The Rhetoric of "Catiline" in Cicero and Sallust: Plural Authenticities in Roman Crisis

Andrew Tianen Zhang*

Eton College, Windsor, Berkshire, UK

Abstract. Catiline became a portable paradigm for Roman arguments about law, virtue, and emergency power. This essay reads Cicero's in Catilinam I alongside Sallust's Bellum Catilinae to show how genre - live oratory versus retrospective historiography - governs what can be seen, said, and silenced. In Cicero, a politics of vision structures authority: the consul claims to "see" the conspiracy and performs guardianship in the moment of crisis. In Sallust, two internal threads organize the history: the narrator's moral frame, which situates the revolt within a longer arc of Republican decay; and the staged debate in the Senate, where "Caesar" and "Cato" appear as Sallust's constructed exempla - lenity and legality versus austere virtue. Read together, these texts yield not one Catiline, but plural authenticities performed under pressure: Cicero enacts custodial vigilance; Sallust's narrator models moral historiography; his Caesar rehearses clementia as precedent; his Cato insists on severitas. Across both, three recurring features structure crisis-talk: bad precedents, manufactured emergencies, and exemplary violence.

1 Introduction

In 63 BCE, the Catilinarian Conspiracy turned Roman politics into a flurry of rhetoric. After losing the consular election, L.S. Catilina was accused of plotting insurrection with indebted followers, assassinations in Rome, and coordinated uprisings in Italy. Whether the threat was as vast as claimed is up for debate, it became a symbolic referendum on what the Republic would do when afraid. Cicero answered with the four Catilinarian speeches; two decades later Sallust retold the crisis in the *Bellum Catilinae*, framing a Senate debate in which Caesar and Cato argued over the fate of the arrested conspirators on December 5, strangely putting very little emphasis on Cicero's own involvement in this conspiracy's outcomes.

This essay treats those four voices - Cicero, Caesar, Cato, and Sallust - not as neutral witnesses but as makers of meaning, with Sallust being the narrator of our Caesar and Cato here. It examines moral construction on two levels: first, the rhetoric of the characters within the works; second, the rhetoric of the authors who stage them (Cicero as live orator, Sallust as retrospective historian). The working thesis is that each figure claims "authenticity," but that authenticity is a crafted effect - what this paper calls plural authenticities.[1][2]

The argument proceeds in three steps[3]. Part I profiles Cicero's emergency-making and optics of visibility. Part II analyses Caesar's procedural restraint as a politics of precedent.

* Corresponding author: Zhangsr.uk@gmail.com

© The Authors, published by EDP Sciences. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Part III turns to Cato's exemplary severity and its appeal to the conscience. A brief comparative synthesis shows how these stances collide and why all can seem true at once. There are also various later reinterpretations in Lucan's epic and Plutarch's Lives[4], where the same postures harden into archetypes. The aim is not to adjudicate guilt, but to show how rhetoric manufactured the Republic's sense of what counted as lawful courage.

2 Cicero: Manufacturing Emergency, Performing Guardianship

As consul in 63 BCE, the *novus homo* with no patrician pedigree, Cicero crafts a guardian persona: righteous watchman, defender of *mos maiorum* (custom of ancestors) and steward of *officium* (duty). Ancient testimony emphasises the performative dimension: Plutarch (.5-7) reports in his *Life of Cicero* details such as: training with actors, studying gesture, and even displaying the notorious breastplate beneath his toga at a mass assembly. Modern accounts: Steel(2001) puts Cicero's political oratory in its real-time contexts[8]; useful for reading "crisis talk" as strategic persuasion rather than neutral reportage and van der Blom (2010) does so with a central study of how Cicero curates exempla and presents himself as heir to chosen traditions. We treat these as components of political technology: the anxious outsider proves his legitamacy; his voice becomes a prop in the play of security. Batstone (1994) lens of disputing Catiline's absence or presence helps us see how Cicero fills the room with his own "seeing" while denying Catiline a voice[7]. "Quo usque tandem abutere, Catilina, patientia nostra?" (In heaven's name, Catiline, how long will you take advantage of our forebearance?) exudes exasperation: it suggests we are at the end of a very long process, at the point of bursting; paradoxically, we begin the speech as if already long into it. The vocative Catilina, positioned in the middle of the clause, stings by fixing blame to a face and interrupting the grammar between *abutere* and *patientia nostra*; here, *abutere* imports a legal-moral register into interrogative form. The opening therefore presupposes guilt and delay and converts senatorial hesitation into complicity.

