



Marcus Porcius Cato Uticensis, "the Younger" (95-46 B.C.)

“LIBERTY OR DEATH”: Extracts of Addison’s “Cato, a Tragedy” (1712)

*“...A day, an hour, of virtuous liberty,
Is worth a whole eternity in bondage.”*
~ Act II, scene 2.

By all accounts, it would seem a given that Joseph Addison’s redoubtable “Cato” could fairly compete for the title of the most popular and influential stage play in all of recorded history. So much so that for many this theatrical drama became a real life blue-print -- if not interpreted as an out-and-out prophecy -- of subsequent and momentous historical events; And Life intentionally, and without embarrassment or apology, copied art – indeed, went on to surpass in grandeur its fictional model.

Quite what incited the impassioned sentiments Addison put forth is something of a puzzle. Were they prompted merely by the Whig versus Tory politics of his day? These last seem to have been relatively tame compared to the vociferous, if not violent, wranglings of the politics of prior and subsequent British generations. In its lauding of Stoic virtues one does sense in Addison’s work an express revulsion for and reaction to the profligacy or at least raciness of Restoration theater. This presumably must be taken as one contributing factor. Yet in championing strict morals Addison paradoxically uses excess himself to combat the excess of his cultural rivals. Perhaps we might note as well, “Cato” should be seen as an English entry into Corneille’s dramatic school of uncompromising heroic virtue -- with Roman history more or less artificially drawn upon as a prop on which Addison could build on and explore his theme. More than likely Addison drew his inspiration to use Cato in particular as his hero from Plutarch and or the poet Lucan’s sympathetic portrait of Cato his Roman civil war epic *Pharsalia*; both of which were immediately familiar to much of his audience.

It is not a little peculiar that though “Cato” was generally received and understood as a Whig literary triumph, the historical Cato the Younger bore far greater resemblance to a conservative of Addison’s time than a populist reformer. Ironically, the Caesar so decried as tyrant in “Cato” had his most prominent predecessor in the reactionary and unscrupulous Sulla -- one of the greatest champions of Roman conservatism. At the same time, the Republic historical Cato represented was by that time oft dominated by corrupt and self-serving aristocrats, and who vied against the middle class, the remaining plebs, and proletariat; which Caesar, like the Gracchi and Marius, took it upon himself to lead.

To say that “Cato’s” later impact was striking to the point of incredible is no overstatement. Decades before young men slew themselves after reading *Young Werther*, Eustace Budgell (1686–1737), an English author and political activist, used "Cato" as a cue to throw himself into the Thames; while leaving behind as his suicide note “What Cato did, and Addison approved, cannot be wrong.”

In 1721, John Trenchard (1662-1723) and Thomas Gordon (c. 1692–1750) took the name for their “Cato Letters” from the play; and issued writings remarkable in their foreshadowing the American Revolutionary ideas and aspirations that took to their own wings in the 1770s.

It is possible that the very youthful George Washington acted in a performance of Addison's play at a private gathering in Virginia, and his subsequent persona as morally prepossessed American commander-in-chief is uncannily mirrored in the stage Cato. In addition, he sometimes quoted from or made allusions to "Cato" in his wartime correspondence. In 1778, it was performed at the Valley Forge encampment; which was altogether fitting seeing how very much of the play distinctly echoes American Revolutionary events and personalities. For example, in Act II, scene 4, we find the lines:

"It is not now time to talk of aught
But chains or conquest, liberty or death."

Or in Act IV, scene 4:

"What a pity it is
That we can die but once to serve our country."

Frequent references are made to the importance of subsisting on prudence, hardship and sobriety, or warnings against the dangers of mutiny -- themes and subjects familiar to Continental soldiers. Similarly and time and again, it is easy for us to spot parallels which the Valley Forge audience could themselves see and that correlated with their own immediate experience and situation. Cato speaking in Act II, scen. 5 must have called to mind to some, not least of which Washington himself, the American rout at the battle of Long Island. In addition, Sempronius, the scheming senatorial intriguer and false ally of Cato, makes almost a dead ringer for Arnold. Yet it would be two years after Valley Forge before the latter's treason.

