

Ox-Eyes' Bugle and Tullia's Fane: The Power of Clodia in Cicero's Letters

The power of Lesbia over her longing lover Catullus, whose paroxysms of jealousy and desire create rather alarming symptoms of physical illness (poem 51), has captured the imagination of schoolchildren and scholars for millennia. Even more revolutionary than the erotic distress of the Polymetric poems is her adoption into the male sphere of *amicitia* in the Epigrams (Ross 80-94; Dyson). When Cicero caricatures Clodia Metelli (almost certainly Catullus' "Lesbia") as a scheming and politically powerful *meretrix* in the *Pro Caelio*, his fugue on masculine fears shares many themes with the bitterly passionate lyrics of Catullus. Yet most readers who know Clodia primarily from poetry and oratory, two genres with a rather dubious relationship to truth, are less familiar with a source that offers to these both a confirmation and a corrective: Cicero's letters (Skinner). After briefly sketching the "poetic" and "rhetorical" Lesbia/Clodia, this paper will discuss the candid and fascinating glimpses of Cicero's "epistolary" Clodia, a woman who played a formidable behind-the-scenes role both in the turbulent politics of the late Republic and in Cicero's personal affairs.

Though we may discount Plutarch's report that Clodia wanted Cicero for her husband (*Cic.* 29.3), Cicero's letters from the early 60s do indicate that the two were friends (*Fam.* 5.2.6). Cicero's relationship with Clodia deteriorated as his enmity grew with her half-brother Publius Clodius Pulcher, and even before Clodius engineered Cicero's exile the incest theme so prominent in the post-reditum speeches appears in private banter (*Att.* 2.1.5). Yet despite the increasing hostility that would culminate in the *Pro Caelio*'s public excoriation of both siblings, Clodia remains one of Cicero's most important sources of sensitive information: calling her "Ox-Eyes" in mocking reference to the Homeric epithet of Hera, Cicero repeatedly pumps his friend Atticus for what Clodia has told him in private conversation. Cicero's cryptic reference to "Ox-Eyes' bugle" (*Att.* 2.12.2) in a list of Clodius' henchmen suggests that Clodia's role may have exceeded spreading gossip (a powerful enough force, to be sure). But the sequel offers a surprise ending that is an even more important comment on the "reality" behind Cicero's public posturing, on the complex and shifting alliances of the Roman aristocracy, and on the potential independence of Roman noblewomen. More than a decade after the *Pro Caelio*, Clodia reappears in Cicero's letters as the owner of an estate that Cicero wants to buy for a shrine to his recently deceased daughter, Tullia. No visible trace of hostility remains; Cicero's only doubt is whether her wealth and her affection for the place will prevent her from selling (*Att.* 12.42.1-2)—not whether his publicly mocking her as a whore and a murderess might cause her some hesitation in doing business with him.

Most of our literary evidence for the Roman Republic, written of course by free adult male aristocrats, tends to give the impression that women mattered only as sex objects, priestesses, or mothers of statesmen. But in correspondence that was never intended for the public eye, Cicero reveals some of the informal yet essential ways that women could influence the course of history in a man's world.

Dyson, Julia T. 2007. "The Lesbia Poems." In *A Companion to Catullus*, ed. Marilyn Skinner (Blackwell 2007), 254-75.

Ross, David O., Jr. 1969. *Style and Tradition in Catullus*. Harvard Univ. Press.

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