The famous "*nihil…nihil…nihil" (not at all)* anaphora later hammers institutional negligence: nothing has been done, nothing decreed, no violence punished. The anaphora and clausal structure make severity feel like restraint by presenting the delay as dangerous. The speech is an exercise in surveillance: Cicero claims to see conspirators meeting at a certain house; to hear their plans; to know their weapons. He juxtaposes his clear vision with Catiline's brazen visibility ("you come into the Senate!") talking to Catiline, creating moral complexity in which the audience is positioned as a watcher who must act with immediacy.

Another hallmark of Cicero's technique is direct address and apostrophe. Throughout the speech, Cicero speaks as if to Catiline (who may have been in attendance), which has a dramatic effect - it is as though the whole Senate were witnessing a prosecutor interrogate a criminal in their midst. He exclaims *"O tempora, O mores!"* ("Oh the times! Oh the customs!") to lament the degeneracy and inaction that allows a traitor to live. By invoking the moral outrage of *"our times,"* Cicero not only demonises Catiline but also implicitly shames the Senate for tolerating him for so long and for not carrying out their *officium* as key members of the *res publica*. This combination of attacking the foe and rallying the audience's indignation is a classic Ciceronian strategy[9]: he combines pathos with ethos, presenting himself as the embodiment of Roman virtue and guardianship. He does so in his speeches for others such as in his speech *Pro Murena[5] and Pro Quinctio[6]* as well as some of his other famous works. Cicero reminds the senators that he, as consul, foiled Catiline's earlier assassination plots, and he invokes Jupiter Stator (the god of the standing Roman state) as a divine witness to the conspiracy unfolding in the very hall. By aligning himself with the gods and the ancestors, Cicero deifies himself as the Republic's saviour while casting Catiline as a blasphemous enemy who dares the sanctity of the Senate and the Roman Republic. Crucially, Sallust's own account of the conspiracy in *Bellum Catilinae* is vastly different.

Cicero's use of praeteritio - "I say nothing of… I pass over…" - smuggles the evidence into the record while pretending to keep it out.It is a legality mask for moral panic: the audience hears the facts, and the orator collects credit for restraint. Modern readers worry about evidence; the speech solves that worry theatrically by flooding the room with omniscient detail and then refusing to litigate it. *Patere tua consilia non sentis? Constrictam iam horum omnium scientia teneri coniurationem tuam non vides?* The grammar humiliates by way of perception: present indicatives in interrogative mode ("do you not notice?") attack *sensus*; an indirect statement under *non vides?* asserts as "seen" what is in fact an attack on their lack of intelligence - *constrictam… teneri coniurationem tuam*. Hyperbaton fronts *constrictam* so that the image of a bound conspiracy precedes its naming. Cicero flips the optics: Catiline "marks out" senators with his eyes (*designat oculis*), as if the traitor's gaze were already a blade. Sight becomes both motif and method: the consul sees truly; the enemy sees murderously while the Senate must learn to act with immediacy.

The second person address divides the Senate into those who "see" with Cicero and those who, by hesitating, risk enabling Catiline. Notice how often he names collective obligations (*patres conscripti*, *res publica*, *mos maiorum*). The syntax keeps returning to the plural, but the verbs demand a singular decision: "I have watched, I have discovered, I have contained." Guardianship is both represented and performed. The consul becomes the Republic's optic nerve and foundation. The speech encodes a familiar Sallustian characteristic but transforms it into a policing of visibility: conspirators are those who meet at night, whisper, and seek the shadows; the Republic operates in light. Even the choice of Jupiter Stator makes "standing" a virtue. To stand is to see to delay is to betray. The end of the speech drives Catiline out, letting Rome "see" its enemy (*hostis)* as absence: a neat trick that makes removal look like voluntary exile. By naming meeting houses, thresholds, the very benches where conspirators sit, he turns the Senate into a stage set already infiltrated by the enemy. Jupiter Stator's temple becomes an ethical backdrop. In Roman political culture, visibility tracked legitimacy; what the people could see on the *templum* counted. The speech translates that civic optic indoors: senators who continue to sit "with" Catiline will appear in the wrong tableau. The final effect - Catiline leaving - lets Cicero claim a victory of exile without trial while insisting the choice was Catiline's. Consular self-restraint is thus attached to a hard outcome.

