CHAPTER 12

Mihi es aemula: Elite Female Status Competition in Mid-Republican Rome and the Example of Tertia Aemilia

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Mihi es aemula.¹

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1 Introduction

Status competition was l’esprit du temps in mid-republican Rome (264–133 BCE), an impetus for elite male action, as prior studies have shown.² If it was vital to elite men, did it also motivate elite women? (By elite, I mean the top tier of the two-tier equestrian aristocracy in mid-republican Rome.) Although Phyllis Culham and Emily Hemelrijk have found status competition among elite women, hitherto no study focuses on the phenomenon.³ So this chapter turns a lens on mid-republican Rome, investigating the rich evidence for what I term ‘elite female status competition’.

Cicero alludes to such competition in his Pro Caelio.⁴ In a celebrated prosopopeia Cicero summons Appius Claudius Caecus (RE 91, cos. 307, 296) ab inferis to condemn his descendant Clodia Ap.f. (RE 66), scion of the elite patri-

¹ Plaut. Rud. 240. RE numbers are provided throughout, patronyms at the first occurrence of female names. On female nomenclature: Kaja 1994. For the magistrates: Broughton 1951; 1952. Latin text comes from the PHI Latin Corpus, Greek from the TLG. Translations are my own. Dates are BCE.
⁴ In defense of Marcus Caelius Rufus (RE 35, pr. 48).
cian *gens Claudia*. Cicero’s Caecus highlights the social position, status, and character of Clodia’s consular ancestors and husband and contrasts it with (what Cicero deems) her debased character (Cic. *Cael.* 33–34). As Caecus, Cicero demands to know whether Clodia’s famed ancestor Quinta Claudia P.f. (*RE* 435) had admonished her to compete with her in familial renown for female status (Cic. *Cael.* 34):

If our male ancestor masks haven’t moved you, didn’t my descendant, that famous Quinta Claudia, admonish you to compete with her in familial renown [i.e., renown for the family] for female status?⁵

Nonne te, si nostrae imagines viriles non commovebant, ne progenies quidem mea, Q. illa Claudia, aemulam domesticae laudis in gloria multiebri esse admovebat?

Such a question suggests the existence of status competition between elite women.⁶ Invective is a problematic species of evidence, but here it prompts further enquiry. By invoking Quinta Claudia’s name during the opening of the Megalensia on 4 April Cicero reminded his audience of her statue in the temple of the Magna Mater and her memorialization on stage, lasting testaments to the *gloria* she obtained for her prominent role in the inaugural procession for the Magna Mater in 204.⁷ Quinta Claudia and her actions were woven into Roman cultural memory, a powerful exemplum of *laus domestica* for the *gens Claudia*.⁸ In conjuring up Clodia’s consular relatives, male ancestor masks, and Quinta Claudia, Cicero connected testaments to male status with those to female status.⁹ He shamed Clodia with the memory of her exemplary ancestors and the phenomenon of elite female status competition.¹⁰

How and why did elite women compete for status? Was it vital to them? In this chapter I will address these questions for elite women like Quinta Claudia in mid-republican Rome, a characteristically competitive period, as is

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⁵ See Austin 1977, 93 and *OED s.v. aemula* (1); *laus* (2); *domesticus* (1, 2); *gloria* (1a). On *laus domestica*, familial renown, and the family brand see section 5.2.

⁶ Here between members of the same clan, but on competition between unrelated elite patrician and plebeian women see, e.g., Livy 10.23.1–10 with Oakley 2005, 245–259.


⁹ Austin 1977, 93. Ancestor masks: Flower 1996. But, as I argue elsewhere (Webb 2017, esp. 175–176), these ancestor masks were also symbols of female status.