The Conscience of Politics and Jonson's *Catiline*

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WHAT IS THE POLITICAL MEANING of Jonson's *Catiline?* Much traditional criticism has somehow understood it to be more or less the same as Gosson claimed for his non-extant *Catiline Conspiracies* (1579): "The whole marke which I shot at in that worke was to showe the rewards of traytors in Catiline, and the necessary government of learned men, in the person of Cicero, which forsees every danger that is likely to happen, and forestalles it continually ere it take effect."[1] Gosson's intentions were clear enough, and it would not have been difficult, given even the outline of the conspiracy, to demonstrate his lessons. The Catiline Plot was, after all, part of popular history, one of those classic examples of the futility of rebellions, and of the punishment that awaited those who took part in them. "Let euery Courtier that will be wise, flee the companie of such *Catelines,*" a seventeenth-century writer exhorted, "and that speedily; for experience it selfe doth truly tell vs, that such seditious swashbucklers, doe very often, yea, most customarily, receiue the wages and reward due to such deedes of impietie: And what's that? marry a miserable, lamentable, & tragical *Catastrophe,* or conclusion."[2] One did not even have to refer to the conspiracy by name, so standard an example had it become. Hence, for instance, the unnamed revolution in *The Character of an ill Court-Favourite,* which virtually translates Livy:[3] "from this stock [ambitious courtiers]monsters are engendered; from such commencements, we are to set Rome on fire, to butcher the senate, to dishonour nature with debauches, and declare

[1]Stephen Gosson, *The Schoole of Abuse* (1579), Shakespeare Society, II (London, 1841), 30.

[2]A. D. B., *The Court of the Most Illustrious and Most Magnificent James the First* (London, 1619), p. 87.

[3]". . . cum Lentulo praetore et Cethego et compluribus aliis coniuravit de caede consulum et senatus incendiis urbis et opprimenda re publica, exercitu quoque in Etruria camparato," Livy, *Fragments,* etc; Loeb ed. (London, 1919), XIV, 126.

war against it by parricide."[4]The danger for a dramatization of the Catiline conspiracy, therefore, was not that the audience would bring to it some knowledge of the conspiracy and of the pious lessons associated with it, but that it would bring *too much*: "One would think it bedlam-folly that men, not unacquainted with history, and sufficiently warned by the experiences of their own times, should endeavour on the very same precipices, on which, all that went before, broke their necks."[5]

But since such "lessons" as the public would bring depended often on an easy discrimination between conspirators and saviors, they tended to emphasize a broad moral about conspiracies rather than underscore the intriguing ironies and paradoxes of the particular conspiracy, ironies and paradoxes which only a critical history could detect. Thus in his "Eclogue on the Death of Ben Jonson" Viscount Falkland speaks of Jonson's Roman tragedies as if they were written in tribute to King and Chief Minister:

> So in vigilant Prince and Consul's parts,
> He shows the wiser and the nobler arts,
> By which a state may be unhurt, upheld,
> And all those works destroyed, which hell would build.[6]

What Falkland does not reckon with, in this summary, is that Jonson's Tiberius, for example, cannot, by insisting on his success against the conspiracy, escape the stigma of the adverse judgments passed on his administration throughout the play. Thus, also, M. Castelain called Tiberius, "un froid politique, comme Séjan, mais plus habile et plus profound. Il dissimule tous ses sentiments sous une contenance impénétrable."[7] By thus suggesting that Tiberius is ultimately a prudent prince, a more profound strategist than Sejanus, by making his success his justification, M. Castelain oversimplifies and distorts the nature of Jonson's political characterization, makes the warnings and the pleas of Arruntius and the moderates both stupid and redundant, and cuts them off from

[4]"The Character of an ill Court-Favourite," in *The Harleian Miscellany* (London, 1809), II, 61.
[5]"The Character," 57.
[6]*Jonson Allusion Book*, ed. J. F. Bradley and J. Q. Adams (New Haven, 1922), p. 207. Daniel C. Boughner develops this argument in "Sejanus and Machiavelli," *SEL*, I (1961), 81-100.
[7]*Ben Jonson, L'Homme et l'Oeuvre* (Paris, 1907), p. 582.