Cicero's authority must be asserted through tradition. Hence the repeated invocation of the mos maiorum and the strategic deployment of exemplary names (earlier consuls killing seditious men, e.g. Scipio). The trick is careful: he must sound like a custodian of ancestral precedent while taking steps whose legality is, at best, debatable. The solution is rhetorical synthesis. He cites the senatus consultum ultimum as permission, performs forbearance as if it were obedience, and casts his own knowledge as the substitute for judicial inquiry. In effect he narrates himself as the last safe barrier between Republic and ruin.

The clausula cadence at the ends of his periods - the march of cretics and trochees familiar from Dyck's (2008) commentary[10] - gives the speech its moral rhythm. Roman ears heard authority in rhythm; the cadences that close public sentences taught the body to assent. The style plays on the moral: the audience feels the state stabilise when the consul speaks. When he breaks cadence - those quick bursts of exclamation - the impression is not sloppiness but felt necessity. Controlled loss of control is the consummate orator's authenticity.

Later rhetorical theory also reinforces the importance of Cicero's techniques. Quintilian praises Cicero as a model of *ἐνέργεια* where vivid description is so compelling that listeners feel as though they are present at the scene. *Insequetur ἐνάργεια, quae a Cicerone inlustratio et evidentia nominatur, quae non tam dicere videtur quam ostendere, et adfectus non aliter quam si rebus ipsis intersimus sequentur.* (The result will be enargeia, what Cicero calls illustratio and evidentia, a quality which makes us seem not so much to be talking about something as exhibiting it. Emotions will ensue just as if we were present at the event itself.) Similarly, *evidentia* is significant, as it bridges the gap between rhetorical vividness and the

juridical concept of evidence. In Roman courts, suspicion and character inference could serve as forms of "proof" in ways that modern evidentiary standards would reject. A modern judge might strip Cicero's orations of much of their content as irrelevant, but in Rome the conjuring of vivid images and suspicions was central to persuasion. Cicero's Catilinarian speech, filled with visual staging and dramatic immediacy, thus exemplifies the Roman preference for rhetorical "proof" that makes the invisible visible.

3 Caesar in Sallust: Procedure as Courage, Clemency as Technology

In Sallust's recount of the debate, Caesar's address stands out for its deliberate restraint and its insistence that the Senate act not from vengeance but from principle. He opens by urging the senators to purge themselves of "hatred, friendship, anger, and pity" - *qui de rebus dubiis consultant, ab odio, amicitia, ira atque misericordia vacuos esse decet* before deciding, a rhetorical trick that immediately establishes him as the voice of calm deliberation in a chamber rife with indignation.

Caesar does not minimise the danger: the conspirators' crimes are "beyond all punishment," as "Nam si digna poena pro factis eorum reperitur, novum consilium approbo;" ("If a punishment proportionate to their crimes can be found, I approve a new course) suggests he acknowledges the gravity of their treason. Yet he consciously avoids the personal invective that Cicero and Cato deploy so freely. Catiline's accomplices are not described as monsters, but as guilty men whose punishment must serve as a model of legality. The shift is from the nature of the crime to the character of the Senate - what they do in this moment will echo in history, and an excessive penalty risks tarnishing the Republic's reputation.

