Fighting over Rome's *Corpus*: Competing Metaphors of the Body Politic in the Catilinarian Conspiracy

Representations of the Catilinarian Conspiracy in Roman historiography are remarkable in their penchant for bodily imagery. Whether describing the feverish constitutions of the conspirators, the cannibalism supposedly practiced by Catiline, or the diseased *res publica* itself, writers from Sallust to Cassius Dio interpret the crisis of 63 BCE through the lens of the human body. I suggest that this tradition can be traced back to Cicero, whose orations stage the conspiracy as a contest between two competing metaphors of the body politic.

When Catiline was called onto the senate floor to account for his suspicious behavior, he used an organic metaphor that soon became infamous. "He said that there were two bodies of the republic—one feeble, with a weak head, the other strong, without a head; and that the latter, as it had been deserving of him, would not lack a head while he was alive," Cicero recalled several months later (*pro Mur.*51). The whole senate was so horrified at this image of a double-headed body politic that it groaned aloud in response, convinced of his intention to overthrow the republic. Yet Cicero quickly moves on, never explaining what made this metaphor so treacherous.

Its full significance only emerges in relation to two hints later offered by Cicero and Varro. Cataloguing the significance of various portents, Cicero explains, "When a girl is born with two heads (*biceps*), there will be sedition in the populace or seduction and adultery at home," (*de Div.* 1.121). Varro uses the same language to describe the political situation created by Gaius Gracchus: "he unjustly transferred the jury-courts to the equites and made the citizen body two-headed (*bicipitem*)—the origin of civil discords," (*de Vita Populi Romani* fr. 114 Riposati). Catiline takes up this symbol of conflict and turns it into an ideal, naturalizing the

increasingly divisive politics of the post-Sullan era (Wiseman 2010, López Barja 2007). He then uses this division as the basis for a new model of authority: just as the senate has a head, so should the people. In the eyes of his fellow senators, this was tantamount to an announcement of tyrannical aspirations.

Rather than accept Catiline's formulation, Cicero challenges it with an alternative model of the body politic in his *Catilinarians*. Employing an extended analogy, he compares the republic to a body weakened by disease. Just as a sick man may experience relief from symptoms without being cured, "so this disease, which is in the *res publica*, if relieved by his [Catiline's] punishment, will grow far worse, since those other men remain alive," (1.31). Catiline and his followers are designated "a dangerous contagion (*pestis*) of the republic" (1.11), and though their disease may be figurative, it prompts real symptoms in their feverish and languid bodies. The only hope for a cure is their purging from the body politic (*purga urbem* 1.10), a goal realized in practical terms through their execution.

This formulation necessarily positions Cicero as the doctor to the body politic (Dyck 2008). He uses an explicitly medicinal vocabulary to describe his role as consul, announcing, "What is able to be cured (*sanari*), I will cure (*sanabo*) by any means, what has to be cut off, I won't allow to remain to the destruction of the *civitas*," (2.11). Assuming the role of *medicus* is a powerful rhetorical strategy for constructing his consular authority, a paramount objective the orations (Steel 2006, Batstone 1994, Konstan 1993). By setting the orator apart from his fellow citizens, all of whom are part of a body that only he can see from the outside, it forcefully sanctions his legitimacy. The speech, crafted as a rejoinder to the rhetorical challenge posed by Catiline's imagery, reveals the origins of Cicero's *medicus rei publicae*, a figure that would become increasingly prominent in his political thought during the waning years of the republic.

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