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INTRODUCTION

I THE LITERARY CHARACTER OF THE *CATO*

(a) Circumstances of composition, and general character of the work

The *Cato Maior de senectute*¹ was written in the early part of 44 B.C. It is mentioned in a letter to Atticus, sent on 11 May in that year,² and, as a recent work, in the second book of the *De divinatione*³ (which was completed in 44 at some time after the Ides of March). There is no certain evidence for a more precise dating, but probability seems to favour a date of composition before the Ides of March (see Appendix 1).

Chronologically, therefore, the *Cato* belongs to the main period of Cicero's philosophical writing, 45–44 B.C. It stands somewhat apart from the series of larger works that preceded it, since it is an essay on a single topic in practical ethics, rather than a technical exposition of a major area of philosophy. It is possible, however, to exaggerate the difference of literary character that this implies: even the more technical treatises often tend towards the popular and rhetorical (cf. below, pp. 11–15). The *Laelius de amicitia* was composed later in 44 in the same mould; Cicero regarded the two dialogues as companion-pieces,⁴ and dedicated the pair to

¹ On the form of the title, see Commentary, p. 93–4. Although the title *De senectute* is usually preferred in English-speaking countries, I refer to the work throughout this edition as *Cato* or *Cato Maior* (cf. the convention of *TLL*): the original principal title of the work was *Cato Maior*, and *Cato* is convenient for brevity.

² *Att.* 14.21.3.

³ *Div.* 2.3; on that passage, see also Appendix 1, and Commentary, p. 93n.

⁴ *Lael.* 4; 11. For a list of parallels and similarities between the *Cato* and the *Laelius*, cf. P. R. Coleman-Norton, *CW* 41 (1947–8) 210ff.

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Atticus, *senex* (in fact three years Cicero's senior) and *amicus*. The lost *De gloria* in two books, written in the early summer of 44 and similarly dedicated to Atticus,⁵ was also a treatment of a particular moral theme which personally concerned Cicero; little, however, is known of its content.

Atticus was a suitable recipient for these three works. An example of cultured leisure and equanimity,⁶ nominally an Epicurean, he had few pretensions to be considered a serious philosopher; but he was well equipped to appreciate this form of philosophically based moralising, cast in a polished literary form and seasoned with Greek and Roman historical allusions and anecdotes, and it appears from Cicero's replies to his letters⁷ that he professed to find these works of some practical benefit, in addition to being a source of pleasure.

Cicero's decision to write on old age is explained partly by the existence of a tradition of philosophic writing on the subject (see below, pp. 15–16; 24–7), and partly by his personal circumstances at the time. In 44 B.C. he was sixty-two years old, already *senex* by Roman reckoning,⁸ and he was experiencing difficulties both in private and in public life. Caesar's dictatorship had meant that he was effectively excluded from politics,⁹ and on the personal side he was probably still affected by the death of his daughter Tullia in February 45 (for possible reflection of this in the *Cato*, see on

⁵ *Att.* 15.27.2; 16.2.6; 16.6.4. Cf. Ruch, *Préambule* 300.

⁶ Cf. *Cato* 1–2; *Nep. Atticus* 17.3. On Atticus' Epicureanism, cf. Shackleton Bailey, *Cicero's Letters to Atticus* 1 (Cambridge 1965) introd. 8; A. H. Byrne, *Titus Pomponius Atticus* (Bryn Mawr 1920) 34ff.

⁷ *Att.* 16.11.3; cf. *ibid.* 15.2.4 on the *Tusculans*.

⁸ Cf. *Cato* 2 and note; *Lael.* 5. A Roman of Cicero's time was reckoned to be *senex* at sixty, though the word could be used loosely of those considerably younger (in *De or.* 2.15, Crassus uses the word of himself at forty-eight). On the definitions of old age and of the other periods of life, see notes on §§4 (with literature there cited); 33–4; 60; 70; 76.

⁹ Cf. *Cato* 1 and note; Appendix 1; on the biographical background, cf. T. Petersson, *Cicero: A Biography* (Berkeley 1920) 571ff.; E. Rawson, *Cicero* (London 1975, repr. Bristol 1983) 203ff., esp. 246; M. Gelzer, *Cicero* (Wiesbaden 1969) 322–4.

