

DANGEROUS LIAISONS : THE WOMEN BEHIND THE BONA DEA SCANDAL OF 62 BC.

IMPORTANT NOTE TO THE FOLLOWING PAPER:

Sall. Cat. 15 even as youth Cataline had many shameful intrigues, with a vestal virgin, and other affairs equally unlawful and impious. Sources in MRR 2.114. Fabia the Vestal Virgin, sister of Terentia, was accused of incest with Cataline by Clodius in 73 BC, defended by Lutatius Catulus.

Imagine 24-7 news networks during the Late Roman Republic exploiting the following events:

BREAKING NEWS

Pompey the Great has divorced his wife Mucia when he returned from the East in 62 BC; rumor had it she was having an affair with Julius Caesar.

BREAKING NEWS

Caesar has divorced Pompeia (no relation to Pompey¹) following the scandal of the Bona Dea sacrilege. Pompeia was rumored to have had an affair with P. Clodius, who disguised himself as a woman to visit her during the most sacred rites of the Great Goddess.² These transpired at Caesar's house, where Caesar's own mother and sister apprehended Clodius in their midst. According to our source (Suet. Iul. 74.2), "When summoned as a witness

against Clodius, Caesar declared that he had no evidence, although both his mother Aurelia and his sister Julia had given the same jurors a faithful account of the whole affair. On being asked why it was then that he had divorced his wife, he replied, ‘Because I maintain that the members of my family should be free from suspicion as well as from accusation.’”

BREAKING NEWS

As Clodius’ trial for sacrilege approached, rumor has it that Clodius’ sister, Clodia, has made sexual advances toward M. Tullius Cicero in an effort to compromise his testimony against her brother. Clodius claimed as his alibi that he was not in Rome on the day of the rites; however, Cicero claimed to have spoken to Clodius in Rome merely hours before the ceremony. Again according to our sources Cicero’s wife, Terentia, was so upset by Clodia’s advances toward her husband that she insisted that he testify in the trial, which he did. Clodius was acquitted by 3 votes (31-25), following heated accusations of bribery and jury tampering. One should add that Clodia was married to Q. Caecilius Metellus Celer, soon to be consul (60 BC. Celer was also her step brother³), whose sister by blood was Mucia, the woman divorced by Pompey. Clodia was additionally rumored to be the mistress of the Roman poet Catullus.⁴

Apart from its place as a delicious exposé of Roman aristocratic mores, the trial resulting from the sacrilege of the rites of the Bona Dea in 62 BC presents itself as a political anomaly, entitling us to ask how was it that so many aristocratic women became embroiled in it? What were their motives? What does this seemingly minor incident say about the role of aristocratic women in the political affairs of Late Republican Rome? While E. Fantham et al. (1994)⁵ elaborate a pattern of rising female autonomy among aristocratic Roman women at the this time, the progression from female independence in private life to proactive female behavior in politically charged judicial proceedings seems unprecedented. Investigation of this controversy requires that it be approached as carefully as possible.⁶

THE JULII:

The likely motives of Caesar's mother Aurelia and sister(s) Julia and Julia seems evident⁷ – obviously the fact that the sacrilege occurred in their house, “on their watch” as it were, would offer sufficient reason to press for an indictment against Clodius, and through him Pompeia. The violation of these rites by Aurelia's daughter-in-law and in her own house, thereby embarrassing not only the women of the household but the dignity of Caesar

