's conception of quality leisure, but we know emperors like Augustus enjoyed board games and gambling and that Tiberius's son Drusus and the emperor Claudius loved the arena spectacles. (Commodus liked them so much so that he participated in them). We also hear of laws passed barring senators or equestrians from performing as gladiators—which surely indicates this was a problem. The first-century philosopher Seneca droned on about the enervating effects of bathing in hot water and claimed to bathe only in cold, but the man committed suicide under orders from Nero in the heated bathhouse of one of his many private villas.

AJP: And where did these pundits detect peril?

Fagan: Elite moralizers found three kinds of danger in poor-quality leisure. First, it was enervating and effeminizing. When real Romans should be out training for war and staying fit, they were instead sitting around in taverns, theaters, or circuses being idle and useless. Second, low-quality leisure catered to the needs of the body, with drink or monetary winnings or the sights and sounds of spectacle. Quality leisure, as every Roman of standing knew, was a matter of cultivating the mind with writing, reading, discussing matters of intellectual interest, and attending recitations and lectures. And, finally, submersion in the swamp of corporeal leisure involved an unseemly public display of emotions, as people got carried away at gladiatorial spectacles, ranted and raved at each other in the theaters, or fanatically followed their favorite chariot racing faction. They also squabbled over dice games. All this was not consonant with the elite Roman idea of proper deportment in public, captured in the concept of *gravitas*, roughly meaning “seriousness.” The elites expected people of quality to project an appropriate sense of aloofness from what went on around them. Pliny the Younger tellingly observed that the emperor Trajan sat like a statue through arena spectacles, whereas other authors criticized Claudius for doing exactly the opposite: he leapt his seat, shouted out, and extended his hand as gladiators fought. This was most unseemly. Indeed, one of the main moral objections—pagan, Jewish, and Christian—to attend spectacles of any sort was precisely the danger of losing oneself in uncouth, emotional display. If watching spectacles carried the risk of moral corruption, then participation in them was much worse. The Roman elite looked down their noses at paid public performers as *infames* (people without repute) so to join their ranks was a terrible social disgrace. As I noted, this did not deter

some members of the elite from doing just that, but it was regarded as a signal form of debasement. So imagine the horror of the elite at emperors like Nero or Commodus who performed in public, alongside the *infames*?

AJP: Could you give us a modern equivalent?

Fagan: I can only liken it to the outrage that would ensue if the President of the United States appeared in a wrestling extravaganza, smacking people with folded chairs, or he competed for a boxing title, or appeared as a main character in a movie. And this is in our modern culture, which not only accepts but (mostly) lionizes actors, athletes, and celebrities. That said, as the cases of Jesse Ventura and Arnold Schwarzenegger show, it is possible to move from the stage to the state house; I wonder if it would be as socially acceptable the other way around: could an ex-governor become a WWE wrestler without being thought to have debased himself? So, in short, the world of Roman play and games was, like so much else in the eyes of the Roman elite, replete with moral risks of all sorts.

AJP: So, do you think Romans generally regarded play as a constructive use of time or as a waste of it?

Fagan: Well, it depended on what kind of play you engaged in, as I have suggested. “Our leisure time gives us away,” said Pliny the Younger.

AJP: How did skill and fortune figure in Roman play? Did Romans see a moral dimension to chance?

Fagan: The intersection of chance and skill fascinated the Romans and, arguably, most other people engaged in sports, games, or play. In board games involving dice and moving pieces (like backgammon), the two work hand-in-hand: dice rolls present opportunities and limit options. But skill in the strategic movement of the pieces, the knucklebones, could have, to some degree, helped obviate the impact of the rolls. Nothing can stop a player who gets all the right rolls or is on a streak, so gamblers think; but most often, the rolls over time affect both parties equally. That could change, however, at any moment. As we saw inscribed on one gaming board, “The grudging dots [of the dice] force the expert to play with luck.” This interplay of skill and chance also ran through chariot racing and gladiatorial combats. A chariot could crash horribly, especially on hairpin turns at each end of the course, even if it were being operated by a champion driver. Or the most skilled gladiator might fall victim to a lucky blow or an unlucky stumble. How things played out in uncertain circumstances kept the Romans excited and engaged.

