

Doing Words Wrong:***Vera Vocabula* and the decline of the *res publica* in Sallust's *Bellum Catilinae*.**

“But in very truth we have long since lost the true names for things.” So says the character of Cato in Sallust's *Bellum Catilinae*. He continues to declare that the result of this has been the exposure of the *res publica* to extreme danger in the form of Catiline's rebellion. Sallust's narrative supports Cato's assertion through the character of Catiline, who calls upon *libertas*, *dignitas* and *virtus* in defence of actions that threaten Rome. Cato's speech was, of course, the one that carried the day in the Senate in 63 B.C. However Sallust's history is not this simple, and the misuse of words extends beyond the obvious villain of the piece. In the *synkrisis* that follows the speeches at chapter 54, he makes it clear that not only Catiline, but also Caesar and Cato fail to use words with their true meanings and reveals a problem of language at the heart of the Republic's decline. In this paper I want to examine the speeches of Caesar and Cato, as they are represented by Sallust, and his subsequent assessment of their characters, in the light of this comment of Cato in order to discuss them in relation to Sallust's representation of the fall of the Roman Republic.

On an initial reading the speeches of Caesar and Cato simply present alternative proposals for the fate of the captured conspirators between which the Senate must decide the one arguing for imprisonment, the other for execution. The speakers are then described by Sallust as men of great *virtus* and *ingenium*, with array of positive qualities being attributed to each. It has been argued that between them Caesar and Cato possess the *virtus* that could have saved the *res publica*, but that individually they are flawed, with their division symbolising the rifts in Rome in the first century B.C. Certainly the positives ascribed to each man, which include as *modesta*, *constantia*, decorum and a *magnitudo animi*, are amongst those that Sallust incorporates into his conception of *virtus* in the *Bellum Catilinae*. However, Sallust's arrangement of these qualities means that they do not function in the complementary manner that would suggest that Cato and Caesar might have come together to present a united front of *virtus* for the benefit of the *res publica*. Rather they undermine each other, the qualities of each man raising questions about their absence in the character of the other, and encouraging the reader to ask how, if each man is lacking certain characteristics that give the other the quality of *virtus*, can either truly be considered to have *virtus*? Through his use of words to describe Caesar and Cato, Sallust makes his reader aware of flaws in their characters, whilst ostensibly praising them. In particular, his ascription of *dignitas* to Cato, and *mansuetudo* and *miseriordia* (gentleness and compassion) to Caesar at 54.2 (see #2 on the handout), contrast with

the use of these terms by the two men in their speeches, and enables him to subvert their arguments and the words in which they are made.

Sallust's description of Cato, rather than Caesar, as a man of *dignitas* acts as the reader's entry point into Sallust's subversion of his speakers. By the time that Sallust was writing, *dignitas* was a quality strongly associated with Caesar: one that he had claimed as a justification for his deeds in his *Bellum Civile* (see #3 on the handout). Cato had stood against Caesar, and chosen to commit suicide rather than submit to Caesar's victory. More pertinently, in the *Bellum Catilinae* it is the character of Caesar who emphasises the importance of *dignitas*, claiming it for and demanding it from his Senatorial audience (#4 on the handout). Cato, on the other hand, makes no claim for or appeal to *dignitas*. Why then, does Sallust go on to ascribe *dignitas* to Cato, not Caesar; and what does this do to the reader's understanding of the character of Caesar in the *Bellum Catilinae*? The answer, I believe, lies in Sallust's desire to differentiate between his understanding of a 'true' *dignitas*, and that employed by Caesar and many of his contemporaries, and his desire to show that Caesar misunderstood and therefore misused the term.

In the *Bellum Catilinae* Catiline claims certain rights – notably that of holding the consulship – on account of his *dignitas*, which he associates with his ancestors and their service to the *res publica*. However, Catiline's employment of *dignitas* in defence of his actions makes it a suspect value for a political figure to call upon, as Catiline's own behaviour essentially invalidates his understanding of *dignitas*, and shows its danger to the *res publica*. Indeed, throughout his writing Sallust tends to cast claims made upon *dignitas* in a negative light. In the *Bellum Jugurthinum* he associates the quality with the *nobilitas* and goes so far as to declare that they abused their *dignitas* in the years after the destruction of Carthage, implying that they have misused the term in order to maintain and justify the maintenance of their power.

