

## **AGENCY, WOMEN AND PANTOMIME: *UMMIDIA QUADRATILLA* IN PERSPECTIVE**

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### **Abstract**

When analyzing ancient societies we often lack elements that constitute a methodological framework that can guide the researcher of classical studies, especially about the history of women in the ancient world. In this sense, this article proposes a dialog with the categories of gender and agency developed by sociological studies, intending to reflect on the political and socio-cultural relations in different historical moments. Based on this theoretical foundation, we will examine the possible economic reasons that led an elderly Roman matron, *Ummidia Quadratilla*, to sponsor pantomime groups.

### **Keywords**

Agency; Gender; Classical Studies; Ummidia Quadratilla; Epistles; Women in Pliny the Younger.

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## Resumo

Ao analisar as sociedades antigas, muitas vezes nos faltam elementos que possam compor um arcabouço teórico-metodológico capaz de orientar o pesquisador dos estudos clássicos, principalmente, no que diz respeito à História das Mulheres no mundo antigo. Neste sentido, propõem-se no presente artigo, um diálogo com as categorias de gênero e agência desenvolvidas pelos estudos sociológicos, com o fim de pensar a respeito das relações, tanto políticas, quanto socioculturais, em variados momentos históricos. Partindo desta base teórica, o objetivo é examinar as possíveis razões econômicas que levaram uma matrona romana de idade avançada, *Ummidia Quadratilla*, a patrocinar grupos de pantomimas.

## Palavras-chave

Agência; Gênero; Estudos Clássicos; Ummídia Quadratilla; Epístolas; Mulheres em Plínio, o Jovem.

## Gender and the categories of articulation: Intersectionality and Agency

One of the most important current theoretical and methodological debates about the study of the ancient world concerns how these societies are analyzed. Since the development of the Annales school and the application of interdisciplinarity to historiographical analysis, many methodologies and theoretical perspectives have emerged to understand as best as possible, cultural, political, economic, and religious practices in their proper contexts, in search of a perspective close to the “historical truth”.

With regard to women’s history, the scarcity of documentation makes research difficult. However, the constant discovery of artifacts from material culture together with the development of digital humanities, which provide mechanisms for analysis and access to sources of different types has made it possible to get a little closer to understanding the practices of those women.

In this context of changes and new possibilities in the development of historical analysis, the critique produced by feminist thought has made a significant contribution to social studies by emphasizing how the category of gender can help in understanding the socio-cultural world. During studies related to biological essentialism; structural anthropology; psychoanalysis; modern theories (structural functionalism; patriarchy; Marxism); and post-modern theories (performativity; queer theories), from the 1990s onwards, the emergence of categories of analysis that allude to the multiplicity of differentiations that, when articulated with gender, permeate the social. These are the categories of articulation and intersectionality. Some authors opt for one of these concepts, others use both alternatively (Cerqueira Barbosa, 2023: 18). In this sense, the intersectional approach to feminism has shown how gender, articulated with other categories such as race, class, sexuality, generation, and locality, can help in more complex analyses of social phenomena.

In the 2000s, the use of these categories was widespread. However, like the concept of gender, these categories acquire different contents according to the theoretical approaches of the authors who work with them (Piscitelli, 2008: 263). Coined by American jurist Kimberlé W. Crenshaw in 1989, the term *intersectionality* has become more widely used since the turn of the century, especially by social science professionals. Crenshaw (2002) proposes that just as it is true that all women are in some way subject to the weight of gender discrimination, it is also true that other factors such as class, caste, race, ethnicity, religion, national origin, and sexual orientation weigh on how various groups of women experience

discrimination. The author teaches that inequalities related to class, gender, or race are not simply subject to hierarchization; it is the interaction of these categories that acts in the production and maintenance of inequalities (Riosa; Soterob, 2019: 2).

According to Crenshaw, intersectionalities are ways of capturing the consequences of the interaction between two or more forms of subordination: sexism, racism, and patriarchy. This notion of 'interaction' between forms of subordination would make it possible to overcome the notion of overlapping oppressions.

The links between categories of analysis are not always well-balanced in sociological theories and empirical studies. Articulating the trio of gender, class, and race, for example, has been challenging. Expanding this list to include categories such as sexuality, locality, and generation, for example, is an even greater intellectual and political challenge (Ferreira et al, 2021: 424).

In Ferreira et al's analysis, the intersectional approach makes it possible to review how power relations and agency are thought of in sociological theory. In this sense, the debate on capabilities is an important aspect to be addressed, taking into account the articulation categories provided by intersectional analysis, which, in the terms of Sen<sup>2</sup> (2012) and Nussbaum<sup>3</sup> (2002), connects to discussions on agency and autonomy. This is partly because the notion of capacity proposed by these authors presupposes power relations, in the same way that Giddens<sup>4</sup> (2009) and Archer<sup>5</sup> (2011) construct their discussions on agency, but also because both perspectives distinguish action from the will to act and the capacity to act. In Giddens' terms (2009:17), "an agent ceases to be an agent if he or she loses the capacity to 'create a difference', that is, to exercise some kind of power". Basing the idea of agency on the possibility of action, even in unfavorable contexts, has also been a path taken by black feminist thought in discussions about oppression and choices (Hooks<sup>6</sup>, 2015). Part of the criticism directed at these perspectives can be addressed through the use of the intersectional approach (Ferreira et al, 2021: 424).

