

THOMAS GORDON (d.1750), WRITER. For a brief biography of Gordon and selections from his other significant work *Love Letters*, see the print anthology, pp. 420-24.

EDITIONS:

Gordon, Thomas and Herbert C. Nutting. *Conspiracy: Historical Perspectives*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1972 [rept. of Gordon's *The Conspirators* (1721) and Nutting's *The Conspiracy at Rome in 66-65 BCE* (1910)]. Vol. 2, no. 3 in the University of California Publications in Classical Philology.

—. *The Conspirators, Or, The Case of Catiline*. [selections from parts I and II]. Ed. Rictor Norton. *Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England: A Sourcebook*. 1 March 2003, updated 16 June 2008 <<http://rictornorton.co.uk/eighteen/catalin1.htm>>.

—. comp., ed., and intro., *The Conspirators, Or, The Case of Catiline. Eighteenth-Century British Erotica II*. Volume 5. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004.

CATILINE [LUCIUS SERGIUS CATILINA] (c. 108-62 BCE), POLITICIAN AND CONSPIRATOR. A successful politician from a minor and impoverished patrician family, Catiline held the office of *propraetor* (for Africa, 67-66 BCE), but his attempts to gain the consulship in 64 failed when Cicero outmaneuvered him and was elected instead, along with Gaius Antonius; presenting himself as a champion of Rome's disadvantaged masses, Catiline failed a second time to be elected consul, and at that point he launched a conspiracy that would have seen Cicero executed and Rome occupied by Catiline's followers, a mix of reform-minded as well as opportunistic aristocrats, the poor, and the dispossessed. Driven out of Rome by Cicero and his supporters, Catiline and his army were defeated in Etruria, where Catiline was killed. In the early modern period, Catiline's reputation was largely based on the accounts of Cicero and the Roman historian Sallust: courageous but opportunistic, Catiline's championing of the poor was insincere, and simply part of his overweening ambition to seize power.

From THE CONSPIRATORS, OR, THE CASE OF CATILINE (1721)¹

[...]

Never was a greater fall from virtue and everything that was worthy, upon the record of history, than that of this great, but infamous people!² They, who were, at first, intent on the protection of their country, and defence of their allies; who delighted more in arms and steeds of war than idle feasts and effeminate luxury; they whose greatest emulation was glory, who strove to be foremost

¹ Cf. Cicero, 'The Second Oration against Catiline,' *Online Companion*, p. 3.

² *this great, but infamous people* i.e., the Roman people. Gordon details here the degeneration in the Roman national character that allowed Catiline to gain so much power and influence.

in mounting the breach,³ and counted such an action to be riches, reputation, and nobility; who were greedy of fame, but liberal of their coin, degenerated at last into ease and indolence; gave way to mean⁴ ambitions and meaner avarice; and sunk into all the contrary extremes of vice and luxury, and every sort of debauchery. From having been severe in virtue, rigid in their morals, and strict in their piety, profaneness now began to be encouraged, and the mysteries of religion and the worship of the gods were exploded and ridiculed. The droles⁵ and buffoons of the age laughed at notions of sanctity, and took this way of recommending themselves to the great, in order to be preferred in their fortunes. It was become the peculiar characteristic of wit to sneer at things sacred, and even the ignorant and foolish (who made up the greater number) had recourse to this impious practice of affronting the gods, for want⁶ of other distinguishing parts whereby to make themselves taken notice of. It became a piece of policy to cultivate a contempt of the priesthood; and the power they once had of accusing those who were guilty of irreverence towards the gods was so suspended that it was, in a manner, quite taken away.

[...]

One of the methods of stupefaction,⁷ which they thought fit to practice, was the exhibiting [of] new and extravagant entertainments. For this end, foreign strollers, songsters, and buffoons were sent for and invited to settle in Rome. These artists, the generality of whom had submitted to eunuchism for the benefit of a voice,⁸ were hired and supported at the most extravagant charge, some of them having pensions equal to the pay of a praetor⁹ or general of the legions. They had their litters and their slaves, their baths and their perfumes, and the privilege of an intimate access to the greatest man in Rome, when an honest citizen, who had any grievance to complain of, might attend without redress, or so much as being admitted to an audience. The voluntary contributions which were made towards the supporting these creatures in state were very large, and their shows and spectacles were governed and ordered by a set of vain patricians¹⁰ then in power, who took care that no representation should be exhibited to the people but such as incited effeminate passions and soft desires; to the end that vice and indolence might steal into their souls imperceptibly, and they might be so overcome by the charms of luxury, as not to be awake either to their virtue or danger.

