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Preview

Mime may be called one of the most challenging genres in Latin literature, because of its popularity during the Roman Republic on the one hand, and the lack of complete Latin texts of mimes on the other hand. Roman mimographers seem to have suffered the same fate as most of Rome's archaic authors: important as their texts may have been in their own time, they were frowned upon or neglected in subsequent periods (notably the Augustan era), and were not consistently copied for future generations, with oblivion and loss of texts as the sad result. All that remains from such lost texts are scattered fragments, found in ancient authors, either literary prose writers, or, more often, scholarly writers such as grammarians eager to quote curious words, word forms, or phrases.

Whereas modern, scholarly collections of such fragments are available for most Roman archaic poets such as Ennius or Pacuvius, the case for mime was less fortunate for a long time. There was no helpful recent monograph in English, nor were the fragments of the most important author of mime, Decimus Laberius, available in English at all. In fact, the Italian critical edition Romani mimi by M. Bonaria from 1965 was almost the only relevant modern book on the subject.

The situation has now dramatically changed for the better, due to the publication of Costas Panayotakis' long awaited edition with translation and commentary of Decimus Laberius in the well known 'orange' series of Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries. Panayotakis worked some twelve years on this ambitious and laborious project, but the result was well worth waiting for. His edition is a truly great achievement, combining the best traditions of classical scholarship with a fresh and modern approach to these scanty remains as fascinating literary texts. It contains an ample, general introduction to the genre as a whole and of the fate of Laberius throughout the centuries, as well as accurate studies of the individual plays by Laberius of which we know anything at all, with highly detailed commentary on every single line and word of all the extant fragments. Thus Panayotakis' study is a mine of information, a monumental edition, that will no doubt remain the standard for decades to come.

Some 100 pages are devoted to the general introduction. After an interesting preface on the origin of the project, a full list of abbreviations, and a bibliography, Panayotakis manages to present a helpful description of the genre on the very first page: 'Mime in Roman culture was primarily a type of popular entertainment which covered any kind of theatrical spectacle that
did not belong to masked tragic and comic drama, and in which actors and actresses enacted mainly low-life situations and used words in their performances' (p. 1).

Although Panayotakis does not present this as a definition and carefully develops his analysis in the next few pages (pointing e.g. to the 'conceptual fluidity and dramatic flexibility' (p. 2) of Roman mime, and a possibly problematic difference between 'popular' mime and literary mime), it may stand as a proper working definition that contains some basic elements: Roman mime belongs to the stage, is connected with low-life subjects, employs male and female actors, and contains spoken text. Hence, it is not hard to understand why the genre was held in low esteem by Roman elite writers such as Cicero. Mimes were scorned and attacked for their style, their contents, and their morality. Nonetheless, the genre was very popular and could even exert strong influence in Roman politics, an interesting point made by Panayotakis (pp. 13-15).

Next, Panayotakis traces back the history of mime to Greek culture. Mime already flourished in the Hellenistic kingdoms of the Eastern Mediterranean. Little is known about 'early mime' in Rome, and as Panayotakis rightly argues, we can learn more about it from other forms of comic drama, notably the plays of Plautus. It is the first century BC which appears to have been the period when mime became popular and also acquired its literary identity. The genre also blossomed from the 1st to the 3rd centuries AD, as appears from numerous inscriptions for mime-actors from that period, and seems to have lasted until late antiquity.

The introduction then zooms in on Laberius, first with a list of testimonia (pp. 33-36), which raise a number of questions and problems (pp. 36-57). It seems fair to say that Laberius remains a rather shadowy figure after all. As Panayotakis acknowledges at the start, all we know with certainty is that he was a composer of mimes, and that he was a contemporary of Caesar and Cicero (p. 36). There follow brief surveys of Laberius' themes, language, and prosody, including some convenient lists of e.g. Laberius' hapax legomena and other special words (pp. 63-65), and of his various metres (p. 68). (For practical purposes, the alphabetic notation by Gratwick is used, making a normal senarius look as follows: ABCD A/BCD ABcD; all is duly explained on pp. 68-69).

The rather technical section on metre is followed by a learned section on the history of the text of Laberius' mimes, a history that is, understandably, rather complex, if only because of the problems involved in manuscripts of the authors quoting his lines, such as Gellius, Macrobius, and Bede. The introduction is completed with a section about later anthologies of Laberius' fragments, the earliest one dating from 1505 (pp. 90-99), and a long list of sigla codicum.