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<sup>2</sup> Sen, Amartya K. *Desigualdade reexaminada*. 3. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Nussbaum, Martha C. *Las mujeres y el desarrollo humano*. 2. ed. Madri: Herder, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Giddens, Anthony. *A constituição da sociedade*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Archer, Margaret S. *Habitus, reflexividade e realismo*. *Dados* 54 (1): 157-206, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Hooks, Bell. *Mulheres negras: moldando a teoria feminista*. *Revista Brasileira de Ciência Política* 16 (1): 2015, 193-210.

In the authors' analysis:

The self-definition of black women and intersectionality are configured as central points for the construction of black feminist thought, considering the interconnection between agency and capacity. If these articulations are successful, we can offer a perspective on agency and capabilities that is capable of understanding the workings of power relations, interactions, disputes, and localized resistance, even in contexts of inequality in which women are racialized, impoverished, and sexualized. In addition to understanding the experiences of black women, this perspective provides sociology with the capacity to understand social dynamics and the construction of subjects in contexts of inequality more deeply (Ferreira et al, 2021: 425).

Based on the success of these articulations, we propose an analysis of women in the ancient world, taking into account the articulation of factors of discrimination, as well as broadening this debate to include approaches to women's agency and capacities in that historical context.

### **Women in the Plinian Epistles**

As Marilyn Skinner (1993: 181) stated in one of the chapters of the important work published at the end of the 20th century, *Feminist Theory and the Classics*, "Classical studies is surely one of the most conservative, hierarchical and patriarchal academic fields". Eminent critical classicists have recognized that "classical studies has been, with few exceptions, anti-theoretical in general and anti-feminist in particular," in the words of Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, in the same work. Funari asserts that "classical studies reinforce conservative points of view in various ways, in most cases by relying on an empiricist, common-sense reading of ancient documents (...)" (Funari, 1995: 180).

An example of this can be seen in the analysis of the Plinian epistles, which allow us to take a closer look at the Roman society of the period since they present the worldview of "a Roman social stratum filtered through the historical experience of the appropriation and economic exploitation of the land" (Rossi, 1993: 4), as well as that of its correspondents and those mentioned.

The Letters are full of portraits of exemplary individuals, and a survey of them confirms this assertion of inclusion; among the individuals pointed to as models and examples in the Letters, women have a significant presence. In recent years, there have been substantial studies on the praise

of individual Roman women, for whom the Letters are notable, and on the Letters concern with exemplarity.

In the complete corpus of 368 letters (a number that includes the correspondence with Trajan in which women have a brief mention but no significant presence), 72 letters contain some reference to women. Thirty-four of these letters offer only a passing mention of a wife, sister, mother, mother-in-law, stepmother, or daughter. That leaves 38 letters, all found in the first nine books, which include 247 letters in total. Of these, 18 focus on women, 9 are addressed to women, and 11 include women prominently, although not as their main subject. Even so, the number of women constitutes less than 10 percent of the hundreds of individuals mentioned in the letters, which, according to Jacqueline Carlon, would be an indication that their particular identities are less important than their roles in the lives of their male relatives. The author asserts that their relatively small number strongly suggests that the corpus as a whole presents a selective rather than comprehensive view of Pliny's relationships with women and that he purposely chose the women he mentions and addresses (Carlon, 2009: 8).

Rebecca Langlands (2014) argues that the presence of women in Pliny's Letters can be partially explained by the fact that women play significant roles in the real world of Pliny's community, as family members, patrons, friends, and survivors of the Domitian era. However, the author points out that this is also a gender issue. Latin literary genres that deal predominantly with contemporary society and real-life individuals (such as letters<sup>7</sup>, consolation, and eulogies) tend to be those in which there is more representation of individual women as praiseworthy and virtuous.