Beyond the 18th century, such heady moralistic fervor became hard to maintain, and it can be forgiven the sons if they did not wildly take to "Cato" as their fathers did. The play has been subsequently and up unto our own time often treated in a shallow and frivolous way by some of the more confused members of left and right: the right clumsily finding "Cato" timely in the fashionable sense; and the left, in too ready to dismiss it as outdated, show themselves as having little sense of poetry or of things larger than life, and the play obviously deserves better justice than either give it.

Addison's stage verse, it should be understood, and for all its dated affectation has a musicality that transcends its mere surface message; and to that extent it is perhaps this, in addition to some individual memorable lines, which gives the play some genuinely sustaining merit. Simply put, Addison's method of dramatic delivery is enjoyable to mimic whether in a friendly or unfriendly way. And the artful attention to the sound, phrasing, and rhythm of words in "Cato" is sometimes half the fun; different yet not so very unlike the witty use of language by 18th century humorists such as John Gay, Smollet, Fielding, Goldsmith, and Joe Miller where sound and meaning are inseparable to the emotional effect intended or aimed at -- and which good fellows will recognize and appreciate. In this sense, "Cato" remains a play for good fellows. But as is only mete, no one can force another to be a good fellow; so that you either *get it* or you *don't*.

Here then are some sample scenes, dialogue, and speeches.

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from Act I, scen. 1.

*Portius.*

The dawn is overcast, the morning low'rs,  
And heavily in clouds brings on the day,  
The great, th' important day, big with the fate  
Of Cato and of Rome — Our father's death  
Would fill up all the guilt of civil war,  
And close the scene of blood. Already Caesar  
Has Ravag'd more than half the globe, and sees  
Mankind grown thin by his destructive sword:  
Should he go farther, numbers would be wanting  
To form new battles, and support his crimes.

Ye gods, what havoc does ambition make  
Among your works! —...

Believe me, Marcus, 'tis an impious greatness,  
And mix'd with too much horror to be envied:  
How does the lustre of our father's actions,  
Through the dark cloud of ills that cover him,  
Break out, and burn with more triumphant brightness?  
His sufferings shine, and spread a glory round him  
Greatly unfortunate, he fights the cause  
Of honour, virtue, liberty, and Rome.  
His sword ne'er fell but on the guilty head;  
Oppression, tyranny, and power usurp'd,  
Draw all the vengeance of his arm upon them...

Well dost thou seem to check my ling'ring here  
On this important hour — I'll straight away,  
And while the fathers of the senate meet,  
In close debate to weigh th' events of war,  
I'll animate the soldiers' drooping courage,  
With love of freedom, and contempt of life:  
I'll thunder in their ears their country's cause,  
And try to rouse up all that's Roman in them.  
'Tis not in mortals to command success,  
But we'll do more, Sempronius; we'll deserve it...

*Sempronius, solus.*

Curse on the stripling! how he apes his sire!  
Ambitiously sententious! — but I wonder  
Old Syphax comes not; his Numidian genius  
Is well dispos'd to mischief, were he prompt  
And eager on it; but he must be spurr'd,  
And every moment quickened to the course.  
— Cato has us'd me ill: he has refus'd  
His daughter Marcia to my ardent vows.  
Besides, his baffled arms, and ruin'd cause,  
Are bars to my ambition. Caesar's favour,  
That show'rs down greatness on his friends, will raise me  
To Rome's first honours. If I give up Cato,  
I claim in my reward his captive daughter.

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from Act I, scen. 3.

*Syphax.*

— Sempronius, all is ready,  
I've sounded my Numidians, man by man,  
And find them ripe for a revolt: they all  
Complain aloud of Cato's discipline,  
And wait but the command to change their master.

*Sempronius.*

Believe me, Syphax, there's no time to waste;  
Even whilst we speak our conqueror comes on,

And gathers ground upon us every moment.  
Alas! thou know'st not Caesar's active soul,  
With what a dreadful course he rushes on  
From war to war: in vain has nature form'd  
Mountains and oceans to oppose his passage;  
He bounds o'er all, victorious in his march:  
The Alps and Pyreneans sink before him,  
Through winds and waves and storms he works his way,  
Impatient for the battle: one day more  
Will set the victor thundering at our gates.  
But tell me, hast thou yet drawn o'er young Juba?  
That still would recommend thee more to Caesar,  
And challenge better terms.