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§12, etc.) and the subsequent divorce of his second wife Publilia. The approach of old age in these circumstances would not have been welcome. A letter to Atticus¹⁰ in May 44 contains the wry comment that old age is making him irritable, and that he ought himself to read the *Cato* to counteract this. On a more serious level, the letters show fears for the Republic and for Cicero's own position:¹¹ he may well have thought that he would not live to see Rome restored to its proper condition, or regain the authority to which his age and experience entitled him. The consolations put forward in the *Cato* should be seen as real attempts to combat such feelings of desperation, in the same way as the *Consolatio* was meant as a real cure for grief after Tullia's death.¹²

It seems probable enough that Cicero felt the exact opposite of all the favourable sentiments about old age which he makes Cato utter in the dialogue. He was not so unrealistic as to think that he could really have the position of a Nestor, nor could he in reality be satisfied with the quiet country life of which he makes so much in §§51–8. No doubt, too, the afterlife of which he speaks in his peroration (§§77ff.) at times seemed as unreal to him as to any Epicurean.¹³ But as a trained advocate he could apply his gifts to the task of self-persuasion, and he claims in the preface to the *Cato* (§2) that the treatment succeeded for a time. Without the evidence of the letters, we should have no explicit indication of Cicero's more personal feelings when he wrote this dialogue, and even with this evidence available, too many critics have mistaken his deliberately contrived optimism in the *Cato* for a bland and unthinking complacency. He stresses the attractive side of old age and plays down its unpleasant features, not because he was unaware of the evils

¹⁰ *Att.* 14.21.

¹¹ *Att.* 12.21.5; 12.33.1; 12.28.2 (all from the spring of 45); for the period after the Ides of March, *Att.* 14.6; 14.13; etc.

¹² Cf. *Cato* 2. On the *Consolatio*, cf. *Att.* 12.14.3; R. Philipsson, P.–W. 7A, 1123ff.

¹³ Cf. perhaps *Tusc.* 1.24.

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of old age, but because he was only too well aware of them and was trying to counteract them in his writing. One does not usually write consolations unless there is something about which one needs to be consoled.

The *Cato* was not written as a social document, and the reader who wishes to use it as one must be careful to allow for Cicero's rhetoric. Yet it does reflect one particular aspect of the reality of old age in the Roman world, in a way that should not be taken as mere rhetorical exaggeration. The Roman senatorial class did have a tradition of respect for the old, which must have made old age in some ways a pleasanter prospect than it is in some modern societies. The picture of the senior statesman with his *auctoritas*, his crowds of young followers (§§26; 28; 63) and his periods of relaxation on his country estates, is not an unrealistic invention of Cicero's, but a view of Roman life as it was or could be, given favourable circumstances. This element distinguishes the *Cato* from Greek moralistic treatments of old age, and makes it agreeably down-to-earth; indeed, some readers have found much to commend in it as a practical guide to coping with old age, even from the point of view of the modern gerontologist or psychologist.¹⁴

However this may be, the main claim of the *Cato* to be read in modern times is its charm as a literary work and its interest as a document of Roman humanism. The sections on agriculture (§§51ff.) and the immortality of the soul (§§77ff.) are particularly fine, but the whole work deserves notice for the literary portrait of Cato the Censor and the gallery of examples and anecdotes, both Roman and Greek; for the elegance of its style, which some have thought to exemplify Latin prose writing at its best; and for its commendation of a civilised, dignified and intelligent way of life.

¹⁴ Cf. D. B. Bromley, *The Psychology of Human Ageing* (Harmondsworth 1966) 42; E. Hübener, *Das Altertum* 3 (1957) 46ff.; B. L. Ullman, *CJ* 29 (1933-4) 456-8; G. Twigg-Porter, *Classical Bulletin* (St Louis 1962) 1-4. On the other hand, M. Finley, *G. & R.* 28 (1981) 156ff. well typifies the social historian's disappointed reaction to the *Cato*.

