

Of *Meretrices* and Men: The Tragicomic Construction of Clodia's Reputation in the *Pro Caelio*

Cicero's damning treatment of Clodia Metelli in the *Pro Caelio* has shaped practically her entire reputation today. Recent scholarship has focused on Cicero's use of humor and slander to mock and defame the prosecution's major witness in the case (e.g. Tatum 2011). Both Geffcken (1973) and Leigh (2004) have written on comedic aspects of the speech, and Leigh in particular has advanced the notion of Clodia's construction as the stock *meretrix* character in Roman comedy, with the defendant Marcus Caelius Rufus then occupying the role of the *adulescens*. However, Jensen (2003) has observed that Cicero's speech also contains several allusions to tragedy. I argue that Cicero's construction of Clodia's reputation is twofold: Cicero's use of *prosopopoeia* and comedy paints her as the stock *meretrix* character from Roman comedy, while tragic allusions to Medea, Clytemnestra, and Helen craft Clodia as a *mala meretrix*. I suggest that Cicero's use of tragedy in an otherwise highly comedic speech is essential to depict Clodia as a malicious character, a trait not necessarily present in the stock *meretrix* character. The *Pro Caelio*, then, is a tragicomic work, incorporating aspects of both genres in order to make its argument against Clodia and reinforce her role as a *mala meretrix*.

Scholars have identified (with varying degrees of consensus) three categories within the umbrella of the stock *meretrix* character: *bona*, pseudo, and *mala* (Auhagen 2009). The *bona meretrix* is not necessarily good in a moral sense, but still functions honestly within her profession, exchanging services for payment (Gilula 1980; Raia 1983). This type of *meretrix* often assists the *adulescens* even after their professional relationship has ended (e.g. Bacchis in the *Hecyra*). The pseudo-*meretrix* is separated from her citizen family at an early age and falls into prostitution by chance or necessity; she is typically restored to her rightful place by the end of the play (e.g. Selenium in Plautus' *Cistellaria*). An example of the *mala meretrix* is

Phronesium in Plautus' *Truculentus*, who manipulates, cheats, and eventually ruins all of her clients. Given the multiple subcategories of *meretrix*, a Ciceronian audience would not have immediately associated Clodia specifically with *malae meretrices*.

To solidify Clodia's representation as a *mala meretrix*, Cicero must consequently introduce into his comic model tragic elements that portray her as the dangerous seductress. For example, Cicero crafts Clodia as a "Medea of the Palatine" (§18). Medea sends her children to bring Jason's bride a poisoned robe in retaliation, and Clodia sends her friends to the baths to frame Caelius' associate and therefore ruin Caelius' reputation (§67). The bath scene itself is particularly tragic. It contains multiple allusions to tragic seductresses: Clytemnestra, who kills her husband in a tub similar to the one in which Clodia's henchmen hide (*alveus*); and Helen, evoked by a mention of the Trojan horse in the same passage (Jensen 2003). However, the passage also crafts as farcical the potentially damning evidence that Caelius' associate was caught red-handed with poison for Clodia. Cicero explicitly makes this comedic when he points out that the men must first get their bath before they can be brave (*primum lautos iuvenes...deinde fortes viros*); he both infantilizes the men and hints at an association between the *lauti iuvenes* and the washed prostitutes of the day (e.g. Pl. *Mil.* 1.787).

Cicero imagines these criminal actions as a form of tragicomedy here and throughout the speech in order to suggest the gravity of Clodia's actions while simultaneously trivializing the entire case. The trial may be a comedy for Caelius as the carefree *adulescens*, but for Clodia it is a tragedy. Cicero's unflinching descriptions of Clodia's seduction and deception tear down her reputation while exculpating Caelius of any wrongdoing. The tragicomic nature of the speech clearly designates Clodia as a *mala meretrix* in every sense of the category.

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