

Giving away the Farm...to *Mimes!* *Vox populi* and the
(Un?)stable Economy of Women Onstage in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds

Beneath the typical legal and literary labeling of female stage performers as sex-workers and low-brow, societal *infames* (Edwards 1997) are ample indicators of popular acclaim resulting in degrees of valuation and remuneration. This is especially true on the Roman ‘stages’ of competing elite stigma and popular artforms, but also under the less legalistic, though equally rigid, social posturing around the Hellenistic theatrical world (Pharsalia/Philomelos—Theopompos²⁴⁸Jacoby/Plut.*Pyth.Orac.*397f-398a; Myrtion/Ptolemy II Philadelphos—Plb.14.11.3-4; *psaltria*/Alexander—Plut.*Amat.*760c) that Romans adopted, adapted, and imperialized. The actress, through her public presentation and voice, along with her audiences’ consumption of her person(a), embodies continual social tension between the ambiguously gendered worlds of men and women on public view.

Cicero cites the substantial salary of the mime/proto-pantomime dancer Dionysia as a benchmark for the earning potential of the wealthy comedian Roscius (*Rosc.Com.*23), while Hortensius backhandedly compliments her to challenge a rival’s taunts against his ‘Asiatically’ gesticulative oratory (Gell.1.5.3). Quintilia receives compensation representing what must be years of lost earnings onstage from torture that Caligula ordered for her refusal to incriminate her senator companion (Jos.*AJ*19.32-36; Suet.*Cal.*16.4). Ovid encapsulates the hypocrisy of Augustus’ public morals campaign against adultery when adultery mimes that featured lead actresses with their comically hidden lovers were enormously popular to a diverse audience, profitable for scriptwriters, and heavily financed to meet high demand (Ov.*Tr.*2.497-518; cf. Apul.*Met.*9.17-28). Actresses’ salaries are occasionally regular and substantial (Fabia Arete—CIL6.10107), though hardly legitimated.

Horace upbraids Marsaeus for virtue-signaling that he “won’t mess with married women” while granting his inherited farm to his mime companion Origo (*Sat.* 1.2.55-63). Cicero early in his career excoriates the notorious Sicilian governor Verres for substantive public gifts to his mime actress companion Tertia (*Verr.* 2.3,5), and in his last year reprises the charge repeatedly against Antony (*Phil.* 2.101;8.26;10.22+cf. Sulla—Ath.6.261c) for parceling out the richest public lands intended for veterans to “male *and female* mimes” (his emphasis), and above all for raising one particularly popular actress, Volumnia Cytheris, to the notional, public role of his wife (*mima uxor*, *Att.* 10.10.5;*Phil.* 2.20). Then literally or figuratively (*Serv. Ecl.* 6.11+10.1) Cytheris plays a performative role as companion and inspiration for Cornelius Gallus’ Lycoris and the foundation of the *topos of domina*-controls-poet in Roman elegy (James 2003; Keith 2010; Höschele 2013). The power of this construct continues to resonate in many successive, misogynistic fantasies of popularly acclaimed actress-companions who ‘control’ their ‘emasculated’ patrons and partners through the gifts and corresponding status those men lavish on them (*Ael.fr.* 126b-e,D-F; *HACar.* 20.4-21.1), and sometimes even more perversely by begrudging the monetized form of the female performers’ returned *peculia* that purchase their own freedom (*Priap.* 40/*Mart.* 6.71).

Élite male social anxiety—especially in the late Roman republic and early empire, but also in propaganda from Alexander to late antiquity—over loss of traditional power dynamics, values, and wealth perpetuated a hyper-masculinized rhetoricization of this non-reciprocal exchange of properties (real estate, land, luxury clothing, jewelry, social standing) to lower-class women as “commercial payments for services rendered” (cf. Strong 2016). But they know status gifts, not salaries, signify substantial transfer of power (cf. Coffee 2013, 2017). These smitten men are rhetorically cast as if onstage actors in the adultery mime role of the *stupidus*, the

cuckolded, exposed husband. Early imperial legislation to prevent legitimation of senatorial marriages to actresses (*Dig.23.2.47*, Crawford 1996; Lebek 1990,1991,1996) confirms the appeal that stage earnings could hold for quickly restoring lost wealth and authority, if not rank. The most successful actresses could potentially monetize their families' future power, though all labored under sexist, quasi-proprietary, social denigration that served to preserve the privileged status quo.

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