

Virtus Without Suicide: Cicero, Exile and Public Image

According to Van Hooff, “in the Classical period suicide was counted as an obligation for soldiers and politicians when confronted with the risk of losing their honour” (1990, 50-51). Cicero, a *novus homo* who tirelessly worked to build and preserve a lasting reputation for himself in Rome, understood the shame and dishonor exile imposed upon him. He also realized the nearly obligatory role suicide played in preserving a prominent Roman male’s honor when facing the humiliation of exile and frequently expressed his regrets over clinging to life in his letters (e.g. *Att.* 3.3; 3.6; 3.15; *Fam.* 14.4). In this paper, I argue that throughout his life Cicero lacked the will to die with *dignitas* to avoid dishonor. Instead he employed multiple strategies to mitigate the blow to his reputation in his exilic letters and then proceeded to exercise self-fashioning in his post *reditum* speeches in an attempt to bolster his status to its previous heights.

Modern scholars examining Cicero’s letters from exile (along with those after the death of Tullia) often focus on Cicero’s mental state. They criticize his missives as unmanly and characterize Cicero as being unbalanced during this time, with Rawson going so far as to consider him an “unreliable witness” to his own exile. Claassen (1992) does point out the drastic change in Cicero’s presentation between his letters from exile and his post *reditum* speeches. While noting the depression and hopelessness of the former, she highlights the way he reinvents himself through self-glorification in the latter. I suggest that Cicero had full control of his mental capabilities both during and after his exile. Lacking the will to commit suicide in protest of the banishment faced under the tribuneship of Clodius, Cicero’s main concern remains protecting his public image.

Cicero recognized that suicide provided the best means for a man facing exile to preserve his *dignitas*. In a courtroom speech, Cicero states that ‘brave men’ possessing *virtus* prefer suicide to the life of an exile (*Cluent.* 61. 171). A well-received political suicide completed at the appropriate time offered Cicero the best chance of preserving his reputation and, perhaps, even damaging his opponent, Clodius (e.g. *Att.* 3.7; *Q. Fr.* 1.4; Plass: 1995, 123). Unable to bring himself to suicide, Cicero instead attempts to convince readers of his letters that he regrets not taking his life. He uses blame to distance himself from the decision to stay alive and faults his friends and family for his exile (e.g. *Att.* 3.3; *Q. Fr.* 1.4). Upon his return, Cicero switches strategies from blame to reinvention, painting himself as a patriotic martyr, sacrificing himself to avert civil war (*Red. Pop.* 1; *Red. Sen.* 33-4). This paper will examine these strategies and highlight Cicero’s attempts at maintaining his public image by reinventing himself for his audience.

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