

“It Wasn’t Rape-Rape”: Roman Attitudes Toward the Sexual Availability of *Mimae*

This paper will argue that Roman attitudes toward the sexual availability of *mimae* were more varied than previously thought. Theatrical performers in the Roman world were more often than not slaves, including mime-actresses, *mimae*. *Mimae*, as the only female performers in the Roman theatrical tradition, were subject to relentlessly sexualized attention. They were often assumed to be prostitutes and denigrated as such, in keeping with Roman attitudes toward performers, prostitutes, and members of other *infamis* professions; precisely as a result of this degradation, they were objects of desire (Edwards 1997). Some *mimae* became the girlfriends of powerful men, such as Cytheris, who was linked with Antony and possibly Gallus (Webb 2008; Panayotakis 2006; Traina 2001; Wiseman 1998), or Tertia, who was linked with Verres (Panayotakis 2006; Wiseman 1998; Garton 1964).

One example of the standard Roman view of *mimae* as sexually available comes from Cicero. In 54 BCE, Cicero defended Gnaeus Plancius against a charge of illegal electioneering. As part of his general character defense, Cicero attempted to rebut or explain away several accusations of sexual immorality against Plancius, including the accusation that Plancius had raped a mime-actress (*Pro Plancio* 30):

“Raptam esse mimulam.” Quod dicitur Atinae factum a iuventute, vetere quodam in scenicos iure maximeque oppidano. O adolescentiam traductam eleganter! cui quidem cum, quod licuerit, obiiciatur, tamen id ipsum falsum reperitur.

“A little mime-actress is said to have been raped.” It’s said that this was done at Atina by a group of youths, using a certain old custom allowed at the scenic games, especially in country towns. What an honorably-conducted young manhood! He is reproached with something he was permitted to do, and yet that very reproach is found to be baseless.

As usual with Cicero's legal advocacy, every word works hard to create an image in the listener's mind. The mime actress is called a *mimula*, the diminutive used to diminish her. He claims that this sort of thing (*quod*) was supposedly (*dicitur*) done by youths (*iuventute*), because it was a sort of old law or right or custom (*quodam vetere iure*) at dramatic festivals (*in scenicos*), especially in country towns (*oppidano*). Cicero then repeats the idea that this crime – if it even was a crime – was committed in adolescence (*adolescentiam*), and in fact it was permitted (*licuerit*), and also it never happened (*ipsum falsum reperiatur*). In other words, whatever happened, it wasn't "rape-rape."

Most scholarship on *mimae* has taken attitudes like Cicero's to be representative of the views of Roman society as a whole: *mimae* were for the most part slaves who occupied the overlapping conceptual categories of "actor" and "prostitute" (Webb 2008; McGinn 2004; Edwards 1993). Yet Cicero provides a glimpse of a different attitude in his defense of Plancius, albeit unwillingly: *raptam esse mimulam*. Cicero does not use the word *rapiro* again in this passage. He tries to downplay the seriousness of the accusation and the accuser. But someone thought it would be damaging to accuse Plancius of raping a *mima*, or Cicero would not have to address this issue at all, and that suggests that there were people in late Republican Rome who thought that at least some *mimae* could be raped – that is, that they had integrity that could be violated, and perhaps, that they had legal standing to bring charges. This passage and other evidence, such epitaphs of *mimae* that describe them as *erodita* and *docta* (CIL 6.10096) or *privata mima* (CIL 6.10111), suggests that there were other views of *mimae* in circulation that tried to separate them conceptually from prostitution, in order to signal that their sexuality was not available to all. In fact, one reason why certain *mimae* attached themselves to wealthy,

powerful men may have been to emphasize that they were in exclusive relationships, and thus inaccessible to the common masses.

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