their role in the play as the conscience of society and of decency. The interpretation which he and Falkland advocate encourages a notion of politics in the History Plays which imagines that the historical tragedy has to be a simple conflict between the forces of stability and those of disintegration, that Cicero and Cato, for instance, have to be good to be the opponents of Catiline. The Tiberius who says to the rascal Macro

> we assigne thee, both to spie,
> Informe, and chastise; thinke, and vse thy meanes,
> Thy ministers, what, where, on whom thou wilt;
> Explore, plot, practise: All thou doost in this,
> Shall be, as if the *Senate,* or the Lawes
> Had giu'n it priuiledge, and thou thence stil'd
> The sauer both of Caesar, and of *Rome*[8]

is clearly not being held up as a model King. If anything, he is being slandered. The grossness of the Machiavellian parody, because it is parody, is meant, surely, to tell on the character and integrity of Tiberius, to make him a man of scanty Machiavellian tact who humors himself with the thought that he is a great plotter. We may go further and ask whether there is no implied slight, some ironical stab at Cicero, in Tiberius's hailing Macro as the savior of Caesar and of Rome especially as Cicero himself, who undertakes a similar mission on his own behalf, receives the same recognition in nearly identical circumstances? Some sarcasm seems likely, not only because, as we saw, Macro is the mock-hero of the Tiberian strategy, but also because we know that Jonson wrote a parody of the "pater patriae" citation in mocking tribute to Lord Monteagle. This nobleman, at one time prohibited from entering London for his activities in the Essex revolt, was thought to have been privy to the Gunpowder Plot and to have betrayed it, very early in the game, to Lord Cecil. When, as a result of this service, he became a national hero, Jonson volunteered the couplet:

> My country's parents I have many known
> But saver of my country, thee alone.[9]

Even if there is no reason to read a jibe into the citation in

[8] *Sejanus,* III.701-707 in Jonson, *Works,* ed. Herford and Simpson, IV (Oxford, 1932).
[9] Hugh Ross Williamson, *The Gun-Powder Plot* (London, 1951), p. 65.

Catiline, there is good reason to begin to suspect that Jonson's interest was not so much in the "ends" of policy as in its processes. This would mean, if we return to *Catiline*, that Cicero's success in outwitting the conspirators would not in itself guarantee that Jonson would applaud him. This, in turn, would suggest that the issues in *Catiline* are not simply those of the good against the bad, the plotters agains the saviors, but the deeper, more permanent questions of the nature of political success and poliical morality; in other words, the conscience of politics. In the play, both people and ideas are brought together in a political situation, and are there examined and censured. "It is strange," Rymer wrote in *A Short View of Tragedy*, "that Ben, who understood the turn of Comedy so well; and had found the success, should thus grope in the dark, and jumble things together without head or tail, without any rule or proportion, without any reason or design. Might not the *Acts of the Apostles*, of a Life in *Plutarch* be as well Acted, and properly called a Tragedy, as any History of a Conspiracy?"[10] Rymer's question has yet to be answered, but it seems to arise from the absence in the play of the traditional determinacy with which conspiracies had been treated in earlier plays, even in *Julius Caesar*. In Jonson's view of the conspiracy, the important issues are neither those of tragic madness on Catiline's part (he is not Brutus), nor of the heroism of a man (Cicero) fending off disaster from the nation. The tragedy of politics, in Jonson's view of it, derives from his disenchantment with the whole process of "Policy" or "Arte" which required that the state should survive, paradoxically, only by the travesty of the values by which, indeed, it ultimately hoped to survive. This is not to agree with Boughner that Jonson is recommending, applauding or even succumbing to the pragmatic value of the Machiavellian philosophy of politics.[11] It is, instead, to say that Jonson was aware, or was able to see, that an identical pattern of politics was being repeated from Marius and Sulla to Cicero; and that, for all their "arte," Rome's rulers and saviors had built their fame, not on the ability to reform the city but rather on their ability to outwit rivals. The irony of the political struggle was that

[10]*The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer*, ed. Curt A. Zimansky (New Haven, 1956), p. 171.
[11]Boughner, pp. 81-84.

Cicero in preserving Rome was helping to perpetuate the same corruption which initially led to the Catiline revolt.