In her article, *Pliny the Younger and the Ideal Wife*, Jo-Ann Shelton (2013) states that the use of real people as role models was widespread in Roman society. Relating behavior – one's own and that of others – to an exemplary standard has a long tradition. Mayer (1991: 144) describes this practice as

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<sup>7</sup> Several scholars have discussed the exchange of correspondence between the Roman elite in terms of symbolic capital and the currency of friendship (16 Juv. 6, 60–81 and 11, 168–70). For Sempronius, see Val. Max. 6.3.12. See also Suet. Dom. 3 for Domitian's brief divorce from his wife for falling in love with the pantomime Paris, Suet. Aug. 45.4, where Augustus has the actor Stephanio and Tac. Ann. 14.60–62, where Nero uses an accusation of adultery to get rid of his wife Octavia; her supposed lover is his slave, the flutist Eucraerus Apud (Shelton). Letter writing was an essential element in developing a network of allies and, therefore, in advancing a career. In addition, recipients often distributed letters among friends, and a writer could well expect his letter to reach an audience of more than one person (Shelton, 2013: 6).

the "cornerstone of Roman moral training". From childhood, Romans were ordered to pattern their behavior after people, living or historical, who embodied the virtues endorsed by their society. The Romans believed that moral instruction was best done through real-life examples rather than by appealing to the abstract theories of Greek philosophy and ethics. Pliny's rhetoric teacher Quintilian drew an explicit contrast between the two systems of moral instruction: "As much as the Greeks excel in moral precepts, so much do the Romans excel in real-life examples, which is far greater.<sup>8</sup> In the same vein, Seneca the Younger said, "The road to moral progress is long if we follow precepts, but short and effective if we follow real models<sup>9</sup>." According to the author, the Roman system of instruction was considered preferable because it offered people an easily understandable image of virtue in action, and they were asked to emulate the character of those who were like them in terms of being members of the community. Role models were capable of extraordinary achievements, yet they were familiar and therefore possible to imitate. Mayer (1991: 165) comments that the use of *exempla* in Roman writing of all kinds is a presentation of "the kind of actions that lead us to conceptualize *virtus*."

### Ummidia Quadratilla and the Pantomimes

Based on the information presented, we will analyze letter 7.24, in which Pliny provides his readers with a character sketch of the old matriarch of a distinguished and wealthy family, Ummidia Quadratilla. Ummidia spent her last years as a theater fan; specifically, "she had pantomimes".

Pantomimes were like dancers performing as soloists in tragic myths, wearing different masks for different characters. They usually didn't speak or sing — because it's hard to generalize about such a complex phenomenon — but just danced, sometimes, at least, in a highly erotic way. The names of these artists tell us something about how their art was perceived. The most common terms for them are imprecise *orchéstés* in Greek and *pantominus* or *histrion* in Latin (Slater, 1994: 121).

It is a surprise that historians of ancient Rome accuse pantomimes of being responsible for the decay of public morals since Augustus and Mecenas first publicly sponsored them in 22 B.C.E., a Roman invention of 22 B.C.E., since there is good evidence that Greek tragic pantomime existed

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<sup>8</sup> Quintilian. *Institutio Oratória*. 12.2.30, apud: Shelton, 2013, p. 3

<sup>9</sup> Seneca. *Letters*. 6.5., apud: Shelton, 2013, p. 3.

elsewhere a few centuries earlier.<sup>10</sup> More significantly, although the subject is still obscure, some types of pantomimic dance were Etruscan and then native Roman and were especially common in religious rituals. But whatever its origins, there is no doubt about the instant success of Augustus' pantomime, which led to the belief that it was important in his reign and that the freedmen of Mecenas and Augustus, Batilo and Pílates, were the creators of the Roman genre. The pantomime may have contributed to popular demand for theater, for by 11 B.C.E. at the latest, two more permanent theaters had joined the Theater of Pompey in Rome, providing a seating capacity unparalleled in the ancient world (Slater, 1994: 121).<sup>11</sup>

Pliny disapproves of the shows presented by these artists and criticizes Ummidia for her interest in pantomime. He sees her conduct as symptomatic of an addiction among women in general: "I have heard that she used to relax her mind with games of checkers or watching their pantomimes, as women do in the idleness of their sex." (Pliny, 7.24). We shouldn't be surprised by these comments; there was a tradition of ambivalence among the Romans towards the theatrical professions, and when women became involved in these professions, ambivalence could turn into contempt (Barbosa, 2020: 14).

Given the general disposition of Roman men towards pantomime and women, modern readers shouldn't accept Pliny's assessment so readily. By training her slaves as pantomimes, Ummidia was greatly increasing their value. We know from numerous ancient sources that the monetary value of slaves trained in theatrical professions was among the highest attributed to any slave. In addition, due to Ummidia's endowment of a theater in Casinum, her hometown, and the presentation of Ummidia's pantomimes at public games, we can say that she was the administrator of a small "theatrical empire". Finally, because of the great interest in pantomime on the part of the masses and the desire of the upper classes, including

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<sup>10</sup> O. Weinreich, *Epigrammstudien 1, Epigramm und Pantomimus*, Shaw 1940, 1.1 (Heidelberg, 1941), collected the evidence.

