



Clodius Pulcher: Caesar's Willing Puppet. *The Bona Dea Affair and Its Effect on Cicero and the Fall of the Republic*

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In the 1st century BCE, the Roman Republic was approaching a state of flux. The fall of the Roman Republic was at hand and the birth of the Roman Empire under Augustus was near. Though the Republic began to fall in 48 BCE when Caesar defeated Pompey at the Battle of Pharsalus, the civil war was not the beginning of the conflict. It found roots in a rarely discussed religious and political event, the Bona Dea affair. Publius Clodius Pulcher, the patrician at the center of this scandal, became a means to control Caesar's interests and enemies in the senate during his Gallic campaign. Clodius's affect on the senate enabled Caesar to continue his path to dictatorship, mostly unrestrained. Clodius became a willing 'puppet' to Caesar because of the Bona Dea affair. It was Clodius's path to political redemption and avenue to voice distain for Cicero, in which Caesar shared a common interest.

Each year in the month of December, the Vestal Virgins gathered at the residence of a prominent senator to perform sacred rituals to the *Bona Dea*—literally translated it means "Good Goddess". It ordinarily refers to the deity Fauna who was worshipped in Rome as the goddess of healing and fertility. The services were confined to women only. Men were not allowed to see any part of the rituals, to the extent that male animals were also removed from inside the residence. Other than these sparse facts, our knowledge of the Bona Dea rituals is quite limited. We can acknowledge that they must have been immensely important due to the religious and political status of the individuals who participated in them.

In 62 BCE, observance of the *Bona Dea* took place at the home of *praetor urbanus* and *Ponifex*

Maximus, Caius Julius Caesar. The ceremonies were interrupted when Publius Clodius Pulcher, a young patrician of the Clodii family, was discovered trying to gain entrance to the Bona Dea rituals. Dressed as a woman, Clodius attempted to gain admittance by pretending to be a musician. Sneaking in at night, he became lost in the hallways of the house and was discovered by a slave. Cicero writes in a letter to Atticus, "I imagine that you have heard that P. Clodius, son of Appius, was caught dressed up as a woman in C. Caesar's house at the national sacrifice, and that he owed his escape alive to the hands of a servant girl". Clodius was undoubtedly fortunate to escape with his life because such an act was considered desecration of a sacred ceremony. Religion in Roman society served a vital purpose to all aspects of culture. It pertained to private life, military, government and trade—virtually every aspect of existence.

There is little explanation giving a *definitive* answer to the reasons Clodius attempted to enter the home. The commonly accepted view is that he was engaged in an affair with Caesar's wife Pompeia. Geffcken writes that perhaps this may have been a "foolish prank" and nothing more than a joke. This would suggest the behavior to be nothing more than a bout of youthful exuberance. Such a joke, nonetheless, led to Caesar's divorce of Pompeia. Later, Caesar justifies his divorce stating: "Caesar's wife must be above suspicion". It is not stretching to infer that Clodius, having an affair with Pompeia, broke into the *Bona Dea* to see her—such we can attribute to youthful disposition leading him to such a foolish act. The excuse of 'youth' would not safeguard him from the possibility of senatorial repercussions, however. Soon after, Clodius would be charged with sacrilege and brought to trial.

Cicero's involvement in the trial became apparent at the beginning because his intimate knowledge of the *Bona Dea* compelled him to action. As *Consul* the previous year, the festivities of the *Bona Dea* were held at his home. His duty, as *Consul*, was to serve as guardian and to oversee the safety of the Republic. Thus, the position he assumed on the Clodius issue appeared to be one of religious 'protection.' Conceivably, in this event, he felt the need to do so again. Standing firmly against such behavior, it became a constant subject in his letters to Atticus, and his determined opinion on the *Bona Dea* affair stemmed from his personal experiences with it.

Clodius's actions affected not only Cicero, but Caesar as well; yet, Caesar's reaction to the affair appeared mild. The *Bona Dea* occurred at Caesar's home, making the offense on the home of the *Pontifex Maximus* himself. Caesar's relaxed attitude to the event is of immense interest. "Caesar," notes Christian Meyer, "declared himself ignorant of the whole affair". However, Cicero mentions in a letter to Atticus that the Vestal Virgins needed to repeat the ceremonies. This implied that Clodius's actions made the rituals unclean. Would Caesar, as *Pontifex Maximus*, be lenient to religious pollution of his home and allow a young patrician under suspicion of having an affair with his wife, go unpunished? This led to a senate decision to review Clodius's actions and pursue punishment for his behavior.