as newly elected praetor and designated host of the rituals, would seem sufficient motive to prompt Aurelia and Julia to furnish public testimony in this instance. However, the behavior of Aurelia suggests that she had it in for Pompeia in a larger way and perhaps from the very outset of the young woman's marriage to Caesar. Despite the fact that the wife of the magistrate, namely Pompeia, was supposed to preside over the rituals, Plutarch demonstrates that Aurelia was decidedly in charge. (10) Once Clodius' presence was detected, "Aurelia put a stop to the sacred rites of the goddess and covered up the holy utensils. She then ordered the doors to be sealed and went all over the house with lighted torches in search of Clodius. He was found hiding in the room belonging to the maid who had let him into the house, and when it was discovered who he was, the women drove him out of doors. They then went away immediately while it was still night and told their husbands what had happened."⁸ In addition, Plutarch observes (Caes. 9) that the "women's part of the house was closely supervised and that Caesar's mother, Aurelia, was a person of strict respectability. She never let the young wife, that is, Pompeia, out of her sight and made it difficult and dangerous for the lovers to meet." According to Suetonius (Div. Iul. 74), both Aurelia and Julia furnished testimony publicly at the tribunal, even as Julius Caesar refused. There seems little doubt, therefore, that Caesar's

mother Aurelia and (presumably older sister) Julia were egging on the prosecution and fell in line in this regard with leading senators such as L. Licinius Lucullus, who bore his own grudge against his brother-in-law, P. Clodius.⁹ Outraged that their one opportunity to host the celebration of the rites of the Bona Dea in their own house was violated by their sister-in-law, Aurelia and Julia would seem to have harbored sufficient rancor against Pompeia to account for their zeal in testifying.

However, Judith Hallett has raised with me another intriguing suggestion, namely, that Aurelia and Julia saw the young, beautiful Pompeia as a threat to their control of Caesar's household and in particular to their claim on Caesar's inheritance. As the 40-year-old father of one daughter and no son, Caesar had no direct male heir. At the end of his life, this resulted in Caesar's naming his great grandnephews, Octavian, Q. Pedius, and L. Pinarius as his successors.¹⁰ All of these men were in fact the descendents of Caesar's sisters. Looking backward 18 years one could argue that Caesar's two sisters were determined in 62 BC to prevent the occurrence of a direct male heir to Caesar and that his young sexually active wife posed a significant threat.

The reasons for the marriage alliance between Caesar and Pompeia remain unknown. Given Caesar's own notorious love affairs, emotional love was unlikely to have played a factor.¹¹ The texts surrounding the scandal clearly demonstrate that the women of Caesar's household resented Pompeia's presence and dominated her in what can only be described as an oppressive manner. The hostility that this young woman encountered in a household 'locked down' by older women would appear to have been unbearable and raises the possibility that her action was in part a deliberate, premeditated act of rebellion. Since she could have found a less conspicuous moment to attempt a liaison with Clodius, she would appear to have chosen this one for dramatic effect. We need to hold that thought for the time being.

Next we must consider the likely motivation of Cicero's wife, TERENTIA: Descended possibly from the house of A. Terentius Varro Murena and married to Cicero between 80 and 77 BC, Terentia, according to Plutarch (Cic. 20), "was bold and energetic by nature, not to mention ambitious. Even Cicero observed that Terentia seemed more inclined to share in his public life than to devote herself to domestic responsibilities."¹² An interesting insight to her behavior during this episode is afforded by the fact that her half sister Fabia was herself a Vestal virgin. Since it is known that the Vestal

Virgins presided over the rites of the Bona Dea, Fabia and Terentia were most probably present at the sacrilege that transpired at Caesar's house.¹³ In fact, Terentia's presence was all but required by the fact that as wife of the consul of the preceding year, she herself had hosted these same rites at Cicero's house. During that previous ceremony Terentia, the Vestal Virgins, and other aristocratic women used the occasion of the rites to make a decided political statement in support of her husband's administration. It so happens that the celebration of the rites had occurred at the very moment that Cicero was attempting to compel the Senate to execute the conspirators aligned with Catiline. Terentia and the other women present at the ceremony claimed to have witnessed a portent that she immediately related to her husband (Plut. Cic. 20).¹⁴

A sign was given to the women who were sacrificing.¹⁵ ...the vestal virgins told Terentia to go at once to her husband and to tell him to act as he had decided for the good of his country, since the goddess was sending him a great light to promise him both safety and glory.