<sup>11</sup> It is a mistake to repeat that pantomime needed a *Kenntenschaft... die man recht eigentlich auch nur als gebildetes Mitglied der Oberschicht erwerben konnte*, "Knowledge... which one could only acquire by being an educated member of the upper class": so R. Meinel, *Das Odeion* (Frankfurt, 1980) 366. Cf. Leppin 151, criticizing Friedlander and others. It wasn't an upper-class fad. *Libanius, Pro Saltatoribus*, 64.112F: "Some god, pitying the illiteracy of the common people, has brought dance as a substitute type of instruction for the masses about ancient deeds; and now the goldsmith will hold a decent conversation with the product of the schools about the House of Priam or Laius." (Sick, 1999).



members of various imperial families, to appease these masses with games, control of the popular pantomimes may have given Ummidia access to limited political power.

The fact that Ummedia has a pantomime troupe exposes her to social censure for several reasons: firstly, the fact that Ummedia has a group of slaves who are not trained in a "practical" skill exposes her to the accusation of extravagance. At the time of Ummedia, moralists criticized the laziness of the Romans, who owned a large number of slaves with very specialized functions. Thus, owning slaves whose sole or main duty was to provide entertainment could easily expose someone (rightly or wrongly) to accusations of ostentation and excess. Pliny and his contemporaries Martial and Juvenal are very careful to mark the simple entertainments they offer in their own homes. Owning a company of performing slaves is a distinction that Ummedia shares with one of the most decadent characters in Roman literature - Trimalchio, who was so extravagant as to own a group of slaves trained to perform in one theatrical genre but made to perform in another.<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, there was a tradition of ambivalence towards the theatrical professions in Roman society. We won't extensively review Roman attitudes towards artists here, but let's say that several Roman prejudices converge on the social position of the artist: most were of foreign origin, and the art forms themselves were influenced by Greek models; in keeping with this foreign origin, most artists were slaves or freed slaves.

Moreover, the uncontrolled expression of emotion and the lack of defined utility in art disturbed traditional<sup>13</sup> Roman objectivity. By accepting money for their services, artists were too mercantile for the elite's sensibilities (Sick, 1999: 331).

With no goods changing hands and the daring quality of some genres, artists were easily accused of prostitution, rightly or wrongly. Pantomime itself constitutes a special case for these concerns, since it was famous for its sexual explicitness, and cases of pantomime and mime with famous upper-class individuals are reported in many literary sources. Ummidia, as a woman, was subject to special sanctions, since women who associated

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<sup>12</sup> See equally ILS 5205 = CIL 12.1929 and Tacito. *Annales*. 11.1-3 for the slaves of Valerius Asiaticus, who was executed under Claudius.

<sup>13</sup> See Wistrand 1992: 30-40, who reviewed the attitudes of first-century CE writers towards theater. Some of the most significant passages include Pliny. *Panegyric*. 46.1-6; 54.1.2; and Tacitus. *Annales* 14.20-1, where the senate debates the value of Nero's Greek games and some complain that the building of stable theaters promoted idleness among the people.

themselves with the folklore of the theater could be labeled "loose". Consider Juvenal's claim that women reach sexual arousal by watching popular entertainers or the case of *Publius Sempronius Sophus* wife, who is said to have divorced him simply for watching the games without her husband's knowledge. These anecdotes indicate common attitudes greatly magnified to provoke reactions (Sick, 1999: 332).<sup>14</sup>

It should be remembered, however, that pantomime, along with other forms of spectacular entertainment, was extremely popular at the beginning of the Empire. According to Suetonius, "he (Augustus) surpassed everything in the care, variety, and splendor of his spectacles,"<sup>15</sup> and soon after the appearance of pantomime in his reign, riots, and violence among the crowds appeared as symptoms of popular passion for the art. The most apt example is related by Dio (56.47.2): a favorite pantomime refused to appear in the plays in honor of Augustus in 14 CE because it considered the payment insufficient; the senate had to be summoned instantly to try to obtain more funds to satisfy the pantomime and prevent the crowds from causing further disturbances. Riots broke out in the theater the following year, causing the deaths of members of the audience as well as members of the guard supporting the elites. These disturbances seem to be related to Tiberius' disdain for pantomime and games in general. Pantomime performances continued to remain a place of social unrest throughout the Byzantine period.

Given the Roman tradition of translating the popularity of plays into political power, the emperors had to maintain control over the pantomime. Restrictions were passed on to the actors<sup>16</sup> themselves, the audience<sup>17</sup>, and

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<sup>14</sup> Juvenal. 6,60-81 e 11,168-70. For *Sempronius*, see Val. Max. 6.3.12. See equally Suet. Dom. 3 for Domitian's short-lived divorce from his wife for falling in love with the pantomime Paris, Suet. August 45.4, where Augustus allows the actor Stephanio, who had been served by a Roman matron with a boy's haircut, beaten, and Tac. Ann. 14.60-62, where Nero uses an accusation of adultery to get rid of his wife Octavia; her believed lover remains his slave, the flutist *Eucaerus* (Sick, 1999: 332).

<sup>15</sup> Augustus 43.1: *spectaculorum et assiduitate et varietate et magnificia omnes antecessit*.