AJP: Do we laugh at the same things Romans laughed at?

Fagan: To a certain degree, there are overlaps in humor between us and the ancients. We can still find the Greek plays of Aristophanes (fifth century BCE) or Menander (fourth century BCE) funny. The former specialized in a kind of Monty-Pythonesque surreal and topical humor, while the latter was the originator of what we call “situation comedy,” comedy that plays on character types in unusual circumstances. We have less Roman comedy, but what does exist—from the early second century BCE—seems of the situational type. The stock characters include the crusty or clueless old father, the lovelorn son, the girl next door, and the wily slave. Indeed, some of Plautus’s plays, including *Miles Gloriosus* (*The Braggard Soldier*), were mined for material for the 1960s musical comedy *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Many Plautine stock characters appear quite recognizable, notably Pseudolus (“Faker”) the cunning slave played famously by Zero Mostel. Roman satire can also be funny to the modern reader, especially when it plays on social stereotypes (as I noted about Petronius’s *Satyricon*).

We are less comfortable when, for instance, Juvenal (in *Satire III*) rails against foreign influences in Rome in a manner that approaches racism or engages in overt sexism in his misogynistic *Satire VI*. Likewise, we find it hard to laugh openly at individuals with physical disabilities and at dwarfs, but the Romans did freely. They watched dwarfs perform in the arena, for instance, and young prince Claudius was shielded from the public eye for most of his life because his physical disabilities risked making the imperial family a laughingstock. The satiric poet Martial liked to use the circumstance of nudity at the baths to make fun of bathers’ bodies and ailments, especially “the ruptured” (that is, people with hernias). So, it is a little of both—we would be familiar with some forms of Roman humor, others would make us uncomfortable. I think this is a standard cultural difference, even today. Some people really dislike the thinly veiled edge of cruelty that runs through many forms of British humor (particularly cringe comedy). Others are offended by the sexism and social stereotyping of double-entendre humor (the 1970s sit-com *Are You Being Served* might be an example), and what the Japanese laugh at often seems bizarre to Westerners. So, no great surprise that the Romans fall into much the same category.

AJP: What does the Roman practice of publicly mocking authority figures tell us about Roman playfulness?

Fagan: This is an interesting case, since mockery impugned one’s *dignitas* (public standing), and the elite was obsessed with *dignitas*. Caesar, in fact, fought

a civil war in defense of his *dignitas* (or so he says). Yet, in triumphal processions, the army marching behind the victorious general in his chariot would sing ribald songs making fun of him and other prominent figures. (These songs were called *carmina incondita*, which means either “extemporaneous” or “rude songs.”) Very few of these tunes are on record, but the most famous might be the ones sung at Caesar’s great triumph in 46 BCE: “Caesar subdued Gaul, and Nicomedes [a king of Bithynia and friend of Caesar in his youth] put Caesar down / See Caesar celebrating his triumph now, he who subdued the Gauls; / Nicomedes, who subdued Caesar, celebrates no triumph!” The joke lay in the word for “subdue” (*subegit*), which covers the whole semantic field of conquering and subduing, including the sexual realm. Specifically, the implication was that Caesar had been a passive partner in an encounter with Nicomedes—a slight on one’s virility and so on one’s *dignitas*. In this instance, a different historian reported that Caesar went so far as to deny the encounter under oath, which only brought further ridicule upon him. The generals and eminences appear to have accepted these jibes, perhaps in an effort to curry popular favor (today we still admire public figures who can laugh at themselves) or perhaps because the songs, rude though they often were, focused attention on them. But, as the case of Caesar shows, this acceptance only went so far. Any serious slight to *dignitas* demanded a response, as Caesar tried, ineffectively, to mitigate. Another possibility is that the songs demonstrated the special bond between commanders and their troops, implying only the latter could say such rude things about their socially and politically potent commanders with impunity. And remember, not all the *carmina incondita* were scurrilous. Many were just plain eulogies. Under the emperors, whether a joke was well received or not depended on the character of the ruler. Trajan’s architect, Apollodorus of Damascus, was a harsh critic of Hadrian’s architectural pretensions (he called his domes pumpkins). When Hadrian came to power, Apollodorus was exiled and then executed. Now that is *really* being unable to take a joke.

