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“The Realm of Truth Confronting its Shadowy Other”?
The Reality of Elite Self-Distancing Narratives in Classical Literature

Karl Ulas-Ono

Introduction

This paper presents an oppositional analysis between representations of elite and non-elite spaces in classical literature, focusing on elite residences (Section I) and the common Roman barbershop (Section II). Its aim is to highlight the ancient literary elite’s selective deployment of the urban as a tool for reinforcing the divide between elite and non-elite. The paper begins by outlining the “controlled” space of the elite residence as a communicator of two things: firstly, at macro-level and looking outwards, that such spaces were a way for the literary class to signal conformity to wider social and cultural patterns; and secondly, at micro-level and looking inwards, that these were spaces through which the structural clarity of elite identity manifested. This manifestation cannot occur in abstraction, and must occur in relation to some “otherness.” I use Achilles Tatius’ treatment of Hippias’ house and garden in *Leucippe and Clitophon* as a way of breaking down these ideas, drawing from the work of Tim Whitmarsh and Shelley Hales to study the relationship between elite domestic space and social identity. The second part of the paper examines the common barbershop as an “uncontrolled” space which lacks that structural clarity. I draw principally from Jerry Toner’s work on Plutarch to explore how barbers occupied a unique position in the social and political landscape of the ancient world. Their condemnation in literature, firmly an elite avenue of expression, exposes the elite’s anxieties surrounding a popular culture that does not conform to its established structures but upon whose submission its power ultimately rests. The paper concludes in the suggestion that the elite self-distancing narratives found in classical literature did not actually correspond to the physical reality of the ancient city—a claim corroborated by recent archaeological and historical scholarship on Roman urban growth—and were instead a self-preservation strategy through which the literary class sought to cement its own identity. In other words, there existed no real material divide between elite and popular spaces in the ancient world, and so the elite continually engineered its impression through literature in a bid to preserve, reaffirm, and validate its own existence.

Section I: The Elite Residence

It is worth briefly sketching out what is meant by elite identity in the classical world. Elite denotes for our purposes that “highly literate, politically powerful group of the senatorial and equestrian classes or a little below who produced most of our literary sources.”[1] It is something inextricably linked to notions of authority, education, and the preservation of a prevailing political orthodoxy. Leading on from this, the state of being elite is something which necessarily occurs relative to others: it requires, implicitly or explicitly, validation and participation from others in that society. A great deal of public life in the ancient world was about displaying credentials in a

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[1] Jerry Toner, “Barbers, Barbershops and Searching,” *Papers of the British School at Rome* 83 (2015), 93.

manner that could be perceived publicly, and in a manner which therefore confirmed and reinforced existing hierarchies. Even relative newcomers to the elite—those who had only recently made their fortunes, among them the *homines novi* of Roman political circles like Cicero or Sallust—would have adopted certain conventions that appropriately legitimized, and thus communicated, their public status.[2]

Houses were enormously important spaces in this context. Ancient literature is packed from its earliest roots with allusions to the house as a marker of social status. The central role that homes and palaces play as markers of civilizing order and hospitality in the Homeric tales, some of the oldest extant works of the Greek literary tradition, demonstrates that this association was deep-rooted and lay at the heart of elite self-identification throughout antiquity. Take, for instance, the much-studied contrast between the residences of Nestor and Polyphemus in the *Odyssey*. The former, an eminently civilized man and King of Pylos, welcomes Telemachus to his palace and insists he spend the night in the guest quarters; the latter, a lone-dwelling cyclops with no conception of hospitality, traps Odysseus in his cave dwelling and seeks to devour him. While Polyphemus may be an extreme example—epic, after all, deals more in symbols than in specifics—the underlying message is clear. One's attitude towards home and hospitality, and to those things which come in association with these concepts (such as cooking food rather than consuming it raw, or recognizing the struggles of seafarers and offering shelter), is an indicator of order and civilization. Those capable of demonstrating such qualities could be said to conform to civilized society, while those who fail to do so are, by contrast, uncivilized.