<sup>16</sup> Suet. lib. 34; Tac. Ann. 1.77; SHA M. Ant. 11.4: the payment of theatrical artists was restricted. Tac. Ann. 4,13, 13,25; Sebo. Tib. 37; Dio 57,21; Pliny Pan. 46: pantomimes were ejected from Rome or Italy. Sebo. Dom. 7: pantomimes were banned from the stage, but were allowed to appear in private homes.

<sup>17</sup> Tac. Ann. 1,77; Sebo. Jib. 37: rebellious spectators could be exiled. Dio 61.8-9: Nero furtively incited riots among the audience members, preventing the praetors and consuls from using military force against the instigators. The strict seating arrangements of the *Lex Iulia Theatralis* (Suet. August 44) also imply an attempt to control the theater crowds, see Rawson 1987: 83-114.

the sponsors<sup>18</sup>. There were, moreover, repeated attempts to prevent elite individuals from performing in the theater (and the arena) through legal prohibition; these attempts imply that individuals, even with the legal system in opposition, continued to find ways to appear<sup>19</sup> on stage and that there were reasons for wanting to appear. Thus, the struggle is between popularity and traditional Roman moral standards - a struggle that, when internalized, can be understood as ambivalence.

This struggle between popularity and morality is displayed in Pliny's character at various points in his writings. Although he forbade in his own house certain forms of entertainment that he considered vulgar, in letter 9.17 he admonished Julius Genitor for being excessively captious about other people's tastes in entertainment. 7.24 belongs to a cycle of letters sent to Pliny's younger senatorial colleague, *Rosanius Geminus* which advise temperance in one's habits, but sympathy for the vices of others. The cycle culminates in letter 8.22 with a quote from the Stoic *Thræsea Paetus*, "Whoever hates vice, hates humanity" (Sick, 1999: 334).<sup>20</sup>

However, in David Sick's opinion, it is almost amusing to watch Pliny struggle in his panegyric of Trajan, with the popularity of pantomime. His distaste for the art is evident, but he doesn't openly condemn the crowds for their enjoyment of it. Furthermore, due to the frequent changes in government policy towards mimes, Pliny (Pan. 46. 1-4) works to find a way to praise Trajan for banning pantomimes from Rome, while blaming Domitian for a similar action and at the same time not insulting Trajan's adoptive father, Nerva, for bringing them back to the city:

Another managed to suppress the pantomimes and put pressure on the Roman people to resist, but he couldn't make them want to. But you were asked to do what the other demanded, and what was a necessity began to be a gift. The affair was carried out in such a way that the people were no less in agreement with you in removing the pantomimes than they were with your father in bringing them

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<sup>18</sup> Dio 54.2.3-4, 54.17.4: responsibility for the *ludi* was assigned by Augustus to the praetors, who received some public funds to organize the games, although limits were placed on the total amounts that could be spent. Dio 56.47: the tribunes asked the Senate for permission to spend more than the law normally allowed for a theatrical production.

<sup>19</sup> According to Levick 1983: 105-108 various attempts at control were made in 46 B.C.E., 38 B.C.E., 22 B.C.E., 11 C.E., 15 C.E., and again in 19 C.E., although the dates, number and nature of the measures are not absolutely certain. See also Lebek 1990: 43-58 and 1991: 41-51. Note that the *Senatus Consultum* of 19 CE found in *Larinum*, the focus of Levick and Lebek, not only restricts senatorial and equestrian appearances in the theater and arena, but also penalizes those who hire the performers of the elite; see lines 7, 9-11.

<sup>20</sup> 8.22.3: *qui vitia odit, homines odit*. Letters 7.1, 7.24, 8.5, 8.22, 9.11, 9.30 are addressed to Geminus. See the discussion in Sherwin-White 1966: 402-403.

back. And so this same population, at once spectator and fan of an emperor actor, has now even turned against the pantomimes and condemned their perverted art and activities as unsuitable for the times (Pliny. Panegyric. 46. 1-4).<sup>21</sup>

Trajan explained to the crowd simply and calmly that pantomime was detrimental to his intellectual development as a Stoic, and, as a result, they cried out in one voice: "Please, Trajan, save us from pantomime!" or so Pliny would have us believe. Trajan's ban was not permanent, and Ummedia's mimes provide evidence of his return<sup>22</sup>. Perhaps Pliny's ambivalence is most obvious in letter 7.24 itself, where he is present at a public performance of Ummedia's pantomimes while praising his grandson for never having seen the pantomimes performed before. One may perhaps see the pantomime, but one must not appreciate it (Sick, 1999: 334-335).

Given this cultural context, Pliny's negative assessment of Ummedia's ownership of pantomimes is not very surprising. What is perhaps more surprising is that this assessment was readily accepted by both ancient and modern commentators. Although some of the most famous Roman women, whose characters were condemned by male Roman authors, have been re-evaluated, the entrepreneurship and patronage activity of elite women has received serious attention (Barbosa, 2020).<sup>23</sup>

In this sense, the concept of agency can be understood not only as the act of acting but also as understanding how relationships are established and how subjects use various tools to build their freedoms. By linking the concept of agency to gender issues, it is possible to understand how subjects, even in an unfavorable situation, are endowed with space for action, from which it is possible to question the current normative order (Frاندji, 2017: 31).