Terentia plausibly enjoyed a particular devotion to the rites, therefore. Her sister Fabia was a Vestal, Terentia herself had presided over the rites in the

previous year, and she had exploited them publicly as a means to defend her husband. To witness the deliberate mockery of these rites by Pompeia and Clodius the very next year was conceivably more than she could tolerate. However, this also raises the legitimate question whether or not Pompeia and Clodius' decision to sully the rites was in fact a deliberate form of protest. Perhaps they did this to win the approval of vanquished Catilinarian sympathizers who were still nursing their wounds. Again I must ask that you hold that thought.

We are told additionally that Clodius' sister, the notorious Clodia of Cicero's *Pro Caelio* and presumably the Lesbia of Catullus' Love Poems, made advances toward Cicero after her brother was indicted, particularly once it became clear that Cicero was to be the lead witness against him.¹⁶ As Plutarch informs us,

[29] Cicero was a friend of Clodius and at the time of Catiline's conspiracy had found him most anxious to help and protect him. However, when Clodius, in reply to the charge made against him, insisted that he had never even been in Rome at the time but had been staying at a place a long way away from the city, Cicero gave evidence against him and stated that he had come to his house where he had consulted him on various matters. This was perfectly true, but it was believed that Cicero gave his evidence not so much because of the truth of it as because he wished to put himself in the right with his own wife Terentia, who was very hostile to Clodius on account of his sister Clodia.⁶⁸ Terentia suspected Clodia of wanting to marry Cicero and thought that she was trying to arrange this with the help of a man called Tullus who was on particularly friendly and intimate terms with Cicero. Terentia's suspicions were aroused by the way in which Tullus kept on visiting and paying attentions to Clodia, who lived close by; and since Terentia had a violent will of her own and had gained the ascendancy over Cicero, she urged him on to join in the

67. November 62; cf. Gelzer, *Caesar*, 59 ff.

68. The eldest of the three sisters, wife of Q. Metellus Celer, *cos.* 60, and probably the Lesbia of Catullus. Cf. Cicero's *Pro Caelio*.

In other words, angered and alarmed by Clodia's advances toward her husband, Terentia compelled Cicero to testify against Clodius at the trial. In so doing, she helped to forge the bonds of hatred that linked Clodius and Cicero in later years, a hatred that culminated in Cicero's exile not to mention the ruin of his and Terentia's finances in 58 BC.¹⁷

We return now to CLODIA. Her example would require a paper in itself so my comments about her must remain brief. In an article currently in press I argue that Clodia played an active role in the emerging mob faction of her brother P. Clodius, and that this political activity helps to explain much of the scandalous aura that surrounded her supposed private life.¹⁸ In this respect she represents perhaps the most visible example of a pattern of

behavior assumed by a number of aristocratic females in this era, such as Aurelia Orestilla, Fulvia, and Sempronia, who were all implicated in the Catilinarian conspiracy (Sall. *Cat.* 25). These aristocratic women appear to have been emboldened by successful examples of political activism among contemporary underclass women.¹⁹ My point here is that the mob followings of radical politicians such as Catiline and Clodius were recruited from various disenfranchised elements of the urban population and that to cultivate this following, its leaders, including women like Sempronia and Clodia, had to frequent the same underclass venues, bars and taverns, as the men, thus, incurring scandalous reputations.

This having been said, it is important to observe that according to Plutarch Clodia's advances toward Cicero were interpreted by Terentia as a marriage proposal. If true this cannot have transpired short of some indication of mutual willingness on Cicero's part, and thus Clodia was merely probing where she sensed weakness.²⁰ Behind Clodia's tactics, to my mind, lay the necessity of insuring the acquittal of her brother P. Clodius, and if flirtation with Cicero advanced this agenda, then so be it.