³ *breach* a gap in a wall or fortification made by an army assault.

⁴ *mean* base, ignoble.

⁵ *droles* cynics, humourists (i.e., those who act based on whim and caprice).

⁶ *want* lack.

⁷ *One of the methods of stupefaction* Gordon has been discussing the various ways in which Catiline and his supporters prepared the groundwork for their conspiracy, prime of which was the encouraging of impiety and irreligion.

⁸ *submitted ... voice* The reference, of course, is to the practice of castrating young boys with promising voices, so that they would retain their alto or soprano range into adulthood. This practice probably began sometime around the 5th century CE, but declined in the eighteenth century, before being legally banned in 1861.

⁹ *praetor* Roman magistrate.

¹⁰ *patricians* members of the Roman Empire's social elite, from which the most powerful government offices were filled.

This extravagance of diversion was seconded by another as expensive but more profligate and licentious in its nature, a diversion that gave so great an umbrage to public scandal that though the people of the first character zealously espoused it, the *Pontifex Maximus*, or High Priest, was obliged in decency to make some representations against it, though he had afterwards the honesty to make one, as it was too generally suspected, in this notorious conspiracy. This entertainment, of which I am now speaking, was of a kind unknown before to the Romans: a midnight revel, where both sexes met in strange disguises—such as centaurs, satyrs, sylvans,¹¹ and the like—and conversed with the utmost freedom, without being supposed to know each other's sex or quality.¹² The whole stream of the people fell into this tempting debauchery; neither years, nor wisdom, nor reason, restrained them from indulging in a pleasure that promised such a variety of satisfaction. For, as Nicolaus de Clemangis describes it, [...] “Not only the giddy youth, but persons advanced in years, were so entangled in these juvenile¹³ vices, that the day was not sufficient for their luxury and dissoluteness, but they often passed whole nights without sleep in dancing and gaming. The men forgetting the dignity of their sex, and sunk into a womanish softness, like that sex were dressed and adorned at the looking-glass, and went out glittering with a weight of gold and jewels; the women, on the other hand, relinquishing their natural modesty, put on an affection of masculine assurance.”¹⁴ Cicero, whose voice was of such authority in other cases, prevailed nothing against the violence of their affection to these sports. [...]

It was supposed by the graver sort at first that this was a contrivance only for cabals and plotting, but, in effect, it was intended for the propagation of lewdness, and to work their more remote designs by poisoning the state with a general taint of debauchery. For now, by the industry of these governors, all the vices of Asia¹⁵ were improved at Rome.

And this sort of policy worked a very notable effect in favour of their cause; for the people being, as it were, stupefied with shows, feasts, vanity, luxury, and every branch of effeminacy, had not leisure to think of or look into their condition, to examine the intricate administration of their governors, or see the tyranny and ruin that was stealing over them, so that they were undone¹⁶ before they knew it. They waked, as it were, from a golden dream, and found themselves in the utmost danger of being destroyed. But these governors very well knew that though the Romans, above all other people, were remarkable for a virtuous love of liberty, yet if they once came to be governed by an arbitrary and despotic power, they would by degrees fall off from that affection to their country: for luxury and indolence are the things that best prepare the minds of men for slavery, and reconcile them to meanness¹⁷ and servitude.

¹¹ For *centaurs* and *satyrs*, see Glossary (print anthology). *sylvans* forest spirits.

¹² *This entertainment ... sex or quality* Public masquerade balls and parties began to be held in England at the beginning of the eighteenth century; masquing allowed a certain anonymity and such events became associated with unchaperoned women, as well as sexual encounters.

¹³ *juvenile* youthful; characteristic of immature young persons.

