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I DEFINING THE ROMAN MIME

Nowadays the word 'mime', when used as a verb, indicates the acting of a play or a role, normally without words, by means of gestures and bodily movement. When used as a noun, it signifies the play that is being performed and the performer himself.[1] This form of modern theatre should not be confused with what the Romans understood by the term 'mime', despite the features which both the Latin *mimus* and contemporary mime share. 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.[2]

The theatrical term *mimus* existed in the Latin vocabulary from at least the late third century BC, and had four possible meanings, not all of which are attested in sources belonging to the same era. It denoted an actor in a form of drama which was normally simple in structure and farcical in content (*CIL* 1², 1861; Varro *apud* Aug. *De civ. dei* 4.22, 6.1; *Rhet. Her.* 1.24), the improvised spectacle or the literary play which a mime-actor performed (Varro *LL* 6.61; Cic. *De orat.* 2.259),

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[1] See *OED* s.v. and J. Lawson, *Mime: The theory and practice of expressive gesture with a description of its historical development* (London 1957); T. Leabhart, *Modern and post-modern mime* (London 1989); and the articles in J. Redmond, ed., *Themes in Drama* 10 (Cambridge 1988). There is also an exciting website dedicated to the promotion of modern mime as theatrical art: see www.mime.info/index.html.

[2] Among the numerous studies on the history of Roman mime see introduction in the edn of Bonaria 1–17; Beacham *Theatre* 129–39; Beare *Stage* 149–58; Cicu *Problemi*; Duckworth *Comedy* 13–15; Fantham *Mime* 153–63; Giancotti *Mimo* 13–42; Horsfall *Mime* 293–4; Kehoe *Adultery* 89–106; McKeown *Elegy* 71–84; Nicoll *Masks* 80–134; Rieks *Mimus* 348–51 and 361–77 (with bibliography); Wüst *Mimos* 1743–61; and F. Dupont, *L'acteur-roi ou le théâtre dans la Rome antique* (Paris 1985) 296–306. My brief account of the characteristics of mime owes much to these studies.

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the literary genre to which mime-plays belonged (Cic. *Pro Cael.* 65), and (metaphorically) a hoax or sham or pretence which was staged at someone's expense (Sen. *Contr.* 1.5.2).[3] The Greek noun μῖμος in the sense of 'an imitator' goes back to Aeschylus (*TrGF* 57.9 Nauck), and by the fourth century BC we find it in the sense of 'an actor' (Dem. 2.19) and 'a form of drama' (Arist. *Po.* 1447b10). Was the Roman mime a theatrical product imported from Greece? The significant literary contribution to the development of farcical comedy made by Sophron and Epicharmus in Sicily in the fifth century BC and by the erudite 'Alexandrian' poets Theocritus and Herodas in the third century BC, as well as the lively presence of mime-actors in the courts of Macedonian and Eastern royal palaces (Dem. 2.19; Diod. Sic. 31.16.3) and in the private banquets of wealthy Roman patrons in the first century BC (Plut. *Sull.* 2.2–4, 33.2, 36.1), demonstrates that the Roman mime was not a purely Greek theatrical phenomenon transported to Italy by travelling mime-performers. From the third to the first century BC there existed a strong native Italian theatrical tradition,[4] with which the mime from the East was blended to form what should be more correctly termed the Greco-Roman mime.

Any discussion of how Roman authors defined mime-drama ought to be preceded by a warning and a distinction. The warning concerns the conceptual fluidity and the dramatic flexibility

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[3] For more instances of each of these meanings see *TLL* VIII 988.63–990.49. One of the quotations cited by *TLL* (VIII 989.66) regarding mime as *genus ludi scaenici* is Lucil. 1345 M = 1143 W (*dum mimi conscius*: *mimi* vel *dicimus mimi* codd.), cited by a scholiast on Persius 1.27. If the text printed by Marx is accepted, this instance is probably the earliest extant literary reference to mime as a distinct form of theatrical entertainment. But the reading *mimi* has been rejected by other editors of Lucilius, who print *dici mihi* (Buecheler, Terzaghi, Krenkel) or *Decimus mihi* (Warmington). The entry on mime in the *OLD* does not mention the Lucilian passage and groups together examples of *mimus* designating a literary play and examples of *mimus* indicating mime as a literary genre.