Plenty of similar examples can be found in the *Odyssey* and other archaic works. Closely related ideas about home, hospitality and civilization recur when Odysseus returns to Ithaca to reclaim his kingship and reestablish order in his domain, for instance, or in the *Iliad*, where it is in the first place a breach of hospitality by Paris—or more specifically, a breach of the sacred Greek concept of *xenia* (ξενία)—which triggers the sequence of events leading to the Trojan War. But without delving into every such example here, the wider point remains that the house is a space through which ideas of authority, fidelity, and legitimacy can be explored and communicated, making it the ideal platform by which to demonstrate conformity to wider social and cultural patterns. The house, in other words, represents a uniquely suitable vehicle for elite self-identification and self-distancing in the literature of this period.

Skipping forward some centuries from Archaic Greece to the High Empire of Rome, the same principles are still in action. A telling example is the use of the house as a deliberate setting in Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Clitophon*. This should prove a particularly illuminating work because it stands at the nexus of the Greek and Roman worlds. Achilles Tatius was a Roman-era Greek author from Alexandria, and his novel can be taken to highlight the ubiquity of such principles throughout the classical world. As Whitmarsh observes, the metonymic association between domestic space and the power and status of elite males "has a long history in Greek thought, stretching back to the *Odyssey*"—but it is also an association which "would have had powerful contemporary resonances for Achilles [Tatius] and his readers," men who were accustomed to a "Roman-influenced […] culture of patronage and display."[3] To qualify as elite in this environment meant to conform unreservedly to those conventions—that is, to live with a certain civic orientation and concern with competitive display—and demonstrate full, independent, patriarchal mastery over one's own domain.[4] So, for the ancient literary class, a man's residence

[2] John Pearce, "The Art of Living" (lecture, King's College London, London, UK, March 6, 2019).
[3] Tim Whitmarsh, "Domestic Poetics: Hippias' House in Achilles Tatius," *Classical Antiquity* 29, no. 2 (2010):, 328.
[4] Whitmarsh, "Domestic Poetics," 344.

could be thought to represent not just a building but “a sign, *the* sign, of propertied selfhood.”[5]

This “sign of propertied selfhood” comes to the fore in Achilles Tatius through Hippias. The young protagonists Leucippe and Clitophon spend nearly all of Books I and II in, and play out their affections in relation to, the father Hippias’ house; it represents and enacts the dominating role of the *paterfamilias.*[6] This is a space where the hand of patriarchal power can always be felt, and that would have been the intention.[7] The duties of a male head of house extended into a quasi-political role. This entailed a genuine mark of authority, comparable to a public post, but transposed to the level of the household. The concept could equally be understood through the Greek nuances of *polis* (πόλις) and *oikos* (οἶκος): what an elite civic ruler was to the *polis*, the father of a household was to the *oikos*.

Such residences were thus projections of their masters’ weight in public, political, and family life: “the [elite man’s] house, it might be said, was his *forum.*”[8] Hippias’ grand and rigidly demarcated urban house should, in this sense, be read as a “complex fusion of traditional Greek ideas […] with new, Romanised concepts of the house as the visual sign of the status and controlling power of the father.”[9] Although Achilles Tatius does not delve into much material detail in describing the physical layout of Hippias’ house—something Whitmarsh waves off to Clitophon’s “flittish” narrating—it is clearly mapped in terms of where we might locate it in the socio-politics of the ancient world. Its structural clarity and walled-in patriarchalism serve a mirroring, conforming function to wider society. When Sostratos writes to Hippias about the arrival of Pantheia and Leucippe, his language is telling: “protect my dear family until the fortunes of war are decided” (σῶζε δή μοι τὰ φίλτατα τοῦ γένους μέχρι τῆς τοῦ πολέμου τύχης).[10] This is a space where Hippias, as patriarch, bears executive responsibility. A similar dynamic arises when Clitophon tells us his father “designated a suite of rooms for their use and then oversaw preparations for dinner” (Αἱ μὲν δὴ κατήγοντο πρὸς ἡμᾶς, καὶ αὐταῖς ὁ πατὴρ μέρος τι τῆς οἰκίας ἀποτεμόμενος, εὐτρεπίζει δεῖπνον).[11] Both the language deployed here, as well as the actions they describe, evoke other forms of authority: *designating* and *overseeing* are the types of actions that elite Greek or Roman men could also be expected to perform in civic projects or even military campaigns. The house is a “visual, architectural construct of the *familia*’s identity,” their “proof of participation” in society.[12] If one’s house plays a part in building identity, then it is necessarily also a space through which the literary class could reaffirm its own identity.[13] So, in every sense—cultural, political, literary—the house is a phenomenological space that encapsulates the moral and social aspirations of Hippias and those like him. It is a dog whistle by which elite consciousness could be read and recognized—a space through which they openly affirm their cultural conformity and their absolute willingness to play by the rules.