Ornstein, recognizing this, contends nevertheless that Jonson "could not come to terms with his own view of politics," that "he could not with a divided mind achieve in tragedy the superb unity of form and vision that characterizes *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*."[12] Jonson had, indeed, come to terms with his view of politics in the only way it was possible to do so, and the comparison with *The Alchemist* (especially if we think of the poised conclusion offered by its epilogue), clearly shows in what ways it was possible for Jonson to do this — to imply, never to impose, the ideal.[13] This method presumed a kind of classical ideal which is the measure for all men, whether high like Cato and Cicero or despicable like Catiline and Cethegus. It is not as if Jonson sought to mediate between the claims of Cicero and Catiline, in order to suggest, as F. G. Read says, that "the Roman ideal is evolved in the action from Catiline's and Cicero's opposed visions."[14] The opposition of Cicero to Catiline is anything but diametric. The lines,

> So CATILINE, at the sight of *Rome* in vs,
> Became his tombe: yet did his looke retayne
> Some of his fiercenesse, and his hands still mou'd,
> As if he labour'd yet, to graspe the state,
> With those rebellious parts[15]

cannot be read as "the embodiment of Catiline's egoism in an admonitory monument, and the realization of Cicero's moral and public ideal in a renewed Rome."[16] It is not in Catiline's personal egoism that Jonson is interested but in his ironic function in the history of this time. A Samson of contradictions — "nobili genere natus, magna vi et animi et corporis sed ingenio malo pravoque," as Sallust tells us[17] — Catiline seemed to think that to "reform" Rome all he needed was to

[12]Robert Ornstein, *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (Madison, 1960), p. 86.
[13]See Geoffrey Hill, "The World's Proportions: Jonson's Dramatic Poetry in *Sejanus* and *Catiline*," *Jacobean Theatre*, Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies, I (New York, 1960), 115.
[14]Forrest G. Read, "Audience, Poet and Structure in Ben Jonson's Plays," Ph.D. Thesis, Cornell University (Ithaca, 1961), p. 321.
[15]V.684-688, *Works*, ed. Herford and Simpson, (Oxford, 1954). Subsequent references are to this edition, V.
[16]Read, pp. 322-323.
[17]Sallust, *The War with Catiline*, v.1-2, Loeb ed. (London, 1921), p. 8.

pull down the city. He thereby reduced himself to the rank of a brigand and an opportunist and converted his ideal, whether pretended or real, to an irrational and incredible plot, "a madness" as both Cicero and Bacon called it. There is just enough of a man in Catiline to make this plausible, but the emphasis is on the fact that he is a creature of a degenerate Rome, and its scourge.

Rome's decadence is underlined by the Chorus at the end of Act I, Rome, the chorus laments,

> So much in plentie, wealth, she doth ioy and ease,
> As, now, th' excesse is her disease. (I.548-550)

But where the chorus is concerned with the State as a unit, Catiline in his complaints is more interested in the fortunes of the impoverished nobility. Though clearly a class protest, this complaint was also part of a larger national problem. In Rome, at least, it had created the state of ferment of which the rise of Catiline, and of Sulla (who was helped on, of course, by consular opportunities) were two terrible manifestations. This decadence manifested itself in another form. Curius's intoxicating speeches to the conspirators (I.375-420), and to Fulvia (II.312-321) describing the attractions of the projected regime, were clearly meant to describe the sincere emotions behind the revolt. It is typical of Jonson to allow attraction and revulsion to coexist in the same scene, the same issues, the same objectives. Curius can see the decadence of Rome, and its attractiveness. Jonson does not contradict him. But implicit in the description itself, is a sterner judgment which brings the proponents and the victims of revolution to the same level. Just as, in the political area, the reform which the conspirators sought to effect is compromised by their use of Sulla as model, so, in the future economic and social order which they hope to institute, they look forward to the perpetuation of the excesses which had angered them so deeply before. The tragedy is in the absurdity. In the words of Heywood's *Sallust*:

> . . . after that L. Sulla by armes had freed the state, by the defeature of Marius; from these good and prosperous beginnings, proceeded disastrous conclusions. For hee, to make the army, suffered his followers to spoile, to robe, to defeat one of his house, another of his possessions: the victors sword knew no meane, no modesty: abominable and cruell, were the executions

> which they inflicted upon their fellow Citizens . . . .
> After that, the Rich man was reputed for honorable, and that Worship, Superiority, and Attendance, depended upon wealth, then began vertue to play bankerupt; Poverty to be disgraceful.[18]

It would seem therefore, that Catiline saw himself, in the context of a degenerate Rome, as supported by the pattern of Roman history and Roman politics. He saw himself as following in the line of previous "reformist" regimes. The actual complexity of Catiline's character, in such circumstances, ceases to be the problem of the play.

