Cato the Censor and the Beginnings of Latin Prose

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Sciarrino, Enrica.
Cato the Censor and the Beginnings of Latin Prose: From Poetic Translation to Elite Transcription.
The Ohio State University Press, 2011.
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This book treats a moment in Roman cultural history that in the last decade or so has become one of the most contentious areas of discussion in classical scholarship. To put it rather simply, on the one side are those who insist on the primacy of literature as a category for understanding the earliest textual remains in Latin. For them the pivotal question is why the Romans developed a literary tradition in Latin at all when, to cite the most notable example, Fabius Pictor, a member of the Roman aristocracy, had, during the third century B.C.E., found little problem in writing his account of Rome’s history in Greek. On the other side are those who focus on the sociohistorical transformations that led the Romans to give away their performance practices in favor of alien forms of cultural production. While the first view draws force from the Hellenistic precedents and its focus on the establishment of a poetic tradition in Latin built upon them, the second relies on a cluster of Latin terms as indicators of the sociohistorical dynamics that governed Rome’s cultural history and sees Latin literature as one expression of them.

My aim in this study is to bridge the current divide and open up new areas of inquiry. I examine how the establishment of Latin poetry in the late third and early second centuries B.C.E. intersected with formal choices, social subjectivities, and historical contingencies. At the same time, I expand our purview on the period in question by focusing on the largely neglected but near contemporary formation of Latin prose writing associ-
ated with Cato the Censor. This would be well and good were it not that in the last few years the divide between the two camps has grown exponentially. For this reason, the challenges that this book now has to meet have grown too. As recently put, the situation is such that to try to account for what authors aimed to do when they wrote what they did means to face up to the powerful “epistemological dogma” whereby such an effort is “always already” compromised, if not doomed to outright failure. If this were not enough, the materials I am seeking to rescue from the margins are also some of the least Greek-saturated texts in the available literary archive; as a result, my approach risks being perceived as a suspicious attempt to decouple Latinity from Hellenism.

I believe that the present situation calls us to reengage with the body of evidence that we have; if this book should not fully succeed in promoting this engagement, at least it will have shown that concepts like authorship, text, literature, and genre are the product of uneven processes that are culturally, historically, and geographically specific.

I consider this book a homage to the multicultural and multilingual make-up of classics today; however, the way I went about composing it inevitably reflects my own background. This ranges geographically, culturally, and linguistically from Siracusa to Bologna in Italy to Berkeley in the U.S. (via a brief period at Utrecht in the Netherlands) to Christchurch in New Zealand. I wrote this book in English with a readership familiar with the Anglo-(North)American scene of scholarly inquiry in mind. It could not have been otherwise. For better or worse, my academic work and professional life participate in that scene and my Italian has devolved to the status of lessico famigliare. I believe that each and all of these factors explain, reduce, and empower the argumentative thrust of this book in ways with which I am still coming to terms. One of the thoughtful readers for The Ohio State University Press commented that my writing style betrays an Italian penchant for having an argument emerge at the level of the paragraph and pointed out to me that English prefers the punch of one point per sentence. This same reader applied the label écriture féminine to the former and écriture masculine to the latter. In the process of revising the manuscript I have tried to make the presentation of my arguments more ‘masculine.’ I regard any remaining traces of écriture féminine as a

2. Lessico famigliare is the title of a book written by Natalia Ginzburg in the early sixties in which she recounts her childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood through the words and phrases of the various members of her family.
tribute to Giulia, my daughter, who has gracefully lived through the ups and downs of this project from the very first day of her life. It is to her that I dedicate this book.

I am happy to finally express my gratitude for the help I have received at every step of writing this book. Some of the ideas unfolded here are scattered in my Berkeley dissertation. I should like to thank Trevor Murphy, Kathleen McCarthy, and the late Ruggiero Stefanini for embracing my project and for letting me get away with an output that bears the imprint of the rough waters I was navigating at the time. If I did not drown then, it is because of the support I received from my family in Italy and the many people I had the fortune to meet in California. These include Julie Shirar, Jed Parsons, Liz Harris, Musashi Lethridge, Melissa Mueller, Dylan Sailor, Yelena Baraz, James Ker, Sarah Stroup, Pat Larash, Mark Griffith, and Donald Mastronarde.