In comparison to his portrayal of the use of *dignitas* in political discourse by the likes of Catiline and the *nobilitas* Sallust presents his 'true' understanding of *dignitas*. By showing the danger of Catiline's claims on *dignitas*, Sallust reveals its falseness and implies that the quality is not inherited from one's family. In the *Bellum Jugurthinum* he states that offices do not bestow honour on their occupants, but rather the *virtus* of their occupants makes the offices illustrious, suggesting that office holding is not something Sallust holds as key to the gaining and maintenance of *dignitas*. This understanding is confirmed by Sallust's attribution of *dignitas* to Cato, a man who failed to attain the highest political office. Instead of defining *dignitas* through family or office-holding, Sallust couples it with *severitas* in his description of Cato, suggesting that the word is really the name of a personal

characteristic; an internal quality that is manifested in one's behaviour, rather than an external quality that can be earned by deeds or inherited from ancestors. Seen against this, Caesar's call upon the *dignitas* of the Senate makes the reader wary. It is not as personal or demanding as that of Catiline; but it does express his belief in its importance to the Senate. This importance comes through its association with the *fama* of the Senate, concerned with seeming to be good, rather than being good – a tendency to which Cato, the man of true *dignitas* was opposed (that's at 54.6). Sallust's denial of *dignitas* to Caesar and attribution of it to Cato reveals that the historian wished to show Caesar misusing the word in his speech, having lost the true meaning. He establishes that Caesar's political language is flawed, and thus casts doubts upon his judgement as to what really is in the best interests of the *res publica*.

Moving on, then, to Cato. Despite being the 'victor' in the Senate debate and being the one to point out the decline of political vocabulary in Rome, he does not escape from Sallust's comment on his character unscathed, nor is he immune to this problem of the misuse of words. Just before noting the loss of the 'true names of things' in his speech, Cato exclaims, "Now, however, the question before us is not whether our morals are good or bad, nor how great or glorious the empire of the Roman people is, but whether all that we have, however we regard it, is to be ours, or with ourselves to belong to the enemy. At this point, someone hints at gentleness and long-suffering!" The words *mansuetudo* and *miser cordia* are expressed with scorn, and their juxtaposition with the comment on the decline of political vocabulary functions as an accusation that Caesar is presenting his argument for the fate of the prisoners as compassionate, when really it will leave the *res publica* in danger. Cato goes on to imply that there is a misunderstanding of the true meaning of *miser cordia*, as he says, "Let them be merciful (*miser cordes*) to plunderers of the treasury!"

However, the two words return at 54.2 included amongst the positive qualities Sallust ascribes to Caesar. The historian makes it clear that Cato's scorn is misplaced, and simultaneously reveals him as a man who has also lost the true names of things. Cato's speech implies that Caesar misapplies the terms *mansuetudo* and *miser cordia* to actions that aim at appeasement rather than justice towards the conspirators, but Sallust's endorsement of these words in relation to Caesar shows that it is Cato who is using them inaccurately, in order to sway the Senate away from Caesar's proposal. He further implies that Caesar's more merciful proposal was not made out of some misplaced *clementia* or self-interest, but out of his understanding of what was best for the *res publica*. *Mansuetudo* and *miser cordia* may be seen as being misapplied in political action if associated with a misunderstood concept, such as Caesar's faulty appeal to *dignitas*, but they are, nonetheless, positive attributes.

But why does this matter? Or to be less existential, why is this important in terms of Sallust's *Bellum Catilinae*. I want to argue that this problem of language is an important aspect of Sallust's understanding of the recent history of the Roman Republic and his explanation for the decline of the *res publica*.

The speeches that Sallust gives Caesar and Cato serve a role beyond a simple representation of the Senate's debate over the fate of the captured conspirators. As he allows his characters to enunciate their own points of view, he is able to give a sense of the multiplicity of views that had existed at the time. He is also able to present a contrast between what is said by character and the 'facts' of the situation as Sallust presents them in his narrative – hence the contrast between the words of Caesar and Cato and Sallust's representation of them as having lost the true names of things. Finally, it allows him to expose the truly insidious nature of the failing of vocabulary and the misuse of words in a political system that revolved primarily around speech, and to mark out this problem as a key factor in the decline of the *res publica*.

Through careful use of words in describing their characters Sallust shows both Caesar and Cato to be guilty of using words wrongly, misapplying them to flawed or false understandings of the concepts they define. This casts doubt as to whether acting upon either of the proposals that they made could possibly have been beneficial to the security of the *res publica*. Surely, if a speaker does not know the true meaning of a word or concept they seek to imply, and if they do not realise that they do not know, their audience (in this case both the members of the Senate within the text, and Sallust's readership outside it) cannot be sure that the arguments and proposals presented in association with these words will have the results the speaker claims. To put it another way, if Caesar misunderstands the nature of *dignitas*, how can his audience be sure that acting in a way that protects its *dignitas*, but does not completely eradicating the immediate danger of the conspirators will not leave the Republic with a continuing problem and threat to its security. At the same time, if Cato misuses *mansuetudo* and *miser cordia* as negative terms, how can one be sure that his proposal for extreme action will not lead to the problem that Caesar foresees when he says: "It is possible that at another time, when someone else is consul and is likewise in command of an army, some falsehood may be believed to be true. When the consul, with this precedent before him, shall draw the sword in obedience to the Senate's decree, who shall limit or restrain him?" (51.6). In such a situation the speaker's proposals become unreliable because they are failing to grasp accurately at the essential concepts. They must therefore fail to understand the situation correctly, and become unable to offer an appropriate solution. There can be no certainty that any decision made in such circumstances is the best one for the *res publica*.

