

Peopling the Past Video 5: Theatrical Performance and Mime with Melissa Funke

Transcript

Video begins with instrumental music played over the title card which reads "Peopling the Past"

We hear Melissa Funke speak: "Hello and welcome to Peopling the Past. My name is Melissa Funke, and I am Assistant Professor of Classics at the University of Winnipeg."

Funke sits in front of the camera with a teal-colored room behind her. She has red hair and dark colored glasses.

Funke: "What topic are you talking about today?" Today I am talking about the genre of dramatic performance from the ancient Greek and Roman worlds known as mime and the actors who performed it. My work focuses broadly on dramatic performance in the ancient Greek world and lately I've been working a lot on mime, but first things first I need to clarify, ancient mime is not like modern mime."

The slide now shows the Neumagen Relief, which is a late Roman tomb sculpture that shows a school scene with pupils and a teacher. The text reads "What topic are you talking about today?" The slide shows a picture of a stereotypical French mime with a big red "X" in front of it.

Funke: "The actors were allowed to speak. So, let's start by explaining a bit about the ancient genre itself. Mime was a very flexible and sometimes informal type of theater that had its roots in farce, and what's really interesting is that unlike comedy and tragedy, which are deeply associated with the city of Athens. The farces that eventually developed into mime originated on the Peloponnese in places like Megara, Corinth, Sicyon, and Sparta. By the 4th century BCE mime was an identifiable genre which focused on specific character types and featured scenes from everyday life. From its beginning it was a very flexible type of theatre. It could be very formalized, very educated, or it could be more informal and crude, and this is what I'm interested in, in that second type, because it tells us a lot about entertainment that could be accessed by the widest possible variety of people in the ancient world. This was truly theatre for the masses. This

cruder form of mime was very interested in bodily functions, so things like eating and drinking and having sex. Its plots revolved around typical dramatic conflicts, things like mistaken identity or adultery, and they often use repetition and slapstick to comic effect. Mime was also very widespread in the ancient Mediterranean, especially from the Hellenistic Period onward (after ~300 BCE). We know that it was popular in the Greek east, so places like Antioch and Syria were known for producing famous mime performers. We also know that mime had become quite popular in Rome by the 2nd century BCE, and there it started to take on aspects of Roman comedy and native Italian farce—basically mime was an ultra-flexible genre, and it could take on aspects of any cultural and performance traditions it came into contact with. It thrived for nearly a millennium.”

The next slide show an image of a small statuette of an ancient mime, who wears robes that hang to the knees and a hat. The caption below the image reads, “Statuette of a mime performer, Getty Museum 96.AD.166.” The title of the slide reads: “Basics of Mime.”

Funke: “Since we're thinking about the real lives of real people in the ancient world let's talk about mime actors. We know that mime actors performed in a wide variety of contexts, from the courts of Philip II of Macedon and his son Alexander to public theatres throughout the Roman Empire, to the private banquets of the wealthy, to the agoras of cities like Oxyrhynchus in Roman Egypt. Unlike actors in other dramatic forms mime actors performed without masks, and in the case of more informal street-based performances, outside of formal theatrical spaces. An author writing in the late 5th century CE named Coricius tells us that mime actors were actually known for their very good memories because they had to remember what they had learned during preparations for performances. Mime actors often were part of traveling troops and there were even official guilds of mime actors. The troops could be composed of free or enslaved people, and they typically had a leader known as the archimimus or archimima—now if you were paying close attention to that term, you noticed that it appears in both a masculine and a feminine form, which means that women were also mime performers, and this is unlike other dramatic genres from the ancient Greek and Roman world in which men played all the characters. So, for example we have an inscription from Aquileia (in Italy) from the 3rd century CE that commemorates a mime actress named Basilla. We also know of a freed woman Fabia Arete who was an archimima, and she earned enough through performances and through running her troop of mimes that she was able to leave behind a major funeral monument for herself and for her husband, and on this monument, it lists 14 slaves that she was wealthy enough to free.

And in fact, some very well-known women were associated with mime, such as the empress Theodora who married the emperor Justinian."

The next slide show another mime statuette. This one appears mostly nude and has exaggerated head and limbs in proportion to its torso. The caption reads, "Statuette of a mime performer, The Met 2000.305.2." The title of the slide reads: "Mime Actors."

Funke: "What sources or data do you look at?" Studying ancient performance means that I need to look at literary evidence, so things like scripts of plays and texts that describe the circumstances of performance, and the cultural position of mime and mime performers. So, for example the orator Demosthenes from 4th century Athens complains that Philip II of Macedon welcomed low comedic actors (that means mime performers) at his court. Authors like Athenaeus and Diadorus Siculus, who wrote several hundred years later in the context of the Roman Empire, also love to tell salacious stories of mime performers and performances, like the famous anecdote of Antiochus V, a second century Hellenistic king who acted naked alongside mime actors at a banquet. So, stories like this can tell us a lot about the position of mime actors in society and the reputation of mime itself."

The slide shows three images. On the left is a statue in stone of a seated scribe from ancient Egypt. In the center is a cuneiform clay tablet from Mesopotamia. On the right is a wall painting from Pompeii known as the Sappho Tondo. Though it does not depict the famous author, it shows the portrait of a well-dressed woman with a writing utensil poised to her lip. The text on the slide reads "What sources or data do you look at?"