AJP: What kinds of toys did ancient Roman children play with?

Fagan: We have some toys from the ancient world—rattles for infants and dolls for girls. Dolls were expressly associated with a girl’s childhood, since brides dedicated their dolls to Diana or Venus on the eve of their weddings, as they made the transition to womanhood. The dolls that are found (some, poignantly, in the graves of preadolescent girls) are made of wood, bone,

ivory, or terra-cotta. They have moveable limbs and heads and, as dolls do, they encouraged role play. We also know of balls, hoops, and knucklebones as toys, and the Roman love of dice and board games likely started early in life. There must have been others, of course, that have not survived.

AJP: Is there a modern equivalent?

Fagan: Did Roman youths play gladiator or charioteer? Yes. In addition to that mosaic in the Byzantine palace at Istanbul that shows boys playing at chariot racing, there is a mosaic in a villa at Piazza Armerina in Sicily that shows children playing at adult pursuits such as declaiming speeches, impersonating magistrates, and so on. Now, to a degree, these mosaics intend to entertain the adult viewer. But there is no reason to think that Roman children did not build games around adult activities, as modern children do (such as playing house, army soldier, or the like).

AJP: Do Roman funerary inscriptions speak about memories of play or a post-mortem continuation of play?

Fagan: Though Romans buried toys with their children, Roman epitaphs themselves are very formulaic and do not tell us about play. For children they tend to stress the child's moral qualities (sweetness, loyalty, dutifulness, and the like). I do not know of epitaphs that mentioned play after death, partly because Roman conceptions of the afterlife were very underdeveloped. The underworld was thought of as rather foreboding and unpleasant—a place devoid of sensation and feeling—so perhaps the idea of children playing there was incongruous. Hades is not the sort of place in which you would play. Indeed, it just occurred to me that I do not know of any scenes (in literature or art) where children appear in the underworld at all. It might be that they—as not yet full members of the community—did not go there.

AJP: Did Roman parents play with their children?

Fagan: Reconstructing the relationship between parents and children in any culture is difficult, more so in the case of one so far removed from us in time as ancient Rome. Certainly, we have much information from the upper classes about their ideas and practices but almost nothing from the lower orders. Thus, we need to avoid sweeping generalizations. In the homes of the upper classes, household staff often included child minders, tutors, and supervisors to look after the immediate needs of the children. Elite parents were often aloof from the day-to-day business of child care (a situation not unheard of in other aristocratic societies, by the way). Fathers might be away on public or private business, and upper-class women had their

own agendas. In such cases, the likelihood that parents took time to play with their children seems slim. Among common Romans, however, the situation may well have been very different. There, teams of slaves would not be available to see to the children's daily needs, and parenting would be much more hands-on. I think it inconceivable that such parents did not spend some time playing with their children. I also imagine that children in these circumstances grew up very quickly. They would be required to help around the farm or the shop or the family business from an early age. Time for play was probably limited to infancy. Work life would start well before adolescence. So once again, our restricted source base limits our perceptions of Roman realities.

AJP: Were children, whether free or slave, male or female, ever used in a literal sense as “playthings” or “toys” rather than as playmates?

Fagan: Did commentators approve or condemn such practices? Slaves were, by definition, “that breathing type of tool,” as one Roman author puts it. Their personhood, while acknowledged, was completely subsumed by their function. As such, they lived at the whim of their owners. Some slaves were dubbed “pets” (*delicati*) and were used at will by their owners. They were often young boys castrated to preserve their youthful appearance. The most extreme case I know of is Sporus, the favorite of Nero. The sources are a little unclear on his status—slave or ex-slave—but Nero took a fancy to him, since Sporus reminded the emperor of his dead wife Poppaea Sabina. (Poppaea died, by the way, after Nero kicked her in the stomach during an argument when she was pregnant.) Sporus, you see, looked a lot like Poppaea. So, Nero had him castrated and surgically altered to look like a woman, married him in a mock marriage ceremony, dressed him in imperial regalia, went about in public with him, and insisted he be addressed as “lady” or “empress.” Sporus was there with Nero at the very end, when the deposed emperor killed himself as search parties closed in on his location. Now, what is particularly strange about this case is that Sporus was taken up by others, after Nero was dead. The Praetorian Prefect Nymphidius Sabinus went about with him in public as his wife, calling him “Poppaea.” Sabinus made a play for the throne after Nero's death and was killed by his own troops. Astonishingly, Sporus then passed to the future emperor Otho and from Otho to the man who overthrew him, Vitellius. It was Vitellius who pushed things too far with Sporus: he had him perform on stage as a female rape victim, and this caused Sporus to commit suicide. The tale