In fairness to Caesar and Cato, there is an element of the victim in their situation, and Sallust acknowledges this. By continuing to refer to them as the men with the greatest *virtus* of their time, he makes it clear that, given his understanding of *virtus*, they both wish to serve the interests of the *res publica*. Their *virtus* and good intentions are undermined, however, by their inability to escape the problems of their time. Latin vocabulary has been misused and perverted to such an extent that even men of great *virtus* can no longer perceive the true names of things.

Speech at Rome, in the Senate, assemblies and courts, was integral to the daily life of the Republic. It was the primary medium of political activity, decision-making depended upon the initiation of proposals, be it for action or legislation, in speech. Those making the decisions, be they Senators, voters in the assemblies or jurors had to listen to a variety of options and make a choice. The security and proper functioning of the *res publica* depended upon speakers speaking properly, and their audience being able to discern when they were not. Without the guarantee of a single *vera vocabula*, the political system would begin to disintegrate, opening the door to those like Catiline, who would pervert it.

Even worse, those who wished to restore it would be unable to do so, as they would not be able to build a consensus of the right way to act. Sallust shows that although men of *virtus* such as Caesar and Cato wished to uphold the *res publica*, their inability to apply words to their correct meaning meant that they could not; in fact, they might have served to make the situation worse. In the *Bellum Catilinae* Caesar and Cato do not seek to spin words and ideas for their own ends, as Catiline does, and yet they still base their arguments in misunderstood concepts. Their flawed understandings of the concepts defined by certain words means that they cannot propose actions that are truly in the best interests of the *res publica* and puts them in danger of proposing those that may be to its detriment.

Sallust thus shows his readers that the decline of the Roman *res publica* is not only due to a rise in ambition and avarice (a cause he identifies early in the *Bellum Catilinae*), but also due to the failure of the *vera vocabula* in which Roman political discourse should be grounded. Even Cato, who identifies the problem in his speech, is not immune and cannot be seen as one who truly knows the *vera vocabula* of Rome. The flawed conceptions of key Republican values and the actions of those who hold them are, in Sallust's historical vision of the first century B.C., a key factor in the decline of the Republic. Sallust does not seem to have been alone in considering problems with political vocabulary a key problem for the Rome at this time. This is a point worthy of more discussion that I can give it here due to time constraints, but it is important, I think, to show that Sallust was not

completely alone in worrying about language. Before the civil war, Caesar had produced his *de Analogia*, a work dealing with word formation and the choice of words, whilst in around 43 B.C. Varro produced his *De lingua Latina*, concerned with etymology, morphology and syntax. The example of Caesar and Varro shows a concern with the technicalities of linguistic purity, if not, as far as we can tell, an explicit concern with the implications of impure language in a political context. More important in relation to Sallust's concern with Rome's political decline is Cicero's comment in the *Tusculan Disputations* about man's involvement in political life (see #5 on the handout) He presents a concept of true *gloria virtus* that is different to that which men pursue as they seek high reputation from the people, who have a false understanding of both qualities, and argues that the inability of some men to distinguish between the two led to the destruction of the *res publica*. This desire to redefine *gloria* reemerges in *de Officiis*, and may well have been a feature of the lost *de gloria*. Cicero, seeking to establish the way in which the *res publica* should function, sought to explain how traditional Roman ideas, such as *gloria* and *virtus* should work in relation to the *res publica*. Sallust, meanwhile, writing after Cicero's death, and the final descent of Rome into another civil struggle, sought to explain the reasons behind the Republic's decline, and laid part of the blame at the decline of language. His belief in a *vera vocabula* and presentation of 'true' forms of such concepts as *dignitas*, *gloria* and *virtus* in narrating the decline of the *res publica* echoes (consciously or not), the concerns of Cicero as he sought to restore it.

Sallust was well aware of the importance of speech in Roman political life, the influence it could have on decision-making and on events. He knew that language, employed properly or improperly, had a great impact on daily life in the *res publica*. For him, the failure of the Republic was partially rooted in the failure of language, in the misunderstanding and misuse of words; a problem that affected the good citizens as well as being abused by the bad, and he chose to reflect this in the speeches of the men who feature in his historical writing. Thus the speeches of Caesar and Cato in the *Bellum Catilinae* not only show the divisions in the Senate over the fate of the Catilinarian conspirators, but also play a role in Sallust's overarching understanding of Rome's recent past, exemplifying the loss of *vera vocabula* in politics and the ongoing decline of Rome.

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