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from Act I, scen. 4

*Syphax.*

Gods! where's the worth that sets this people up  
Above your own Numidia's tawny sons!  
Do they with tougher sinews bend the bow?  
Or flies the javelin swifter to its mark,  
Lanch'd from the vigour of a Roman arm?  
Who like our active African instructs  
The fiery steed, and trains him to his hand?  
Or guides in troops th' embattled elephant,  
Loaden with war? These, these are arts, my prince,  
In which your Zama does not stoop to Rome.

*Juba.*

These all are virtues of a meaner rank,  
Perfections that are plac'd in bones and nerves.  
A Roman soul is bent on higher views:  
To civilize the rude unpolish'd world,  
And lay it under the restraint of laws;  
To make man mild, and sociable to man;  
To cultivate the wild licentious savage  
With wisdom, discipline, and liberal arts;  
Th' embellishments of life: virtues like these  
Make human nature shine, reform the soul,  
And break our fierce barbarians into men...

...To strike thee dumb: turn up thy eyes to Cato!  
There may'st thou see to what a godlike height  
The Roman virtues lift up mortal man,  
While good, and just, and anxious for his friends,  
He's still severely bent against himself;  
Renouncing sleep, and rest, and food, and ease,  
He strives with thirst and hunger, toil and heat;  
And when his fortune sets before him all  
The poms and pleasures that his soul can wish,  
His rigid virtue will accept of none.

*Syphax.*

Believe me, prince, there's not an African

That traverses our vast Numidian deserts  
In quest of prey, and lives upon his bow,  
But better practises these boasted virtues.  
Coarse are his meals, the fortune of the chase,  
Amidst the running stream he slakes his thirst,  
Toils all the day, and at th' approach of night  
On the first friendly bank he throws him down,  
Or rests his head upon a rock till morn:  
Then rises fresh, pursues his wonted game,  
And if the following day he chance to find  
A new repast, or an untasted spring,  
Blesses his stars, and thinks it luxury.

*Juba.*

Thy prejudices, Syphax, wont discern  
What virtues grow from ignorance and choice,  
Nor how the hero differs from the brute.  
But grant that others could with equal glory  
Look down on pleasures, and the baits of sense;  
Where shall we find the man that bears affliction,  
Great and majestic in his griefs, like Cato?  
Heavens! With what strength, what steadiness of mind,  
He triumphs in the midst of all his sufferings!  
How does he rise against a load of woes,  
And thank the gods that throw the weight upon him!

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from Act II, scen. 1.

*Sempronius.*

— My voice is still for war.  
Gods! Can a Roman senate long debate  
Which of the two to choose, slavery or death!  
No, let us rise at once, gird on our swords,  
And, at the head of our remaining troops,  
Attack the foe, break through the thick array  
Of his throng'd legions, and charge home upon him.  
Perhaps some arm, more lucky than the rest,  
May reach his heart, and free the world from bondage.  
Rise, fathers, rise! 'Tis Rome demands your help;  
Rise, and revenge her slaughter'd citizens,  
Or share their fate! the corps of half her senate  
Manure the fields of Thessaly, while we  
Sit here, deliberating in cold debates  
If we should sacrifice our lives to honour,  
Or wear them out in servitude and chains,  
Rouse up, for shame! our brothers of Pharsalia  
Point at their wounds, and cry aloud — To battle!  
Great Pompey's shade complains that we are slow,  
And Scipio's ghost walks unreveng'd amongst us!

*Cato.*

Let not a torrent of impetuous zeal  
Transport thee thus beyond the bounds of reason:

True fortitude is seen in great exploits  
That justice warrants, and that wisdom guides,  
All else is towering phrenzy and distraction.  
Are not the lives of those who draw the sword  
In Rome's defence intrusted to our care!  
Should we thus lead them to a field of slaughter,  
Might not the impartial world with reason say  
We lavish'd at our death the blood of thousands,  
To grace our fall, and make our ruin glorious!  
Lucius, we next would know what's your opinion?

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from Act II, scen. 4.

*Cato.*

Dost thou love watchings, abstinence, and toil,  
Laborious virtues all! learn them from Cato:  
Success and fortune must thou learn from Caesar...

Adieu, young prince: I would not hear a word  
Should lessen thee in my esteem: remember  
The hand of fate is over us, and heav'n  
Exacts severity from all our thoughts:  
It is not now a time to talk of aught  
But chains or conquest; liberty or death.

