

The Pygmalion Dream Revisited: Constructing Claudia Quinta
as an Ideal of Virtue in Augustan Literature

The virtuous women of the Republican period, particularly Lucretia, and Cornelia, were carefully reconstructed in later literature as ideals of matrimony and motherhood. In order to create perfect examples that can be held up in comparison to other less perfect but more realistic women, their actual historical persons were subsumed by their supposed perfections. The end result is not a famous woman, but a personified virtue.

Like her sisters of Republican history, Claudia Quinta is recreated as an idea of sexual purity. When her chastity is called into question because of her general self-presentation, she proves her innocence by pulling the barge of the Magna Mater out of a mud bank without aid. This trial by ordeal most closely resembles the trials undergone by Vestal Virgins whose purity, like Claudia Quinta's, is in doubt.¹

In order to be useful to later writers as a personification of virtue, Claudia Quinta is stripped of her historical identity to the point that her authenticity must be called into question. She is not identified with a patronymic, as was customary for Republican women,² nor is her husband's name mentioned, for all she is called a Matron. Her only identifier that distinguishes her as separate from every other daughter of the gens Claudia is the numeric "Quinta." There is no way of even knowing what branch of that large clan she is from.

Claudia Quinta is a figure without context. She has no family and no history beyond her one great act. While it is not unusual for Republican women to appear in the historical record

¹ Val. Max. 1.1.6-7; 8.1.6 absol. Pliny NH 28.3.1; Aug. C. D. 10.16; Tertull. 22.12 and D. H. 2.69.1-3; 2.68.3-5; Prop. 4.11.53-54.

² Bauman, R. (1992). p. 7.

briefly then disappear, all other women are at least given the context of male relation and family. Claudia Quinta becomes nothing but a single moment of tested chastity.

In this capacity, she can be useful to Cicero as a comparison to Clodia's corruption.³ Later, even her status as a matron is taken away. To further emphasize the importance of her sexual purity, the matron performing a Vestal's trial of virtue is turned into a Vestal by later authors. Claudia loses all historical identity so that she can be a useful literary tool.

Like other perfect examples of virtue, Claudia Quinta loses all her identity that does not specifically pertain to her role as a woman of proven sexual propriety. In the case of Lucretia, the perfect wife, and Cornelia, the perfect mother, it is necessary to preserve their relationships to their men folk, so some of their lives outside of their virtue are retained. Claudia Quinta is reduced to a name and an act because she is more useful to authors as a trope than a historical person.

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³ *Pro Caelio* 14.34

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