[4] This is discussed in detail by E. Rawson, 'Theatrical life in republican Rome and Italy', *PBSR* 53 (1985) 97–113, reprinted in *Roman culture and society: Collected papers* (Oxford 1991) 468–87.

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which characterised the Roman mime as a form of entertainment. It is perhaps because of the great variety of performances called mime in antiquity that an exact definition of this genre is so difficult. In our literary and documentary sources mime-performers are often named alongside street-actors and popular entertainers whom we would nowadays associate with a circus. The targets of mime-satire included social mores, philosophy, religion, and politics, and the extraordinary style of mime-plays combined instances of vulgar obscenity happily co-existing with sophisticated apophthegms of highly moral standards. Because of the heterogeneous nature of the Roman mime, which seems to defy any attempt at literary categorisation or generic classification, a scholarly distinction was drawn between the non-literary, 'popular' form of mime, which was brief and crude, and depended mostly on improvisation, and its development, mainly during the late republic, into a form of literature in the hands of Laberius and Publilius. The literary mime was composed in verse and performed in theatres. The 'popular' mimes may have been enacted in streets, squares, theatres, and private houses,[5] and had words, but possibly not a fixed script, which could have been copied by later scribes and assessed on literary grounds. This distinction between the two strands of mime-drama is helpful because it underlines the varied nature of the spectacles covered by the generic title *mimus*. But it can also be misleading and ought to be made with caution, because it is far from clear that the repertory of the 'literary' mimes was different

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[5] See Cic. *Ad fam.* 9.16.7; *P.Oxy.* 2707 (sixth century AD; see Maxwell *Mime* 124 no. 21); Nicoll *Masks* 99–109; and Beare *Stage* 149, 270–4. On the *scena* 'the theatre-platform' see Isid. 18.43; Amm. Marc. 26.15; *CGL* 4.168, 5.41, and 5.391. On the *proscenium* see *CGL* 5.324, 5.476, and 5.556. On the *orchestra* see Isid. 18.44 and Festus 194.6–12 L. On the *siparium* 'small curtain or screen' see Cic. *De prov. consul.* 6.14; Iuv. 8.185–6 and schol. Iuv. 8.186 Wessner; Apul. *Met.* 1.8; Festus 458.11–13 L; and Paul.–Fest. 459.4 L. On the *scabillum* 'a kind of hinged clapper attached to the sole of the foot, and used for beating time for dancers in the theatre' (*OLD* s.v. 2) see Cic. *Pro Cael.* 64–5; *Auct. de dub. nomin.* = *GL* 5.590.4–5 K. On the *choragium* 'stage properties' see Paul.–Fest. 45.19 L; *CGL* 4.293 and 4.397.

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to that of the 'popular' ones, or that the 'literary' mimes developed from the 'popular' ones and did not co-exist with them. Moreover, it is not always obvious that authors such as Ovid and Petronius were influenced by only one of these mime-strands, and it is instructive to note that the differentiation between 'literary' and 'popular' was not made by ancient authors, whose testimonies normally betray an obvious contempt for all of these shows.

The usual starting-point in modern discussions of the features of the Roman mime *as a literary genre* is the definition of *mimus* found in the treatises of late antique grammarians and commentators. But mime as a literary form of scripted theatrical entertainment was commented on by educated Romans long before the time of Donatus, Diomedes, Evanthius, and Isidore (whose definitions I discuss below), and it is instructive to see what the explicit comments or implicit statements of the earlier sources were on this matter before we evaluate the information offered by writers of late antiquity. Of special value is the evidence which deliberately differentiates mime from other types of comedy. Already in the middle of the first century BC Cicero seems to treat the Roman mime as a loosely constructed form of comic drama,[6] whose plot abounded in tricks (*fallaciae* or *praestigiae*) borrowed from the degenerate life of Alexandria (Cic. *Pro Rab. Post.* 35); mime is a type of theatre that, Cicero believes, should be juxtaposed to formal comedies (*fabulae*), which had a structured plot and a proper ending (Cic. *Pro Cael.* 65). This is not entirely true. Cicero in his speeches on the defence of Rabirius Postumus and Caelius was not interested in describing accurately the format and content of mime-plays, but in demolishing the credibility of the Alexandrian witnesses supporting his opponents and the sincerity of the story put forward