If, however, the play is not about Catiline, not even about his conspiracy as such, it is about other things. Especially, it is about the implications for politics (in this case, Roman politics) of that conspiracy when seen as one more point in the process of history. Because it is a tragedy of this kind, Jonson felt it necessary, for a starting point, to have a "true" and "authentic" Argument. Thereby the action would not be fiction; it would not have been manipulated to present a predetermined idea of politics.[19] Rather it would be a "true" and "authentic" story of madness attempting to wreck the state, and of the kind of agents and agencies involved in the resolution of the dilemma. The play is concerned with a historical and a political process, and accordingly, not only the conspiracy (which is the occasion for the play), but also the means of thwarting that conspiracy become necessary subjects for study. Cicero, Cato, and Caesar are as much part of that subject as Catiline and his cutthroats. And because the moral purpose of the tragedy included more than the conspiracy proper, the actions of the conspirators do not detain us much after the Third Act.

This interpretation is borne out by Jonson's treatment of the other characters — Cicero, Caesar, and Cato. Jonson does not deny Cicero the traditional political honors associated with him. Nor does he hide his respect for the "new man." The attacks leveled against Cicero *the rhetorician* by the conspirators, for example, are carefully maneuvered into unwitting praise for the orator. Cethegus sees one of the main objectives

[18] *Heywood's Sallust* (1608), ed. Charles Whibley, The Tudor Translations, 2nd series (London, 1924), pp. 64-65.

[19] C. G. Thayer, *Ben Jonson: Studies in the Plays* (Norman, 1963), p. 115, makes a similar point, though he does not there argue it.

of the rebellion as the frightening of "the degenerate talking gown . . . out of the air of Italy!" Sempromia, mocking Cicero, speaks his praise. "Jonson so places the virtue of the old Rome in the mouth of a 'modern' degenerate that [Cicero] gets away with a good deal. . . . All that [Sempromia] sees as laughable or contemptible we are to receive as serious and worthy."[20] What Jonson does in the play, however, is lay Cicero's claims to political virtue during the conspiracy open to qualification on several counts. For one thing, Cicero owed the discovery of the conspiracy initially to Fulvia's double-dealing. For another, the audience is so placed to see Cicero's methods for foiling the plot through his use of Sanga and the Allobroges that his later concern for the "security" of the state becomes almost dishonest. Critics have complained about the scenes in the Senate where Caesar makes what they call "mean" comments on Cicero:

> . . . cunning artificer!
> See, how his gorget 'peeres aboue his gowne;
> To tell the people, in what danger he was. (IV.91-93)

> What are his mischiefs, *Consul?* you declame
> Against his manners, and corrupt your owne:
> No wise man should, for hate of guiltie men,
> Loose his owne innocence. (IV.133-136)

These, indeed, may be "mean comments," but they serve nevertheless to underline the possible immorality of Cicero's "gallery politics."

In the *Discoveries,* Jonson states that "Cicero is said to bee the only wit, that the people of Rome had equall'd to their *Empire.*"[21] He had reason, it would seem for the scepticism implied in the phrase "is said to be." Jonson was not unaware of the role Cicero played in this and in subsequent Roman history, both as efficient servant and ambitious politician. Cicero, in order to win the support of the Senate, was fond of stressing his role as "novus home," just as Marius, before Sulla, used to remind Rome that the "nobiles" when in office, were often excused their mistakes because of "their titles of Ancient Nobility, the prowesse of their Auncestors, power of their allies, or multitude of their retinue: my hope and assur-

[20]Hill, p. 127.
[21]*Discoveries,* Bodley Head Quartos, V, ed. G. B. Harrison (London, 1923), 37.