of Sporus is tragic and revolting, in that it illustrates the extent to which slaves (and ex-slaves) were the tools of their owners.

AJP: Were animals used in art or literature as examples of playfulness?

Fagan: Yes, certain kinds of animals are used in Roman art to suggest playfulness. The best examples I can think of come from the wonderful figured mosaics at the villa of Piazza Armerina, probably dated to between 300 and 320 CE. The villa was likely owned by a man who prospered by providing exotic animals from around the Mediterranean for Roman spectacles, since animals feature prominently in the mosaics that decorated the floors. (The largest, in fact, covers the floor of a corridor over 210-feet long and shows the capture and transport of various animals.) One mosaic shows children in an arena riding chariots pulled by birds. This is clearly a parody of a larger mosaic in the same complex featuring an adult chariot race in earnest, complete with a crash. A more macabre image in the same villa shows children hunting animals, again in parody of adult hunts depicted elsewhere. Whereas adults hunt boars, deer, and bears, the children hunt bunny rabbits, billy goats, and birds. Where an adult huntsman is gored by a fearsome boar rushing out of a thicket, a child hunter is bitten in the leg by a vole or marmot or some other such small field rodent. Another child flees from a rooster. These images were intended to be playful and amusing, even if we might not find them very hilarious—the rabbits and goats the children hunt are shown speared in the chest, with blood streaming down to the ground.

AJP: What kinds of Roman play would most trouble or offend modern sensibilities?

Fagan: Well, many of them. Think of the gladiatorial spectacles that combined animal hunts, public executions, and (occasionally) lethal combat. Our norms for what is acceptable to stage in public have changed dramatically—but only quite recently. The last legal public hanging in the United States took place in Kentucky in 1936. Twenty thousand people converged from five states to watch. While there are certainly people today who would be perfectly fine with executions being staged in public, social norms have moved on and, I think (or at least, I hope), that such a regression would at least meet with public outcry and condemnation. That said, I am also no less certain that should executions once more become public, there would be no shortage of people who would come out to watch. The astonishing hit rates for online videos of beheadings in the Middle East pretty much establish the existence of a taste for this sort of thing.

AJP: And what of using animals for public spectacle?

Fagan: Forcing animals to fight for sport is, again, not something modern Western sensibilities condone, but it has its fans still, as the Michael Vick dogfighting ring demonstrates. Cultures since the Romans have enjoyed various forms of animal-baiting shows, such as bear baiting in Shakespearian London (which housed a large building specifically to accommodate such events). And, of course, boxing continues to be a huge sport that generates astonishing amounts of money at the top levels, and mixed martial arts (a.k.a. ultimate fighting) is not far behind. Both are violent combat sports that inflict real injury as part of the normal run of play. True, death is not an acceptable outcome, but that, to my mind, is really a matter of degree. The Romans also did not share our sensibilities about individuals with physical disabilities, and the ancients would make them the objects of scorn and hilarity. So, what this question really raises is a tension between the widespread propensity of people to watch violence (real, injurious, and even lethal) found in many cultures and those social and cultural norms that hamper them from doing so. My book on the *Lure of the Arena* invited discussion about this topic. In the Roman case, but not in theirs alone, the propensity to enjoy watching violence was given free reign.

AJP: Do you know of instances of play where animals harmed humans?