For Achilles Tatius and his literary class, then, such spatial and power dynamics form an instantly recognizable set of propositions. Domestic architecture was among the main markers of

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[5] Whitmarsh, “Domestic Poetics,” 328.
[6] Whitmarsh, “Domestic Poetics,” 328.
[7] Whitmarsh, “Domestic Poetics,” 344.
[8] Shelley Hales, *The Roman House and Social Identity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.
[9] Hales, *The Roman House,* 1.
[10] Achilles Tatius, “Leucippe and Clitophon,” trans. John J. Winkler, in *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, ed. B. P. Reardon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 178.
[11] Achilles Tatius, “Leucippe and Clitophon,” 179.
[12] Hales, *The Roman House,* 2.
[13] Hales, *The Roman House,* 1.

aristocratic Roman identity in this hierarchical age of ambition.[14] The domains of politically participatory men are spaces of clarity, authority, and order, occurring in stark contrast to the dust, debris, and supposed disinformation that characterized those urban spaces associated with commoners. When Clitophon returns from the funeral of Charikles, he finds Leucippe in a "formal garden adjoining the house" (ὁ δὲ παράδεισος ἄλσος ἦν, μέγα τι χρῆμα πρὸς ὀφθαλμῶν ἡδονήν· καὶ περὶ τὸ ἄλσος τειχίον ἦν αὔταρκες εἰς ὕψος καὶ ἑκάστη πλευρὰ τειχίου [τέσσαρες δὲ ἦσαν πλευραί] κατάστεγος ὑπὸ χορῷ κιόνων· ὑπὸ δὲ τοῖς κίοσιν ἔνδον ἦν ἡ τῶν δένδρων πανήγυρις).[15] He describes this as a "grove of very pleasant aspect," a quiet, sheltered space "encloistered by a sufficiently high wall and a chorus line of columns […] on all four sides."[16] Here the phenomenon of elite self-distancing manifests more plainly. Aside from serving in the immediate context of the plot as the ideal backdrop to Clitophon's romantic advances, this grove provides a deliberately enclosed and secluded urban space—a manmade countryside described in the language of "petals opening" and "songbirds singing"[17]—whose tranquillity and cultivated order are worlds removed from the hubbub of everyday urban business just moments away.

There is a profound significance to this relationship between narrative authority and truth in the spaces of the ancient world. Clitophon hints at this while describing the pool in his father's garden. Flowers reflect there "as in a mirror, so that the entire grove was doubled—the realm of truth confronting its shadowy other" (ἐν μέσοις δὲ τοῖς ἄνθεσι πηγὴ ἀνέβλυζε καὶ περιεγέγραπτο τετράγωνος χαράδρα χειροποίητος τῷ ῥεύματι. τὸ δὲ ὕδωρ τῶν ἀνθέων ἦν κάτοπτρον, ὡς δοκεῖν τὸ ἄλσος εἶναι διπλοῦν, τὸ μὲν τῆς ἀληθείας, τὸ δὲ τῆς σκιᾶς).[18] That "realm of truth," a bastion of rational order, is how the elite wants to portray its spaces—particularly in contrast to the "shadowy other" of those things outside of its control and authorization. While undeniably a beautiful passage, we can read echoes of something more sinister taking place under this beauty. The reality depicted in our sources is one where the beauty, clarity, truth, and order of the literary class, with its grand houses and immaculate gardens, is necessarily juxtaposed with a shadowy "otherness" that is murky, dishonest, and confused. The eminence of the former can only exist against, or in relation to, this undefined "otherness." So, we see there is a question of authority at play: whose voices are we hearing in these stories? Who had the power to attest to the veracities of Roman life, and who were the voiceless in that dialogue?