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<sup>21</sup> *obtinuit aliquis ut spectaculum pantomimorum populus Romanus tolli pateretur, sed non obtinuit ut vellet: rogatus es tu quod cogebat alius, coepitque esse beneficium quod necessitas fuerat. Neque enim a te minore concentu ut tolleres pantomimos, quam a patre tuo ut restitueret exactum est .... Idem ergo populus ille, aliquando scaenici imperatoris spectator et plausor, nunc in pantomimos quoque aversatur et damnat effeminatas artes et indecora saeculo studia* (Plinio. Panegírico. 46. 1-4)

<sup>22</sup> According to Dio 68.10.2, Trajan readmitted the pantomimes for the celebration of his triumph in the First Dacian War in 103 CE; in addition, Dio states that the emperor fell in love with one of the main dancers. Pliny's Panegyric dates from 100 CE, and Ep. 7.24 dates from 107 CE (Sick, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> See, for exemple, Delia 1991: 197-217; Forbis 1990: 493-512; Dixon: 1986: 93-120; Hallett 1984: 35-61; Dixon 1983: 91-112; Van Bremen 1983: 223-41; Skinner 1983: 273-87; MacMullen 1980: 208-18

## Pantomimes: Fun or Investment?

Pliny's interpretation of Ummidia still needs to be examined carefully. In Sick's (1999) analysis, many assumed that Ummedia's involvement with pantomimes represented a flaw in his character. Guillemin, following Juvenal, assumed that the pantomimes were Ummidia's sexual lovers. Carcopino comments that among wealthy Roman women, "the best tried to combat their boredom with artificial enthusiasms," and he must count Ummidia among the best since he writes: "Some like old Ummidia Quadratilla (...) spent every day when there were no public shows (...) watching the idiotic shows of the mimes with whom she filled her house."<sup>24</sup> Pliny never told us that she spent every day watching pantomimes; Carcopino's exaggeration is obvious. A 1982 article on women in Pliny tells us that Ummedia "did not lead a particularly virtuous lifestyle"<sup>25</sup> and, even in 1994, in a comprehensive work on women in the classical world, the authors start from the assumption that "Ummedia's wealth allowed for trivial and morally ambiguous pastimes" (Fantham, 1994: 350).

Just as David Sick asserts in his article entitled *Ummedia Quadratilla: Caged Businesswoman or Lazy Pantomime Watcher?* While we can debate the intrinsic value of watching mime – and admittedly, from what we know of ancient pantomime, this was not a sublime and subtle art – the aim of this article is not to recast Ummedia Quadratilla as a woman of moral perfection, nor is it to argue that these theatrical arts were of high reputation and quality during the first centuries of the Common Era. Rather, the aim is to provide alternative or additional reasons for Ummidia's interest in pantomimes – reasons that fit in with Roman business practices regarding slaves, with her successful financial position, and with her social and political standing as a wealthy Roman widow. Again, we see the relevance of thinking about the meaning of agency.

We need to understand women as historical subjects endowed with agency, that is:

The ability to make decisions even in an unfavorable environment. More importantly, we need to understand that there has been a process of silencing women through historiography and that rescuing these trajectories within their contexts is of paramount importance to building more plural narratives about the

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<sup>24</sup> Carcopino 1941: 104.

<sup>25</sup> Ver Dobson 1982: 82.

past that take into account the different ways in which individuals can relate to each other (Frandji, 2017: 31-32).

To begin with, we should point out that Pliny's assessment of Ummedia, perhaps in line with his admonition regarding tolerance for the vices of others, was not entirely negative; he tells us that she decorously educated her grandson, whose character Pliny praises (7.24.3-4). According to Pliny, whenever she was watching his pantomimes, she told her grandson to go away and study (7.24.6). She also disposed of her property properly in her will. The numerous theatergoers who fawned over her pantomimes received little from her will (7.24.8), while the largest shares went to her grandson and granddaughter.<sup>26</sup> This is an important detail for Pliny and his group of colleagues, who often criticized the practice of legacy hunting or *captatio* as one of the great evils of their time. These facts leave Pliny with an overall positive view of Ummedia, and he sums up his sketch of the grandmother and grandson by saying: "I take pleasure in the *pietas* of the now-dead woman and the dignity of the most virtuous young man." So it turns out that the robust eighty-year-old woman with a penchant for pantomime displays the same quality of character as the hero of the Aeneid, Aeneas<sup>27</sup>; her interest in pantomime was an aberration in her character and not indicative of it. This is the bifurcated portrait of Ummidia that Pliny presents to readers, a portrait that has led to negative comments about her activities and degraded her reputation over time.