Fagan: Yes. The morning phase of gladiatorial spectacle was termed the *venatio* (“the hunt”), and it involved different kinds of animal shows. Romans shared an interest in animals and their behavior. The stranger the animal, the more interesting it was. So some of the Roman displays of animals were simply meant to meet this curiosity. Animals could also be trained. We hear in the sources about elephants trained to walk on tightropes or of a lion in the late first century CE that allowed hares to jump unharmed in and out of its open jaws. This feat amazed the audience, who later mourned the lion’s death as they would that of a child. The amazement came from the animals *not* behaving in ways expected of them: huge elephants having the coordination to walk on delicate ropes, and the predatory lion entertaining lunch in its mouth unmolested. The darker side of the animal displays came from their being pitched against each other or against human hunters. The animal-versus-animal combats were thought to be just what nature did, demonstrating natural predation that might, on some subliminal level, appeal to those living in an imperial culture. The human-versus-animal contests asserted human superiority over threatening natural forces. An

added frisson was the fact that the human performers were in danger, too, and, at any moment, an animal might get the better of the contest. (To a lesser degree, lion- and tiger-training acts in circuses operate on a similar basis, though these are more and more out of public favor these days.) Performers could play on this uncertainty to raise their own profiles. So, we see in one mosaic from Africa a huntsman who stalks leopards from stilts. A variation on the straight hunting and slaughter of animals was a quasi-gymnastic show with animals. We have third-century reliefs that show rodeo riders—performers leaping and pole vaulting over dangerous animals or subduing and binding them bare-handed. Other performers boxed and wrestled with bears (*ursarii* they were called). In the later empire, these shows became more common—presumably because stocks of available animals had been depleted and it had grown expensive to buy creatures to perform in only one show where they were killed. These late imperial displays had all sorts of dangerous events: people trying to avoid bears or felines by means of a rotating lattice device fixed in the ground, hiding behind little doors from feral beasts, or encasing themselves in a strange-looking slatted egg as a bear pawed away at the outside. One supposes the occupant inside rolled the device around while the bear tried to get in. In another part of the image, an animal grabs one of the human performers by the leg. These were not harm-free events.

AJP: Was Roman play, in general, violent?

Fagan: In terms of children's games, we must imagine boys playing at soldiers and gladiators—did they play Romans and Barbarians as, when I was young, we played cowboys and Indians? Obviously, Roman spectacles often featured violence. Even events like chariot racing, which we do not necessarily think of as violent, were regularly so. If we think of the mechanics, it becomes clear how chaos could creep in. The usual format of a race was to have twelve, four-horse chariots race at once on a course with two hairpin turns, one on each end. There were seven laps in a race. Forty-eight horses, twelve men, and twelve vehicles with twenty-four wheels went careening around this course at full tilt. The chariots themselves were small and light, built for speed. They barely reached above the knees of the drivers. Crashes were termed “shipwrecks” (*naumachiae*) by the spectators, and they were likely to occur at or around the turns. The design of Roman circuses was such that the central spine (*spina* or *euripus*) that the chariots raced around did not lie down dead center of the bullet-shaped circus. Rather, it was

angled slightly to the right as you looked down the course. This created a wider turn-arc coming out of the hairpins and encouraged taking those turns at high speed. Charioteers wore leather bands around the torso (not unlike motorcyclists today), leather helmets, leggings, and a tunic. They also carried a small knife, since they often drove with the reins wrapped around their waists. Should they come to grief, they risked being dragged to death behind the horses, so they could (in theory) cut themselves free with the knife. Nevertheless, we hear of famous drivers crashing fatally during races. According to epitaphs of dead drivers, they were mostly in their twenties when their luck ran out. But chariot racing was not a death sentence. The greatest driver, we know from his epitaph, was C. Appuleius Diocles, from Spain. During the second-century reigns of Hadrian and Antoninus Pius, he raced for twenty-four years from the ages of eighteen to forty-two, took part in 4,257 races, won 1,462 (34 percent) of them, and placed in 1,438 (33.7 percent) more. Diocles was in the money almost seven of every ten times he raced. And the money was huge. His gravestone totals his prize money at 35,863,120 *sesterces*, which has been estimated at about \$15 billion in today's money. This would make Diocles the highest paid athlete known to history. In ancient Rome, as today, play could pay.