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(b) The dialogue form

All Cicero's extant philosophical works except the *De officiis* are cast in the form of a dialogue, and in all the dialogues except the *Tusculans* (where the characters are anonymous, though one apparently represents Cicero himself) the speakers are noble Romans. In the *Cato*, as previously in the *De republica* (and, among the rhetorical writings, *De oratore*), *Hortensius* and *Academica priora*, the dialogue is set in a past generation; the subsidiary characters of the *Cato*, Laelius and Scipio, are already familiar from the *De republica*, and Laelius appears again as the principal character in the dialogue named after him. In the *Laelius* (4–5), Cicero remarks on his use of historical characters as conferring greater *gravitas*, while in letters to Atticus he mentions the more prosaic motive of avoiding envy among the living.¹⁵

Most of the work consists of an uninterrupted speech by the principal character. In this respect it is similar to the *Laelius*, and to individual books of the *Academica*, *De finibus*, *De natura deorum* and *De divinatione*. The actual dialogue is confined to some polite conversation at the beginning, in which Cato is asked for his opinion by the other two participants; however, Cato is made to recognise the presence of Scipio and Laelius a number of times in the course of his speech.¹⁶ It is a mistake to suppose that the dialogue form is here reduced to a mere convention: Cicero could have done without it had he wanted to (as he did in the *De officiis* or *Orator*), and it adds greatly to the charm of the work.

The antecedents and inspirations of the Ciceronian dialogue need only be briefly summarised here, in so far as they concern the *Cato* in particular. The influence of Plato, first of

¹⁵ *Att.* 12.12.2; 13.19.4; cf. *Q. fr.* 3.5.1; Ruch, *Préambule*, 403–4.

¹⁶ §§9; 19; 28; 34–5; 39; 49; 68; 77; 82; 85. A number of the *exempla* concern Scipio's family: see on 15; 29; 35; 50; 68; 77; 82. On characterisation in Cicero's dialogues in general, cf. W. Süss, *Hermes* 80 (1952) 419ff. For a less favourable view cf. D. Keiffer, *Rev. Inst. Publ. Belg.* n.s. 9 (1869) 73ff. On the characterisation of Cato in this work, see below, pp. 17–22.

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all, should not be underestimated: Cicero clearly looked back to the founder of the genre, despite the differences between them. Cicero's preference for continuous speech over dialectical interchange has often been seen as an important point of contrast; but Plato is not all Socratic dialectic, and one should remember that the Platonic dialogues that were most read in Cicero's time, and by Cicero himself, were the more literary and expository ones.¹⁷ Even in such a superficially un-Platonic dialogue as the *Cato*, Cicero adapts very closely one passage of conversation from Plato's *Republic* (*Cato* 6–8), and there is Platonic content in a number of other parts of the work.¹⁸ The dialogues of Xenophon were also admired by Cicero, and by other Romans;¹⁹ they perhaps provided a clearer precedent than Plato for the attribution of imaginary discourses to historical characters; and, with their practical ethical outlook and pleasant, uncomplicated style, they would have constituted a more accessible model than the heights of Platonic philosophy.

Scholars have tended to emphasise the influence on Cicero of the lost dialogues of Aristotle, and of various post-Aristotelian philosophers, particularly Heraclides Ponticus.²⁰ The ground for this in the case of the *Cato* is Cicero's own reference to these two philosophers as precedents for his method of writing dialogue (*Att.* 13.19.4; cf. *Q. fr.* 3.5.1): he

¹⁷ *Rep.*, *Leg.*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Timaeus*, *Gorg.*, *Apol.*, *Menex.*: cf. P. Boyancé, *Assoc. G. Budé, Congrès de Tours et Poitiers: Actes du Congrès* (Paris 1953) 195–221.

¹⁸ See on §§39ff.; 44; 46; 47; 77–8; etc.

¹⁹ Cf. K. Münscher, *Philol. Suppl.* 13.2 (1920) 70ff.; for influence from Xenophon in the *Cato*, see notes on §§51ff.; 59; 79.

²⁰ Aristotle: Hirzel, *Dialog* 1, 272ff.; Leeman-Pinkster on *De or.*, vol. 1, 67–8; the Aristotelian features referred to at *De or.* 3.80 and *Fam.* 1.9.23 do not recur in the *Cato*. Heraclides: Hirzel, *Dialog* 1, 321ff.; Wehrli on Heracl. fr. 24b. On the Ἡρακλείδειον of *Att.* 15.4.3 and 15.27.2, which is most certainly not the *Cato*, though erroneously connected with it by scholars, see Hirzel, *Dialog* 1, 547n.; H. B. Gottschalk, *Heraclides of Pontus* (Oxford 1980) 8.