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[6] This does not necessarily mean that all mime-plots presented dramatic inconsistencies; see Quint. 4.2.53: *Est autem quidam et ductus rei credibilis, qualis in comoediis etiam et in mimis. Aliqua enim naturaliter secuntur et cohaerent, ut si bene priora narraveris iudex ipse quod postea sis narraturus expectet.*

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by Clodia; he achieves this by associating the members of the opposite party with a form of drama that was generally regarded as insubstantial and disreputable.[7] Moreover, some scenes from the extant fragments of Laberius (for instance, **50(a)**) resemble closely story-lines from *fabulae palliatae*. Even so, Cicero's invective must contain at least a grain of truth, otherwise it would not have made sense in the context of the speeches. His remarks are also supported by papyrological finds and by other literary sources which link Egypt (and specifically Alexandria) with mime, and confirm that at least some mime-plays had an abrupt ending and a plot that depended on improvisation.[8]

Cicero draws extensively on mime in order to create a detailed negative example for those wishing to achieve the ideal of the perfect orator. His instructions include constant warnings to future public speakers to avoid excessive mimicry, 'for, if the imitation is exaggerated, it becomes a characteristic of mime-actors who portrayed characters, as also does obscenity' (*De orat.* 2.242). Quintilian follows Cicero's doctrine almost to the letter (6.3.29). In the same section of his rhetorical treatise (*De orat.* 2.251–2) Cicero conveniently singles out the characteristics of mime-wit as follows: ridicule of human figures who exhibit particular vices, emphasis on mimicry, exaggerated facial expressions (perhaps our strongest evidence that, in most cases during Cicero's time if not always, mime-actors and actresses did not wear masks),[9] and

[7] See R. G. Austin, ed., *M. Tulli Ciceronis pro M. Caelio oratio* (Oxford 1960³) 128–9; M. Siani-Davies, *Cicero's speech pro Rabirio Postumo* (Oxford 2001) 195.

[8] In addition to the literary mimes of Herodas and Theocritus, several papyri and other literary sources testify to the presence of mime-activities in Egypt and especially in Alexandria: *P.Oxy.* 1025; *P.Oxy.* 519; *P.Oxy.* 1050; *P.Osl.* 189; Dio Chrys. *Orat.* 32.4, 32.86; Philo *In Flac.* 34; Pallad. *Laus hist.* 26; *HA, Verus* 8.11. The mime of the 'Adulterous Wife' (*P.Oxy.* 413 *verso*) occasionally makes sense only if we assume that the protagonist embellished her lines with actions that are now irretrievable, and has an ending which seems dramatically contrived and abrupt.

[9] To my knowledge, only Nicoll *Masks* 91 is sceptical about this assumption: 'There is not . . . a single statement made by an earlier writer which stamps the whole mime drama as maskless; it seems probable that some parts at least required the use of exaggerated and comic masks.' This may be the case

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obscenity.[10] Although these features square with what we know
about mime-drama in the republican era, it should be empha-
sized that our primary source for mime in this period is Cicero
himself, and it is thus difficult to disentangle what is accurately
reported on mime-practice from the distorted or even invented
mime-details which suit the argument of Cicero's case. It should
also be stressed that these characteristics are articulated from a
rhetorical perspective, and that they allow us to observe mainly
not how mime-actors acted but how vital it was for the Roman
male citizen with political ambitions to act in public within the
acceptable social norms.

A feature peculiar to the mime-stage, and surely linked with
its low reputation, was the employment of women for female
roles. Although it may be argued that the voice of a female
character portrayed by an actress is 'a real woman's voice' (that
is, the expression of – and an insight into – what a woman of
that time would have felt about certain issues, such as adultery,
presented on the stage), such a view is seriously undermined by
the surviving evidence of the mimes of Laberius and Publilius,
and the non-dramatic references to lost mime-plays, according
to which the female characters of Roman mime are as conven-
tional and artificial in their behaviour as their female counter-
parts in the other genres of popular theatre. The reliability of
the majority of our evidence on historical women who acted in
mimes is somewhat compromised by the image of the 'starlet'
that was deliberately created and projected onto these women,
who functioned as attractive, even seductive, social scapegoats.

in Tertullian's account of mythological mimes (*Apolog.* 15.3): *Imago dei vestri
ignominiosum caput et famosum vestit* 'The image of your god covers the head of a
shameless and infamous person.'