In 2002 my colleagues in the classics department at the University of Canterbury made my move ‘down-under’ both smooth and enjoyable. I would like to thank each and all of them: Tim Parkin for introducing me to the All Blacks, Alison Griffith for sharing her thoughts about juggling motherhood and academia, Alison Holcroft for being always enthusiastic about our Classics Days, Graham Zanker for offering me his wise advice whenever I needed it, Robin Bond for keeping my mood up at all times, Gary Morrison for enduring my daily moaning, Patrick O’Sullivan for his sophistic arguing, and Victor Parker for reminding me about the traditional historical method. Although some of them have moved on, they are all responsible for making classics in Christchurch a very successful enterprise in spite of a long chain of restructures and downsizings. In Christchurch I have also met people whose friendship I can no longer do without: Nabila Jaber, Terry Austrin, Marco Reale, Brunella Olivieri, Ester Vallero, Lisa Fazi, and Nicola Di Cosmo.

Over the years I have presented my work piecemeal in a variety of conferences and settings in North America, Italy, New Zealand, and the UK. I would like to single out Alessandro Barchiesi, who invited me to speak in Arezzo on more than one occasion; Gualtiero Calboli, who made me think in new ways about Roman law; Jon Hall and Bill Dominik, who gave me the chance to participate in their ‘companion’ enterprise; and Francesca Martelli, who organized a most challenging and rewarding conference in Oxford in September 2009 in order to discuss the kind of theoretical issues I have been struggling with for a number of years. Above all, however, I must thank Tom Habinek. Without his vision and commitment, classics
would doubtless be a less interesting discipline. Although I was never one of his students, I believe that this project would not have been possible without his support and feedback.

This book has gone through more revisions than I would want to remember. I would like to acknowledge here the help I received from James Ker, Jon Hall, Robin Bond, and Patrick O’Sullivan who took the time to read through entire chapters and offered me practical advice and support. I have also benefited from constructive conversations with Siobhan McElduff, David Konstan, Matthew Roller, Andrew Riggsby, Clifford Ando, Mary Jaeger, Eric Gruen, Sander Goldberg, William Fitzgerald, Hector Reyes, Claudia Moatti, and Nicola Terrenato. I owe special thanks to Ann Kuttner who has generously allowed me to use her drawings of censorial scenes. These are now inserted in chapter 5. I would also like to acknowledge here the professional and warm support I have received from Eugene O’Connor at The Ohio State University Press at every stage of the publication process.

The cover and internal art is by Julia Shirar. Thanks go, finally, to Jeff Carnes for his work on the indices.

The University of Canterbury and the various schools under which the Department of Classics has been subsumed in the last few years have been incredibly generous with me. During my study leave in 2006 I was able to write the first draft of chapters 4 and 5. Thanks to a Humanities grant in 2008 I was able to speed my writing by hiring Anna Milne and Elizabeth Lochhead as research assistants. I hope that they obtained from our conversations about single points of my argument as much as I did. In the last phase of this project I relied on a Canterbury Fellowship at Oxford and the support of Alan Bowman and Nicholas Purcell. In Oxford I have also benefited from a Plumer Research Fellowship at St Anne’s College for which I have to thank Matthew Leigh and Tim Whitmarsh. During this time my parents, my brothers, my sister Alessandra, and Federico, her son, taught me yet another spectacular lesson in love and resilience. On February 22, 2011 while I was working on copyediting this book, a 6.3 earthquake shook Christchurch, taking numerous lives and destroying many homes. I must here thank Chris Jones for helping me get the work done despite the chaos of the weeks following. The publication of this book is a small token of recognition of the admirable resolve and tenacity of the people of Christchurch. As Salvatore Quasimodo says in the last line of his Al Padre, oscuramente forte è la vita.

All translations are my own, unless otherwise specified.