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informs us that while Aristotle introduced himself as a major character in his dialogues (the practice followed by Cicero in e.g. *De finibus* and *De divinatione*), Heraclides used characters from the past and did not himself have a part, and thus produced dialogues which were more obviously fictitious. This should not be taken to mean more than it says; it may be that the use of historical characters was more constant in the works of Heraclides than elsewhere, and thus more characteristic of him than of other dialogue-writers, but this provides no reason to assume that a dialogue of Cicero's which (like the *Cato*) used historical characters was intended to be 'Heraclidean' in any other respect, whether in form, style or content.²¹ In default of other evidence it is impossible to assess accurately what influence Aristotle or Heraclides may have had on Cicero's dialogue technique, in this work or elsewhere, in respects other than those which Cicero himself mentions.

Not much is known about the turns taken by dialogue-writing among other Hellenistic philosophers, though the surviving *testimonia* concerning some of their works show that they continued to write in this form.²² It is quite possible that Cicero was influenced in the case of the *Cato* by lost Hellenistic works on old age,²³ notably the work of Aristo (of Ceos or Chios)²⁴ which he mentions in *Cato* 3; his reference to it implies that it was a dialogue of some sort, in which Tithonus was the principal speaker on the subject of old age. However,

²¹ It appears to me that too much has been read into the mention of Heraclides in *Q. fr.* 3.5.1. Cicero could not very well have used the example of Plato, Aristotle or Xenophon in this disparaging context. In view of this, the double mention of Heraclides here and in *Att.* 13.19.4 becomes less striking.

²² Cf. Hirzel, *Dialog* 1, 308ff. for Hellenistic writers of dialogue in and after Aristotle's time; Ruch, *Préambule* 46; E. Martin, P.-W. 5, 546ff. (Dicaearchus). On the antecedents of Cicero's dialogue form in general, cf. Ruch, *Préambule* 31–71; Hirzel, *Dialog* 1, 457ff.; 544ff. on *Cato* and *Laelius*.

²³ See below, pp. 15, 25–6.

²⁴ See note on §3 and Appendix 2.

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this does not take us very far, and of the form of the other pre-Ciceronian Hellenistic writings περὶ γήρωσ we know nothing. Their loss probably does not leave much unexplained as regards the form of the *Cato*.

Another question, which there is not sufficient evidence to resolve, is whether Cicero was influenced by Latin predecessors. No Latin dialogues can be certainly dated before Cicero's *De oratore*, with one exception – a lost dialogue on civil law by M. Junius Brutus, the father of the conspirator, referred to in *De or.* 2.224. A connection has however been seen between Cicero and certain works of Varro, which may possibly have predated Cicero's philosophical writings. These are the so-called *Logistorici*,²⁵ some of whose individual titles are attested in later sources: *Catus de liberis educandis*, *Tubero de origine humana*, *Messalla de valetudine*, etc. There is clearly a parallel between these titles and Cicero's *Cato Maior de senectute*, *Laelius de amicitia*, implying perhaps a similarity of form (dialogues usually with Roman characters, of whom one is important enough to give his name to the whole work) and subject-matter (individual topics, suited to the chief character, treated in some cases from a clearly moralistic standpoint – as is evident from some of the available fragments). The dates of the *Logistorici* being unknown, it is impossible to say whether Cicero imitated Varro, or Varro Cicero, although it does seem reasonable to suppose a connection of some sort. Unfortunately it is not possible to be more specific, and it is to be observed that most work on this subject argues from the well-known features of the *Cato* and *Laelius* to some hypothesis about the character of the *Logisto-*

²⁵ Cf. F. Ritschl, *Opuscula* (Leipzig 1886) III, 403ff.; A. Riese, *Varronis Saturarum Menippearum Reliquiae* (Leipzig 1865) Prolegomena, 32ff.; R. Müller, *Varros Logistoricus über Kindererziehung*, Kl. Phil. Stud. 12 (Leipzig 1938); Hirzel, *Dialog* 1, 546–7; H. Dahlmann, P.–W. Suppl. VI, 1261ff.; id., *ANRW* 1.3, 16–17; id. and R. Heisterhagen, *Varronische Studien* 1, Abh. Akad. Mainz (1957) no. 4. Cf. Appendix 2 on 'Ariston' quoted in Varro's *logistoricus* '*Catus de liberis educandis*'. On Varro's Menippean satire *Tithonus*, see p. 26–7.

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rici; to use received opinion on the *Logistorici* as an explanation of the form of Cicero's dialogues is therefore an unsafe and circular proceeding.