[10] Mime-performances were traditionally associated with obscenity (from
Cicero to the Church fathers), even when viewed in the context of a religious
festival. See Cic. *De orat.* 2.242; *Ad fam.* 7.1.2; Ovid *Tr.* 2.279–81, 2.497–8, 2.515–
20; Val. Max. 2.6.7b; Mart. *Epigr.* 8 praef.; Tert. *De spect.* 17.1–2; Aug. *De civ. dei*
2.26; <Evanthius *De fabula*> 3.5 = 20.2 Wessner; Choric. *Apol. Mim.* 88. But
this bad reputation was not always justified, and often served a specific social
and moral purpose (discussed below).

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Their function was to preserve the chastity of decent wives, whose role was to be faithful to their husbands and produce legitimate children. In fact, the body of the mime-actress seems to have been exploited to such an extent that it became a stereotypical source of entertainment; this was the case especially in the festival traditionally associated with the mimes, the *Floralia*, which became annual in or after 173 (Val. Max. 2.10.8; Ovid *F.* 5.347–50; Lact. *Div. inst.* 1.20.10). The striptease of women in these shows (whether they were actresses or prostitutes is beside the point) was allegedly designed to fulfil the theatrical conventions of the time, but in reality functioned as a means of control of the behaviour and the moral standards of aristocratic Roman *matronae*.[11]

Bearing in mind the above features of mime-theatre and the distinction which the ancients themselves made between mime and pantomime – a form of drama in which a solo actor was telling a story, usually taken from Greek mythology, by means of skilful dancing and elaborate movements to the accompaniment of a chorus or a *cantor* singing the plot[12] – it is not surprising to find weak points in the well-known definition of mime offered by the grammarian Diomedes, who was writing in the fourth century AD, and was paraphrasing a Hellenistic source

[11] For a detailed discussion of the portrayal of mime-actresses in literary sources see D. R. French, 'Maintaining boundaries: The status of actresses in early Christian society', *Vigiliae Christianae* 52 (1998) 293–318; R. Webb, 'Female entertainers in late antiquity', in P. Easterling and E. Hall, eds., *Greek and Roman actors: Aspects of an ancient profession* (Cambridge 2002) 282–303 (especially 287–9); and C. Panayotakis, 'Women in the Greco-Roman mime of the Roman republic and the early empire', *Ordia prima: Revista de estudios clásicos* 5 (2006) 121–38.

[12] See Isid. 18.48 (*De histrionibus . . . hi autem saltando etiam historias et res gestas demonstrabant*), 18.50 (*De saltatoribus*), and Maxwell *Mime* 21–2. On pantomime see E. Wüst, 'Pantomimus', *RE* XVIII.3 833–69; V. Rotolo, *Il pantomimo: Studi e testi* (Palermo 1957); M. Kokolakis *Platon* 10 (1959) 3–56; E. J. Jory *BICS* 28 (1981) 147–61; Jory in A. Moffatt, ed., *Classical, Byzantine and Renaissance Studies for Robert Browning* (Canberra 1984) 57–66; I. Lada-Richards, *Silent Eloquence: Lucian and Pantomime Dancing* (London 2007); and the contributions to E. Hall and R. Wyles, eds., *New Directions in Ancient Pantomime* (Oxford 2008).

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(possibly Theophrastus) on drama.[13] Diomedes lays emphasis
on the spoken word (*sermonis*), imitation (*imitatio* and *mimus dictus*
παρὰ τὸ μιμεῖσθαι, *quasi solus imitetur*) and bodily movements
(*motus*) as the primary means by which mime-actors performed
their roles, and makes it clear that obscenity (*factorum et dicto-
rum turpium cum lascivia*) was a standard ingredient in these per-
formances, which drew their material from uncensored every-
day life (μίμησις βίου τά τε συγκεχωρημένα καὶ ἀσυγχώρητα
περιέχων),[14] not from heroic or divine subjects.[15] Diomedes
was not a theatrical critic and was in no position to ascertain
what mime was like centuries before his time. His definition
contains information which could easily have been obtained
from performances of his own era, or could have been copied
from his unacknowledged Greek source. There is no mention
of the religious context of mime-performances, of the mask-
less appearance of mime-actors, of the employment of women
for female roles, of the unrealistic and grotesque presentation