Section II: The Common Barbershop

There are few spaces better placed in the ancient world to shed light on that undefined "otherness" than the busy barbershop. This popular urban trade answered to the bodily needs of all groups and was a central locus of social intercourse in the classical world. Like public baths, this was—by simple virtue of its function—a space where "different classes interacted at close quarters."[19] But this interclass contact alone is not what makes the barbershop useful in uncovering the societal dynamics of the ancient city. There would have been plenty of other shops, businesses, and social hubs in the urban political centre—among them jewellers, theatres, and possibly even

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[14] Whitmarsh, "Domestic Poetics," 328.
[15] Achilles Tatius, "Leucippe and Clitophon," 186.
[16] Achilles Tatius, "Leucippe and Clitophon," 186.
[17] Achilles Tatius, "Leucippe and Clitophon," 187.
[18] Achilles Tatius, "Leucippe and Clitophon," 187.
[19] Garrett G. Fagan, "Socializing at the Baths," in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World,* ed. Michael Peachin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.

slave-sellers—but the barbershop is the most interesting of these specifically because of its relationship to the circulation of opinions and information.[20]Barbers played a significant role in distributing and relaying public opinion, and the social nature of their work gave them the perfect platform for exchanging information in the urban realm.[21] What ancient literary sources choose to relay about them, however, is deeply telling.

Plutarch divulges bluntly in his book *On Garrulity* that "the barbers are a talkative clan."[22] The matter-of-factness with which he delivers this observation suggests that it is already a widely accepted trope; barbers had "acquired a reputation for being full of chat" in the ancient world, and indeed their loquacity was well-known to the point of being caricatured in jokebooks like the *Philogelos*.[23] So notorious was the barbershop as a place of chatter, the philosopher Theophrastus allegedly "used to call [them] 'wineless symposia.'"[23]It is also known that this was a porous space whose activity often spilled out into the street. Martial reports that an edict by Domitian meant razors were no longer rashly drawn in the middle of a dense crowd, while Ulpian also speculates about legal liability in the event that customers are injured while being shaved in a public place.[24] This feels worlds away from the delineated, structured rationality of the elite household. The impression is instead of semi-private, semi-public meeting-places where talk flows freely, gossip is exchanged, and egos are kept in check—moderating arenas of masculinity where neighbours, friends, relatives, and rivals alike could fraternize.[25]

Clearly barbershops played an important role in the everyday life and culture of the masses. This was a cornerstone of local communities, and crucially, it afforded the non-elite a safe spot to hear and discuss the latest news; "for ordinary people, such media provided the fastest and most accurate source of information available."[27] The barbershop as both a physical place and a concept became synonymous with the dissemination of news and political information in urban life. This was a bastion of street culture whose decidedly public character stood in stark contrast to the privacy of elite spaces. It was also a focal point of popular discourse and sociability where the non-elite could speculate about the private, self-sustaining elite. These features of the barbershop made it less a venue for a simple shave, and more a type of public forum where local issues and politics could be freely discussed.[26]

That barbers occupied an important niche in ancient life is hardly contested by the literary elite. Even Plutarch admits in *On Garrulity* that it was, in fact, a barber who first announced the military disaster of the Athenians in Sicily (κουρεὺς δὲ καὶ τὴν ἐν Σικελίᾳ τῶν Ἀθηναίων μεγάλην κακοπραγίαν ἀπήγγειλε πρῶτος, ἐν Πειραιεῖ πυθόμενος οἰκέτου τινὸς τῶν ἀποδεδρακότων ἐκεῖθεν).[27] This barber is said to have left his shop and rushed "at full speed to the city, lest another might win the glory of imparting the news to the city" (εἶτ᾽ ἀφεὶς τὸ ἐργαστήριον εἰς ἄστυ

[20] Cristina Rosillo-López, *Public Opinion and Politics in the Late Roman Republic* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 61–62.
[21] Rosillo-López, *Public Opinion and Politics,* 62.
[22] Plutarch, *Moralia*, *Volume IV,* trans. W. C. Helmbold, Loeb Classical Library 337 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1939), 509A.
[23] Toner, "Barbers," 102.
[24] Plutarch, *Moralia,* 716A.
[25] Claire Holleran, *Shopping in Ancient Rome: The Retail Trade in the Late Republic and the Principate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 126.
[26] Toner, "Barbers," 101.
[27] Toner, "Barbers," 106.
[27] Toner, "Barbers," 103.
[28] Plutarch, *Moralia,* 509A.