Caesar's refusal to indulge anger here is strikingly Stoic: he insists, *omnis cruciatus minores quam facinora illorum esse.* (any torments are less than their crimes.) turning the argument away from vengeance to justice and claiming that the dishonour of arbitrary punishment would outlast the conspirators' destruction. Sallust thus presents Caesar as performing a *recusatio* of emotion, a pose familiar from Roman historiography, where the author disclaims bias to establish himself as a guardian of truth. Here, the same strategy makes Caesar the voice of reason against Cato's fiery rhetoric. The irony is sharp, since it would be Cato who later became the Stoic hero of principled resistance to tyranny, while Caesar's legacy would be one of dictatorship. In the moment, however, Sallust shows Caesar adopting the historian's stance of unemotional clarity: a man who warns that yielding to passion is dangerous. To Caesar, then, the trial of Catiline's allies is not only about punishing guilt, but about proving that the Republic could act free from destructive passion - a test of Rome's self-mastery as much as its justice.

Caesar's approach is also deliberative and legalistic - he treats the question as a matter of policy, weighing benefits and drawbacks and invoking legal tradition. His portrayal of Catiline's conspirators is impersonal; he condemns the crime but does not dwell on lurid details or moral failings. Instead, Caesar's focus is on the *Republic's integrity*: he argues that how Rome deals with Catiline is a reflection of Rome's own values. This is a more nuanced portrayal where Catiline's menace is acknowledged but backgrounded in Favor of highlighting the Senate's duty to act wisely. Caesar uses logical structure (for example, if we execute now without trial, what prevents future abuses?) and ethical appeals (presenting himself as a guardian of Roman law and *clementia*). "Omnia mala exempla ex rebus bonis orta sunt…" (All bad precedents have arisen from good measures…) is a good example of his commitment to the *mos maiorum*. He even subtly employs praeteritio in a way; by saying he could enumerate atrocities to justify harshness but that everyone already knows the evil done, so the focus should be on Rome's example. This tactic avoids competing with Cato in

outrage and instead sets a higher moral ground. However, there is some debate over whether Caesar had some connection to the conspiracy or personal affiliation with some of the conspirators that led to his gentler approach and speech against them.

4 Cato in Sallust: Exemplary Fury, Moral Minimalism

Cato's reply is a complete reversal in tone and content. Where Caesar is cool and procedural, Cato is fierce, moralising, and implacable. He begins with a direct declaration that his (mind is very different) *Longe mihi alia mens est* from Caesar's, signalling that he will not be bound by concerns of precedent or appearances.

In Cato's portrayal, Catiline's followers are not simply guilty; they are parricides, sacrilegious enemies of their (country, parents, altars, and hearths.) *patriae, parentibus, aris atque focis suis bellum paravere*. He paints them in stark, almost apocalyptic terms: they have plotted massacres, and their survival threatens the very life of Rome. His rhetoric collapses the gap between possibility and certainty - if they are spared, Rome will burn. The dominant appeal here is to pathos. Cato shames the Senate for its softness, accusing them of caring more for villas and artworks than for the Republic's safety. He conjures the vivid image of the enemy at the gates – (Catiline is at our throats) *Catilina cum exercitu faucibus urget* and of senators still hesitating while destruction closes in. Sarcasm sharpens the attack: (Pity them, I advise… and even let them go armed!) *Misereamini censeo ... atque etiam armatis dimittatis*. The irony turns any thought of clemency into an absurdity, ridiculing Caesar's proposal in front of the chamber.

Cato's ethos is self-fashioned as the incorruptible moralist. He reminds the Senate of his consistent opposition to luxury and vice, his refusal to indulge his own faults, and by implication, his immunity to the temptations of political expediency. When he turns to logos it is to dismantle Caesar's plan with practical objections: dispersing the conspirators into provincial towns only makes it easier for them to escape or find allies, since disloyalty is not confined to Rome.

Like Caesar, Cato uses exempla from Roman history, but his examples glorify severity rather than mercy. The most striking is the tale of Manlius Torquatus executing his own son for breaking discipline - a reminder that ancient Rome was built on uncompromising enforcement of duty. His conclusion is that ancestral justice demands the execution of the conspirators caught in the act (*manifesti*).

Grammatically and syntactically, Cato's speech bristles with imperatives and second person addresses to the Senate: (Wake up at last… take charge of the state.) *expergiscimini aliquando et capessite rem publicam*. He alternates between long, rolling moral indictments and staccato commands, mirroring the rhythm of a man both diagnosing a deep sickness and prescribing an immediate cure. The polysyndeton in his repeated uses of connectives such as *atque* and neque to add fuel to his burning speech; amplifying lists of vices and dangers, and the historic present keeps the threat immediate. His language is blunt, even coarse, in service of urgency.