Impressively erudite as Panayotakis' general introduction already is, his presentation of the fragments is even more admirable. Taking into account that all we have from Laberius is 44 titles and about 150 lines (divided into 96 fragments), the nearly 400 pages devoted to this scanty material seem almost overwhelming. In advance, one might say, Panayotakis' book can be expected to include almost everything that any reader might wish to know about any given word attributed to Laberius.

Panayotakis’ method adopted for every play, and the depth and wealth of his analysis, may best be illustrated with one or two case studies.
As an example, I take the mime called 'Ephebus' (Fr.28-29, pp. 247-254). The section opens with the relevant documentary material: a testimonium in Macrobius with a quotation of Fr.28 licentium ac libidinem ut tollam petis/togatae stripis, and another one, equally from Macrobius, with Fr.29 idcirco ope nostra dilatatum est dominium/togatae gentis. The Latin texts are followed by English translations (testimonia and fragments). First comes a general commentary of nearly 2 pages on the title and general aspects of the mime in question, with some interesting observations on 'young men' in Middle and New Comedy, and, in another context, as the objects of (usually male) sexual desire. Panayotakis is not misled, however, into adding overhasty suggestions about the possible plot of the 'Ephebus'.

Four pages then discuss the two Laberius fragments, starting with general observations on the key phrases togata stirps and gens togata, and their possible influence on passages in Virgil (e.g. Aeneid 1.282 gentemque togatam, and metrical analysis. Next, nearly every single Latin word is discussed in separate lemmata, with e.g. a cautious and convincing case being made for the form licentium rather than licentiam, and good questions about who exactly is speaking in the first line (a god or goddess perhaps?), the solemn tone of togata gens and the resulting stylistic tension with the 'wantonness' of the start of Fr.28. All is abundantly documented with parallel texts and references to standard works. Having read all of this, a reader will not easily feel disappointed by Panayotakis: this seems really all there is to know.

What we definitely would like to know more about is, of course, Laberius' play and its actual contents, which in this case (and regrettably in most Laberian mimes) remains almost completely in the dark. What was the play really all about? Were any women involved? Could any homo-erotic tones be heard? Was this funny and 'Latin' in a Plautine way, or rather more refined and polished like New Comedy? We shall never know, it seems. Needless to say Panayotakis is not to blame for that.

A particularly strong point in Panayotakis' commentary is his unbiased attention to sexual elements and Latin obscenities, matters that were often rather obscured than clarified in early studies on mime. The 21st century reader now simply receives all the relevant information and discussion. For instance, in the commentary on the 'Catularius' ('The mime of the puppy') (Fr. 14-15; p. 168-179), there are truly fine notes about mammae, neque aliter hunc pedicabis, caedes (here a verb form denoting a sexual activity), and the obscure noun hillam ('an intestine').

Here too, the commentary seems exhaustive, and the reader's desire to know still more concerns the rest that has now been lost. It is almost painful to read so much about so few and scanty remains without the faintest of ideas about the general plot and atmosphere of this mime, let alone its actual performance. In spite of the rich material provided by Panayotakis, we hardly have anything to go by if we wish to assess Laberius' qualities as a playwright. Again, Panayotakis can only be blamed for whetting our appetite.

The volume is concluded, not surprisingly, with some learned and helpful extras: a concordance of the fragment numbers, a list of Laberius' vocabulary, and separate indexes of passages and topics.

One or two minor complaints perhaps on what is so great an achievement, both concerning typographical decisions. The first concerns the actual presentation of the Laberius lines. I found it surprising that the Latin lines and English translations are set in a font that is smaller than the surrounding text of the testimonia and accompanying secondary material. (Only the
apparatus criticus, wherever it is added, is even smaller). In such a fine book, it would surely not have mattered to include a few extra pages for a proper presentation of what is, after all, the essential textual material about Laberius that we possess.

Secondly, and less importantly, sections in the commentary are not, as a rule, divided into paragraphs. This often result in blocks of text that seem less attractive to read (for an example I refer to p. 261: an entire page set as a block of text).

Admittedly, if this is all that a reviewer can complain about, it may rather be taken as another compliment to this excellent piece of scholarship. Panayotakis has rendered classicists a great service, one that may make them feel proud of what classical philology can achieve in our time. It is to be hoped that the book will also serve to inspire others in the field.