¹⁴ *Nicolaus de Clemangis* Gordon's marginal note attributes the Latin passage at this point (which I have deleted, offering only Gordon's translation) to his “Epistola LIV.” Nicholas de Clémanges (1360-1434/1440), French theologian and university professor. *affection* affectation, pretended show.

¹⁵ *vices of Asia* Ancient Latin writers often associated Asia, and particularly Persia, with sensual and sexual excess, luxury, and effeminacy.

¹⁶ *undone* ruined, destroyed.

¹⁷ *meanness* lowliness, base-mindedness (i.e., the state of being incapable of noble thoughts or actions)

It may be very material (though it is a task of difficulty and much trouble at this distance of time) to characterize the persons that so infamously distinguished themselves in this conspiracy.

Lucius Sergius Catiline was himself descended from a patrician family, his father bearing the same name and having likewise born some offices in the commonwealth. At his death, he left behind him rather the character of a cunning than of an honest man, for he had not carried himself with integrity in the offices he held, but had, as it was afterwards well known, betrayed the secrets of the commonwealth to its enemies. Therefore, the people bore a kind of hatred to the name of the family, and it became a common phrase in the mouths of the people, when any great man in office was suspected of betraying the state (which was common in those days) to say, 'He'll prove another Catiline.'

By this it may be seen that the Catiline whose history I am now penning came into the world with the prejudice of the people, nor did he ever, 'tis certain, take any pains to remove that prejudice. He was so far from being beloved by his fellow citizens that he improved the hatred towards his family, and not without cause, for he had none of those virtues in his soul which recommend a man, being neither generous, compassionate, friendly, nor a lover of the populace, but sullen and reserved in his temper, a very little talker, and very seldom observed to smile, wherefore he was not an agreeable companion even in his pleasures.

[...]

As to his person, he was of a middle stature, and something inclined to corpulence, but nature had not adorned his mien¹⁸ or countenance with any grace or taking¹⁹ beauty. There was a fixed and settled sourness in his face, which made an impression upon the beholders at first sight, much to his disadvantage, and prepossessed men with a notion of his being ill-tempered.

It is the trick of nature sometimes to hang out colours, as it were, and to write the passions and inclinations of the soul in expressive characters upon the lines and muscles of the face, and men put so strong a belief in those external marks of virtue or vice that when they behold a man whom the gods have marked, as they used to term it, act and behave himself with justice and benevolence towards mankind, they will not be persuaded to believe it the effect of virtue, but rather to proceed from dissimulation in order to carry on some wicked design.

Be this as it may, it is certain that Catiline's face did no way belie his soul. If he looked crafty, vicious, sour or envious, he certainly was so, and we need no clearer a proof than an appeal to his actions. History has not been very particular as to his education, but as soon as he came to man's estate, we find he thrust himself into factions and cabals, and herded with those who were for embroiling²⁰ the public, only with private views of preferring themselves.

He married several times, but chiefly, as people suspected, for the convenience of strengthening himself by alliances with great men, rather than out of any affection for the ladies.

¹⁸ *mien* appearance; bearing, deportment.

¹⁹ *taking* captivating, alluring.

²⁰ *embroiling* inciting, 'firing up.'

For if we may believe some authors he had a most unnatural taste in his gallantries, and in those hours when he gave a loose to love, the women were wholly excluded from his embraces. *Omitto pestis huius impurissimas voces, mollitiem scenicam, obtuitus impudicos, blanditias muliebres et omnem denique copiam non mediocrem viti, orum, etc.*²¹ There are some vices which give too gross ideas to be repeated by the names that are affixed to them. 'Tis certain, however odd and unnatural his lewdness was, yet it was a notorious practice among some great men of that age, and some of his ganymedes²² were pampered and supported at a high rate at his expense; and this profuseness, excepting only in briberies, was the kind in which he most indulged himself.

[After Catiline gives a speech to encourage his fellow conspirators, Gordon emphasizes its chief points, particularly the kinds of indulgences his fellows can expect once they have control of the state.]