All this leads back, ultimately, to the motivation of Caesar's young wife, Pompeia. As the daughter of Q. Pompeius Rufus, the consul of 88 BC, she would have to have been in her late 20s at the youngest in 62 BC. Given that her brother was old enough to marry Sulla's daughter in 88 BC (and be killed in the urban violence of that year), she seems more likely to have been in her early 30s. However great her reputed beauty, therefore, it's conceivable that she was neither as young nor as frivolous as the sources portray. As we noted above, marriage to Caesar had landed her in a household dominated by hostile older women. One can imagine that even if emotional attraction had induced her to marry Caesar, the atmosphere she encountered in his household would rapidly have extinguished such a sentiment. One scenario would posit, accordingly, that her decision to engage in a scandalous liaison with Clodius was an act of rebellion in response to her entrapment in this oppressive household. A younger woman, caged in the house of her in-laws, with an indifferent husband, may in this instance have been entirely willing to express her independence through sexual intrigue.

However, there is one more factor that needs to be considered. Her love affair with Clodius meant unquestionably that Pompeia knew as well his

sister, Clodia. It is, therefore, possible that along with Clodius and Clodia, she participated in the urban mob faction mentioned above. One must add to the mix the fact that Caesar and Crassus were similarly aligned with the Clodii at this juncture. Caesar's awareness of his obligations to this faction were in fact what prohibited him from speaking out against Clodius at the trial, despite the obvious embarrassment the scandal incurred him. Part of the problem was that both Caesar and Clodius were heavily funded by Crassus. Later that year Caesar needed a sizable surety from the last mentioned politician in order to depart for his praetorian command in Spain. That Pompeia and Clodius would have crossed paths many times in this social circle, thus enabling a love relationship to develop seems logical. But the chief question remains why these two needed to take this love affair to such an extreme.

A final scenario holds that the decision to engage in their sexual liaison at the rites of the Bona Dea in Caesar's house marked an intentional act of political effrontery and retaliation, instigated possibly by Pompeia, Clodius, and Clodia alike. It is conceivable, in other words, that demagogic politicians resented the way in which established Roman matrons had exploited the rites of the Bona Dea in a show of force on behalf of Cicero

the previous year. By so doing they politicized the rites themselves, transforming them from their intended religious importance into a form of a political statement. The scandal prompted by Pompeia and Clodius may have been a deliberate attempt on their part to retaliate against this decision and its use in the suppression of Catiline by violating the sanctity of these rites and with them the religious sensibilities of the worshipers themselves. This assumes, of course, that Clodius and Pompeia anticipated completing their tryst undetected (not to mention under the very noses of many distinguished women) and escaping to brag about it later among their popular supporters. However diabolical, it would have been, and ultimately became the stuff of legend.

In conclusion, my suspicion remains that the entire affair possessed unseen political significance, and that it was instigated in fact by the decision of Terentia and the Vestal Virgins to politicize the rites during the previous year. One might argue that these women had meddled where others felt they did not belong. As Erich Gruen and others have noted, the entire decade of the 60s was marked by tit-for-tat political sniping as various political factions positioned themselves for the return of Cn. Pompeius Magnus from the Greek East. A younger generation of political mavericks, Clodius,

Clodia, and perhaps Caesar's wife Pompeia were determined to turn the tables on these older women by further politicizing the rites through sacrilege. And as with the concoction of any practical joke there was always a high risk of things going haywire. This explanation suggests, nonetheless, that the conflict surrounding this scandal was as much generational as much as it was ideological.

END NOTES

¹ daughter of Q. Pompeius Rufus, granddaughter of L. Sulla

² The rites occurred at the beginning of December and were presided over by the Vestal Virgins in the house of a magistrate bearing imperium, who himself could not be present. Refs: Cic. *Att.* 1.13.3; 1.14.5-6, 16.1f.; Suet. *Iul.* 6.2, 74.2; Plut. *Caes.* 9-10; Plut. *Cic.* 29; Dio 37.45.2; Schol Bob. 85 St Plut. *Caes.* 9: It is not lawful for a man to be present at the rites not even to be in the house where they are being celebrated. The women perform the sacred ceremonies by themselves and these ceremonies are said to be very much like those of the Orphics. When the time for the festival comes, the consul or praetor at whose house it is being held goes away, as does every male creature in the household. His wife then takes over the house and arranges the decorations. The most important ceremonies take place by night; the women play together among themselves during the night-long celebration and there is much music as well." Dio 37.45.1, adds the fact that according to the *mos maiorum* it was the vestal virgins who carried out the rites at the residences of consuls and praetors out of sight of the entire male population.

