

Cicero in Catilinam

(to accompany “Cicero denounces Catiline in the senate,” *Wheelock’s* chapter 11)

In 63 B.C., Marcus Tullius Cicero won the consulship, the highest office in the Roman republic. One of the men whom he defeated in the election was a charismatic nobleman named Lucius Sergius Catilina – Catiline. Born on 108 B.C. (and thus two years older than Cicero), Catiline came from a recently undistinguished and impoverished patrician family, the Sergii. Like all Roman politicians, Catiline pursued a political career as a means of securing reputation and wealth. From its beginning, however, Catiline’s pursuit was marked by a desperation greater than that which burdened most Roman noblemen, primarily because of the decline in recent decades of his family’s prestige and fiscal security. For Catiline, obtaining the highest offices of the Roman state was both a birthright and a practical necessity. After doing his military service in the 80s and 70s, Catiline won a praetorship, the second highest office in the republic, in 68. Upon completing his term of office, Catiline served as a governor in Africa for two years. When he set out for his term as governor, Catiline’s prospects for winning a consulship in the near future must have been promising, but when he returned from Africa in 66, he was prosecuted for acts of extortion during his governorship. Although he was acquitted of this charge, the legal proceedings prevented Catiline from standing for the consulship in 65 and 64, so in 63 he made a frantic grab for the office. In this election he was defeated by Cicero. As consul, Cicero also conducted the elections for 62. Catiline again ran and, in part because of Cicero’s opposition to him, was again defeated.



By this time Catiline was truly desperate: his ambition had been repeatedly thwarted and his finances were in ruins. Thus did he form a conspiracy with implications for Rome

and the whole of Italy. Owing to the bias in our sources, however, we are not able to delineate the exact character of this conspiracy or its intended results. It is certain that Catiline planned to use force against his enemies in Rome, and it is probable that he intended to issue a general cancellation of debts and to redistribute Roman lands. Through his spies, Cicero was kept informed of Catiline's designs, but he was unable to move against him due to Catiline's aristocratic connections and popularity with the people. Cicero's first oration against Catiline, from which "Cicero denounces Catiline in the senate" is adopted, so frightened Catiline that he fled the city of Rome to his army of penniless veterans in Etruria. Soon afterwards, Cicero came upon the written evidence he needed to prove Catiline's intentions and thus to move the senate into action. The leaders of the conspiracy in Rome were arrested and, after a long debate in the senate, put to death without trial. In January of 62 B.C., a Roman army marched against Catiline's forces. Catiline was cut down fighting bravely alongside his soldiers. Cicero was hailed as the savior of Rome, a salutation he never forgot, nor let anyone else ever forget. His action was marred, however, by the fact that he had executed Roman citizens without trial.

To understand this adaptation from Cicero's speech you need to recognize the precariousness of his situation. As explained above, he has reasonably sound (albeit hearsay) evidence about a coup that will lead to his own death and, presumably, some restructuring of the Roman state and economy, yet he is unable to move against the leading conspirator, Catiline, because Catiline is so well connected with other patricians and so popular with the people. Moreover, Cicero is delivering this speech to a convened senate, *not to a jury*. Catiline is not on trial here and cannot be condemned to punishment after Cicero has given his speech. This is simply a public denunciation of a reputed conspirator. So, as a pre-reading question, ask yourself what Cicero may be trying to accomplish in this speech.

Post-reading questions to consider:

1. Whom is Cicero trying to frighten in the first two lines of the passage and how?
2. Whom is Cicero trying to frighten in the third and fourth lines of the passage and how?
3. On whom does Cicero place the blame for the fact that Catiline is still alive? How, in terms of his syntax and word choice, does Cicero emphasize this blame? What sort of strategy do you think he is employing here?