He animates them to the vilest depredations and most flagrant crimes, with notions of glory and honour, but the baits and temptations, which he threw in their way, showed that he understood the depravity of nature, and knew how to strike in with all its appetites. He considered them as a crew of profligate and abandoned wretches, and therefore very cunningly speaks to their vices. He tells them of wealth, of power, and of revenge; of raising their interests, and destroying their enemies; of commanding what women and boys they liked; giving them in this a touch of his own taste, but very slyly avoiding to declare what his own particular views were.

His speech therefore met with a general approbation, as they had but one mind among them all, that is to say, one wicked mind to destroy their country. But, in respect of friendship one to another, they had no tie or disposition to it any longer than their common interest or safety obliged them to unite. For a friendship grounded upon virtue is the only lasting friendship;²³ but theirs having no foundation but a political confederacy to carry on mischief and ruin, every one of them had some private views of his own, independent of his fellow thieves; so that it would not be improper to say that, at that time, there were as many conspiracies against the state as there were men in office.

Catiline, having ended his speech, as 'tis reported by several authors, took the blood of a man whom he had caused to be murdered for that purpose and having mixed it with wine, drank a draught of it to the conspirators, and made it be carried round to them in cups, such as were used at the most solemn sacrifices. With this horrid ceremony, each took an oath of secrecy to the

²¹ Gordon's marginal note attributes this Latin passage to M. Porcius Latro (late 1st c. BCE, celebrated orator and rhetorician) in "Declam[atio] contra Catilinam." For his orations, see the collected works of the Roman historian Sallust, *Catilina Iugurtha Historiarum Reliquiae: incertorum auctorum epistolae ad Caesarem Invectivae Declamatio in Catilinam*. Unlike Clemangis' Latin (above), Gordon remains 'decorously' silent here, refusing to translate the sexual insults from his original: *Omitto pestis huius impurissimas voces* 'I omit the most filthy names of these plagues/vices.' *mollitiem scenicam* 'wanton or effeminate acting.' *obtuitus impudicos* 'shameless gazes.' *blanditias muliebres* 'unmanly or effeminate blandishments / allurements.' *et omnem denique copiam non mediocrem viti, orum, etc.* 'and in short the whole not insignificant abundance of vices, effrontery.'

²² *ganymedes* boys or young men kept for the sexual pleasure of their masters/employers; catamites.

²³ *For a friendship ... friendship* For Cicero's famous formulation that true friendship could exist only between virtuous men, see 'Laelius,' *Online Companion*, p. 8.

other, binding themselves not to give the least hint to any person, though it were to save a father, brother, or most intimate friend from inevitable destruction. So that by this confederacy, all the ties of blood and nature were to be cut off, the dearest and most tender unions to be broke, and friend and foe to be sacrificed to their schemes without distinction.

[...]

[Although the conspiracy is uncovered, and the chief conspirators (including Catiline) are brought to trial in the Senate, even the eloquence of the great orator Cicero cannot secure any convictions.]

Upon the acquittal of Catiline, a kind of despair spread itself through the populace, nor was ever anything so miserable as their present condition. It was melancholy to look into the wants of private families; they who but for some months before lived in ease and plenty were reduced to straits²⁴ for the very necessities of life, while they saw these triumphant robbers, laughing at justice, and shining in gold and purple, spurning and insulting the people whose wealth they were dressed in. Nor durst the poor sufferers reproach their plunderers, because it was penal to bespatter their honour. For though virtue fears no calumny, vice is tender, and will not be touched too rudely.

The Senate also discovered what vast quantities of the people's money had been given to foreign courtesans, bawds, parasites, and ganymedes,²⁵ who had made young Verres²⁶ their agent in this affair. And the resolution at first was to have the agents punished, but finding by the acquittal of Catiline that the stream of corruption run so very violent that there was no bearing up again it, they despaired of contributing to the relief of the commonwealth. [...]

²⁴ *straits* desperate circumstances.

²⁵ *bawds* pimps, procurers. *parasites* obsequious flatterers who live off the wealthy (here, the state). *ganymedes* See n22.

²⁶ Gaius *Verres* (d. 43 BCE), bribe-taking praetor (74 BCE) and later the notoriously corrupt governor of Sicily (73-71 BCE); condemned and sentenced to exile for extortion.