Within a month of the incident, Clodius was proposed for trial and the senate began delegation over jurisdiction. The trial proposition seemed a delicate and confusing task because *who* had governance over the trial needed to be defined. Piso, who represented Clodius in the senate, argued that laws pertaining to the *Bona Dea* were under stringent religious authority and not under the veil of the senate. However, the *optimates*, led by Cato the Younger—and a strong fixation for tradition—argued for his case to be brought to trial within the senate. Ultimately, Clodius began to understand the seriousness of his condition and began pleading to members of the senate. "The *honest* men are yielding to Clodius's pleas and dropping out," Cicero wrote as Clodius began to swing support his way.

Cicero labored heavily against Clodius because he believed that he could convince the senatorial body of Clodius's guilt easily. He also wanted to use the Senate floor to increase his personal and political standing in the senate. Throughout the trial, Cicero spoke adamantly against the actions of Clodius to the senate. Clodius's alibi was that he was away the night of the *Bona Dea*, in *Interamna*. In Cicero's trial testimony, he stated Clodius visited his home that day, hours before the incident occurred, implying that this fact discredited the alibi because the distance was far too long a trip to be made in a single day. Cicero continued his attack on Clodius unrelentingly during his speech to the senate, saying:

O extraordinary prodigy! O you monster! Are you not ashamed at the sight of this temple, and of this city, nor of your life, nor the light of day?

Do you who were clad in woman's attire, dare to assume a manly voice—you, whose infamous lust and adultery, united with impiety, was not delayed even by the time required to stubborn witnesses to procure your acquittal?

Cicero also knew that his involvement in the trial could be a politically advantageous event; a senator in Rome had much to gain by taking political stances. "In Cicero's Rome", Bell writes, "the competitive routines of civic visibility were particularly intense, as men strove to occupy positions of prominence before the attentions and judgments of crowds in houses and streets, at the games, or in the Forum."

In a staggering change of events, a case that appeared easily prosecuted proved the opposite; the senate cleared Clodius of all the charges against him. Cicero believed the senate, though being "strict and courageous", had lost the trial due to poor management. In place of a standard trial, a bill proposed by the senate enacted a "special tribunal" to determine the fate of the young patrician. Cicero believed the case failure rested upon the result of two primary factors. First, the rush to convict Clodius was a mistake; more time should have been afforded to the case and selection of a jury—stating a more traditional form of prosecution should have been pursued. Second, and possibly most important, Clodius used monetary means to secure his freedom.

Cicero's attempts to secure a guilty verdict were beyond his control due to corruption in the senate. A large number of the tribunal received payments, bought off with money supplied to Clodius from Crassus—a member of the first *Triumvirate*. "A more raffish assemblage," Cicero wrote to Atticus, "never sat down in a low-grade music hall. Flyblown Senators, beggar Knights, and Paymaster Tribunes who might have better been called 'Paytakers'." Cicero believed the senators who took the bribes were responsible for making a farce of the religious and the moral fibers that continued to hold the Senate, and Republic, intact.

Cicero's testimony was spiteful enough to create an irreparable rift between Clodius and himself. We know Cicero's testimony from the trial attacked Clodius's respect for religion, his family and sexual deviance. However, as the trial wore on it is conceivable that Cicero softened his stance upon realizing that he may not win. There exists speculation about Cicero's involvement once corruption in the trial was evident. Epstein argues, "As soon as the trial became inevitable, Cicero sensing a corrupt jury, cooperated only half-heartedly with the prosecution". Epstein presents the opinion that Cicero knew, or at least believed, the trial had become corrupt. Upon realizing this he backed off, believing he had done all he could. Inevitably, Cicero must have accepted that the strength of money held greater weight than his rhetoric.

Caesar viewed the desperation of Clodius as a

way to get to a broken man. The acquittal at the close of the trial did not release Clodius from scrutiny. There still existed a contingent of senators deeply offended by his actions. Hence, he was 'free', yet still unable to perform his family tradition of senate service. This put his shame not only on himself, but his entire family, the *Clodii*—his father was Appius, a former *Consul* of great respect. Caesar recognized his advantage in the situation. By not bringing Clodius to trial for the accusation of adultery he, in essence, offered him mercy.