Fortunately for us, Ummedia doesn't just exist in the pages of Pliny. We can use epigraphic evidence to reify Ummidius and his troupe of pantomimes: a *C. Ummidius Actius Anicetus* seems to be one of Ummedia's freed pantomimes, and a certain Dionysius was one of his slaves. We also have a dedicatory inscription that tells of the construction of an amphitheater by Ummidius in his hometown<sup>28</sup> and another that tells of the restoration of a stage there. Given these theatrical expenses, one wonders how there was money left over for Ummedia's heirs at any event. This is perhaps the wrong question to ask, since Ummidia's involvement in

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<sup>26</sup> (Ummedia) *decessit honestissimo testamento: reliquit heredes ex besse nepotem, ex tertia parte neptem*. The difference between the legacy to the grandson and the granddaughter may be due to a previous dowry gift to the granddaughter.

<sup>27</sup> This reference to Aeneas concerns his filial devotion to saving his father by carrying him on his shoulders. Thus, "*Pietas* is usually defined as a feeling of obligation towards those to whom man is connected by nature (parents, children, relatives)" (Rocha, 2013: 338).

<sup>28</sup> CIL 10.5813 = ILS 5628: *Ummidia C. f. Quadratilla amphitheatrum et templum Casinatibus sua pecunia fecit*. "Ummidia Quadratilla, daughter of Gains, built this amphitheater and temple with her own money for the citizens of Cassino".

theatrical activities would not have cost her money, but could have earned her money (Sick, 1999: 337).

There are numerous sources, literary, papyrological and legal, that show that Roman slaves trained in trade increased greatly in value. Skilled slaves could be sold at a good profit, or owners could claim the slaves' *peculium*, or "rent"; likewise, patrons could demand *operas* or "work obligations" from their freed slaves. The best-known example of training slaves and profiting from their added value comes from Plutarch's biography of Cato the Elder (Sick, 1999: 337).

It turns out that Ummidia's slaves also had to have a good reputation. The fact that several members of Ummidia's family could afford funeral monuments attests to a relatively prosperous economic position. Furthermore, we know that these mimes achieved a distinct level of fame. Pliny himself, despite his concerns about the morality of mime, describes the participation of their pantomimes in recent priestly games (7.24.6-7)<sup>29</sup>, and we have the impression that the pantomimes had already given previous public performances since Pliny comments that his grandson Quadrato didn't watch the pantomimes "in the theater or at home."<sup>30</sup> If they had only done this one public performance, there would have been no need for the comment. The pantomimes seem to have had their own set of *groupies* in the audience of this show. Pliny didn't take much notice of the *groupies'* behavior either, as they made a lot of noise running around the theater imitating the pantomimes<sup>31</sup>. The popularity of Ummidia's troupe was in line with the popularity of pantomime in general (Sick, 1999: 340).

Ummidia's financing of the *Casinum* amphitheater and the restoration of the broken stage show his wider involvement in spectacular affairs in Italy.

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<sup>29</sup> The Latin here (7.24.6) reads: *productis in comissario pantomimis*, "with the pantomimes brought to the performance". From the lack of any possessive adjective (i.e. she), it can be inferred that not all the pantomimes were associated with Ummidia. Her grandson Quadratus then comments: *scis me hodie primum vidisse saltantem aviae meae libertum?* "Did you know that today is the first time I've seen one of my grandmother's freedmen dancing?" The mention of a single pantomime here is interesting. Perhaps one of Ummidia's clients was given the lead role, as there was usually only one main performer apart from the chorus in pantomime shows. If this were the case, it would explain why Quadratus mentions only one performer and why part of the theatrical crowd fawns over Ummidia after the performance, as if it were a great coup for the old lady. For the exact identification of these games, see Beaujeu 1975: 109-24.

<sup>30</sup> 7.24.5: *hos (pantomimos) Quadratus non in theatro non domi spectabat.*

<sup>31</sup> 7.24.8: *alienissimi homines ... in theatrum cursitabant exsultabant plaudebant mirabantur ac deinde singulos gestus dominae cum canticis reddebant ....*

We can assume that his pantomimes would have received a special prerogative to perform on the stages endowed with his funding. At the very least, Ummidia would have had the privilege of inaugurating new or renovated installations with artists of her choice. She could certainly have increased the reputation of her slaves and performing clients by having them appear on the stages she endowed, and as their fame grew, they could be hired for other public and private performances. We can conceive of the stages in *Casinum* as a stopover for pantomime performances before they performed in Rome.

Even though none of Ummidia's mimes ever performed in theaters in *Casinum* or other Italian cities, we know from Pliny's letter that they performed at events outside Ummidia's house and had some following, and therefore their value must have increased, not to mention any payment they received for their performances. The income from performances outside the house could have provided at least the means necessary to maintain a group of slave artists. Furthermore, given Cicero's examples, the successful careers of several popular pantomimes may have provided considerable income. We can therefore see Ummidia's interest in pantomime not as an idle pastime, but as a lucrative business. This is not to say that Ummidia didn't enjoy watching pantomimes, but contrary to Pliny's claim of indolence, she could have enjoyed pantomime and profited from it (Sick, 1999: 342).

