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Clodia: A Threat to the Republic

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Clodia: A Threat to the Republic

Cicero evidently understands that a successful oration must be grounded in persuasion, which can be accomplished by using his relationship with the audience to elicit their serious consideration and efforts to benefit the case. Unfortunately for the figure he casts as chief villain in the *Pro Caelio*, Cicero goes to extremes to characterize her to invoke fear and hatred among the audience. He wants the jurors to understand that his defendant, Caelius, should be acquitted on the pretense that his ex-lover, Clodia, is to blame.¹ To address the charges against Caelius in light of this woman, Cicero goes beyond claims of Clodia's public sexual immorality and overall lack of virtue to fabricate a woman who herself obtains enough power and resources to pose a threat to the republic he is so keen on protecting.

While L. Sempronius Atratinus initiated a prosecution against Caelius on account of five charges of political violence (*vis*),² Cicero's defense strategy was to create a striking figure to be the center of his defense. The object of Cicero's pure brutality is Clodia Metelli, a woman from the famously noble and politically eminent Claudian family.³ She married the consul Q. Metellus Celer, whose death in 59 B.C. made her a widow. Moreover, Clodia was already linked to Cicero since her brother, tribune P. Clodius Pulcher, was one of Cicero's enemies after he sought out revenge by sending Cicero into exile.⁴ Therefore, Cicero already had a bitter personal investment with Clodius and, by extension, Clodia.

From the beginning of his defense, Cicero triggers a distinct emotion in his audience that suggests Clodia is a serious threat: a fear of powerful and resourceful women against the

¹James M. May, "Ciceronian Oratory in Context." *Brill's Companion to Cicero: Oratory and Rhetoric*. (Brill: 2022) p. 61.

²Stephen Ciraolo, "Introduction." *Cicero: Pro Caelio*. xxix.

³Anne Leen. "Clodia Oppugnatrix: The Domus Motif in Cicero's *Pro Caelio*." *The Classical Journal*. (2001) 141; similarly in Marilyn B. Skinner. "Clodia Metelli," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 113 (1983) pp. 273-275.

⁴James M. May. "Chapter One: Cicero: His Life and Career." *Brill's Companion to Cicero: Oratory and Rhetoric*. (Brill: 2002) 10-11.

republic. To understand just how extreme this characterization is, this emotion must be considered in the context of Cicero's audience: the male jurors. It is a heavy emotional charge on Cicero's part, but he knows it will tap into his audience's undeniable misogyny. Cicero arouses gendered anxieties the jurors when he claims that this trial having "no crime, no audacity, no violence (*vim*),"⁵ was being financed (*opibus*) by a prostitute (*meretriciis*).⁶ Even without naming her, the jurors could be counted on to understand that this prostitute (*meretrix*) would be Clodia. This description sets up the argument as centered on a woman, who is claimed to be disreputable and dishonorable due to the social construction of prostitution. Moreover, she supposedly has enough resources to provide and pursue such a serious matter. If the audience catches onto this, all that follows should already dull support for the woman involved.

Now that there is an awareness of some prostitute behind Caelius and this case, Cicero trolls his audience by conserving her appearance until later. This space could be most useful for the jurors to gather feelings about women in their own lives and hypothesize if they have someone in their own family who would be similar to Clodia. And so, when he makes the following reference to this woman, Cicero begins his construction of her as a monster within the republic. Cicero includes an obvious citation of the Roman poet Ennius' *Medea exsul*⁷:

"For never a wandering woman' would have presented this trouble to us, 'Medea sick in spirit, wounded by savage love.' And so, indeed, jurors, you will discover that which I will show you, when I will have come to this point, that this Palatine Medea and the

⁵ *cum audiat nullum facinus, nullam audaciam, nullam vim in iudicium vocari* (*Pro Caelio* 1.11-12) All Latin translations are mine.

⁶ *ipse in iudicium et vocet et vocarit, oppugnari autem opibus meretriciis* (*Pro Caelio* 1.15)

⁷ Stephen Ciruolo. "Vocabulary and Notes." *Cicero: Pro Caelio*. p. 90-91.

change of residence was whether the cause of all bad deeds of the young man or rather of the gossip of all.”⁸

While he continues to draw out (*ostendam*) his characterization of Clodia, Cicero presents this allusion to the witch Medea, who herself sought out revenge by killing her own two children, the king and his daughter after her husband, Jason, left her.