ance resteth on my self alone; which I must necessarily maintaine by Vertue and Innocency."[22] Jonson must have known, too, that Cicero was not the honest disinterested man he had made himself out to be in his public speeches, and that he was himself a "politician" as desirous to preserve the state as to secure his fame. Finally, Jonson must have known from his sources that history often gave Cicero more credit for heroic patriotism than he deserved, that, for example, the oration credited to him by Lucan (*Pharsalia*, vii.62-67) could never have been spoken by Cicero since the Orator was not, as Livy makes clear,[23] present at that battle. Such knowledge would indeed induce Jonson into the qualified praise which he gives to Cicero in the play.

Not, obviously, that Jonson was condemning Cicero's tact, his prudence, but rather that he was recognizing it for what it was. When Cicero says to the people.

> I know, beside, some turbulent practises
> Already on foot, and rumors of moe dangers—

Crassus promptly adds, "Or you will make them, if there be none" (III.51-53). We do not have to believe Crassus to appreciate Jonson's purpose in writing this retort — namely to introduce an element of doubt concerning Cicero's virtuous statesmanship. It is true that in this particular instance Cicero is speaking from private information received from his agents. All the same, it is left to the audience to determine if Cicero would not have engaged in such a "policy" even if he did not have the exact justification available to him in this case. The attack seems directed at all "Policy," whatever its excuse. Jonson is clearly pointing out the ambiguous nature of "policy" and the very narrow line that separates the good men who use it from the criminals who need it. In Ornstein's phrase, it is as if Jonson had perceived that "contemporary attacks on policy [were] protests against history itself,"[24] especally if that history was not only unsavory, but fundamentally tragic.

Jonson's Caesar saw the process of history and politics from the cynic's corner, possibly Jonson's also:

[22]Heywood's *Sallust*, pp. 209-210.
[23]Livy, *Fragments*, Loeb ed., XIV (London, 1919), 138: "vir nihil minus quam ad bella natus." Also p. 219.
[24]Ornstein, p. 104.

> Doe you not tast
> An art, that is so common? Popular men,
> They must create strange monsters, and then quell 'hem:
> To make their artes seeme something. Would you haue
> Such an HERCVLEAN actor in the scene,
> And not his HYDRA? (III.95-100)

The fact that Catiline's conspiracy happened to be true does not affect this comment, nor does it invalidate the judicious corollary seated by Crassus that

> Treasons, and guiltie men are made in states,
> Too oft, to dignifie the magistrates. (III.102-103)

A major charge against Caesar is the extent of his involvement in the plot. Marchette Chute argues that "Sallust had been a lieutenant of Caesar's and in his account of the conspiracy was naturally slanted in Caesar's direction. Jonson, on the other hand, was convinced that Cicero has been the hero of the occasion and he made Cicero the focus of his play."[25] Jonson did not have to make Caesar a villain in order to establish, did he want to, that Cicero was his hero for the occasion. Caesar did encourage the revolt, though this is not the same thing as saying, with Bryant, that the conspiracy is "not really Catiline's after all, but Caesar's."[26] Caesar is not *shown* as having done anything substantial to ensure the success of the plot. It could not, therefore, have been his in any serious sense. It is rather that in his search for power and popularity, and aware of the genuine needs of the poor nobility, Caesar chose to exploit for his own ends, which we must assume, differed radically from Catiline's. Bryant quotes Bacon's judgment that Caesar "secretly favoured the madness of Catiline and his conspirators." Bacon did also say of Caesar that he "made himself a way to the sovereignty in a strange order"; "as a most skillful carpenter of his own fortune" ("ut faber peritissimus"). What Bacon seems to be insisting on was Caesar's combination of political adroitness — "a power popular and seditious" — and military competence — "a power military and imperatorial." Bacon also seems to have seen Caesar as ruined not so much by his scheming as by his love of popularity. "For there is nothing so popular as the forgiveness of ene-

[25] *Ben Jonson of Westminster* (New York, 1953), p. 188.
[26] Joseph A. Bryant Jr., "*Catiline* and the Nature of Jonson's Tragic Fable," *PMLA*, LXIX (1954), 270.

mies: and this it was which, whether it were virtue or art, cost him his life."[27] Bryant has urged on us that Caesar, as he was seen by Plutarch, Suetonius, and Dio (though not by Sallust), was "the primary threat to the Roman Republic."[28] What he might have said, for proper emphasis, was the Caesar was a threat to Roman "republicanism"[29] not to the Roman state itself. Caesar was a future threat because he was as dissatisfied with Rome's erratic republicanism as he was with Catiline's anarchism.

