

## The Laureolus-Mime

The Laureolus-mime concerned the capture, arrest, and public execution of a notorious bandit leader. Its first known performance was mere hours (and steps) away from Caligula's assassination in 41 CE, and it continued to be performed at least through the second century CE. This paper will suggest that the surprising longevity of the Laureolus-mime may have been due to a possible subversive interpretation of the mime. Careful reading of the scanty evidence for the Laureolus-mime's ongoing popularity hints at Laureolus' stature as a folk hero to the disenfranchised in Roman society.

This paper will use Scott's (1990) theory of the "official transcript" and "hidden transcripts" in societies with unequal power relations to explain the Laureolus-mime's popular appeal for centuries. Briefly, Scott argues that societies with unequal power relations have an "official transcript" of social relations which is established by those in power, and enforced on subordinates by implicit threats of violence. Subordinates develop "hidden transcripts" in which they can express their frustration with those in power in veiled, indirect, or obfuscated ways: folk tales celebrating "trickster" figures are one example, as are images of the World Upside Down (or as Romans would call it, the Saturnalia).

Most Roman dramatic genres were authorized: they were performed in theaters and funded either by elite families looking to accrue political capital or by the Roman government itself as part of the "games" for annual religious festivals. Mime was different. As an unauthorized genre performed outside traditional venues by scandalous performers, mime was in a unique position to push the boundaries of performance: it abandoned theatrical masks, employed women, and embraced improvisation. These qualities also positioned mime to critique

traditional, authorized Roman culture, as certain mime routines reveal: the adultery mime flouted traditional Roman ideology about marriage and female chastity, for example, while mimes travesty Christian sacraments satirized the new religion for mixed audiences in the later Empire. The Laureolus-mime was another example of a plot in which a kind of insubordination against established Roman values, laws, or rules was expressed, then ultimately thwarted (Webb (2008) 131): the bandit leader successfully evaded capture for some time, but was eventually caught and crucified in public.

As it featured the crucifixion of the main character, the mime was reputed to be exceptionally bloody. Suetonius mentions the mime's performance in a list of bad omens right before Caligula's assassination, noting that not only the lead actor playing Laureolus vomited blood during the performance, but that many other members of the cast did too, so that the stage was "awash with blood" (Suet. *Calig.* 57; cf. Joseph. *AJ* 19.1.13). The Laureolus-mime was used in a "fatal charade" during the dedicatory games of the Flavian Amphitheater in 80 CE (Mart. *Spect.* 7), where the condemned criminal playing Laureolus was mauled by a bear while being crucified (Coleman (2006) 82-96 and (1990) 65). Tertullian mentions the mime in the second century CE (Tertul. *Adv. Valent.* 14), which may suggest that performances of the mime had reached North Africa. The second-century satirist Juvenal mentions the Laureolus-mime once by name (8.187) and may reference the character a second time more obliquely as "the trickster runaway slave of Catullus" (*fugitivus scurra Catulli*, 13.111; Sutton (1986) 63-67).

It is unclear whether Laureolus was a historical or legendary figure, but his story seized the public's interest for over a century. Any given performance of the Laureolus-mime could be read by those in authority (the "official transcript") as celebrating the bandit leader's well-deserved downfall, complete with bloody evidence of abundant suffering. Scott (1990) 206

notes that the “official transcript” often labels insurgents as bandits, seeking to diminish their political significance, while subordinates elevate bandits into folk heroes. The appeal of the Laureolus-mime, its “hidden transcript,” may have been that Laureolus, a runaway slave and trickster figure, defied and evaded authorities successfully, if only for a short time. Suetonius’ story about this mime as an omen of Caligula’s bloody death may have had as much to do with Laureolus as a figure of wish fulfillment for the disenfranchised against the powerful in Roman society as it had to do with bloodshed.

#### Bibliography

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