The trial was not the end of Clodius and Cicero's fight, and their distain for one another became progressively public. They verbally confronted each other in the streets and the senate, where "Cicero aimed not just to criticize Clodius but to annihilate him through incentive and wit." It is evident Clodius lacked the eloquence of Cicero, or the respect. Why would Clodius attack a man of Cicero's skill and admiration? That he acted in such a way, one may conclude that he felt safe in making such bold transgressions. Pocock writes that several years later he "knew very well that he was safe" when he focused his attacks on Pompey after Cicero was exiled from Rome in early 58 BCE. Although his arguments present events years after the *Bona Dea* affair, I contest that Clodius's attitude was the same during the aftermath of the *Bona Dea*. In both instances, he had the support of Caesar; this backing could empower an individual, such as Clodius, to speak so loudly against established powers.

Cicero, betrayed by the senate, felt the debacle of the *Bona Dea* had passed him by. Caesar, on the other hand, found himself in a position of leverage due to his 'manipulation' of the trial. The *Triumvirate* had provided the funds for Clodius to 'purchase' votes in the senate. Caesar, though insulted by the *Bona Dea* affair, did not bring charges against Clodius for adultery—a serious offense to commit against a patrician of Caesar's standing. Caesar, as previously discussed, acted 'ignorant' to the entire affair, yet had reasons to secure Clodius's freedom. Caesar could not have crafted the outcome of the trial; however, he had a hand in it enough to see if it would play into his interests, which it did.

Caesar's distaste for Cicero evolved as the product of another trial, the trial of Caius Antonius. Antonius was charged with the governorship of Macedonia after his *consulship* came to an end—a post made possible at the request of Cicero. During this time Antonius "inflicted many injuries on the subject territory as well as upon that which was in alliance with Rome, and had suffered many disasters in return." In correspondence to Antonius in 61

BCE, Cicero advised him of the growing concerns for his safety. Antonius was under investigation for his role in the 'Cataline conspiracy' to which Cicero writes, "Your future, believe me", writes Cicero, "stands in need of much greater zeal on my part, greater firmness and greater labour." Antonius eventually faced the senate for "extortion" and his inability to maintain control of his governed territory. Cicero's fears came to fruition when he was convicted in March 59 BCE for his participation in the Cataline conspiracy. Cicero, greatly outraged by the conviction, blamed the *Triumvirate* for the outcome. He believed Caesar to be the true instigator of the verdict. Personally, Cicero found it offensive because it was his appointment, and therefore his suggestion of governorship, that was offended as well. For this offense, Cicero made a "most bitter attack on Caesar."

Remembering Cicero's attack on him in the Senate, Caesar identified Clodius as his way to put a 'thorn' in the side of Cicero. The most effective method Caesar could devise was to install Clodius into the senate. Clodius, politically crushed by Cicero's testimony in the senate, needed the resourceful manipulation which Caesar could offer. C. Herennius, a *Tribune* and supporter of Caesar, proposed to make Clodius a 'pleb' by having him adopted into a lower class plebian family—a process known as "*transition ad plebem*". As a rule, this was done circumstantially when a patrician had more to gain from a 'societal' change of class.

Cicero was fully aware of the reason for which Clodius was to be transferred to the 'plebs'; that is, so he might become a *Tribune*. His transfer remained under scrutiny and spent several months being deliberated on by the senate, backed by Herennius. Cicero disbelieved Clodius sought to become *Tribune* and delivered speeches against him in the senate. He aggressively challenged Clodius by recalling his sacrilegious actions, insulting him about his lies at the *Bona Dea* trial. Amid all Cicero's objections, Clodius was eventually cleared for adoption. Cicero wrote to Atticus in April 59 BCE, "What, deny that Publius [Clodius] has been made a plebian? There's tyranny if you like, absolutely intolerable!" The adoption certainly had an amount of orchestration to add insult to injury. The man that would adopt Clodius was much younger than him—obviously a rare occurrence. Cicero would later say in a speech condemning Clodius's adoption "that the man who has adopted you as your father might, as far as his age went, have been your son."

Once a *plebian*, Clodius won election as a *Tribune of the Plebs* in October 58 BCE. The power of his new appointment put Clodius in a position to negatively

affect Cicero in the senate. As *Tribune*, Clodius had authority to call the proposal of laws and manage the closing of senate sessions. But, most importantly, a *Tribune* was able to veto the motions of other senators; “they could even veto another’s veto.” Here lies Caesar’s most desired tool against Cicero and the senate, the ability to challenge their legal motions. A man as inexperienced as Clodius in the senate places himself in a political corner. Due to the problems that continued to linger over his head from the *Bona Dea*, and the hatred many in the senate had for him, he was outmatched. Yet, the benefit he gained from the situation outweighed the issues he may have had if he were unwilling to work with Caesar.