By presenting her in this manner, Cicero makes Clodia Rome’s real-life Medea (*Palatinam Medeam*). Medea’s literary tradition shows that men are fearful of her since her irrational behavior has the potential to pollute the minds of their wives and daughters. If they become like her, they may also cause destruction to their family and the patriarchy. Fear of this woman and her possible harm is explicitly expressed in the conversation between King Creon and Medea in Euripides’ *Medea*: Creon is concerned that if Medea remains in Corinth, she may stir up some harmful thoughts in his own daughter on account of her cleverness in evil.⁹ If Clodia, like Medea, were to use her intelligence to entice other women to this state of being, they would make many men fearful for the sake of their families and the patriarchy. There is certainly a parallel where an ex-lover (Medea/Clodia) seeks revenge against their abandoner (Jason/Caelius). While Cicero does not present Clodia as the killer of her own children, he relies on this extreme image to invoke fear in the jurors that women have an innate potential to do destructive deeds: they just need something to prompt it.¹⁰ For Cicero, this shows that this woman can pull off the most absurd things: whether it comes in the form of killing her children or risking the lives of many men with political power.

⁸ ‘*Nam numquam era errans’ hanc molestiam nobis exhiberet ‘Medea animo aegro, amore saevo saucia.’ Sic enim, iudices, reperietis quod, cum ad id loci venero, ostendam, hanc Palatinam Medeam migrationemque hanc adolescenti causam sive malorum omnium sive potius sermonum fuisse. (Pro Caelio 18.209-216)*

⁹ Euripides. *Medea*. 311-370, translated by Ian Johnston of Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, BC.

¹⁰ Marilyn B. Skinner. “Palatine Medea,” *Clodia Metelli: The Tribune’s Sister*. (Oxford: 2011) p. 105-107.

After Cicero notes other details regarding Caelius' charges and largely Clodia's sexual immorality and possible investment, he uses this developing characterization of Clodia as an angle to address the accusation of Clodia poisoning her late husband, Q. Metellus. Cicero does not seem to have the grounds to formally accuse Clodia of this charge. Still, he includes an emotional account of his death, particularly stressing how Metellus' death would be a loss for the republic:

“Indeed at that time that man dying, although his mind had now been oppressed in other matters, he was reserving his last sense for the memory of the republic (*ad memoriam rei publicae*), when while looking at me crying he was showing with a fading and dying voice, how great a storm threatens me, how great a tempest threatens the state (*[impenderet] civitati*), and when he often striking his wall, which was shared with Quintus Catulus, he was often naming Catulus, often me, and most often the republic (*saepissime rem publicam*), he was grieving not so much because he was dying as because both the fatherland (*patriam*) and also I were being robbed of his protection.”¹¹

Cicero pointly includes grave concern for the republic (*ad memoriam rei publicae*) that follows the death of Metellus. If the jurors understand this gossip, then Clodia can be seen as an actual threat to the republic.

Cicero claims that the death of Metellus threatens the state (*[impenderet] civitati*) and the fatherland (*patriam*). And so, Rome would no longer be protected because it was being robbed (*spoliari*) by Clodia. If Clodia actually killed her husband, Cicero implies that the republic would be at a serious disadvantage. He gives his best attempt at characterizing Clodia as a serious

¹¹ *Quo quidem tempore ille moriens, cum iam ceteris ex partibus oppressa mens esset, extremum sensum ad memoriam rei publicae reservabat, cum me intuens flentem significabat interruptis ac morientibus vocibus, quanta impenderet procella mihi, quanta tempestas civitati, et cum parietem saepe feriens eum, qui cum Q. Catulo fuerat ei communis, crebro Catulum, saepe me, saepissime rem publicam nominabat, ut non tam se mori quam spoliari suo praesidio cum patriam, tum etiam me doleret. (Pro Caelio 59.736-744)*

threat, first to Caelius, then to the republic through her close association with “mad” mythical women. He uses the death of her husband and supposed involvement as a manifestation of these qualities to show that Clodia certainly has the potential to be involved in Caelius’ charges.

Cicero drives this point home later in the speech by referencing Caelius’ witty description of Clodia as a “two-bit (*quadrantaria*) Clytemnestra.”¹² Before he unfolds the events at the Senian baths, Cicero drops this reference which should evoke for the jurors the downfall Clytemnestra created by killing her husband, Agamemnon. Again, Clodia’s associations with both Medea and Clytemnestra *literally* surrounding the suspicious death of her husband demonstrate the type of women Cicero claims Clodia to be in the context of Caelius’ life and Rome’s political climate.

