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The Ultimate *Romana Mors*

The Death of Cato and the Resulting Paradigmatic Shift in Roman Suicide

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Abstract: *The suicide of M. Porcius Cato at the end of the Roman Republic shifted the Roman attitude towards self-killing. Suicides before Cato were intended to avoid imminent shame or defeat; however, after the example of Cato, suicide became an act to be imitated: it was a means of achieving glory. This paper treats the evolution of suicide, before and after Cato, and the impact of his suicide.*

In 46 BCE, Marcus Porcius Cato killed himself in the town of Utica on the African coast.¹ Many others, including commander Metellus Scipio, would ultimately follow the same course of action as Cato.² Yet, those deaths go largely unnoticed due to the shadow cast by Cato's suicide. This one man's death stood apart from all other Roman precedents and forever altered the concept of suicide in the Roman world. Cato's noble suicide presented Romans with a new form of political protest that still maintained aristocratic dignity and virtues.

In order to show how Cato's suicide differs from those before him in Rome, this paper will begin by discussing Roman suicide before Cato. Next, the death of Cato will be treated, showing the ways in which his self-killing created a new Roman paradigm of the suicide. Finally, the impact of Cato's suicide will be examined, looking particularly at his influence upon authors and the aristocracy of Rome in the early Empire.

Roman Suicide before Cato

Although Latin includes no word similar to the modern understanding of 'suicide,' such acts of self-killing are found throughout Rome's history.³ In the records of Roman suicide throughout the Regal Period and the Republic, the principal reason for such deaths was to avoid shame.⁴

Lucretia, a woman who was raped by the son of the king of Rome, serves as a famous victim of suicide early within Roman history. In the case of Lucretia, the shame of her rape left her so dishonored that she felt compelled to commit suicide.⁵ In Rome, it was the woman herself who was disgraced by such violent acts; after her rape, Lucretia was left with overwhelming *pudor*.⁶ Lucretia's suicide, although politically powerful in that it incited the founding of the Republic, was committed so as to retract the dishonor brought upon her by rape.

While sexual humiliation was a common reason for suicide among females, the male equivalent of such *pudor* could be found upon the battlefield. Suicide was nearly obligatory for

¹ Allen Ward et al., *A History of the Roman People*, (New York: Prentice Hall, 2010) 209.

² Yolande Grisé, "De La Fréquence Du Suicide Chez Les Romains," *Latomus*, 39, no. 1 (1980): 26; Metellus Scipio, commander of the Republican forces, ultimately committed suicide after his defeat.

³ Timothy Hill, *Ambitiosa Mors: Suicide and the Self in Roman Thought and Literature*, (New York: Routledge, 2004) 5.

⁴ See Grisé "De La Fréquence Du Suicide Chez Les Romains," for a comprehensive list of all recorded Roman suicides.

⁵ See Livy 1.58 for the death of Lucretia.

⁶ Ward et al., *A History of the Roman People*, 54: *Pudor* meaning a feeling of shame.

those soldiers or commanders on the verge of losing their honor in a military defeat.⁷ In the civil sphere, men facing condemnation also often chose suicide rather than lose face.

In contrast with these *pudor*-related deaths, one act, known as *devotio*, allowed self-killing to take on a nobler connotation. In *devotio*, a Roman military commander would offer himself to the enemy as a sacrifice by rushing recklessly into battle.⁸ However, such an act would only be performed if the Romans were on the verge of defeat; the *devotio* would be done in order to ensure an ultimate victory for the Romans.⁹

In the cases of *pudor*-related deaths and *devotio*, the act of suicide is meant to serve as an erasure of an event or possible outcome. Suicide was committed in order to counter something negative that had already occurred or was about to occur, whether that be a ruined reputation or a military defeat. No new meaning is added through the death. While some of these deaths, such as that of Lucretia, influenced the people of Rome and motivated political change, the act itself was neither a political nor philosophical statement.