5 Comparative Synthesis: Plural Authenticities

The four principal voices: Cicero, Caesar, Cato, and Sallust construct rival versions of "authentic" Roman virtue in the Catilinarian crisis. Despite stark stylistic contrasts, each claims higher legitimacy for his stance; authenticity functions less as sincerity than as a crafted moral performance designed to move audiences toward a preferred action.

Their tone and emotional register. Cicero and Cato operate in the angered zone but with different aims. Cicero's indignation is calibrated: theatrical outrage modulated by irony,

invocations of shared civic pride, and moments of feigned restraint (e.g., *praeteritio*). Cato's anger is presented as unfiltered conscience - scathing, impatient with compromise, and contemptuous of softness. Caesar adopts an impassive tone that performs impartial reason, suppressing visible emotion to project adult steadiness. Sallust's narrative voice blends controlled moral indignation with resigned lament for civic decline. Plotted on a spectrum of characteristics - Cato: fiery indignation; Cicero: similarly fiery but artfully modulated; Caesar: calm impassivity; Sallust as a narrator. Each treats his register as the only fitting, "authentic" response to crisis.

Cicero's speeches are quick but controlled, alternating bursts of accusation with ritual pauses and accelerating anaphora to enact urgency. Caesar's pacing is methodical and periodic, producing the feel of deliberative authenticity - conclusions that seem earned by careful weighing. Cato barrels forward with single-minded momentum, a drumbeat toward execution that refuses alternative paths once principle is invoked. Sallust's history alternates scene and analysis; its holistic angle yields a cyclical authenticity in which events fit a moral pattern.

Strategies: all four mix ethos, logos, and pathos but weight them differently. Cicero's ethos is vigilant consul, guardian of *mos maiorum*, reinforced through sacred and ancestral alignments; his logos is prosecutorial while his pathos stokes fear. Caesar's ethos is principled statesman; his logos stresses precedent and constitutional risk; his pathos is cerebral - the fear of regret. Cato's ethos is incorruptible tradition; his logos is moral logic with practical jabs (e.g., risks of dispersed custody); his pathos yields shame. Finally, Sallust's ethos is truth-telling historian; his logos binds effects to causes across time; his pathos is elegiac.

Each pose seeks to appear the truest or authentic patriot: Cicero as messianic consul within procedural forms; Caesar as lonely defender of law and clemency; Cato as Stoic simplicity made action; Sallust as impartial moralist. They collide as accusations of inauthenticity: Cicero frames mercy as naivety or complicity; Cato brands Caesar's proposal as sophistry aiding enemies; Caesar recasts blood zeal as performative betrayal of Roman values.

In 63, the Senate largely sided with Cicero or Cato; the broader public often admired Caesar's clemency. Sallust's later narrative canonised the episode as a moral parable and supplied the vocabulary for reading politics as ethics under stress. The ironies are famous: Cicero's "necessity" later cost him exile (58 BCE); Caesar, apostle of legality here, would cross the Rubicon; Cato's purity ended in suicide at Utica; Sallust's lament became the soundtrack to the Republic's eclipse. The larger lesson is that in the late Republic authenticity and rhetoric were inseparable: to win assent to a vision of justice, one had to sound utterly authentic - even when the authenticity itself was a crafted instrument of persuasion.

6 Socioeconomic, Speaker and Historical Background

Sallust's background score is consistent: *avaritia* (greed), *luxuria* (addiction to pleasure), and *ambitio* (status hunger) corrode elite discipline; *inopia* (want) radicalises those left out. Cicero translates this into optics - criminals hide, the state stands. Caesar translates it into institutions - laws are what keep appetite from writing constitutional text in panic. Cato translates it into exemplarity - only ancestral hardness can cauterise decadence. None is naïve about social cause; each selects the mechanism he trusts most. That selection is what their speeches really authenticate: not facts about Catiline alone, but a theory of how republics survive their own habits.