Caesar and Clodius desired the same thing; they wanted to see Cicero ousted or discredited in the senate. It is documented by Dio that Cicero, though a brilliant Senator and Statesman “made for himself bitter enemies by always striving to get the better of even the most powerful men and by employing an unbridled and excessive frankness of speech toward all alike”. Clodius’s sacrilege at the *Bona Dea* destroyed any future that may have been possible for him in Roman politics. Cicero’s testimonies were, arguably, enough to persuade most against Clodius and secure his displacement from government positions. For this reason, Clodius had the motive to assist Caesar; specifically, political and personal redemption.

Caesar, bothered by Cicero’s attack on him during the trial of C. Antonius, regarded the entire affair as a means to plant a ‘seed’ in the senate. He ingeniously constructed a web of reasons coinciding with his own needs. The monetary backing of the *Triumvirate* secured Clodius’s freedom and Caesar never formally accused Clodius of adultery—which most likely saved Clodius from death or exile. Caesar and the *Triumvirate* ‘arranged’ his adoption into a *plebian family* and made him a *Tribune*. Caesar essentially granted him clemency which gave him back what he lost and offered him power from nothing. Caesar knew Clodius shared a common opinion of Cicero, which was the tie that bound the two conspirators against the master rhetorician.

Clodius’s service in the senate became essential to Caesar’s future plans. Caesar soon left for his conquest of Gaul, with Clodius as his hand in the senate. Interestingly, Caesar offered Cicero a post under his command, and Cicero refused. Cleverly, he tried to keep Cicero under his personal watch while at the same time intending to keep him at ‘arms length’. Clodius then enacted a series of four laws designed to increase the backing of the common people. These laws were designed to promote positive public

opinion of Caesar in Rome. Cicero unsuccessfully stood against these laws and under scrutiny for his part in the Cataline conspiracy was exiled from Rome—in an ironic reversal, the senate was led by Clodius in the senate’s persecution of Cicero! Clodius also proposed that Cato be sent to Cyprus to handle matters pertaining to the Egyptian aristocracy’s role in piracy. This left Clodius to also be the “check” on Pompey who, for all intents and purposes, proved to be mildly inept in the Roman political arena.

Clodius’s role was to disrupt the leaders of the senate, which would prevent Cicero, Pompey and the *Optimates* from coming together in Caesar’s absence. This was important for Caesar to achieve because he would be at war in Gaul for many years. The plan unfolded well and worked for some time, until Clodius grew tired of being manipulated for power. With Caesar’s distance from Rome and the power he gained, he no longer “considered himself a mere tool of the men in power.” His behavior became increasingly tyrannical. He ordered the homes of high ranking senators located on, or next to, sacred grounds confiscated and had these homes gutted and burned.

Cicero eventually returned to Rome in August 57 BCE under protection of Pompey who, along with several other senators, had grown weary of Clodius’ behavior. Cicero’s return to Rome brought him face-to face with the ‘gang-warfare’ type conditions in Rome, a byproduct of Clodius’s incessantly vile behavior. Such conditions were the result of fighting between Clodius and various aristocratic factions. Clodius, ousted from the senate for his conduct and political failure, was murdered in 52 BCE by Milo. In the wake of his murder, Clodius’s followers “burned his body in the Senate House, which itself was burned down.” The violence in Rome caused the senate to elect Pompey as sole Consul and used him to protect the citizens—declaring “martial law.”

At this point in Roman history, Caesar stood at the doorstep of conquering Gaul. It was too late for Pompey, Cicero and Cato to effectively work together on their concerns about Caesar’s growing power and popularity. Pompey found himself in a position of absolute senatorial power in Rome, which instigated political feuds among senate factions who differed in their opinions about a singular *Consul*. This continued for several years while Caesar achieved unequivocal power and the love of the common people. Clodius had served his purpose as a ‘check’ on the senate and its various factions; he had been able to divide the senators long enough for Caesar to achieve his military and public objectives with little influence from the Roman government. By the time Pompey,

Cicero and Cato had come to an understanding, Caesar had begun his march to Rome—crossing the Rubicon in 49 BCE, Caesar began the civil war.

The fall of the Republic is related closely to the civil war between Caesar and Pompey. However, the impact of Clodius on the senate during Caesar's absence was central to the fall of the Republic and rise of the Empire. In a bizarre political paradox, Clodius's sacrilege during the *Bona Dea* led to his own rise to power. It was Clodius's willingness to be Caesar's 'puppet' that resulted in being provided the tools to attack Cicero. Without the aid of Clodius, Caesar's political adversaries may have brought his quest for dictatorship to a premature end.

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