The Suicide of Cato

Near the end of the Republic, in a time of corruption and decay, Cato personified old Republican virtues. He took his political duties seriously, even while in lower ranking offices, and served as tribune of the plebeians and as the unofficial watchdog of the treasury.¹⁰ A practicing Stoic, Cato applied his philosophical teachings to all his state duties. He looked beyond philosophy as a tool for learning argumentation and instead saw it as a principle by which he should live.¹¹

While each school of philosophy found an audience among Romans, the doctrines of Stoicism were most closely attuned with traditional Roman values and the ethical sensibilities of Roman aristocrats.¹² Stoicism emphasized rationality and promoted man's duties and obligations to his community.¹³ Cato, as an adamant Stoic and Roman politician, was following a philosophical school most compatible with the older Republican virtues he embodied.

Cato spent his political career attempting to restore the morals and politics of Rome to their former, uncorrupted glory; however, by the year 46 BCE, Caesar had proven to be unstoppable. He had already forced Cato's son-in-law out of politics, defeated Pompey's forces at Pharsalus, and been named dictator. After the death of Pompey in Egypt, Cato rallied the remaining Republican forces and took them to Africa. However, Cato relinquished command to Metellus Scipio, who was superior in rank to him.¹⁴ Once news arrived of Scipio's defeat at Thapsus, Cato knew that all hope for the old Republic was lost.

⁷ Anton Van Hooff, *From Autothanasia to Suicide: Self-killing in Classical Antiquity*, (London: Routledge, 1990) 50.

⁸ Grisé "De La Fréquence Du Suicide Chez Les Romains," 22: "moyen – précipitation sur les glaives de l'ennemi;" Van Hooff, *From Autothanasia to Suicide*, 55.

⁹ Note on *devotio*: One of the first recorded instances of *devotio* occurred in 340 BCE, with the Roman general Publius Decius Mus. Although this act was greatly glorified, it was extremely rare; the descendants of Publius Decius Mus make up the majority of known acts of *devotio*.

¹⁰ Lily Ross Taylor, *Party Politics in the Age of Caesar*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949) 125; his commitment to the financial aspect quaestorship was exceptional.

¹¹ *Ibid.*; Cicero, *Pro Murena*, 62.

¹² Ward et al., *A History of the Roman People*, 147.

¹³ Miriam Griffin, "Philosophy, Cato, and Roman Suicide: I," *Greece and Rome* 33, no. 1 (1986): 73.

¹⁴ Ward et al., *A History of the Roman People*, 209.

Cato could have surrendered and been subject to the clemency of Caesar; however, in doing so, he would be acknowledging and legitimizing Caesar's rule.¹⁵ Instead, Cato decided to keep with the principles that had defined his life. As Cicero wrote, Cato would rather die than look upon the face of a tyrant.¹⁶ Cato chose to end his life and die with the Republic.

In addition to keeping with his political beliefs, Cato also died in accordance with his philosophical principles. According to Stoicism, if the reasons and the moment were right, suicide could be a powerful act of freedom. Through death, a man could be free and subject to no force but himself. Suicide became an affirmation of personal liberty for the Stoics, transforming it into a virtuous act.¹⁷

Thus, through his death, Cato gained undying *libertas* that was fundamentally impossible under Caesar's tyranny. Cato was no longer subject to Caesar, but only to himself. Caesar could not politically surpass the suicide of Cato. Cato's death rendered him politically untouchable: he could neither be saved nor killed by Caesar.

In addition to being philosophically aligned with the values of the old Republic, Cato's suicide was also distinctly Roman in its mode of death. In Plutarch's version of the story, Cato spent the night reading the *Phaedo* twice over, fell into a deep sleep and then, upon waking up, calmly stabbed himself with his sword.¹⁸ Death by metal weapons was the ultimate mode of death for a Roman man.

In the documented cases of ancient suicide, 153 suicides by arms exist among Romans compared to only 66 among the Greeks.¹⁹ Weapons were the tools of soldiers and aristocrats, who were one in the same in Rome.²⁰ The sword incarnated the courage and honor of battle alongside the power, determination, and liberty present in the Roman *virtus*.²¹ For the elite of Rome, metal weapons provided the quick, dignified end to life that they aimed for in their suicide.²²

However, metal weapons did not always result in the instantaneous death that was hoped for by the victim. Stabbing oneself with a sword required intense energy and precision, which Cato lacked due to a previous hand injury.²³ After the initial blow from the sword, Cato knocked over an abacus and passed out.²⁴ A doctor rushed to his side and stitched his wound; however, after regaining consciousness, Cato ripped out the stitches and disemboweled himself with his own hand and proceeded to die.²⁵ Cato's persistence in death demonstrated his life-long Stoicism coupled with his Roman valor; Cato was victorious over death, both mentally and physically.²⁶

¹⁵ Miriam Griffin, "Philosophy, Cato, and Roman Suicide: II," *Greece and Rome* 33, no. 2 (1986): 194.