After Cicero accomplishes this, the other piece of work entails convincing the audience that she actually has the means to pull it off. Therefore, Cicero examines her figure within the boundaries of the resources she possesses or lack thereof. Keeping in mind the emotions being elicited for this woman, Cicero puts Clodia right into the scheme of things: “Moreover there are two charges, one of gold and one of poison; in which one and the same character is involved. Gold was taken from Clodia (*sumptum a Clodia*), and poison was sought, which was to be given to Clodia, as it is said.”¹³ Cicero suggests that this woman had enough wealth to support the cause for which Caelius was mistakenly charged: the attempted murder of Dio.¹⁴ It would be fitting that Clodia would finance something so shameless because she also uses her wealth to support her own luxurious lifestyle:

“Now, I say nothing against that woman; but, if there was some woman unlike that one who makes herself open (*pervolgaret*) to all, who openly had some other man selected as

¹² Marilyn B. Skinner. “Palatine Medea,” *Clodia Metelli: The Tribune’s Sister*. (Oxford: 2011) p. 110

¹³ *Sunt autem duo crimina, auri et veneni; in quibus una atque eadem persona versatur. Aurum sumptum a Clodia, venenum quaesitum quod Clodiae daretur, ut dicitur. (Pro Caelio 30.354-356)*

¹⁴ *Aurum sumpsit, ut dicitis, quod L. Lucei servis daret, per quos Alexandrinus Dio qui tum apud Luceium habitabat necaretur. (Pro Caelio 51.625-629)*

her lover, in whose gardens, house, Baiae, her lusts of all were coming and passing freely, who even supported young men and sustained the frugality of fathers at her own expenses (*suis sumptibus*), if a widow were living freely, if she were living recklessly and shamelessly, if a rich woman were living extravagantly (*dives effuse*), if a lustful woman were living in a whorish manner (*meretricio more*).”¹⁵

Straightaway, Cicero claims that Clodia has the financial means to support several matters on her own (*suis sumptibus*). He wants to demonstrate to his audience that when a woman, who can be greatly feared, is in a position to obtain resources to her advantage, she is in an even more threatening position. This works very well because Cicero knows that the male jurors do not want to see women in their positions of power, particularly in a position to dismantle their patriarchal society.

Presenting Clodia with such resources supports her ability to partake in these charges against Caelius. Still, Cicero’s speech has obvious inconsistencies that weaken his case and further undermine the historical veracity of his characterization of Clodia. Continuing his defense, Cicero slowly contradicts his previous characterizations regarding Clodia’s wealth, effectively casting doubt on her role in these charges. It begins to become imprecise when Cicero describes that Clodia prized her suitors gifts, being a frequent despoiler of people with wealth: “Did you dare to take the gold from your chest, to despoil that Venus statue of yours of its ornaments, despoiler of your other lovers, although you knew for how great a crime this gold was sought, for the murder of the ambassador for the perpetual stain of evil of Lucius Luceius, a

¹⁵ *Nihil iam in istam mulierem dico; sed, si esset aliqua dissimilis istius quae se omnibus pervolgaret, quae haberet palam decretum semper aliquem, cuius in hortos, domum, Baias, iure suo libidines omnium commearent, quae etiam aleret adolescentis et parsimoniam patrum suis sumptibus sustineret; si vidua libere, proterva petulanter, dives effuse, libidinosa meretricio more viveret. (Pro Caelio 38.474-482)*

very venerable and untouched man?"¹⁶ This completely shifts Cicero's previous narrative and puts Clodia in a different position. Here, she is not the one providing. Instead, she is put in a much more dependent relationship with her suitors. This contradiction weakens the efficacy of Cicero's argument that Clodia has enough resources to pull off something as disgraceful as using gold to destroy powerful political figures.

Looking into the strengths and weaknesses of Cicero's characterization of Clodia is necessary to evaluate its historical veracity. Cicero was undoubtedly a skilled orator and is famously known for going to any and all extremes to win an argument. This is exactly what he did here. Cicero's claims against Clodia are completely based in *fama*,¹⁷ so he muddles with the character of Clodia only for the sake of winning an argument. The true figure of Clodia is a long-time debate and can be continuously challenged within the text itself. Due to the obvious extremes and lack of legitimate grounds, it can be concluded that Cicero's Clodia is certainly not some insane Medea figure or war-like leader. However, because she is a woman with enough gossip surrounding her problematic qualities, Clodia is an easy target to objectify. This was further stimulated by the fact that Cicero's audience was a group of male jurors with prejudices against powerful women with resources and abilities to participate in serious matters.