(c) Rhetorical features

The speech of Cato, which makes up most of the work, is arranged according to a clear and simple rhetorical plan. There is an exordium, though a very informal one, setting out general principles and illustrating them with examples; there is a *partitio* in §15, and the main discussion is carried out under the four headings there specified, by the recognised rhetorical method of objection and refutation (see note ad loc.). The insertion of a digression (the section on agriculture, §§51ff.), between the third and fourth main divisions of the argument, contributes to an effect of informality, but this method of concealing art was itself well known to the rhetoricians (*egressio*).²⁶ The last part of the argument, in which discussion of death leads naturally to the topic of the immortality of the soul, forms an effective peroration.

The method of argument is often loose, proceeding by illustrations, examples and appeals to common sense, rather than strict logic. Philosophical arguments are alluded to or summarised, rather than expounded in detail (see e.g. §4 on self-sufficiency; §46 on moderation; §47 on the meaning of *carere*; §71 on the equation of 'good' with 'natural'; §78 on immortality, with arguments reproduced from Plato; see notes on all these passages). The many examples and anecdotes give the work a distinctive flavour:²⁷ again the technique derives from rhetorical practice. A number of them are

²⁶ Volkmann, *Rhetorik* 164–7.

²⁷ Volkmann, *Rhetorik* 233ff.; Nisbet–Hubbard on Horace, *Od.* 1.12.37 and literature there cited; M. Rambaud, *Cicéron et l'histoire romaine* (Collection d'études latines, série scientifique 28, Paris 1953). Cicero refers to his own use of *exempla* in *Cato* 26 and *Div.* 2.8. There seems no reason to suppose that the examples of old age, etc., were taken by Cicero from some rhetorical handbook, as argued by C. Bosch, *Die Quellen des Valerius*

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simply Cicero's favourite *exempla* of old Roman virtue,²⁸ some without any special appropriateness to the context of old age, while others are used to illustrate specific points: long life, activity in old age, memory, physical strength, courage in mourning, and so on.

The final section of the *Cato*, on death and immortality, owes much to the philosophical and rhetorical tradition of consolatory literature. Cicero himself refers to the consolation as a recognised form of oratory (*Part. or.* 67); formal letters of consolation sent on occasions of bereavement, e.g. Cicero to Titius (*Fam.* 5.6) or Ser. Sulpicius to Cicero (*Fam.* 4.5), exhibit a standard repertoire of themes. The tradition of the philosophic consolation is supposed to derive from Crantor's Περὶ πένθους,²⁹ which Cicero imitated in his lost *Consolatio*. Particularly close to the subject of the *Cato* is the consolation on the approach of death in the pseudo-Platonic *Axiochus*, which contains a number of parallels in detail with

Maximus (Stuttgart 1929): the parallels with Valerius Maximus show no more than that V. Max. used Cicero, in common with other sources; V. Max. 8.13 ext. 1 on Masinissa cites the *Cato* explicitly, cf. on §34; a similar degree of paraphrase is evident in the items on Isocrates, Gorgias, Solon, Themistocles (8.7 ext. 15, with material from other sources), Duilius and Valerius Corvinus, and in the anecdote in V. Max. 4.5 ext. 2, probably derived directly from *Cato* 63. Cf. also A. Klotz, *Studien zu Valerius Maximus und den Exempla*, Sitzungsab. d. Bayer. Akad. d. Wiss., Phil.-hist. Abteilung (Munich 1942) Heft 5, pp. 10ff. The other ancient collections of examples of long life may also be compared: Cicero shares material with Pliny, *NH* 7, Lucian (or pseudo-Lucian) in the short book entitled Μακρόβιοι or *Longaevi* (cf. F. Rühl, *RhM* 62 (1907) 422ff., and 64 (1909) 137ff.), and Censorinus, *De die natali*; the compilation περὶ μακροβίων of Phlegon of Tralles is mainly a list of names extracted from the census-records, but ends with the examples of Arganthonius (also in Cicero: see on §69) and the Sibyl, and may originally have contained more: cf. A. Giannini, *Paradoxographorum Graecorum Reliquiae* (Milan 1965).

On the use of anecdotes in the *Cato*, cf. also H. C. Gotoff, *Illinois Classical Studies* 6 (1981) 294–316.

²⁸ Fabricius, Curius, Coruncanus (15; 43; 55); the Decii and Scipiones; Atilius Calatinus, Cincinnatus, L. Brutus, Regulus, Marcellus.

²⁹ Diog. Laert. 4.27; Cic. *Acad. pr.* 2.135; cf. on §84 for an apparent parallel with Crantor.