

Cato under the Principate: Stoic Saint or Radical Republican

In the spring of 46 B.C.E., Julius Caesar (100–44 B.C.E.) was in haste to reach the city of Utica. He had already defeated his republican foes in the battle of Thapsus, so his urgency was not dictated by military exigency. Rather he sought to save the life of Cato the Younger (95–46 B.C.E.), who had stationed himself in Utica during the North African phase of the civil wars. This is one of ancient history's ironies, as Caesar and Cato had been bitter enemies for nearly twenty years dating back to the conspiracy of Catiline. Cato adhered to the Stoic school of philosophy, which taught that virtue was the highest good, and had been a staunch defender of the republican constitution. In the face of defeat, Cato's Stoicism and political loyalties compelled him to commit suicide rather than surrender to Caesar. Caesar presumed that Cato would take this course of action, which explains his race to Utica. But it was political expediency, not goodwill, that drove on the dictator; Caesar wanted to exchange Cato's life for his political subservience. Cato would have none of it, and after reading Plato's discourse on the soul, the *Phaedo*, he stabbed himself in the chest. Caesar arrived too late.

Thus ended the physical life of Cato the Younger, but it was also the birth of Cato the political symbol, representing in turn philosophical resolve, treason, and impassioned resistance against tyranny. These are the three predominant stories the Romans told about Cato in the immediate aftermath of his death in the midst of the civil wars that ended the Roman Republic. Cicero praised Cato's Stoic fortitude in his pamphlet entitled *Cato*. Caesar responded with a riposte of his own, the *Anti-Cato*, in which he published all of Cato's vices and political short-sightedness. Brutus, the future tyrannicide and nephew of Cato, answered with another pamphlet defending Cato's political commitment to the Republic. Cato's fortunes have risen and fallen

over the ages, but these three interpretations of Cato's life have endured through the centuries, serving as standards for how to measure political virtue.

The traces of Cato as traitor can be found throughout Tacitus' *Annales* in the accusations and trials of republican dissidents, such as Cremutius Cordus and Thrasea Paetus. The writings of Seneca the Younger and his nephew Lucan preserve the other two interpretations in their competing portrayals of Cato: the Stoic saint and the republican enemy of tyrants. I intend to argue that the former was the safe interpretation tolerated by the imperial regimes while the latter was an interpretation that often served as a surrogate for direct critique of the emperors. Seneca hews more closely to the view of Cato as a Stoic sage who maintains his sense of equanimity in the face of external pressures. This reading of Cato's life was particularly fitting for Romans living during the reign of Nero who had to confront the challenges of navigating public life under his violent and arbitrary rule. Seneca himself would be forced to commit suicide under Nero and looked to Cato for a model. Lucan too understood the need for maintaining a sense of equanimity in political life, but he also felt passionately about partisan engagement in politics as demonstrated by his leadership in the Pisonian conspiracy to overthrow Nero. Lucan encapsulates this tension between philosophic withdraw and committed engagement in book two of *De Bello Civili*, in which he includes a dialogue between Brutus and Cato. The former expects Cato to stand aloof from the struggle, while the latter argues for choosing sides and trying to bring about the best possible outcome for the Republic. While Seneca and Lucan are deeply interested in Cato, their writings reveal a greater concern for how a Roman should conduct oneself politically. Both of them turned to Cato for guidance on thinking through this question. As for later writers, Cato served as a mirror for Seneca and Lucan to reflect their own thoughts on proper political behavior.

Bibliography

Fehrle, Rudolf. *Cato Uticensis*. Darmstadt, 1983.

Gäth, Stephan. *Die literarische Rezeption des Cato Uticensis: In Ausschnitten von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit*. Frankfurt am Main, 2011.

Goar, Robert J. *The Legend of Cato Uticensis from the First Century B.C. to the Fifth Century A.D. with an Appendix on Dante and Cato*. Brussels, 1987.

Goodman, Rob and Jimmy Soni. *Rome's Last Citizen: The Life and Legacy of Cato, Mortal Enemy of Caesar*. New York, 2012.

Griffin, Miriam. "Philosophy, Cato, and Roman Suicide: I and II." *G&R* 33 (1986): 64–77, 192–202.

Griffin, Miriam. "Seneca on Cato's Politics: *Epistle* 14.12–13." *CQ* 18 (1968): 373–375.

Sklenar, R. *A Taste for Nothingness: A Study of Virtus and Related Themes in Lucan's Bellum Civile*. Ann Arbor, 2003.