

Acting Her Age: Beauty Image, Aging, and Ageism in the Reception of Actresses in the Roman World

Claudian (AP 9.139) abuses an exotic dancer for continuing in her profession until she has to color her gray hair, accent her ineffectual gaze, rouge her pale cheeks, and bind her sunken breasts - a pointless exercise to the poet. This belongs to a substantial subset of invectives in the Palatine Anthology (Bertman 1989), and elsewhere (Mart. 3.93, *Vetustilla*), that lambaste older women for stereotypical exhibition of drunkenness, lust, and decayed beauty (Esler 1989, Parkin 2003) – women conceived by men as inviting this abuse by their defiance of nature and mores.

Actresses, the quintessential public women of the Roman world, are particularly vulnerable to such ageist attacks, since the prime societal motivation behind the demand for their appearance onstage rests on their objectification under the gaze of a male society. The previously unexamined age data available on female performers (from epigraphic and literary sources) highlight some norms of these women's professional careers. After early training as dancers or minor performers, actresses in their teens and twenties specialize in a dramatic genre. These are clearly her prime years, and with physical and vocal maturity, these women begin to claim lead and solo roles and gain a fan base that would further their success in the profession, like Antony's and Gallus' mistress, Volumnia Cytheris, who sang a memorable recital of Vergil's *Eclogue 6* (Serv. *Ecl.* 6.11); or they might leave the stage, like Theodora (Procop. *Anec.*). The *emboliaria* Galeria Copiola (Plin. HN 7.158) was a retired *amus* at age 40, 'called back onstage' for a special appearance (and again at age 104!) – a freak of nature, not an object of desire.

While a few might continue as specialists, or gain financial status as *archimimae* (ILS 5211,5212), many would presumably be cast in low-comic roles such as those attested among performers in dipinti at Dura-Europos: *greopsis*, 'old grey head'; *paleoporne* 'madam'; *konna* 'drunken old female parasite (Immerwahr 1944).' Mime roles for crones or aging matrons appear in papyrus mime fragments, Herodas' mimiambos, and Theocritus' *Idylls*. A mosaic in Baetica also presents a scene best explained as a mime including a pygmy/crone couple (Daviault 1987). Aging onstage is implicit punishment as attested in CTh 15.7.8 (381 CE) which declares that a woman who reverts to acting after seeking exemption as a convert 'be dragged back to the stage, and remain there without any hope of absolution until she is a ridiculous old woman, decrepit with old age with no choice but to be chaste.' Thus, a young actress of 19 might truly be able to declare on her epitaph: 'By living fortunately through my short span of life, I have escaped your reproach, long old age (Zampieri 2000).'

Select Bibliography

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