Emily Hemelrijk

In one of his letters, Pliny the Younger presents a lively picture of Ummidia Quadratilla, an elderly lady of a well-known consular family from Casinum, who had recently died at the age of almost seventy-nine.¹ In his obituary, which starts with her name as if it were a public inscription, he vividly describes her robust physique and excellent health, praising her for the strict upbringing of her grandson and the excellent will she had left.² Yet, he does not turn a blind eye to her less appropriate habits: her fondness for playing draughts and watching her troupe of pantomime dancers, “on whom she fawned with a greater indulgence than appropriate for a woman of the greatest distinction”.³ In his sensitive assessment of this formidable woman, however, there is a remarkable lacuna in the information. Though Pliny calls her the ‘leading lady’ of the town (princeps femina) and dwells upon her popularity with the people because of their common love for pantomime,⁴ he

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¹ This paper is based on a chapter of my forthcoming book Hidden Lives—Public Personae. Women and Civic Life in Italy and the Latin West during the Roman Principate. I thank the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) for their financial support of this research project.


³ Plin. Ep. 7.24.1: usque ad novissimam valetudinem viridis, atque etiam ultra matronalem modum compacto corpore et robusto (“she was vigorous until her last illness and had a sturdy physique and a robust constitution even beyond what was common for a matron”); her will: decessit honestissimo testamento (7.24. 2: “she died leaving an excellent will”); generally, her attitude towards her grandson is characterized by amor, reverentia and pietas (love, respect and familial devotion, 7.24.5 and 8). The letter begins with her name in the nominative as in building inscriptions and, occasionally, in honorific inscriptions (for instance, that of Iunia Rustica discussed below, n. 27).

⁴ Plin. Ep. 7.24.4: Habebat illa pantomimos fovebatque effusius quam principi feminae convenit. Her life of leisure: Ep. 7.24.5: ut feminam in illo otio sexus, laxare animum lusu calculorum, solere spectare pantomimos suos (“as a woman with the many idle hours of her sex she used to relax her mind by playing draughts and watching her pantomimes”); her luxurious life-style is summarized in Pliny’s characterization of her as an avia delicata (“self-indulgent grandmother”). The freedman mentioned in CIL 10, 1946 = ILS 5883 (Puteoli, It. 1): C(aius) Ummidius / Actius / Anicetus / pantomimus, may have been one of her pantomimes.

⁵ For Ummidia Quadratilla as princeps femina, Plin. Ep. 7.24.4. She had her pantomimes perform in the theatre before an exhilarated public, some of whom “jumped up and
does not reveal what must have been the main cause of her local renown: her munificence. By a stroke of luck, inscriptions from Casinum throw light on this side of her character. In spite of their fragmentary survival, they unequivocally show that Ummidia Quadratilla was an important benefactress: she built a temple and an amphitheatre and repaired the local theatre celebrating the dedication of the theatre with a public banquet for (probably) the decurions, the people, and the women of the town.5 Though she lived at least part of her life in Rome, Ummidia Quadratilla clearly felt an emotional bond with her native town, which prompted her to shower benefactions on it.

Pliny’s reticence about Ummidia’s benefactions is, to some extent, mirrored in modern discussions of civic munificence. Since, in the general perception, the typical civic benefactor was an upper-class man aspiring to social prestige and political power, female benefactors are often ignored or only mentioned in passing. Some scholars believe that women cannot be viewed separately from their social class and families and that female munificence, therefore, does not warrant a separate discussion. Others explain benefactresses away as exceptions or as “honorary men”.6 A few include

applauded to show their admiration, and then mirrored every gesture of the grand lady with chants”, as Pliny somewhat condescendingly relates, see Plin. Æp. 7.24.7: exsultabant plaudabant mirabantur ac deinde singulos gestus dominae cum canticis reddabant; cf. Plin. Æp. 7.24.4 and 6. I do not agree with Carlon (2009) 210, who assumes that the pantomimes were mimicking Ummidia Quadratilla.

5 CIL 10, 5183 = ILS 5628 = EAOR 4, 46 = AE 1991, +326 (on a limestone plaque from the amphitheatre in Casinum, It. 1): Ummidia C(ai)f(ilia) / Quadratilla / amphitheatrum et / templum Casinatibus / sua pecunia fecit (“Ummidia Quadratilla, daughter of Gaius, built the amphitheatre and the temple for the citizens of Casina from her own resources”) and AE 1946, 174 = AE 1992, 244, a badly damaged inscription on fragments of a marble plaque in the theatre of Casinum: [Ummidia C(ai)f(ilia) Quadratilla] [amphitheatrum] [in honorem C. Ummidii patri[s]). EAOR 4, 47 (Casinum, It. 1; on two blocks of limestone found near the entrance of the amphitheatre): Ummidia C(ai)f(ilia) Quadratilla / Asconia Secunda, who may have been a sister, or half-sister, of Ummidia Quadratilla (see FOS 830) or is perhaps one and the same, see Syme (1968) 77 and Carlon (2009) 190.

6 Against a separate discussion of women, see Andréau (1977) 165: “Il serait absurde de constituer une catégorie à part regroupant toutes les femmes, alors que les femmes sont partie intégrante du groupe socio-juridique de leur père ou de leur frère, puis de leur mari.” For female euergetēs as “honorary men”, see Gordon (1990) 230: “Finally, women appear