συνέτεινε δρόμῳ μή τις κῦδος ἄροιτο τὸν λόγον εἰς τὴν πόλιν ἐμβαλών, ὁ δὲ δεύτερος ἔλθοι),[28] suggesting some actively revelled in their role as public arbiters or announcers. Plutarch's account, however, soon takes a dark and telling turn. For all this barber's eagerness to relay the latest news, he is apparently dumbfounded when townsfolk probe him for "the *origin* of the rumour" (γενομένης δὲ ταραχῆς, οἷον εἰκός, εἰς ἐκκλησίαν ἀθροισθεὶς ὁ δῆμος ἐπὶ τὴν ἀρχὴν ἐβάδιζε τῆς φήμης. ἤγετ᾽ οὖν ὁ κουρεὺς καὶ ἀνεκρίνετο, μηδὲ τοὔνομα τοῦ φράσαντος εἰδὼς ἀλλ᾽ εἰς ἀνώνυμον καὶ ἄγνωστον ἀναφέρων τὴν ἀρχὴν πρόσωπον).[29] The mob, angered, binds this barber on a wheel, forgetting about him until it was already nearly evening (ὀψὲ δὲ λυθεὶς ἤδη πρὸς ἑσπέραν ἠρώτα τὸν δημόσιον εἰ καὶ περὶ Νικίου τοῦ στρατηγοῦ, ὃν τρόπον ἀπόλωλεν, ἀκηκόασιν).[30] This patently abnormal treatment of such a central figure to local life should strike the reader as a strange account. It is worth reflecting on who stands to benefit from the deliberate misrepresentation of such a character.

What stands out about Plutarch's account is that there is a simplifying, even comical element to his depiction of the barber. This vein of classical literature shows how the ancient elite simultaneously acknowledged the role barbers played in everyday urban life, while still choosing to portray them to suit an agenda. The resulting disconnect is a stark reminder that "elite and popular interests did not always coincide."[31] There is a sneering condescension in the way Plutarch treats the character of the barber: he may be fast in relaying news, but surely his faculties cannot be expected to be on par with those of a political or literary man—a man with the correct priorities and with access to the *official* version of events! This sequence is part of a deliberate attempt by the literary class to relegate the barber, the best source of information for most ordinary people,[32] to the status of a worthless gossip. Casting him as an unreliable rumour mill was a way for the elite to play down a figure who was otherwise "central to the daily enactment of popular sociability."[33] Plutarch, accordingly, concludes the segment in a tone of mocking disapproval: "such an unconquerable and incorrigible evil does habit make garrulity" (οὕτως ἄμαχόν τι κακὸν καὶ ἀνουθέτητον ἡ συνήθεια ποιεῖ τὴν ἀδολεσχίαν).[34]

Elite discrediting of barbershops should not be read as a benign occurrence because it is no coincidence the barber of all generic characters, that symbol of popular "otherness," should be painted as a chattering simpleton. What takes place here is the "denial of the political aspects of non-elite culture", and the demotion of plebs to something "subpolitical" through literature—a "powerful strategy in the maintenance of the political hegemony of the Roman upper classes."[35] Literature, after all, was a weapon that lay firmly in the domain of the elite. Like the structural nuances of a political household, this was home-turf for Plutarch and those like him. That fact applies both before his time—such as with Polybius, who distinguishes between real history and the "common gossip of a barber's shop"—and after, as with Lucian, who shuns the "stray information you sometimes pick up at the barber's."[36] Clement of Alexandria puts the barbershop

[29] Plutarch, *Moralia,* 509A–509B.
[30] Plutarch, *Moralia,* 509B.
[31] Plutarch, *Moralia,* 509C.
[32] Toner, "Barbers," 106.
[33] Toner, "Barbers," 106.
[34] Toner, "Barbers," 107.
[35] Plutarch, *Moralia,* 509C.
[36] Peter O'Neill, "Going Round in Circles: Popular Speech in Ancient Rome," *Classical Antiquity* 22, no. 1 (2003): 136.
[37] Toner, "Barbers,"106.

alongside seedy taverns; they are places where men with the wrong priorities are to be found "babbling nonsense."[37] We see, overall, a persistent effort to denigrate popular knowledge and place it far below the level of serious culture.[38] The insinuation is that real news is not something to be exchanged at local barbershops. By delegitimizing the information arising from these spaces and their communities, the elite sought to preserve their own identity and defend the prevailing order. It is exclusively their voice and narrative that emerges from these sources.