AJP: Does superstition or magic ever appear in the context of Roman play?

Fagan: Yes. One of the most interesting types of documents to have survived from the ancient world includes papyri invocations of magical powers to achieve specific goals. Among these are attempts to summon supernatural forces to restrain, hold back, or otherwise cripple charioteers from rival teams, either the drivers themselves or their horses, or both. Some of the instructions involved maiming cats while summoning magical forces. Parts of the chants sound like incomprehensible gobbledygook—magic words of supposed great mystery and power. Since much gambling accompanied chariot racing, gaining an edge in any way one could was understandable. Harming animals as a mode of interfacing with the supernatural was part and parcel of regular state religion, too, in the form of sacrifice. Although we might look askance at this sort of thing, there was a certain logic to it. And before we climb atop our postmodern high horses, take a moment to consider the persistence of alleged psychics and palm readers in our own day.

AJP: Why does the study of the ancient world sometimes lure fringe archaeologists who believe in lost civilizations or the enduring scheming of extraterrestrials?

Fagan: To an extent, alternative archaeology—more properly, pseudoarchaeology—is just one wing of the wider irrational conspiracy theory movement so alive and well in current culture. This mindset that attacks various branches of science and scholarship typifies UFO people, Bigfoot and ghost hunters, moon-hoax and Bermuda Triangle true believers, the evolution and Holocaust deniers (who are exceptionally sinister), and snake-oil salespeople of all stripes. Ancient civilizations are a natural target for fanciful and fantastical speculations, since our evidence for them is circumscribed and because much about them remains unclear or uncertain even in real scholarship. We still do not yet know for sure, for instance, exactly how the Egyptians built the pyramids. There are many good theories, but the matter has not been fully resolved. This circumstance and the fact that the ancients were capable of astonishing feats of engineering still apparent today leave the door open for the speculators to step in and make a quick buck. And they can do so without all the tiresome business of training in difficult ancient languages and learning the techniques of modern archaeological science. All of that they dismiss as the “orthodoxy,” thus positioning themselves as the heroic challengers of big and powerful institutions. Once fortified with this heroic mantle, they propose their own ludicrous ideas that explain nothing.

AJP: Can you give us an example?

Fagan: Surely. In answer to the question of where did pyramids come from, they might propose some lost civilization like Atlantis. This response only defers the question, of course, since the next step is to ask: So, where did Atlantean pyramids come from? In essence, when they propose some lost civilization or alien culture as a source for human civilization, they are saying civilization came from civilization. This doesn't really get us very far, does it?

AJP: Yet we do not seem to hear fantasies about aliens teaching the Romans how to build aqueducts.

Fagan: That is true. Only some ancient cultures are the targets of pseudoarcheologists' speculations. The Romans, the Greeks, and the Mesopotamians are usually ignored in favor of the Egyptians, the Maya, the Aztecs, and the vanished societies on Easter Island. The more exotic the ancient culture, the better, it seems. Another feature of such speculations (I refuse to call them theories) is that they have buried in them mythological motifs of proven staying power. Often their beloved lost civilizations are conceived of as magical

wonderlands, where the science of immortality was propagated (the details are never provided). This story encapsulates the motifs of the Golden Age and the Fall from Grace, two very appealing narrative tropes found in various mythological cycles from around the world. So, their stories have an inherent allure. They also appeal to people educated in fields like engineering, who insist that since it would be hard for us with our modern technology to build ancient monument X or Y, it could not have been done by the ancients lacking advanced technology.

AJP: Can scholars remain open to new interpretations of the evidence without seeming credulous or wild in their conjectures?

Fagan: Yes. It just takes the genuine commitment to following the evidence within the limits set by logic and reason. The application of Occam's Razor—an argument should be no more complicated than it needs to be—helps. When you start invoking unproven entities like aliens or Atlanteans, your argument just got infinitely more complicated. Where did the aliens come from? Why did they come here? Where did the Atlanteans get their technology? Genuine scientists and scholars welcome new evidence and the possibilities it represents. They are excited to have their minds changed and to see a long-held theory and established narrative debunked. Indeed, it is precisely by doing this that you get ahead in academia. Contrary to the pseudoarchaeologists' view of universities as closed clubs where everyone is afraid of being wrong and toes the party line, the true superstars in the academy are those who overturn established narratives or make ground-breaking discoveries.