³ Bradley 1991, 136.

⁴ (Cic. *Att.* 1.13.3; 1.14.5-6, 16.1f.; Suet. *Iul.* 6.2, 74.2; Plut. *Caes.* 9-10; Plut. *Cic.* 29; Dio 37.45.2; Schol Bob. 85 St).

⁵ E. Fantham et al., *Women in the Classical World*, Oxford 1994, Chapter 10, Excursus: The "New Woman": Representation and Reality, 280-293. Emphasizes rising female autonomy among aristocratic Roman females at the end of the Republic.

⁶ I personally believe that the attitudes of these people are extremely alien, if not entirely beyond the reach, of contemporary mindsets and that true reconstruction of their life perspectives is essentially impossible. At the outset one must recognize that aristocratic

female activity in the public arena was not altogether unique. Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi, and a woman generally recognized as the paragon of Roman matronly virtues, allegedly aided her younger son's efforts to resist the consuls and senate in 121 BC, though our one source for this questions the truth of this report. With Rome immersed in Civil War Julia, the widow of Marius reportedly urged her son not to assume the consulship in 82 BC, in the face of certain defeat and destruction at the hands of L. Cornelius Sulla. In a similar manner and within the same family grouping, Atia, the mother of Octavian strongly urged him in 44 BC not to return to Rome to assume his inheritance from his great granduncle the dictator Julius Caesar. Judith Hallett has argued that Roman aristocratic females exerted far greater influence over their brothers and sons than they did their husbands, and in that respect the behavior of several of the women just mentioned, Cornelia, Julia, Atia, Aurelia, and perhaps Clodia, confirm her point. Only the examples of Pompeia and Terentia stand out. Others could be mentioned: Fulvia the wife of M. Antony actually conducted warfare at Mutina on her husband's behalf, just as Octavia, later wife of Antony, weighed in against her brother to protect her children and those of Cleopatra, following their disastrous end. (See D. Delia 1991.) We should not be surprised that aristocratic females acted to protect their loved ones, particularly close family relations in these particular instances. However, the fact that so many women weighed in during the trial of the Bona Dea sacrilege, knowingly and unabashedly stepping into the public eye, remains remarkable. A closer consideration of the likely or probable motivation on the part of each of these women seems necessary. At first glance the motivation of several of these women appears relatively traditional, whereas, that of others appears to reflect emerging trends. From the perspective of blended aristocratic family constructs Keith Bradley 1991, 171, has identified a number of salient factors to bear in mind in this discussion. Roman aristocratic females were as much motivated as they were constrained by a number of conditions: the arranged nature of marriages, especially those controlled by the world of politics, and the relative unimportance of sentiment in compacting them; the impermanence of the marriage bond and the ease of its dissolution; the frequency of premature death and consequent availability of a surviving spouse to enter a new union; the likelihood that an individual's children would be broadly spaced in age; the likelihood that some of an individual's children would belong to the same generation as his or her grandchildren's; the likelihood that the husband and wife would either be significantly distanced in age or belong to different generations'; the immanence of the belief that marriage and procreation were culturally induced social obligations, not the result of individualistic choices;; the creation through serial marriage of networks of familial relationships which extended beyond the immediate household; to which I would add two: the likelihood that financial constraints rarely entered into consideration in arrangements, such as divorce and remarriage at least among aristocrats?; on the other hand, the importance of inheritance questions in blended family combines of this kind; By process of elimination let us investigate the degree to which any of these impediments played a part in the unfolding of this scandal.

⁷ Julia, 2 sisters of Caesar, the younger of whom married M. Atius Balbus, begetting Atia, mother of Octavian, she was probably the one who with her mother opposed to clodius in the bona dea thing

⁸ Plutarch continues, As soon as it was day then word was going about the city that Clodius had committed sacrilege and owed satisfaction not only to those who had been outraged by his conduct but also to the city and the gods. One of the tribunes, therefore, officially indicted Clodius for sacrilege and the most influential members of the senate banded themselves together against him. They gave evidence of a number of shocking crimes which he had committed; among which was adultery with his sister who was the wife of Lucullus.