¹⁶ Cicero, *De Officiis*, 1.112.

¹⁷ Yolande Gris , *Le Suicide Dans La Rome Antique*, (Montr al: Bellarmin, 1982) 183: "...les Stoiciens ont  t  les seuls philosophes antiques   faire du suicide l'acte philosophique par excellence en accordant   l'homme la libert  de disposer sa vie ..."

¹⁸ Plutarch, "Cato the Younger," 70.1 – 6.

¹⁹ Van Hooff, *From Autothanasia to Suicide*, 235.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 47.

²¹ Gris , *Le Suicide Dans La Rome Antique*, 98.

²² *Ibid.* 97: "C'est que l' lite romaine croyait   la supr matie,   la noblesse,   la dignit  de la mort consomm  par le fer."

²³ *Ibid.* 97; Plutarch, "Cato the Younger," 68.3: The injury was caused from striking a slave who had attempted to hide his weapons from him, in order to prevent his master's suicide.

²⁴ Plutarch, "Cato the Younger," 70.5.

²⁵ Plutarch, "Cato the Younger," 70.6.

²⁶ Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 78.

Immediately following Cato's death, news of his suicide made a far greater impression on Roman citizens than the news of Caesar's victory.²⁷ However, to ensure the knowledge of his victory, Caesar celebrated a triumph in Rome in honor of his military success in Africa. During this triumph, he paraded images of defeated Romans, including Cato, in the act of killing themselves.²⁸ Caesar anticipated that the images would provide evidence of his enemies' failures; however, the crowd reacted with grief and horror.²⁹ Subsequently, after Brutus' eulogy and Cicero's laudatory pamphlet about Cato, Caesar published his own pamphlet called the *Anticato* to attack Cato.³⁰ However, Caesar's unjust attack of the morally exemplary Cato only served to lower the public's respect of the tyrant.³¹ Cato's suicide politically stymied Caesar; it was the ultimate political victory.

Cato's self-killing transformed Roman suicide into a noble act.³² Suicide was no longer an obligatory matter of social shortcomings, but instead a powerful political message executed rationally and patriotically. Cato's actions brought further attention to the tyranny and loss of liberty in Rome; Rome was no longer the Republic, instead it was now the possession of one man. Cato transformed self-killing into a vehicle for political protest that still upheld the dignity and philosophical beliefs of the victim, making it a form of suicide that is uniquely Roman in character.

Roman Suicide After Cato

Cato received almost immediate glory after his noble suicide.³³ Horace, Lucan, Plutarch, Seneca, and Valerius Maximus all praised Cato's virtues in their literary works.³⁴ In Vergil's great Roman epic the *Aeneid*, Cato is found among the Elysian Fields administering justice and law among the dead.³⁵ Vergil also recognized how different Cato's suicide was from its precedents: others who killed themselves stood in the dark, separate region in the underworld where they pine for light.

Cato quickly became a model for the ideal Roman citizen. Children were encouraged to see Cato as exemplary, and the death of Cato became a lesson learned by every schoolboy in Rome.³⁶ As with any highly esteemed act, the noble suicide of Cato soon found imitators throughout Rome. The suicides of Brutus and Cassius, fellow Republicans and conspirators against Caesar, resembled that of Cato.³⁷

Soon after the assassination of Caesar, Rome became a principate. Throughout Augustus' reign as emperor, he limited honors such as triumphs, normally bestowed upon only the best Roman citizens, to strictly members of his family. The traditional means of attaining glory in

²⁷ Taylor, *Party Politics in the Age of Caesar*, 170.

²⁸ Appian, *Bella Civilia*, 2.101.