Funke: "There's also a wide variety of material evidence for mime scattered across the Mediterranean. Visual evidence of performance is particularly helpful to me, like the statuettes of mime performers we've already seen, and this relief from what's now Libya, that depicts mime actors taking part in a slapstick scene while a female actor looks on—she's on the right. Images like this can help us better understand costuming and sets."

The slide shows the image that the presenter just described. It appears to be carved into the side of a building, possibly made of marble or another light-colored stone. The building itself appears to have many Ionic style columns, both free-standing and those merely carved into the building for design purposes. The caption reads, "Relief from theater of Sabratha, Libya,

ca. 2nd cent. CE." The title of the slide reads: "Visual Evidence for Mime Performance."

Funke: "The type of evidence for mime that is perhaps the most informative is papyrus fragments that preserve actual mime scripts. We don't have very many of these and the main examples that we have all differ slightly from one another, but this is actually helpful because they tell us more about the various kinds of preparation for performance. One papyrus actually has two different kinds of mime scripts, one on each side, and it's likely that this came from a technical manual on mime. On one side is a full script. It's quite detailed and sophisticated. It takes place in India and it contains all kinds of allusions to Greek tragedy. What's most exciting when we think about a performance is that this papyrus contains cues for sound effects, so we have things like symbols and drumming and lots of farts. The other side contains what seems to be the script for an individual actress. It contains mostly her lines only. She's playing an adulterous woman pursuing her lover. So, it's very clear from this script that this is what an individual actor would use to prepare. Now we shouldn't be surprised to find mime scripts in a city like Oxyrhynchus, since it was a city with a sizeable population—around 30,000 at the time that we're looking at, with Greek, Roman, Jewish, and indigenous Egyptian inhabitants. It also clearly had an appetite for theatre—there are estimates that the theatre in Oxyrhynchus held about 11,000 spectators. So, mime as this cross-cultural art form was well suited for a multicultural city like Oxyrhynchus with an appetite for theatre."

The slide shows an image of Egypt. On the map is the Nile Delta to the north. Labeled cities included are Alexandria, Cairo, Payum, and Oxyrhynchus. Oxyrhynchus has a large yellow arrow pointing towards it to add emphasis to the location. The text reads: "Papyri Scripts from Oxyrhynchus."

Funke: "A sixth century CE papyrus from Oxyrhynchus that I've been working on lately along with my collaborator C.W. Marshall is a unique mime script because it contains stage directions which are few and far between in the evidence for ancient Greek and Roman drama. This papyrus contains the best and most full example of stage directions that we have in all of our evidence for ancient Greek and Roman drama. Now in this papyrus the stage directions indicate something that's happening while various actors are speaking, so we have a good sense of the actor's entries and exits, and where they're meant to be positioned on the stage at various times. We also see evidence of slapstick humour with some of the characters hitting each other and falling over other characters. It's clear from the crude jokes

in the script that this is street theatre, so we can also tell that there would be no major set- one that we might expect to find in a more formal theatrical space. The plot involves an elderly female slave who devises, rehearses, and attempts to pull off a ruse with a wealthy soldier, and the use of masculine forms to refer to the actor playing the part of the female slave suggests that this performance involved cross-dressing for comic effect. While all of the actor's lines are labeled using underlined letters of the alphabet, so alpha, beta, gamma, so on and so forth. There is one extra character who is labeled the "akaidos", this means "the untimely one," but we would better translate it as "the jerk." So, this is a character similar to the awkward neighbor in sitcoms from the 80s and 90s— that's right we have an ancient Steve Urkel here! We also see some terms in this script that reflect the cultural makeup of Oxyrhynchus, such as "Nonna mou" for the old woman and "abba" for her elderly male conspirator, which suggests that these characters are actually meant to be understood as Christian or Jewish, and on that note there's also a very crude joke about a circumcised penis."

This slide shows the tattered papyrus script that Funke just mentioned. The text reads, "P.Oxy 5189."

Funke: "So, what can this material tell us about real people in the past? Evidence like the papyrus script I've just been talking about tells us a lot."

Slide shows four images. On the left is a Greek marble grave stele of a little girl holding a bird. To the right of this is a Greek vase painting scene that shows women weaving at a loom. To the right of that are model figures of bakers preparing and baking bread from ancient Egypt. On the right is a painted "mummy portrait" of a young man from the Fayum in Egypt. The text reads "How can this topic or material tell us about real people in the past?"

Funke: "First of all it tells us about mime actors and what they were doing on stage, perhaps what they were wearing on stage, and how they may have prepared for this performance. But it also tells us about the ways that people in places like Roman Egypt entertained themselves. It tells us about the ancient form of popular culture. I mentioned earlier that this crude slapstick form of mime reached the widest possible audience. A performance like the one captured in this papyrus performed in the agora of 6th century Oxyrhynchus would have been watched by enslaved people and free people, the poor and wealthy alike, and people representing all the cultural groups in

that city, allowing them all to share in theatrical culture. So, a mime like this offers us a taste of the cultural appetites of real people in the ancient world." This slide has no image. The text reads: "Actors and Audiences." All text on the slide was read by the speaker.

Funke: "Thank you for watching."

The last slide shows the credits for this episode of Peopling the Past:

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