

Success and Failure in Cicero: The Case of Titus Albucius

The question of how to judge the success or failure of a life looms large over Cicero's late writings. By examining the exemplum of disgraced governor Titus Albucius, this paper considers how Cicero's thinking on the topic evolves from the mid-50s up until the writing of the *Tusculan Disputations* (summer 45 BCE). Cicero comes to conceive of subjective success and failure as submerged in an ethical field that cannot be described exclusively using the traditional categories of *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* (on these categories, see e.g., Bénatouïl and Bonazzi 2012; for Cic., see e.g., Boyancé 1967, Görler 2004). At the same time, however, the figure of Albucius does not simply offer Cicero a new model of success. Rather, the transformation of this exemplum in Cicero's writings discloses his attempt to think through a complex of concerns surrounding community, belonging, and happiness in an increasingly authoritarian and globalized world.

Titus Albucius was a minor politician and socialite from the late 2nd century BCE who is remembered in Cicero's writing for two reasons: he was infamous for his Epicureanism; and, due to a farcically disastrous propraetorship in Sardinia (c. 105/4), he was denied a "thanksgiving" (*supplicatio*) by the Senate and eventually exiled on charges of blackmail.

The paper begins from Albucius' first appearance in Cicero's oeuvre, the *Oratio de provinciis consularibus* (§15-16, with Grillo 2015 *ad loc.*), which marks a turning point for Cicero's political career because of his support for the renewal of Caesar's governorship in Gaul. At this juncture in Cicero's life and the demise of the Republic, Albucius serves as a negative exemplum, whose political failures are intended to admonish the arrogance of governors and advocate for a form of provincial administration based on Senatorial oversight—represented, as Cicero claims, by Caesar. The historical irony of this interpretation unravels the coherency of the

exemplum over the course of the next decade in Cicero's writings (cf. *Pis.* 92; *Scaur.* 40; *de Orat.* 2.281, 3.171; *Brut.* 102, 131; *Orat.* 149; *de Fin.* 1.9). Albius' story evolves to focus on his exile at Athens and his Epicurean leanings. His life continues to serve as a negative exemplum. Yet, whereas previously his story represented the failure of a *vita activa*, it now demonstrates the perversion of a *vita contemplativa*, in which Greek philosophy is used as an ignoble avoidance of public duties. This figure, therefore, comes to be counterpoised to Cicero's own withdrawal from public life under Caesar's dictatorship and his renewed engagement with philosophy, which, he insists, *will* benefit the Republic.

Thus when Albius resurfaces in the final book of the *Tusculan Disputations* (5.109), it is remarkable to find the exemplum supporting an argument that exile, far from being a source of unhappiness, can open up new forms of communal belonging and personal fulfillment that are inaccessible both to the active politician and the lifelong recluse. Included favorably alongside Socrates, Metrodorus, Xenocrates, and Damaratus, the father of Tarquinius Priscus, Albius' life offers proof that it is better to prefer "the freedom of exile to enslavement at home" (*exsilio libertatem domesticae servituti*, *ibid.*). In the *Tusculans*, a text written through Cicero's grief at the loss of his homeland and his daughter, Cicero attempts to think beyond the conventional dichotomy between active and contemplative lives. Albius' transformation from ineffectual politician to public disgrace to a model of seeking personal happiness outside of traditional avenues traces the development of Cicero's thinking on how to measure a life: Albius ultimately offers a possibility of success, happiness, and global citizenship through political failure, public rejection, and exile.

The paper concludes by considering how the transformation of this exemplum reveals the limits of political interpretations of Cicero's late *philosophica* (see e.g., Gildenhard 2007, Baraz

2012). Through this exemplum we can see that Cicero's philosophy does not simply reflect back the political and personal impasses in which he finds himself, but rather operates as a creative mode of critical thought (cf. Habinek 1990). Albucius appears as a symptomatic figure whose trajectory Cicero can use to envision new potentialities and forms of life.

Bibliography

- Baraz, Yelena. 2012. *A Written Republic. Cicero's Philosophical Politics*. Princeton.
- Bénatouïl, Thomas and Mauro Bonazzi, eds. 2012. *Theoria, Praxis and the Contemplative Life after Plato and Aristotle*. Leiden.
- Boyancé, Pierre. 1967. Cicéron et la vie contemplative. *Latomus* 26.1: 3-26.
- Gildenhard, Ingo. 2007. "Paideia Romana. Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*." CCJ supp. 30.
- Grillo, Luca. 2015. *Cicero's De provinciis consularibus oratio*. New York.
- Görler, Woldemar. 2004 [1990]. "Cicero zwischen Politik und Philosophie." In Christoph Catrein ed., *Kleine Schriften zur hellenistisch-römischen Philosophie*. Leiden: 158-171.
- Habinek, Thomas. 1990. "Towards a History of Friendly Advice: The Politics of Candor in Cicero's 'de Amicitia.'" *Apeiron* 23.4: 165-185.