²⁹ Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 115: "Caesar's attempt to appropriate Cato's spectacular countermove to his offer of *clementia* was a failure. Cato's moral victory was publicly confirmed."

³⁰ Taylor, *Party Politics in the Age of Caesar*, 170. ; Caesar's *Anticato* is lost.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Grisé, *Le Suicide Dans La Rome Antique*, 202: "Avec Caton, le suicide se pose donc comme l'acte noble par excellence, en vertu de la qualité du sujet et de but poursuivi, où le *decorum* est observé et la *dignitas* respectée."

³³ Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 2.

³⁴ Grisé, *Le Suicide Dans La Rome Antique*, 203.

³⁵ Vergil, *Aeneid*, 8.670.

³⁶ Catharine Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 155; Hill, *Ambitiosa Mors*, 179.

³⁷ Hill, *Ambitiosa Mors*, 186.

Rome, such as through war or political success, no longer existed or held the same valor. Suicide provided a new opportunity for glory for aristocratic citizens.³⁸

After Cato's self-killing, suicide became an esteemed means of death and provided the individual with an opportunity to voice a socially communicative critique of the current situation of the state. Cato and his suicide became an object of identification for the intellectual opposition to the principate during the early Empire.³⁹ The aristocrats became Cato, and the serving emperor became Caesar.

Cato became a model for the self-killings prominently portrayed in Roman literature throughout the first and second century CE. Cato found particular relevance during the reign of Nero. Such renewed interest in Cato at that time may be due to the publication of Cicero's *Letter to Atticus*, which praised Cato's suicide.⁴⁰ Nero also sentenced many Romans to death, with an option of forced suicide. Roman writing made no differentiation between suicides that were self-inflicted and those that were not.⁴¹ While the difference between the two may be vast, forced suicide, rather than execution, still allowed the victim to salvage their dignity.⁴² Thus many Romans on the verge of forced suicide could turn to Cato for inspiration on how to confront death nobly.⁴³

Seneca, Thrasea Paetus, and Lucan all lived under Nero and portrayed Cato as a Republican hero through their literature. Seneca generously praised Cato's suicide and emphasized the death as a victory for human autonomy.⁴⁴ Seneca is even believed to have modeled his own suicide, ordered by Nero, on the death of Cato.⁴⁵ Thrasea Paetus wrote a highly influential biography of Cato that was used by Plutarch in his account of Cato; however, no remnants of this biography exist.⁴⁶ Thrasea Paetus' forced suicide is believed to be modeled after Seneca's imitation of Cato.⁴⁷ Lucan, who also faced death under Nero but did not choose suicide, praised Cato in his *Pharsalus*. In the epic, Cato embodies virtue while Caesar personifies vice.⁴⁸ Each of these influential Roman philosophers and writers took Cato as the standard for noble, Roman suicide, even to the point of modeling their own demises after his.

Cato continued to find aristocratic imitators well into the second century CE.⁴⁹ Even in modern times, Cato's suicide is considered to be the quintessential *Romana mors*, Roman death.⁵⁰ Cato transformed suicide from an act devoid of meaning into one laden with political, philosophical and moral values. Cato's politically powerful suicide created a new form of protest that still maintained aristocratic dignity and virtues. This Catonic suicide—the embodiment of Roman strength, virtue, constancy and morals—became the archetype for all sequential Roman suicides.

³⁸ Griffin, "Philosophy, Cato, and Roman Suicide: I," 197.

³⁹ Van Hooff, *From Autothanasia to Suicide*, 109.

⁴⁰ Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 181.

⁴¹ Hill, *Ambitiosa Mors*, 11.

⁴² Valerie Hope, *Roman Death: Dying and the Dead in Ancient Rome*, (London: Continuum, 2009) 59.

⁴³ Taylor, *Party Politics in the Age of Caesar*, 182: "... when the time came, it (the story of Cato) helped them meet death courageously."

⁴⁴ Gris , *Le Suicide Dans La Rome Antique*, 204.

⁴⁵ Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 157.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 157, 158. Plutarch's interpretation of Cato's suicide may have been influenced by these later deaths.

⁴⁸ Taylor, *Party Politics in the Age of Caesar*, 178.

⁴⁹ Hill, *Ambitiosa Mors*, 71.

⁵⁰ Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 1.

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