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[13] Diomedes *De arte gramm.* 3 = *GL* 1.491.13–19 K: *mimus est sermonis cuius
libet imitatio et motus sine reverentia, vel factorum et dictorum turpium cum lascivia imi-
tatio; a Graecis ita definitur* μῖμός ἐστιν μίμησις βίου τά τε συγκεχωρημένα καὶ
ἀσυγχώρητα περιέχων. *mimus dictus* παρὰ τὸ μιμεῖσθαι, *quasi solus imitetur,
cum et alia poemata idem faciant; sed solus quasi privilegio quodam quod fuit com-
mune possedit: similiter atque is qui versum facit dictus* ποιητής, *cum et artifices,
cum aeque quid faciant, non dicantur poetae.* Diomedes does not render faith-
fully the Greek definition which he cites, since he omits from his version
the Greek words τά τε συγκεχωρημένα. For him mime can only be vulgar
and obscene, but the impression that mime-performances contained noth-
ing but sex and violence is inaccurate and misleading (see Rawson *Vulgar-
ity* for an excellent discussion of this). Diomedes' passage and its possible
source are discussed by Giancotti *Mimo* 26–8, Reich *Mimus* 263–74, and R.
Janko, *Aristotle on comedy: Towards a reconstruction of* Poetics *II* (London 1984)
48–9.

[14] Cf. Chor. *Apol. Mim.* 88: ἐπεὶ δὲ καὶ μίμησις ὑπάρχει τὸ ἐπιτήδευμα,
ἑκατέρας δὲ ἰδέας μετέχει – νῦν μὲν γὰρ οὐ σεμνὰ σχηματίζονται, νῦν δὲ
πάσης αἰσχύνης ἀπηλλαγμένα.

[15] Cf. Evanth. *exc. de com.* 4.1, p. 21 Wessner: *mimos ab diuturna imitatione vilium
rerum ac levium personarum*; 6.2, p. 26 Wessner: *planipedia autem dicta ob humilitatem
argumenti eius ac vilitatem actorum.*

of low situations,[16] and of the importance of dance in these plays.[17]

The definition of Isidore of Seville, writing in the seventh century (*Orig.* 18.49), is even less original, reliable, and detailed than that of Diomedes. Isidore identifies the harmony between plot and bodily movements (*motui corporis*) as the key to the success of a mime-performance (is he thinking about pantomime?), and relates the Greek etymology of the word *mimus* to imitation of human affairs without giving further explanation as to why this should be so. His use of imperfect tenses (*habebant*, *agerent*, *pronuntiare*(*n*)*t*, *componebantur*) suggests that he refers to spectacles of a bygone age, but his mention of a mime-'composer who announced in advance the plot before the performance of the play' is surely a garbled version of having a prologue-speaker informing the audience about the plot-line in some *fabulae palliatae*.[18]

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[16] On mime-caricature see G. M. A. Richter, 'Grotesques and the mime', *AJA* 17 (1913) 149–56; J.-P. Cèbe, *La caricature et la parodie dans le monde romain antique des origines à Juvénal* (Paris 1966) 39–40, 45.

[17] That mime-actors, like pantomime-actors, danced is confirmed by Ovid *AA* 1.501–2 (dancing in an adultery mime), Gell. 1.11.12 (*ut planipedi saltanti*), Diod. Sic. 31.16.3, Ath. 195F (dancing mimes at the court of Antiochus IV Epiphanes), Philo *De agr.* 35, and Porph. on Hor. *S.* 2.6.72 (the harmonious combination of Lepos' speech and dancing). Dance was a common feature in the description of the activities of the mime-performers Bassilla, Eucharis, and C. Caecilius Chariton Iuventius (*IG* 14.2342 and *add.* on p. 704 of that volume; *CIL* 6.10096 = *ILS* 5213 = *ILLRP* 803 = Buecheler *Carmina* 55; B. Gentili *Archivio storico siracusano* 7 (1961) 20–1). See also Chor. *Apol. Mim.* 124 (δεῖ γὰρ καὶ φωνὴν εὐφραίνουσαν ἔχειν καὶ ῥέουσαν γλῶτταν ἑτοίμως . . . δεῖ καὶ χορεύειν ἐπίστασθαι καὶ μὴ φθέγγεσθαι μόνον ἐπιδεξίως, ἀλλὰ καὶ βλέμματι θέλγειν) and Stephanis *Choricius* ad loc.