## **Conclusion: Agency and Power**

In this article, we have mainly examined the possible economic reasons for Ummidia Quadratilla's interest in pantomime. To conclude, we should highlight, from the perspective of agency, the political power that could have resulted from the control of popular entrepreneurs. If, as we have seen, the popularity of pantomimes could evoke riots and senate sessions, the political advantage of owning pantomimes is clear. We can imagine various friends of the elite (men were the main sponsors of the games) appealing to Ummidia for the use of their pantomimes at various public and private events. In turn, in a society very concerned with the exchange of duties and gifts, Ummidia may have acquired forms of power not traditionally accessible to Roman women. The most important people in Rome would have liked to have the most popular performers at the games they sponsored; if Ummidia's mimes were employed, she would have been in a position to make a subtle demand for an economic or political reward in return (Sick, 1999: 344).



The relationships that developed between these slaves and freedmen prove the interactions that took place between the house of Ummedia and the imperial house, and Ronald Syme has already demonstrated the extensive relationships between the noble families themselves. Ummedia's grandson was Hadrian's consul, and her great-grandson married Marcus Aurelius' sister (Syme, 1968: 88–99). It remains to be seen what the relationship is between what happened "downstairs" among the slaves and what happened "upstairs" among the nobles, and to what extent Ummedia and her pantomimes served to foster alliances between the two families.

The social stigma imposed on professions in the entertainment industry may have represented an opportunity for women like Ummidia in a field with which the conservative men of the elite did not want to be directly associated. A woman may have served as an intermediary for the artist. Let's return for a moment to Plínio's assessment of Ummidia. According to Pliny, the passion for pantomime was a vice allowed to women "in the idleness of their sex"; an intelligent woman could have used this indulgence for personal gain. The stakes were quite high, however: Pliny's indulgence in Ummidia could quickly turn into Juvenal's condemnation of women in the theater (Sick, 1999: 345).

In the end, these interactions seem to have been effected positively by Ummedia; she achieved a conspicuous social and political position. Pliny was not only willing to overlook her fanaticism for pantomime, but she, in fact, like several other women in the first centuries of the Common Era<sup>32</sup>, became the patroness of both her family and her city. Note that her grandson took his name from his grandmother's line, not his father's<sup>33</sup>, and the party to rededicate the theater in Casinum was held for the magistrates, people, and women of the city.<sup>34</sup> The inscription not only announces her gift and therefore patronage of the city, but the text also alludes to her femininity. Although Ummedia's moral position as a Roman matron may have been threatened by her owning a pantomime troupe, the economic and political advantages that resulted from these very pantomimes must have allowed her to counter such a threat (Sick, 1999: 346).

Sherry B. Ortner (2006), in her chapter "Power and Projects: Reflections on Agency," states that "agency" is never a thing in itself but always part of a

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<sup>32</sup> Forbis 1990, Van Bremen 1983 and MacMullen 1980 describe an increase in patronage by women at regional sites under the empire; they review dedicatory inscriptions similar to Ummidia's at Casinum, as does Richlin 1997: 339–46, 368–74 (Sick, 1999).

<sup>33</sup> See Syme 1968: 78, 83–84, on the discussion.

<sup>34</sup> See Fora 1992: 272–73 in which he discusses the inclusion of women in the feast.

process that Giddens calls structuration, the creation and reconstruction of broader social and cultural formations (Ortner, 2006: 134). Generally speaking, the notion of agency can be said to have two fields of meaning. In one field of meaning, "agency" is about intentionality and the pursuit of culturally defined projects. In the other field of meaning, agency is about power, about acting within relations of social inequality, asymmetry, and force. In this author's conception, "agency" is never merely one or the other. Its two "faces" – as (the pursuit of the realization of) "projects" or as (the exercise of or against) power" – blend or bleed into each other or remain distinct but intertwined in a relationship (Ortner, 2006: 139).

From this perspective, "agency" can be virtually synonymous with the forms of power that people have at their disposal, their ability to act on their behalf, influence other people and events, and maintain some kind of control over their own lives. Agency, in this sense, is relevant to both domination and resistance. People in positions of power "have" – legitimately or not – what can be considered "a lot of gency," but the dominated also always have certain capacities, and sometimes very significant capacities, to exert some kind of influence over the way events unfold (Ortner, 2006: 143).

Based on these assumptions, it is possible to relate Ummidia Quadratilla's activities to the perspective of agency, given that she took advantage of her taste for pantomimes and turned it into a profitable business capable of providing power in the sense of participation in public life, as well as a form of financial enterprise capable of sustaining her social position, educating her grandson and practicing evergetism, sponsoring restoration works in her hometown, Casinum.

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