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from Act II, scen. 1

*Portius.*

Marcus, the friendships of the world are oft  
Confederacies in vice, or leagues of pleasure;  
Ours has severest virtue for its basis,  
And such a friendship ends not but with life.

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from Act II, scen. 5.

*Cato.*

Perfidious men! and will you thus dishonour  
Your past exploits, and sully all your wars?  
Do you confess 'twas not a zeal for Rome,  
Nor love of liberty, nor thirst of honour,  
Drew you thus far; but hopes to share the spoil  
Of conquer'd towns, and plunder'd provinces?  
Fired with such motives you do well to join  
With Cato's foes, and follow Caesar's banners.  
Why did I 'scape th' envenom'd asp's rage,  
And all the fiery monsters of the desert,  
To see this day! why could not Cato fall  
Without your guilt? Behold, ungrateful men!  
Behold my bosom naked to your swords,  
And let the man that's injur'd strike the blow.

Which of you all suspects that he is wrong'd,  
Or thinks he suffers greater ills than Cato?  
Am I distinguish'd from you but by toils,  
Superior toils, and heavier weight of cares!  
Painful pre-eminence!...

Meanwhile we'll sacrifice to Liberty.  
Remember, O my friends, the laws, the rights,  
The generous plan of power deliver'd down,  
From age to age, by your renown'd forefathers,  
(So dearly bought, the price of so much blood)  
O let it never perish in your hands!  
But piously transmit it to your children.  
Do thou, great Liberty, inspire our souls,  
And make our lives in thy possession happy,  
Or our deaths glorious in thy just defence.

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from Act. IV, scen. 4.

*Lucius.*

I stand astonish'd! what, the bold Sempronius!  
That still broke foremost through the crowd of patriots,  
As with a hurricane of zeal transported,  
And virtuous even to madness —

*Cato.*

— Trust me, Lucius,  
Our civil discords have produced such crimes,  
Such monstrous crimes, I am surprised at nothing.  
— O Lucius, I am sick of this bad world!  
The daylight and the sun grow painful to me.

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from Act V, scen. 1.

*Cato, solus, sitting in a thoughtful posture: in his  
hand Plato's book on the Immortality of the  
soul. A drawn sword on the table by him.*

It must be so — Plato, thou reason'st well! —  
Else whence this pleasing hope, this fond desire,  
This longing after immortality?  
Or whence this secret dread, and inward horror,  
Of falling into naught? why shrinks the soul  
Back on herself, and startles at destruction?  
'Tis the divinity that stirs within us;  
'Tis heaven itself, that points out an hereafter,  
And intimates eternity to man.  
Eternity? thou pleasing, dreadful, thought!  
Through what variety of untried being,  
Through what new scenes and changes must we pass?  
The wide, th' unbounded prospect, lies before me;  
But shadows, clouds, and darkness rest upon it.

Here will I hold. If there's a power above us,  
(And that there is all nature cries aloud  
Through all her works,) he must delight in virtue;  
And that which he delights in, must be happy.  
But when! or where! — This world was made for Caesar.  
I'm weary of conjectures — This must end them.

[*Laying his hand on his sword.*]

Thus am I doubly arm'd: my death and life,  
My bane and antidote are both before me:  
This in a moment brings me to an end;  
But this informs me I shall never die.  
The soul, secured in her existence, smiles  
At the drawn dagger, and defies its point.  
The stars shall fade away, the sun himself  
Grow dim with age, and nature sink in years;  
But thou shalt flourish in immortal youth,  
Unhurt amidst the wars of elements,  
The wrecks of matter, and the crush of worlds.  
What means this heaviness that hangs upon me?  
This lethargy that creeps through all my senses?  
Nature oppress'd, and harass'd out with care,  
Sinks down to rest. This once I'll favour her,  
That my awaken'd soul may take her flight,  
Renewed in all her strength, and fresh with life,  
An offering fit for heaven. Let guilt or fear  
Disturb man's rest: Cato knows neither of them,  
Indifferent in his choice to sleep or die.

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For the complete text of "Cato" (in .txt format), see:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/31592/pg31592.txt>

~or~

http://www.constitution.org/addison/cato_play.htm

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