AJP: Would you give us an example?

Fagan: Until recently, the standard view suggested that humans were hunter-gatherers first, became agriculturalists (in the Near East sometime around 6000 BCE, maybe earlier), and then started building large monuments. Only a settled population of agriculturalists would have enough food, population, stability, and social sophistication to embark on monument building, or so the thinking went. Hunter-gatherer societies seemed too small, scattered, and simple to construct large things. This makes sense, only it is probably wrong. Between 1996 and 2014, German archaeologists working at Göbekli Tepe in eastern Turkey made astonishing discoveries. Huge stone-pillar statues up to twenty feet high were erected in some twenty stone enclosures, and there may well be more yet to be found. Some were engraved with images of animals. But the age of the site is what

changed everything. Radiocarbon dating and pottery analysis dated the first use of the site to the tenth millennium BCE—eleven thousand years ago. It appears to have been abandoned in the eighth millennium, around nine thousand years ago. This was long before the appearance of agriculture and, indeed, no contemporary settlement has been found nearby. Hunter-gatherers created Göbekli Tepe. The discovery has prompted a radical rethinking of how human society developed. The working theory is that Göbekli Tepe was a religious center (the oldest known on earth) for the hunter-gatherers who wandered about, perhaps for a radius of a hundred miles around the site. They gathered here to celebrate religious rites (many animal bones have been found at the site), maybe to ward off natural rivals for the wild grasses they used to make bread. They developed and monumentalized the site, and it was perhaps this effort that generated the social hierarchies that heretofore had been attributed to agriculture and sedentary living. Perhaps the monument building provided the organization necessary for agriculture to take hold. If so, we have to rewrite the history books: monuments came first, agriculture second. Notice how this need to rewrite has been achieved: not by wild speculations about Egyptian or Mayan pyramids but by hard work, new evidence, and openness to following the data. The archaeological world remains on fire about Göbekli Tepe, and the hunt is on to find other sites like it.

AJP: To return to your childhood interest, how do you explain the rise in the “sword and sandal” films of the 1950s and early 1960s?

Fagan: Well I suppose an historian of the cinema would be better informed to answer this than I am, but surely it must have had to do with the Cold War. A movie such as *The 300 Spartans* about the battle of Thermopylae (480 BCE) pitted freedom-defending Greeks against an evil despot at the head of eastern hordes. *Spartacus* not only championed freedom in the form of the title hero played by Kirk Douglas against an evil empire but it made oblique reference to McCarthyism and the threat of tyranny overthrowing a republic in the form of Crassus, Spartacus’ nemesis, who Laurence Olivier played with a cold-eyed menace. Another favorite meme in movies like *Quo Vadis?* and *Ben-Hur* addresses the rise of Christianity and its supposedly civilizing effect on savage Romans. The Romans surely often stand in for heathen and militarily powerful Soviets.

AJP: And what do you make of the continual willingness of fiction and film to play with the ancient world?

Fagan: There was a long lull in these epics, until *Gladiator* debuted in 2000, and then others followed, like *Troy* and *300*. When we look at novels such as Robert Harris' *Pompeii* and the BBC series *Rome*, we see a distant reflection of ourselves. Or, at least, we are able to project onto that world our contemporary concerns and preoccupations. The ancient Greeks and Romans are at once familiar and alien. Much about them seems to echo ourselves—their urban culture, their republics, their development of a rule of law, and their engineering feats. These we find admirable and intriguing. But much about them is also strange or even revolting—their commitment to slavery, their maltreatment of animals, their odd religious practices, their regressive view of women, and, above all, their absolute commitment to a hierarchical social order that cast whole swathes of the population as worthless and expendable. Individual worth was calibrated against group membership in the ancient world. And that is a cast of thought of which we are suspicious. In our culture, we adhere at least to the principle of individual worth as an absolute human right, even if we recognize that, in practice, things often do not work that way. For the ancients, though, the very notion that all people are equal was, on the face of it, ridiculous, and so inequality was written into law.