

**Dead End or Dividend:  
Falling (Face-First) into the Intentional Fallacy**

Myrial Holbrook

In a male-oriented, male-documented society like ancient Rome, how can we reconstruct women as they really were? This was the task I set myself to in the crafting of my essay “Medeas of the Palatine,” in which I examined and made a case for the changed status of late Republican women in Rome. I started with a case study of an elite woman of the late Republic: the notorious Clodia, a wealthy widow who, according to Cicero, behaved “riotously” like “a common harlot” and was involved in all manner of intrigue—financial, sexual, even criminal. I drew on her case study as a microcosm of the broader status of women at the time.

Due to the scantiness of female-authored primary source material, I resolved to distort the already-distorted male-written history and hopefully arrive at something less distorted. No easy task, to be sure—plunging into an intentional fallacy head-on is a messy and confusing business. I was working from Cicero’s speech, a decidedly male-centric opinion in a decidedly male-dominated institution in a decidedly male-governed society.

Nevertheless, I took the plunge, cataloguing Cicero’s known biases against Clodia as well as more general perceptions of women in Roman society at the time that might be coloring his speech. Here’s an excerpt of that passage:

Cicero was an orator; his aim was to win the case, so he molds the story and his argument to the benefit of his client, Caelius, and to the audience of an élite all-male assembly. It should also be noted that, besides the professional motivation, he also had several personal scores to settle with Clodia and her family. Clodius, Clodia’s younger brother, was Cicero’s greatest enemy (for Clodius, the feeling was mutual). Moreover, as Cicero himself mentions in the speech, Clodia had perpetrated violent actions against him and his family, such as burning down his house while he was exiled. There is also an indication that Cicero might have been romantically involved with Clodia himself at one point; Plutarch mentions that Terentia, Cicero’s wife, “suspected Clodia of wanting to marry Cicero” (Plut. *Life of Cicero* 29). Although Cicero claims he is “brushing aside the memory of what I suffered” in the case, there is no doubt that his personal dealings with Clodia and Clodius shade his arguments (Cicero, *Pro Caelio* 50).

As regards the limitations of the case itself, one has to wonder how representative Clodia is of the status of a typical Roman woman in the late Republic and thus what quality and quantity of insights can be gleaned from the case. She was a noblewoman, widowed, wealthy, and propertied. She had not remarried, her father had been dead some years already, and her brother, Clodius, was in no place to supervise or criticize her behavior with his own record of scandal (including, but not limited to, persistent rumors of incest with his sisters, as well as his infiltration in 62 B.C. of the women’s festival of Bona Dea to schmooze around with Pompeia, the wife of Caesar), so Clodia was in a position of relative freedom to do as she pleased—up to a point.

Perhaps this is a package deal; a woman can have her fun, but only if she masks it well and plays out her social role of devoted wife and mother. When Pompey, for example, was away on campaign for many months and caught wind of his wife Mucia’s increasingly “loose life,” he was at first unperturbed (Plut. *Life of Pompey* 42). As he began the return trip to Italy, however,

he decided to divorce her (Plut. *Life of Pompey* 42). As Cicero said of Clodia, “she no longer even bothers to seek privacy and darkness and the usual veil of discretion to cover her lusts” (Cicero, *Pro Caelio* 43). It is difficult to tell here if “usual” means “usual” for Clodia or “usual” in the lusty pursuits of the elite. However, in the context of some of Cicero’s other statements, it seems to be the latter. He lumps Clodia into “a household of that sort under a woman who behaves like a prostitute,” a situation in which “it is perfectly obvious and universally known” to what extent Clodia pursued “lusts and excesses” (Cicero, *Pro Caelio* 56). Her particular case might have a few “unheard-of perversions,” but the case of Clodia and her “associates” nonetheless seems to fit a well-known societal mold, whether fitted by Cicero for argumentative purposes or by the ready-made cache of circulating rumors.

I’m still not sure how I worked myself into that “ready-made cache of circulating rumors” (what a mouthful!). Phraseology aside, however, I had set myself up well—I was going to scientifically dissect this case study for biases and account for them in my analysis. But what I failed to do is realize the improbability of my construction. I was trying to be precise, setting up the biases and limitations of my case, then using that same case to prove something bigger. In a case study alone, such dissection might be workable (though still delicate and difficult). But the task of my paper was to make an argument for an entire period of history, not just one woman in a brief moment in that history.

Constrained by a ten-page limit, I was forced to compromise my rigor. By the end of my paper, I had left things rather open-ended, juxtaposing two more male-authored primary sources to hint at a noteworthy sense of male vulnerability in response to spurts of female agency in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> centuries B.C. In many ways, I had backtracked—my claims were no longer as nuanced nor as persuasive as they had been in the case study format. I should have been prepared for the same level of rigor in my broader arguments. On the small-scale case study level, the intentional fallacy seemed to pay off, but when I tried to extrapolate, I found myself hovering in a realm of ambiguity and uncertainty. Lesson learned: always look (long and hard) before you leap.

### Works Cited

Appian. Roman History, Volume IV: The Civil Wars, Books 3.27-5. Translated by Horace White. Loeb Classical Library 5. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913.

Cicero, Marcus Tullius. "In Defense of Marcus Caelius Rufus." *Selected Political Speeches of Cicero*, translated by Michael Grant, London, Penguin, 1969.

Culham, Phyllis. "Women in the Roman Republic." *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Republic*, compiled by Harriet I. Flower, 2nd ed., New York, Cambridge UP, 2014.

Evans, John K. *War, Women, and Children in Ancient Rome*. London, Routledge, 1991.

Livy. "The History of Rome." *Perseus Digital Library*. Tufts University. Accessed 16 Jan. 2017.

Plutarch. *Fall of the Roman Republic*. Translated by Rex Warner and Robin Seager, Rev. and expanded ed., London, Penguin Books, 2005.

Plutarch. *Makers of Rome, Nine Lives: Coriolanus, Fabius Maximus, Macellus, Cato the Elder, Tiberius Gracchus, Gaius Gracchus, Sertorius, Brutus, Mark Antony*. Translated by Ian Scott-Kilvert, London, Penguin Books, 1965.

Richlin, Amy. *Arguments with Silence: Writing the History of Roman Women*. U of Michigan P, 2014.

### Bio

**Myrial Holbrook '19**, in addition to serving as an editor for *Tortoise*, is also a Fellow in the Writing Center, Managing Editor of Innovation, a staff writer and assistant editor for *The Nassau Literary Review*, a Princeton Business Volunteer, a Sustainable Engineering and Development Scholar, and a Community House Big Sib. She hails from Columbus, Ohio, and is majoring in Comparative Literature (a convenient catch-all for her dabblings in English, Spanish, Chinese, history, journalism, and creative writing) and contemplating certificates in Cognitive Science and Environmental Studies. She wrote this as a sophomore.