

I'm Not There: Cato the Younger in the Writings of Tacitus

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. 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, 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.

The writings of Tacitus provide a clear record of how Cato functioned as a political symbol. Since Cato died well before the events Tacitus records in his historical works, he is referred to obliquely and only in dialogue or speeches with one exception. Cato most commonly appears in the speeches of political dissidents, who evoke the memory of Cato the republican in their political resistance to tyrannical emperors, and *delatores*, who invoke the image of Cato the traitor in their accusations against the dissidents.

In the *Historiae*, Epius Marcellus, who had successfully charged Thrasea Paetus and Helvidius Priscus with treason, sarcastically compared Helvidius to M. Iunius Brutus and Cato the Younger for his bravery (*fortitudo*) and resolve (*constantia*) (*H.* 4.8.3). Cato is named along with Brutus again in the one passage that is not part of a speech or dialogue, namely Tacitus'

obituary of Junia Tertia, niece of Cato (*A.* 3.76). Tacitus remarks how in her funeral procession C. Cassius Longinus and M. Iunius Brutus were omitted but were conspicuous by their absence. Tacitus uses the death of Junia to mark the loss of republican freedom under the Principate dating here death to the republican defeat at Philippi.

In the following book (*Annales.* 4.34.4), Cremutius Cordus mentions how Cicero praised Cato to the skies, which was tolerated by Caesar. Cremutius, accused of treason for praising Cassius and Brutus in his histories, speaks at length on the toleration of free speech prior to his day. His reference is to Cicero's laudatory *Cato*, to which Julius Caesar responded merely with another pamphlet, the *Anti-Cato*. Cato's final appearance in Tacitus is in a violent speech similar to Epirus Marcellus' speech at *H.* 4.8; Cossutianus Capito attacked Thrasea Paetus and likened him and Nero to Cato and Caesar (*A.* 16.22.2). These accusations to Nero resulted in Thrasea's trial and condemnation, demonstrating the regime's ability to use Cato as a symbol of illegal resistance to legitimate authority, a charge Cato would have vehemently rejected.

These passages shed light on Cato's appearance in the *Dialogus de oratoribus*. Tacitus' primary interlocutor, Curiatus Maternus, has written a tragedy entitled *Cato*, which offended the powerful because it presented the views of Cato (*D.* 2). Tacitus claims to have accompanied Marcus Aper and Iulius Secundus to Maternus' house the day after the performance when Rome was abuzz with the news. Aper and Secundus apparently have come to persuade Maternus to revise his *Cato*, not to make it better but to make it safer, a suggestion Maternus strongly opposes (*D.* 3.2-3). The discussion then launches into the question of which is better poetry or oratory. In his argument for oratory, Aper returns to the dangers related to writing a drama on Cato (*D.* 10.6). Based on Tacitus' use of Cato as a political symbol in his other works, Marcus

Aper speaks from the position of a *delator*, while Maternus takes on the characteristics of a political dissident.

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