Sallust writes compact moral history. *Bellum Catilinae* is less chronology than diagnosis: a descent from industria, iustitia, innocentia to luxuria et avaritia, crystallised in the chiasmus *publice egestatem, privatim opulentiam*. The historian's persona is terse and disenchanted; his technique is multiperspectival staging. By scripting Caesar and Cato and giving Catiline

his own apocalyptic rhetoric, Sallust refuses a single victor's narrative. Genre matters: oratory must coerce consensus at speed; history preserves disagreement for judgment (Batstone). Kennedy (2015) & Graff's (2005) role-voice analysis clarifies how each speaker is cast to do specific moral work within that frame.[11] [14]

Speaker backgrounds, briefly. Cicero, a *novus homo*, turns precarious magistracy into performative authority: the vigilant consul persona compensates for lineage (Steel; Dyck; van der Blom). Caesar, patrician with *popularis* tact, condemns treason yet refuses to arm future tyrannies; his later cultivation of *clementia* germinates here. Cato, aristocratic austerity incarnate, treats crisis as a referendum on identity; his authority is autobiographical - a life of discipline licensing disciplinary politics.

Debt (*inopia*), veteran dislocation, and urban precarity made Catiline's coalition plausible; promises of debt relief and redistribution were not mere demagogy but policy with audiences. Lintott's (1999) [13]work on violence and constitutional strain, and Morstein-Marx on mass oratory, help explain why rhetorical postures map onto constituencies: Cicero mobilises the *boni* as counter-coalition; Caesar stabilises expectations by legal form; Cato reassures through exemplary severity.[12]The moral economy reads as the after-image of conquest: riches concentrate, virtue thins, and the city becomes vulnerable to men who promise fast clarity - relief or retribution.

7 Conclusion: Rhetoric Makes Reality

The Catilinarian affair matters not just as a set piece of history but as a compressed map of the Republic's recurring dilemmas. Cicero teaches Rome to speak emergency in the second person - "you see it, therefore act"- and performs guardianship. Caesar teaches the Senate to fear tomorrow's tyrant more than today's criminal and to invent penalties that let the constitution keep breathing - he performs legality. Cato teaches an audience to prefer the simple story in which hardness heals - he performs ancestral virtue. In Sallust's hands, each stance looks intelligible, even necessary, yet his cool irony implies that none by itself can save a polity already trained in its own appetites.

Three levers keep returning: manufactured emergency, dangerous precedent, exemplary violence. The episode shows how those levers are pulled not by facts alone but by performance - timing, cadence, framing, and the audience's appetite for certain kinds of courage. That is the durable lesson: authenticity in Roman political speech is made, not found. The orator's now, the historian's after, and the Senate's self-image conspire to make one path feel like truth. In crisis, Romans did not ask only what happened; they chose which version of themselves to be: guardian, legalist, moral avenger, or judge and then spoke the Republic toward that choice. Safety, law, and virtue rarely aligned; rhetoric decided which two would carry the day.

References

[1] Cicero, *In Catilinam* I
[2] Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae*, esp. 35 (Catiline's speech), 51–52 (Caesar and Cato).
[3] Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* (on *enargeia/evidentia*).
[4] Plutarch, *Lives*: *Cicero* 10–23; *Cato Minor* 21–24; *Caesar* 7–8.
[5] Cicero, *Pro Murena*
[6] Cicero , *Pro Quinctio*
[7] Batstone, William W. "Cicero's Construction of Consular Ethos in the First Catilinarian." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 124 (1994): 211–66.

[8] Catherine. *Cicero, Rhetoric and Empire*. Oxford University Press, 2001.
[9] Van der Blom, Henriette. *Cicero's Role Models: The Political Strategy of a Newcomer*. Oxford University Press, 2010.
[10] Dyck, Andrew R. *Cicero: Catilinarians*. Cambridge University Press, 2008
[11] Graff, Richard, and Kristine Bruss. "Style, Character, and Persuasion in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*." *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* 8 (2005): 1–32.
[12] Morstein-Marx, Robert. *Mass Oratory and Political Power in the Late Roman Republic*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.
[13] Lintott, Andrew. *The Constitution of the Roman Republic*. Oxford University Press, 1999.
[14] Kennedy, George A. *A New History of Classical Rhetoric*. Princeton University Press, 2015 (reprint).