[18] In addition to these attempts at a definition of mime-drama, there exist some references in which mime seems to be linked with comedy. The emperor Marcus Aurelius (11.6.2) views farcical mime not as a variety of comedy but as its successor (especially as the successor of New Comedy). In the fourth century, mime is considered by Evanthius (*exc. de com.* 4.1) as a form of comedy together with *fabula togata*, *fabula palliata*, *fabula Atellana*, and others. The sophist Choricius of Gaza, writing in the sixth century AD, defended the theatre of the mimes and stressed the benefits for its audience. Reversing the formula of Donatus, Choricius regarded *comedy* as a form of mime, and he was justified

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According to the definition of Diomedes and his unnamed
Greek source (cited above), mime – unlike epic, tragedy, and
comedy proper – dealt with both licit and illicit subjects. This
vague description is unhelpful because it covers a vast range of
topics from all spheres of life and culture. Moreover, there is
some evidence that mimographers borrowed from the realms
of epic, tragedy, and myth stories which they then exploited
for humorous effect. Can we be more precise about the plot-
lines of the plays performed on the mime-stage? Were there in
mimes stories of recognition and reunion between parents and
long-lost children, of reconciliation between estranged spouses,
and of trickery and deceit between masters and servants? The
fragmentary evidence of Roman mimes does not allow any-
thing more than speculations on the mime-repertoire, although
the scanty references to this subject in our primary (theatri-
cal and non-theatrical) sources do enable us to compile with
caution a list of *some* plot-elements of mime-plays. A host of
pagan and Christian authors, from Horace and Ovid to John
Chrysostom and Choricius, allude to or describe mimes fea-
turing the themes of adultery (perhaps the most popular stock
theme of a mime-script), mock weddings, staged trials, staged
shipwrecks, the fugitive slave, anti-luxury, false deaths, cunning
schemes, poison-intrigues, and reversals of fortune.[19] Moreover,

in doing this, since mime had virtually driven comedy off the stage many
centuries before his time. See Kehoe *Studies* 6–8.
  [19] Adulterous affairs: Hor. *S.* 2.7.58–63; Ovid *Tr.* 2.497–506, 2.514; Sen.
Contr. 2.4.5, 6.7.2; Iuv. 6.42–4 and schol. Iuv. 6.44 = 77.8 Wessner; Iuv. 6.275–8
and schol. Iuv. 6.276 = 91.18 Wessner; Iuv. 8.196–9; Tert. *Ad nat.* 1.16.12–13;
Minucius Felix *Octav.* 37.12; *HA*, *Heliog.* 25.4; Cyprian *Ad Donatum* 8; Lactant.
Div. instit. 6.20.27; Donat. on Verg. *Aen.* 5.65; Salvianus *De gubern. dei* 6.(3.)19 =
PL 53.111; John Chrysostom 6.558 = *PG* 56.543 and 57.72; Choric. *Apol. Mim.*
30, 55; Kehoe *Adultery*; Reynolds *Adultery*. Weddings: Sen. *Contr.* 2.4.5; Ps.-
Quint. *Decl.* 279.17 Winterbottom. Trials: Philo *De Legat.* 359; Choric. *Apol.
Mim.* 30, 55. Shipwrecks: Sen. *De ira* 2.2.5. The fugitive slave: Suet. *Gaius* 45.2;
Sen. *Ep.* 114.6; Petr. *Sat.* 117.4; Iuv. 13.110–11 and schol. Iuv. 13.109 = 205.4
Wessner. Against luxury: Sen. *De brev. vitae* 12.8. False deaths: Petr. *Sat.* 94.12–5.
Cunning schemes: Cic. *Pro Rab. Post.* 35; Petr. *Sat.* 106.1; Ps-Quint. *Decl.* 338.27–
8 Winterbottom; Artem. *Oneir.* 1.76 = 68.16 Hercher. Poison-intrigues: Plut.