We ought, really, to see the conflict between Caesar and Cicero as the conflict of two policitians separated less by questions of preserving or destroying the state than by those of power and popularity.[30] The Caesar who spoke to the Senate during the trial was no great statesman, nor was he a monster. His argument was Roman enough, and not even Cato accused Caesar of arguing for the destruction of the state. Caesar, for reasons of his own, stuck to the letter of Roman law, and Cicero, knowing Caesar's game, understood in what relation they stood to each other's plans. Bryant's categories—"Catiline the symptom, Caesar the disease, Cicero the will of the state, Cato its all but submerged conscience"—are rather neat. "All these," he contends, "are elements in a body politic that is outwardly flourishing but spiritually doomed."[31] One can only hold this view if one construes Caesar's speech as but an attempt to exculpate the criminals and not also one to preserve the laws of the state.

> If there could be found
> A paine, or punishment, equall to their crimes,
> I would deuise, and helpe: but, if the greatnesse
> Of what they ha' done, exceed all mans inuention,
> I thinke it fit, to stay, where our lawes doe. (V.458-462)

Caesar goes on to show that the extreme sentence intended for the prisoners could neither be justified by fear for national

[27]The extracts are from Bacon, "Imago Civilis Julii Caesaris," in *Works*, ed. J. Spedding et al. (Boston, 1860), XII, 38, 37, 41.

[28]Bryant, p. 272.

[29]I am aware of Bryant's quotations from Plutarch, Dio, and Suetonius (p. 272, fn. 12). I think, however, that "destruction of the whole state and Commonwealth of Rome," as used of Catiline cannot mean the same thing when used of Caesar.

[30]Cf. Livy, *Fragments*, p. 219: "Cicero suffered from a victorious personal enemy nothing crueller than he would himself have done, had he attained to the same success."

[31]Bryant, p. 276.

security, "When, by the diligence of so worthy a *Consul,* / All is made safe, and certaine" (V.483-484), nor as punishment, since death, which was not legal penalty in Rome, is the "end of euills, and a rest, / Rather than torment" (V.485-486). Cato's argument, when it comes, is not a denial of Caesar's contentions but an appeal to exigency, "as things now stand" (V.558):

> necessitie,
> Now, bids me say, let 'hem not live an houre,
> If you meane *Rome* should liue a day. (V.564-566)

One responds with mixed feelings to this speech of Cato's. Its ultimate sanity is undeniable. But its moral basis is questionable, "necessitie" rather than the law being its justification. "No vertue," Jonson states in the *Discoveries,* disagreeing with both Bacon and Machiavelli, "is a Princes owne; or becomes him more, then this *Clemency*: And no glory is greater, then to be able to save with his power. . . . The state of things is secur'd by Clemency; Severity represseth a few, but it irritates more. . . . It is then, most gracious in a Prince to pardon, when many about him would make him cruell; to thinke then, how much he can save, when others tell him, how much he can destroy . . . and they that give him other counsels, are but the *Hangmans* Factors."[32]

The opposition of Caesar to Cato here, as to Cicero before, is not, then, the "essentially Chapmanesque conflict between Stoic hero and corrupt society" which Ornstein suggests,[33] unless we acknowledge at the same time that the moral foundations for that stoicism have been seriously undermined. For in this play Cato's justification comes less from his moral firmness than from the justness of his cause. It is only because he is on the side of the *status quo,* because he has no reforms to make but will not allow the disintegration of the state that he is different from Cethegus. For Cethegus and Cato are full of passion and moral vehemence for the opposed causes they support. Neither can tolerate halfheartedness in any of their supporters. Cato is as unequivocal in his support for Cicero as Cethegus is for Catiline. The two characterizations are elaborated from history. But Cato's stoic severity when confronted with the idealism (pretended idealism, perhaps) of

[32]*Discoveries,* pp. 46-47.
[33]Ornstein, p. 99.