Cicero could only successfully define Clodia as ruthlessly and villainously as he did and present her as a possible threat to the republic because he touched his audience's deep misogyny. Clodia's connection to women like Medea and Clytemnestra allows Cicero to play with the jurors' fears. After Cicero presents these potential qualities in Clodia, he needs to show his audience that, in reality, Clodia had the means to be a part of Caelius' charges, where he outlines

¹⁶ *Tunc aurum ex armario tuo promere ausa es, tunc Venerem illam tuam spoliare ornamentis, spoliatricem ceterorum, cum scires, quantum ad facinus aurum hoc quaereretur, ad necem legati, ad L. Luccei, sanctissimi hominis atque integerrimi, labem sceleris sempiternam?* (*Pro Caelio* 52.632-637)

¹⁷ Basil Dufallo. "Appius' Indignation: Gossip, Tradition, and Performance in Republic Rome," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-2014), 2001, Vol. 131 (2001), pp. 122-128

her excessive wealth. However, inconsistencies in these particular descriptions muddle her overall character, thus impacting how the audience perceives the authentic Clodia. Regardless, Cicero is well-trained in persuasion and fabricated an appropriate character for Clodia so that the audience may perceive her as a villainous threat to Caelius and, quite possibly, the republic.

Endnotes

1. James M. May, "Ciceronian Oratory in Context." *Brill's Companion to Cicero: Oratory and Rhetoric*. (Brill: 2022) p. 61.
2. Stephen Ciruolo, "Introduction." *Cicero: Pro Caelio*. p. xxix.
3. Anne Leen. "Clodia Oppugnatrix: The Domus Motif in Cicero's Pro Caelio." *The Classical Journal*. (2001) 141; similarly in Marilyn B. Skinner. "Clodia Metelli," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 113 (1983) pp. 273-275.
4. James M. May. "Chapter One: Cicero: His Life and Career." *Brill's Companion to Cicero: Oratory and Rhetoric*. (Brill: 2002) 10-11.
5. *cum audiat nullum facinus, nullam audaciam, nullam vim in iudicium vocari (Pro Caelio 1.11-12)* All Latin translations are mine.
6. *ipse in iudicium et vocet et vocarit, oppugnari autem opibus meretriciis (Pro Caelio 1.15)*
7. Stephen Ciruolo. "Vocabulary and Notes." *Cicero: Pro Caelio*. p. 90-91.
8. *'Nam numquam era errans' hanc molestiam nobis exhiberet 'Medea animo aegro, amore saevo saucia.' Sic enim, iudices, reperietis quod, cum ad id loci venero, ostendam, hanc Palatinam Medeam migrationemque hanc adulescenti causam sive malorum omnium sive potius sermonum fuisse. (Pro Caelio 18.209-216)*
9. Euripides. *Medea*. 311-370, translated by Ian Johnston of Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, BC.
10. Marilyn B. Skinner. "Palatine Medea," *Clodia Metelli: The Tribune's Sister*. (Oxford: 2011) pp. 105-107.
11. *Quo quidem tempore ille moriens, cum iam ceteris ex partibus oppressa mens esset, extremum sensum ad memoriam rei publicae reservabat, cum me intuens flentem significabat interruptis ac morientibus vocibus, quanta impenderet procella mihi, quanta tempestas civitati, et cum parietem saepe feriens eum, qui cum Q. Catulo fuerat ei communis, crebro Catulum, saepe me, saepissime rem publicam nominabat, ut non tam se mori quam spoliari suo praesidio cum patriam, tum etiam me doleret. (Pro Caelio 59.736-744)*
12. Marilyn B. Skinner. "Palatine Medea," *Clodia Metelli: The Tribune's Sister*. (Oxford: 2011) p. 110
13. *Sunt autem duo crimina, auri et veneni; in quibus una atque eadem persona versatur. Aurum sumptum a Clodia, venenum quaesitum quod Clodiae daretur, ut dicitur. (Pro Caelio 30.354-356)*
14. *Aurum sumpsit, ut dicitis, quod L. Lucei servis daret, per quos Alexandrinus Dio qui tum apud Luceium habitabat necaretur. (Pro Caelio 51.625-629)*

15. *Nihil iam in istam mulierem dico; sed, si esset aliqua dissimilis istius quae se omnibus pervolgaret, quae haberet palam decretum semper aliquem, cuius in hortos, domum, Baias, iure suo libidines omnium commearent, quae etiam aleret adolescentis et parsimoniam patrum suis sumptibus sustineret; si vidua libere, proterva petulanter, dives effuse, libidinosa meretricio more viveret. (Pro Caelio 38.474-482)*
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17. Basil Dufallo. "Appius' Indignation: Gossip, Tradition, and Performance in Republic Rome," *Transactions of the American Philological Association (1974-2014)*, 2001, Vol. 131 (2001), pp. 122-128.

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