Yet the consistency with which the Roman elite demean the barber through literature betrays another element of their relationship to popular culture. What these sources propose time and again through literature is that there existed an absolute divide between the spatial realms of elite and non-elite. It is assured that the elite flourished in a superior bubble of beauty, clarity, and truth, while the non-elite scampered about in spaces of disorder and disinformation. While this may have been true in some instances, the relationship on the ground was likely less straightforward, and this official self-distancing narrative cannot be taken as a reflection of social reality.[39] Just as much is revealed about the ancient elite by the pictures they do not paint as those they do. Taking this into account, real elite identity is problematic and even contradictory.

The scoffing and sneering towards barbers in these sources could equally be read as symptoms of a serious underlying anxiety. Elite writers weaponized literature in a way that allowed them to reaffirm their standing in relation to the masses, thereby engineering an impression of control; yet the fervor with which they sought to achieve this only highlights their actual inability to control urban political discourse. Their grasp on society rested on an illusion of superiority whose success required from the masses an acceptance, a certain playing-along.[40] Elite attitudes on this front could be interpreted as an "index of failure"—having to fight to dismiss the everyday discussions of ordinary people as useless and dangerous, desperately casting them as the very opposite of elite rationality, exposes a certain powerlessness.[41]

This dynamic explains why barbershops were zones of discomfort for the Roman literary elite. What for the commoner represented everyday life, familiarity and social networking, instead symbolized for the elite the potential for political subversion and moral chaos.[42] Unlike the controlled environments of elite houses and gardens, the uncontrolled space of the popular barbershop posed an active and unpredictable threat to the status quo. The literature which survives accordingly conceals their sociable uses.[45] Physically, too, this was a grey area where the elite rubbed shoulders with the very masses they subjugated. With this wider context in mind, Plutarch's following image of the tyrant Dionysius and his barber offers a grim and deeply revealing insight into what was at stake for both parties.

> But most talkers do not even have a reason for destroying themselves. For example, people were once talking in a barber's shop about how adamantine and unbreakable the despotism of Dionysius was. The barber laughed and said, "Fancy your saying that about

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[38] Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, A. Cleveland Coxe, eds.,, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, trans. William Wilson, rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), 11.
[39] Toner, "Barbers," 107.
[40]Toner, "Barbers," 107.
[41] Andrew M. Riggsby, "'Public' and 'Private' in Roman culture: The case of the *cubiculum*," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 10 (1997): 53.
[42] Riggsby, "'Public' and 'Private,'" 53.
[43] Toner, "Barbers," 105.
[44] Toner, "Barbers," 105.

> Dionysius, when I have my razor at his throat every few days or so!" When Dionysius heard this, he crucified the barber.
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> οἱ δὲ πλεῖστοι τῶν ἀδολέσχων οὐδ᾽ αἰτίαν ἔχοντες ἀπολλύουσιν αὑτούς. οἷον ἐν κουρείῳ τινὶ λόγων γινομένων περὶ τῆς Διονυσίου τυραννίδος, ὡς ἀδαμαντίνη καὶ ἄρρηκτός ἐστι, γελάσας ὁ κουρεύς, 'ταῦθ᾽ ὑμᾶς,' ἔφη, 'περὶ Διονυσίου λέγειν, οὗ ἐγὼ παρ᾽ ἡμέρας ὀλίγας ἐπὶ τοῦ τραχήλου τὸ ξυρὸν ἔχω.' ταῦτ᾽ ἀκούσας ὁ Διονύσιος ἀνεσταύρωσεν αὐτόν.[43]

Here, the ruler briefly shares the same space and takes care of the same bodily needs, totally at the mercy of the common man in a powerful metaphor for the vulnerable position of the elite among the masses that sustain them.[44] The grand illusion is momentarily shattered. For all the supposed rationality of the elite, the jarring hypocrisy of this physical and political dependency on a class they demonized was evidently difficult to reconcile; Dionysius, after all, immediately abandons any rational pretence and simply crucifies the hapless barber.