Caesar's argument becomes hysterical, and even "theatrical."[34]

> Great parent of they countrie, goe, and let
> The old men of the citie, ere they die,
> Kisse thee; the matrons dwell about thy necke;
> The youths, and maides, lay vp, 'gainst they are old,
> What kind of man thou wert, to tell their nephewes,
> When, such a yeere, they reade, within our *Fasti*,
> Thy *Consul*-ship. (V.610-616)

Sallust said of Cethegus: "Natura ferox, vehemens, manu promptus erat; maximum bonum in celeritate putabat."[35] It is easy to see how, with a slight shift of emphases and a change from "celeritate" to "severitate," Cato would answer to that description. There is an implicit criticism of Cato in the presentation of him as a man of passion and policy, however noble his indignation. If there is any irony in this play, it is in the fact that the appeal to old Roman virtues of justice and discretion comes from Caesar, and the recourses to undisguised "reason of state" from the great statesman of the old Rome.

There is, then, no one character who can be said to be the moral center of the play. Cicero, though he plays an important part, is not, as we saw, that character. Nor is Catiline, as critics have always noted: his importance is not to the play, but to history. Caesar, serving as chorus as well as politician, denies himself the independence which would have given his choric voice its moral validity. Cato, finally, is made to carry the moral (as opposed to the political) responsibility for the illegal execution of the conspirators. To develop any of these characters as the hero of the play would be, therefore, to argue against the clear directions of the play's structure and characterization. Read says that in the play "authority is problematical" but he appears to mean only that there is no one character who can be said to *have* authority. But beyond this meaning, there is another, namely that the Rome of *Catiline*, unlike that of *Sejanus*, is republican in the worst sense of the term. When, soon after the expulsion of the Kings, Coriolanus entered the Roman political scene with the tributes playing dangerously with the possibilities of power, he found himself an outsider because he could not use "arte" to keep himself in

[34]Ornstein (p. 98) speaks of Cato's and Cicero's "theatrical Machiavellianism."
[35]Sallust, *The War with Catiline*, xliii.4, p. 74.

power and popularity. The rise of imperial Caesar, if we like, was inevitable when a man of royal ambitions became cynical enough to employ "policy" against his republican rivals. Authority in Rome was problematical because the republicanism of that Rome was arrant and decadent.

What, if anything, was Jonson's purpose in *Catiline*? To answer this question, we need to remind ourselves again of Jonson's first requirement for tragedy,[36] and see it in the context of ideas of his own age. His age was, after all, the age of the antiquarian, of Bacon and Selden and James I himself. One of the Court historians of this time called the "Knowledge of Histories, and Antiquaries" a "singular tuxtrixe, and faithful informer, how to abide and suffer patiently the inconstancies, and mutabilities, of britle and fickle Fortune. If therefore," he continued, "thou wouldst not continually, shew thy selfe a childe, and *Non-proficient*, in the Court of thy Prince, be not (I say) rude, but well read, and a skillful Antiquary in Histories and Chronicles."[37] Writing to his son in *Basilikon Doron*, James I recommended to him that "nexte to the lawes, I would haue you to be well versed in authenticke histories, & in the Chronicles of all nations. But by reading of authenticke histories & Chronicles, ye shall learn experience by Theorick, applying the by-past things to the present estate, *quia nihil novum sub sole*: such is the continuall volubility of things earthlie, according to the roundnesse of he worlde, and the revolution of the heavenly circles."[38] Heywood himself in the "Introduction" to his translation of Sallust discusses the nature of authenticity in history. It is important that his readers bear in mind, he urges them, that historical sources have varying degrees of authority and reliability. "For such is the Nature and obscurity of truth, that unlesse it be rased from auncient and fundamentall Originals, it will hardly appeare like it selfe, but best buried with their bodies."[39] "Historie ought to be nothing but a representation of truth, and as it were a Map of mens actions, sette forth in