⁹ Lucullus offered up additional salacious testimony, namely, that Clodius had engaged in incestuous relations with his own sister, namely, Lucullus' wife (Plut. Caes. 10).

¹⁰ Suet. Div. iul. 83, who adds that Caesar left a provision even at this time for the possibility of a son being subsequently born to himself and appointed several of the assassins as guardians to the boy.

¹¹ These included not merely Mucia noted above, but Servilia, the mother of Brutus, who sent a love letter to Caesar in the Senate house during the height of the debate over the Catilinarian conspiracy),

¹² and gave his a daughter (79?) and son (65).

¹³ *virgo nobilis* (Plut. Cat Min. 19.3; Ascon. Cic tog. Cand. 82 KS) According to Plutarch her dowry 120000 denarii (Cic. 8.2). Her role in cat consp. Plut. cic. 20.2; Dio 37.35.4; and trial of Clodius Plut cic 29.2; mentioned during Cicero's exile Cic. Fam 14.2.2; Cael. 50; their close relation remained until 51 bc with the engagement of tullia with dolabella without cicero's permission, and looks like the start of their conflict, cic. Att. 6.6.1; fam. 3.12.2; and in 48 they divorced over financial matters; 46 Cicero accused Terentia of messing with the dowry for Tullia? Sources later only legendary refs to her, Sallust 2.4 and Messalla corvinus 2.4 that she married them. The sources for her personality, plut. cic. 29.2, 41.

¹⁴ Plut. Cic. 20.2; Dio 37.35.4. On the next day, the famous debate re: what to do with the conspirators, Cato and Caesar's speeches in Sallust. CHECK Plut. Them. 13.3, Suet. Tib. 11.3, concerning the trial of Catiline in 73 BC. CHECK: Serv. Eclogues 8.105, *hoc uxori Ciceronis dicitur contigisse cum post peractum sacrificium libare vellet in cinerem: uae flamma eodem anno consulem futurum ostendit eius maritum, sicut Cicero in su testator poemate*. Cic. Cat. 4.3, shows that she was active in exposing the conspiracy. Sall. Invective 3, *ill ate magis extollunt, quae post consulatum cum Terentia uxore de re publica consuluisti, cum legis Plautiae iudicia domo faciebatis*. Check Cic. Fam. 14.2.2, 5.6.1; Plut Cic. 23. Cic. Cael. 50.

¹⁵ Deleted: *The fire was on the altar was assumed to have already gone out, but from the ashes and burned bark a great bright flame sprang up. It was a sight which terrified most of the women, but*

¹⁶ According to Plutarch, Terentia became alarmed by the fact that Cicero's friend, Tullus, made repeated visits to Clodia's residence. That she lived nearby apparently added to Terentia's mounting sense of alarm.

¹⁷ Intriguingly Plutarch adds that Cicero and Clodius prior to the trial had been friends and that Clodius had taken an interest in Cicero's safety during the suppression of Catiline. Since Clodius elsewhere was accused of complicity in the conspiracy of Catiline, the likelihood of comprehending his behavior in this instance seems limited. Many figures including Caesar and Crassus had played a double role in that event.

¹⁸ (Cic. *Cael.* 48; Catul. 37),

¹⁹ These latter include the Roman *meretrix*, Praecia (Plut. Luc. 6.2-4) who, according to Plutarch (*Luc.* 6.2-4) "was nothing better than a courtesan, but from her using her encounters and conversations to advance the political causes of her friends, and adding to her other charms the appearance of being an influential friend, acquired the greatest power," and the elderly prostitutes who supported Catiline.

²⁰ I find it interesting all the same that both Clodia and Clodius used sexual advances, the former toward Cicero, the latter Pompeia, to spin their intrigues during this episode.