Passages like this reveal important facts about narrative authority and truth in the spaces of the ancient world. It becomes clear there existed tensions between elite and popular interests, and that literature was effectively weaponized to represent the former and discredit the latter. The barbershop carried a special significance within this confrontation: this was a "zone of overlap where cultural symbols clashed," a space where "cultural contestations were both widely accessible and highly visible to all."[45] The ideological justification which underpinned the elite's domination of the non-elite was a mask of supposedly "inherent […] moral superiority."[46] But that mask comes closest to slipping in liminal spaces like the barbershop, explaining why the literary class consistently sought to dismiss or discredit the value or legitimacy of such popular spaces through literature.

Conclusion

There is a final point to be made on reading the classical urban in its appropriate historical context. As recent historical and archaeological scholarship on the subject indicates, the "yeasty organic growth" of Roman cities rules out the possibility of class segregation: "reconstruction of Rome's social patterns does not accommodate […] a distinctive 'plebeian district.'"[47] Elite houses were instead spread throughout the city, likely in a bid to prevent direct and immediate competition."[48] If urban form can be taken to reflect cultural practices, the full picture here is that such a thing as a wealthy, landed political elite does exist, but its members are neither isolated nor removed from the urban.[49] They do not rule by proxy. Rather, they are plonked in the middle of urban communities, and their existence forms part of the lived experience of urban dwellers.

[45] Plutarch, *Moralia,* 508F–509A.
[47] Toner, "Barbers," 108.
[48] Toner, "Barbers," 108.
[49] Riggsby, "'Public' and 'Private,'" 53.
[50] Lisa Marie Mignone, *The Republican Aventine and Rome's Social Order* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 178.
[51] Mignone, *The Republican Aventine*, 178.
[52] Mignone, *The Republican Aventine,* 176–179.

Taking these findings on board, the narrative that elite and popular spaces were strictly separate simply does not correspond to material reality. Any distance would therefore have had to be symbolic or figurative rather than literal; the border between elite and common was largely an imagined one, and so its implementation could only succeed insofar as the non-elite played their part.

By extension, these findings also imply that neither elite spaces nor common barbershops existed totally independently of the other. In a socially heterogeneous cityscape, landed patrons and magistrates would have sponsored public building projects as gifts to the community.[50] But the social model on which the Roman world had urbanized was slowly becoming dysfunctional: "the traditional model of social relations, where the non-elite were tied in by patronage relationships to their social superiors, had failed."[51] The tensions we find in our sources are the result of "friction generated by the chafing of those two different subcultures."[55] The symbolic trope of the barbershop as a place of popular gossip, and the ensuing distaste shown in elite texts towards barbers and their behavior, are signs of a breakdown in communication between these co-dependent classes in the urban context.[52] It is no wonder, then, that the elite are so keen to entrench social, political and spatial divisions via literature. Despite the impression that our sources give, in reality, there is no way to determine the extent to which these groups were culturally distinct or mutually integrated.[53]

Elite self-distancing narratives deliberately skew the realities of ancient life. There was "no simple divide between elite and popular cultures," and much of what is found in the sources is based on an "elite image of the popular created to suit their own literary purposes."[54] This lack of a real distinction—and the insecurities arising from it—forms precisely the reason why the elite fought to structuralize and reaffirm their own standing relative to the masses wherever possible, whether through architecture, literature, violence, or any other such avenue. This fraught relationship can be seen to manifest clearest in liminal spaces like the barbershop. Overall, the juxtaposition between representations of both elite and popular spaces in ancient literature—studied in this paper through houses and barbershops—yields a productive oppositional analysis in exposing the hypocrisy of elite attitudes. The ruling class and its writers sought to discredit popular culture under the guise of literature, but what this vilification exposes is that they recognized, and even feared, barbershops and the wider framework of popular culture such spaces represented.

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[53] Mignone, *The Republican Aventine,* 140.
[54] Toner, "Barbers," 108.
[55] Toner, "Barbers," 108.
[56] Toner, "Barbers," 108.
[57] Toner, "Barbers," 93.
[58] Toner, "Barbers," 107–109.

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