[36]J. A. Bryant, "The Significance of Ben Jonson's First Requirement for Tragedy: 'Truth of Argument'," *SP*, XLIX (1952), 195-213.
[37]A. D. B., *The Court of the Most Illustrious . . . James I* (London, 1619), p. 22.
[38]*Basilikon Doron* (1603), ed. James Craigie, Scottish Text Society, XVI, 3rd series (London, 1944), 149, 151.
[39]*Heywood's Sallust*, pp. 13-14.

a publicke view of all commers to bee examined."[40] In this search for authenticity, Heywood was critical enough to remind his readers that "Dionysius Hallicarnesseus (a man of no eminent place in Government) wrote the History of the Romans with better faith and more uprightnesse, then Fabius, Sallust, or Cato, men advanced to wealth and honour in their Common-weals."[41]

There is a simple conclusion to be drawn from these statements, namely, that the value of history rested primarily and pre-eminently on the "authenticity" of the narrative. A parallel conclusion would be that such authentic history, if available, would be a veritable "representation of truth, and as it were a Map of mens actions sette forth in a publicke view of all commers." If Jonson claimed authenticity for his tragedies, he was probably claiming no lesser truth. If he was insistent on sources and scholarship, it was probably for no lesser reason than his learned contemporaries had. Jonson sought a fidelity to history which would itself be proof of the "truth" of the tragic conclusion of the play. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, in the light of Jonson's theory, would be historical tragedy only in a loose sense, since it could not claim to be authentic. *Julius Caesar* has a political lesson but it is not necessarily connected with the particular Rome of Caesar and Brutus. It is a history based on a reconstituted, not on the authentic, the original world.

One may say, then, in answer to the question raised above, that in *Catiline*, Jonson sought to show that history was a true as life. He did not try to write about that history with blatant Machiavellian cynicism,[42] nor with the moral pretentiousness of Gosson. Rather he looked with a sophisticated and critical eye at the concept of politics as a game of "Policy." Caesar says:

> Come, there was neuer any great thing, yet,
> Aspired, but by violence, or fraud:
> And he that sticks (for folly of a conscience)
> To reach it . . . [is]
> A superstitious slaue, and wil die beast. (III.515-519)

[40] *Heywood's Sallust*, p. 16.
[41] *Heywood's Sallust*, p. 9.
[42] See W. D. Briggs, "Influence of Jonson's Tragedy in the 17th Century," *Anglia*, XXXV (1912), 277-337; and, for a qualification of his argument, Mario Praz's, "Machiavelli and the Elizabethans," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XIV (1928), 49-97.

Caesar's view here covers Catiline and Cicero. It is a cynical view, but, again, it was true of Rome—tragically so.

Secondly, his play denied the need for a hero. What is at stake in the play is not the conscience of an individual, not even the welfare of the state, but the conscience of politics. The tragic lesson in terms of Cicero and Caesar, as individuals, is not as important as the essential problem which this concept of authority and power, of politics raises. Johnson's politics was not the politics of the partisan, but that of the artist and the humanist. His measure was not "necessity" but "classical" integrity. His men are engaged in a human struggle, but as they try to resolve their problems in the way they know how, we are allowed to watch both the noble and the criminal follow the rather attractive path of exigency and of policy. What we have is thus no mere defence or disavowal of Machiavellianism. We have instead an anatomy of the political conscience. There was sense, after all, in Shakespeare's saying that Caesar "did never wrong, but with just cause," for no other paradox would as easily justify Cicero's actions in *Catiline*. But Jonson found Shakespeare's line ridiculous, perhaps because he did not feel that Shakespeare intended the comment as a bitter underlining of the fact that Caesar, too, was, in his own way, the "politician" par excellence. Whatever pessimism Sallust felt about "the ability of mankind, either individually or collectively, to live for very long by the light of reason, especially if subjected to the temptations of power, luxury, and ease"[43] probably derived from a recognition, such as Jonson's, of this paradox of politics. Such pessimism did not come to Jonson as a frightening fact, however. It did not move him to passionate outbursts on the degeneracy of humanity. It is Jonson's intellectual acceptance of his political vision, his ability to analyze it with classical detachment that has made his *Catiline* the elusive play it is, and the odd failure it has been in Elizabethan and modern critical circles.

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[43]Bryant, "*Catiline* and the Nature of Jonson's Tragic Fable," *PMLA*, LXIX (1954), 268.